Harry Potter, Heir of Gryffindor

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Chapter 1. Wizards on Privet Drive

As Vernon Dursley pulled away from King's Cross Station he looked in the rear view mirror at the black haired boy in the back seat and, sneering, sarcastically asked, "So what did you do at that ... school of yours this year, boy?"

Harry Potter, whose mind was still reeling from the loss of his godfather, absentmindedly mumbled a response.

"What's that, boy," Vernon demanded loudly, "I couldn't hear you."

Consumed by grief, Harry snapped, his emotions rising to the surface overriding all of the emotional restraints that had kept him both safe and sane over most of the past fifteen years - ever since Dumbledore had placed him on the front step of Number Four Privet Drive on that chilly November night so long ago - and before he could stop himself blurted out, "I got my godfather killed, alright! You happy now?"

A stunned silence filled the car for several seconds as Vernon, his wife, Petunia, and their son, Dudley, all turned to look at Harry. When the traffic light turned green Mr. Dursley turned the car onto one of the main thoroughfares. Moments later Vernon regained his composure and resumed his caustic attitude towards anything magical. "Oh," he sniffed. "Well, at least that's one less freak we'll have to worry about this year."

"Vernon!" his wife scolded. "He saved Dudley's life. The least we can do is be nice to him for five minutes. What else did you do at school?" Petunia asked in a strangely normal voice.

Harry's emotions were still running high and his mind was now on his meeting with Dumbledore on the morning after the battle in the Department of Mysteries. "I found out that I am the only one who can kill Voldemort. I either have to kill him or die trying."

Silence once more fell over the occupants of the car. No one said anything until they reached the M5 and even then the conversation was strained at best. Dudley talked about his year at Smeltings and his boxing title and Vernon talked about his company and his hopes for another successful year. He talked about drills and bits, financial statements and work orders and contracts and some of the labor problems the construction industry was having. He talked about just about everything. It seemed to Harry, as he sank deeper and deeper into his depression, that his uncle was talking just to hear himself talk. On the few occasions he looked up Harry noticed that his aunt was watching him in the rear view mirror with a look of genuine concern on her face.

"Whose that?" Vernon scowled as they turned onto Privet Drive. A sandy haired man, who looked to be going prematurely grey, was sitting on the stoop in front of number four. He was wearing faded jeans and an oversized, long-sleeved, flannel work shirt.

Harry looked up as they pulled into the drive and, even though he thought he recognized the man as Remus Lupin, pulled his wand out of his pocket and said, "Wait here and be prepared to run. It might be a trap."

Petunia and Dudley paled as Harry got out of the car but his uncle, Vernon, started to get out. In

response to a cautioning glance from his wife, however, he closed the door and settled back into his seat. As Harry walked away from the car and approached the person sitting on the stoop he heard his aunt say, "Vernon, please. Give the boy credit for knowing how to deal with his own people."

Harry approached the man and pointed his wand at his head. "Who are you?" he growled.

The man looked up. The wand that was trained on him was shaking slightly. He looked up into Harry's eyes, reading a mixture of anger, hatred, rage, fear, frustration, loss, confusion and the simple desire to be comforted and held in the bright green eyes of the young man before him. He smiled to himself, thankful for once in his life that the wolf's senses could pick up on so many conflicting emotions at a glance. "It's me, Harry, Remus Lupin," he said carefully, as if he had expected this challenge.

"Who's Prongs?" Harry demanded.

"Prongs was your father." The man said with a hint of sadness in his gentle voice.

"How did he get that name?"

"He got it by becoming an illegal animagus so that he could accompany me on full moons. His form was that of a stag." Harry thought for a moment. Wormtail would know these things. He needed some way of verifying this man's identity. Then it hit him. It wouldn't be nice if this truly was Remus and he hoped he would understand but it was necessary. "Who is Wormtail?" Harry asked, almost spitting the words out in disgust.

The man's face darkened and his eyes flashed angrily as he grimaced at some internal demon. "Wormtail," the man spat, "is a no good traitorous rat that goes by the name of Peter Pettigrew."

Harry lowered his wand, putting it back in his pocket. Then, extending a hand to his former professor, asked, "What are you doing here, Professor Lupin?"

Remus took Harry's hand and pulled himself up. "We need to talk. I've lost the last of my best friends and you've lost the only real father figure you've ever known. I hate to say this, Harry, but the only way we are going to get through this thing is if we work together. I've been down this road before and I know how hard it can be …"

"Did Dumbledore send you?" Harry asked darkly.

"No." the werewolf said just as darkly, "Albus doesn't even know I'm here and quite frankly I don't care. I am not his puppet and the sooner he gets that through his head the better. I am here because I want to be, because I know how hard it can be and because I care about you as a human being, not because I have to be." The werewolf's voice very nearly crackled with a sense of outrage and disgust at Harry's treatment at the hands of others but, amazingly, he was able to control his temper.

Sensing this, Harry let his shoulders sag and his head fall forward as he let the pent up tension and energy flow from his body. "I know you're right," he said sullenly. "I just … I just don't know if I'm ready yet."

"I understand," the werewolf said. "Like I said, I've been down this road before. I think I lost almost twenty-five kilograms after your parents died because I just didn't care any more. I thought I had

lost the four best friends a werewolf could ever have. It took me almost a full year to come out of it. And do you know what finally brought me around?"

"What?" Harry asked.

Remus looked into Harry's eyes as a gentle smile appeared on his face. "You," he said. "I knew I had to keep living for you. I honestly didn't think we would ever meet because werewolves are, after all, considered to be dark creatures and I didn't think they would let me anywhere near you but I had to try. I had to keep living for you and for Lily and James. I guess it was a matter of … honor that kept me going. I wanted to honor the relationship I had with your parents by somehow doing everything in my power to help you grow up both straight and strong.

"You may look a lot like James, Harry, but you have Lily's eyes and I have a very feeling that you have more of your mother in you than you do your father."

Harry put his wand in his improvised leg holster then put his hands in his pockets and looked down at his worn trainers. "Thanks," he said softly. "At least you are able to look beyond my physical appearance and see that I am not my father."

Remus grinned sadly then asked, "Why'd you ask about Wormtail?"

"To be honest with you, professor, of all the people I know you are one of the few who could have answered the first two questions correctly. And since I don't know how many people Wormtail has told I had to find some way of determining your authenticity and asking about Wormtail seemed to be the best way: to judge your reaction to the mentioning of the name of someone we both know is a traitor. I'm sorry but that was the only thing I could think of at the time."

Remus nodded his head in understanding. "Good thinking, Harry," Remus said. "It was just the kind of question you should have asked. Moody would be proud. And my name is Remus. I haven't been your professor for a little more than two years now and I don't want that title to stand between us."

Harry looked up into his former professor's amber eyes and smiled weakly. "Okay," he whispered hoarsely.

Remus pulled Harry into a tight hug and said, "It'll be fine, cub. I know that the pain will always be there and that it will never really go away; but with a little luck we will get through this thing together." He then glanced over at the Dursleys who were still sitting in their car, waiting for Harry to give them the all clear. "Do you think we should tell them that it's safe to get out of the car?"

Harry looked up. "Huh?" Then, following Remus' eyes, remembered the Dursleys. "Yeah. But let me do the introductions," he said as a mischievous grin began to spread across his face.

Remus chuckled. "Alright, Harry. Try to be nice to them, though."

"Oh, I will," Harry said innocently as they walked over to the car. "I wish I haf a camera, though, because this is going to be something I am going to want to remember."

When they reached the car Harry's Uncle Vernon rolled his widow down. "Well?" the beefy man asked.

"Uncle Vernon, Aunt Petunia, Dudley," Harry began, "I'd like you to meet Pro … Remus Lupin. He

was one of my professors a couple of years ago. He was also best friends with my dad and godfather." Harry hesitated a moment before adding, "Oh, and by the way, he is also a werewolf."

The looks of pure terror on the faces of Vernon, Petunia and Dudley were a sight to behold and Harry had to fight to keep from laughing. When he felt he had composed himself enough he turned back to finish the introductions. "Remus, I'd like you to meet my uncle, Vernon, my aunt, Petunia, and my cousin, Dudley."

"Pleased to meet you," Remus said with a straight face, extending his arm through the window to shake Vernon's hand.

"P-p-p-pleased to meet you too," Vernon said as his face rapidly draining of color.

"If you would be so kind as to open the boot I will help Harry with his things and we can all go inside. Harry and I have lost a good friend in his godfather and I will be coming over almost every day this summer so that we can talk and work our way through it."

"Wh-wh-wh-why not every day?" Vernon asked nervously as he released the boot catch.

Smiling over at Harry Remus said, "Oh, I suppose I could if you insist; but full moons can be a bit tricky sometimes."

Harry had to run to the back of the car and stuff his fists into mouth to keep from laughing. As it was, tears were streaming down his face. "N-n-n-no. That's quite alright," Vernon stammered. "Y-y-you can have those days off."

"Why thank you," Remus said and strolled nonchalantly to the back of the car to help Harry with his trunk. When he reached the boot he smiled at Harry and murmured, "Let the fun begin." Harry looked up at Remus, tears of laughter streaming down his cheeks and his face almost as red as Ron's hair.

When Harry and Remus were safely in Harry's room and the Dursleys were cowering in the living room Harry burst out laughing. "Remus, you are too much!" he laughed. "How were you able to pull that off without busting a gut?"

"They didn't call me the most dangerous marauder for nothing, Harry. James and Sirius never could keep a straight face. I, however, never had a problem with it."

"I can tell," Harry laughed. "You're good."

Remus shrugged his shoulders. "Ah, but you set it up. Now, shall we get this thing unloaded," Remus asked indicating the trunk.

Harry looked down at his trunk then back up at Remus. "Yeah, I guess. So what are the plans for this summer?" Kneeling down in front of Harry's trunk and undoing the latches Remus sighed and hung his head. "I know you don't want to hear this, Harry, but under the circumstances I think you will understand why it is necessary. There will always be at least two members of the Order guarding you at all times. In fact, right now I believe Kingsley and Sturgis are on duty. As of this morning, however, I have officially taken myself out of the rotation. I'm getting kind of tired of playing by the rules. I know how much it hurts to lose someone and when you are grieving the rules of 'acceptable behavior' no longer apply. I am going to be here for you whether they like it or

not, Harry. So they are going to have to schedule around that. There will be no more of this clandestine operation stuff. I don't care what Dumbledore says. I respect him as a man and a very wise and powerful wizard but you have a right to know what is going on and we both need time to grieve." Remus' voice was tense, laced with frustration and rage, and Harry could hear the anger and rebellion it held.

"Thank you," Harry said softly, gently resting his hand on Remus' shoulder. "Is there anything else I should know about?"

Remus hung his head and sighed. "Yes, there is. Albus wants you to stay here as long as possible this year. I don't know if that means you will be staying until September first or not but I don't think you are going to be getting out of here any time soon. Also, Albus will be teaching you Occlumency and, if he feels you are ready for it, the Legilimens curse this summer. You will be going down to Arabella's house three times a week for that and you will be escorted both to and from those lesson not only by myself but also by at least one other member of the Order as well."

Harry thought about this for a moment then, changing the subject, asked, "What about headquarters?"

A satisfied smile spread across Remus' face as he turned and looked up from his position on the floor. "In his will, Sirius left the house to you." When Harry blanched Remus stood up and pulled Harry into a hug. "I know it hurts, cub," he whispered. "You don't have to do anything about it yet. The official reading isn't for another three weeks, a full week before the next full moon, so we have time to get there." Harry nodded. "Besides," Remus added, "I do have some news on that front that I thing you might actually want to hear."

Harry looked up curiously. "What do you mean?"

Remus smiled grimly and sat down on Harry's bed as Harry walked over to sit at his desk. "Well," Remus said as a genuine smile spread across his face, "it would seem that for a house elf to betray any master to their death is a crime punishable by death. Kreacher knew this and rather than go before the tribunal and bring public shame upon his family he hung himself."

Harry smiled darkly and snarled, "Good. That's no more than he deserves."

Remus nodded his head in agreement. "I couldn't agree more," he said. "But there's more. When we couldn't get the old bat off the wall - and we tried everything - we decided to take the wall down." Harry looked up in surprise but Remus laughed and held his hands up to forestall any rush to judgment. "No," he laughed. "Don't worry. The house is still standing. We just took down the inside paneling. We got rid of all of the portraits, all of the heads and the tapestry. We saved the portrait of Phineas because Albus wants him relocated - he is currently in the loo - but all of the others went. It took some doing but we finally got everything burned. Needless to say, the old bat was the first to go." Remus hesitated briefly then said, "That's when Kreacher injured Buckbeak."

"Stupid elf," Harry muttered.

Remus sighed and looked down at the floor. "I know, Harry. I know. He was sick and delusional but unfortunately there is nothing we can do about that now."

Harry nodded. "I know but I just wish …"

Remus walked over and squatted down in front of Harry. "Wishing won't change it, Harry. I know. I've tried. All we can do is to deal with it the best we can and try to remember the good times.

"An ancient philosopher once said that the lives we lead are little more that collections of interactive parables and that while the lessons are different for each of us, depending upon our needs at the time, they have been arranged in such a way as to prepare us for what lies ahead. He also said that while the learning the lessons of life is never easy it is our choices that, more than anything else, determine who we are, what we will become, what we will take away from each of our lessons and, ultimately, our lives. I don't know if he was right or not but it makes sense. I know that I don't have the right to tell you what to say or do or think, Harry, but if you will let me I would like to offer you the benefit of my experience. It may not be much but I am hoping that it will be enough to at least help you get through this summer."

Harry looked over at Remus - the last of the true Marauders - and saw the hope in his eyes. After thinking it over for a bit he said, "I'll tell you what, Remus, … um, I know I'm not an adult yet; but if you will be honest with me, answer my questions, not try to hide anything from me no matter how much you think it might hurt and, above all, not treat me like some kind of child who needs protecting all the time I'm willing to give it a go."

Remus looked up and softly smiled. "I won't guarantee anything, Harry," he said, "because, as you said, you are not an adult yet; but I will do my best."

Harry was silent for a few more seconds as he contemplated the werewolf's response. Then, looking into the amber eyes of his former professor said, "I guess that's all I really have the right to expect so where do we begin?"

Several hours later, after a tense standoff at dinner during which Harry and Remus chatted about happenings in the wizarding world and various Defense Against the Dark Arts spells and the Dursleys glared at their unwelcome guests, Harry and Remus returned to Harry's room and closed the door. "Do you think they will ever get used to it?" Harry asked.

"What?" Remus asked, glancing up. "Oh, you mean the Dursleys? Yes, I think they will. Petunia knows more than she is letting on and Dudley, quite frankly, is scared out of his mind after what happened last summer. The hard one might be your uncle. He's kind of set in his ways and is dead set against anything 'unnatural.'"

"Boy, you got that right," Harry interjected.

"However," Remus continued, "one can only hope that with constant exposure to us he will come to realize that we are just ordinary people with ordinary wants and ordinary needs. Hopefully, in time, he will come to understand that the only thing that really sets us apart is that witches and wizards are able to tap into and use energies that most muggles don't even realize exist."

Harry nodded and sat down on the edge of his bed. Staring out the window he fell silent for several minutes then broached the subject they had been avoiding all afternoon. "Why did it happen, Remus? I know it was my fault but why did he have to die?"

Remus pulled the desk chair over and sat down in front of Harry. "I want you to look at me, Harry,"

he said. Harry looked up into Remus' eyes and saw a kind of patience and understanding born of years of torment and torture that he knew would not lead him astray. "Do you remember when you first met Sirius in the Shrieking Shack two years ago? He was still blaming himself for James and Lily's deaths and it was tearing him apart.

"He did what he though was right and asked Peter to become their secret keeper to throw Voldemort off the trail. None of us knew that Peter was a spy. If we had known things might have turned out differently. But we didn't and they didn't. Voldemort took advantage of one of our weaknesses - Peter. That's what he did with you last year. He took advantage of one of your weaknesses and of your love for Sirius. He turned those things against you in an attempt to get something he wanted. I think he was also counting on Snape's hatred of your father to make his job easier, which it did and for which Snape is going to pay.

"There was nothing you could do, Harry. Oh, I'm not saying that there is absolutely nothing you could have done differently but the fact remains that Voldemort is very manipulative and will stop at nothing to get what he wants. You are still young, Harry, and you do not yet have access to all of the resources you will need to fight him. This makes you an easy target. If you let him he will destroy you - through guilt if nothing else." Remus paused then looked hesitantly into Harry's eyes. "I hate to say this, Harry, but you are going to have to grow up awfully fast. I'm not saying that there is anything childish about you now because you have already seen more than most full-grown wizards will ever have to face. Albus told us about the prophecy. Not the whole thing of course but enough to let us know that you are the one who has got to face Voldemort. What I'm trying to say, Harry, is that you are going to have to grow up in ways that take most witches and wizards a lifetime to even begin to recognize, realize and comprehend. It won't be easy, Harry, but I promise you that I will always be here for you."

Harry looked down at his hands then stared out the window again for several minutes as he thought these words over. After a while he got up and let Hedwig out of her cage and opened the window so she could go hunting. Then, turning back to Remus, he said, "How do we beat him?"

Remus looked thoughtfully out at the stars for a time then said, "I don't know, Harry. I really don't know. But I do know that the first step is to stop being a victim. And the first step in taking charge of any situation is to stop blaming yourself for everything that goes wrong in the world. People have free will, Harry, and they are responsible for their own actions. No matter how much you might want to blame yourself for everything that goes wrong in the world you can't because it isn't your fault. For many years You have been manipulated into thinking certain things by Dumbledore, Voldemort and Snape. If you want to turn this thing around and get your life back you are going to have got to go on the offensive. We have got to learn his weaknesses and figure out how to take advantage of them." Remus paused. "We are going to do everything we can to prepare you for what lies ahead but you are going to have to work too."

Staring out the window at Mr. Tibbels, one of Mrs. Figg's cats, who was perched on a garden wall across the street watching him Harry nodded then said, "What are his weaknesses?"

"I don't know," Remus said sadly.

A few minutes later, after searching his mind for some sign of weakness in Voldemort's armor and only coming up with his disdain for his muggle name and the fact that he was a half-blood, Harry said, "Where do his loyalties lie? What does he place his faith in?"

"So far as we know he is loyal only unto himself and so far as we have been able to determine he places all of his faith in magic and the magical world."

"Do you know if he has ever studied muggles at all?"

"He's a half-blood, Harry. He grew up in a muggle orphanage. But so far as we know he doesn't want anything to do with muggles. In fact, if anything he seems to want to destroy them."

"Then maybe we can find something in the muggle world that can stop him. But what could they have that would be powerful enough?"

Remus shook his head. "I don't know. I'll have to think about that one. But it's getting late so you had better get some sleep. I think you are supposed to start your Occlumency lessons tomorrow."

"Yeah, okay," Harry said, his numbed emotions a mixture of pain, anger, hatred, determination and guilt. "I'll see you out."

As Harry opened the door to his room and stepped out onto the landing he heard his uncle in the living room, complaining about the weather. But Harry knew that he was really complaining about wizards being in his house and didn't want to provoke him so they crept quietly down the stairs and made their way to the front door. Once there, Remus said, "What's our password going to be?"

"Our what?" Harry asked.

"Our password, so you will know it's me."

Harry thought for a moment. Then, as a determined glint came into his eye, he said, "Padfoot rides again."

Remus nodded as a small smile appeared on his face. "Alright. I'll see you tomorrow then." Then calling over Harry's shoulder he called out, "it was nice to meet you Mr. and Mrs. Dursley. I'll be back tomorrow to help Harry with his homework."

Harry groaned. "Did you have to say that?"

Remus chuckled. "Got to keep up appearances you know." With a smile on his face Remus then turned and walked out the door and into the night.

Harry closed the door and walked back towards the bottom of the stairs. As he passed the entrance to the living room he called out, "Good night."

His Uncle Vernon grunted.

As Harry took the steps, two-at-a-time, to the second floor landing he could not help but smile at Remus' daring. Not only was a defying Dumbledore's orders but he was making the members of the Order of the Phoenix work around his schedule and the time he wanted to spend with him, Harry. This summer might not be so bad after all, he thought as he opened the door to his room. At least he would have a friend, someone who had known both his parents and Sirius, to keep him company. As he got ready for bed he began to wonder what, if anything, could be taken from the muggle world and transferred into the magical world that would be powerful enough to destroy Voldemort.

Chapter 2. Muggle Means and Magical Methods

The next morning, after the first restful night's sleep in more than a week, Harry opened his eyes to the dull thumping of Uncle Vernon's feet as he descended the stairs. When they reached the kitchen he heard the familiar bellow, "BOY, GET DOWN HERE AND FIX MY BREAKFAST!"

Harry rolled out of bed and dressed as quickly as he could, running down the stairs with one trainer loosely tied and the other not tied at all. As he turned the corner and headed for the kitchen he noticed that the front door was slowly, yet silently, opening. He pulled his wand and cautiously approached the opening door, ready to strike if need be. Moments later Remus stuck his head into the hallway and, looking straight into Harry's eyes, whispered, "Padfoot rides again." Harry smiled, nodded and tucked his wand back into his leg holster.

"BOY," Uncle Vernon bellowed again, "I TOLD YOU TO GET DOWN HERE AND FIX MY BREAKFAST!"

When Harry walked into the kitchen, as Remus crouched behind the doorframe, his uncle had his face buried in the newspaper, his aunt was standing near the window, spying on the neighbors, and Dudley was watching cartoons on the kitchen telly. Harry went to the refrigerator and got out the eggs, ham, sausage and bacon, took them over to the counter and set about preparing his uncle's breakfast. Ten minutes later, as he placed his uncle's five slices of toast, six slices of bacon and four eggs (sunny side up) on a plate, he glanced up at Remus who was motioning for him to stand back. When he did Remus waved his wand in a curious pattern while whispering an incantation. As he finished the incantation a silver bolt of magical energy shot from the tip of Remus' wand and struck the center of the plate. Nothing looked any different so Harry glanced questioningly at Remus who motioned for him to go ahead and serve it. Harry looked suspiciously at the plate then glanced back at Remus. "Go on," Remus mouthed through a mischievous grin.

Harry took the plate over and placed it before his beefy uncle and returned to the range to begin preparing Dudley's breakfast, which, now that he had excelled in boxing and begun a strenuous training program, consisted of bacon, eggs, toast, ham and sausage. Moments later, as he was cracking the third egg and emptying its contents into the frying pan, he heard his uncle Vernon spit his food out and throw his paper onto the table, knocking over a glass of orange juice which spilled and spread out over the surface of the table, dribbling onto the floor in several places. "WHAT ARE YOU TRYING TO DO, BOY!" his uncle bellowed, "POISON ME? GET OVER HERE AND CLEAN UP THIS MESS!"

"Don't move, Harry," Remus said, calmly walking into the kitchen. Then, just as calmly, taking a fork out of the silverware drawer he walked over to stand beside Vernon and said, "Do you mind?" Vernon paled at the sight or Remus but Harry could tell that he was getting ready to explode.

Without waiting for a response Remus stabbed an untouched slice of bacon and took a bite. Chewing thoughtfully for a few moments while looking up at the ceiling he screwed his face up at the taste then nodded. "Yep. That's what I thought: earwax and chili powder. I'm afraid, Mister Dursley, that you are going to have to do your own cooking from now on. You see, due to the particulars of Harry's current situation, his need for additional training and our need to ensure that he is being treated fairly in this house the restriction on the underage use of magic has been lifted in his case. He is not to tell anyone who does not need to know this particular fact and he is not to

abuse this privilege. I, however, am a fully trained wizard who is under no such restriction. If I find that you are abusing Harry in any way I will not hesitate to hex you in ways you cannot even begin to imagine.

"Now, while Harry was not responsible for the rather unusual taste of your food this morning I thought you should know that he will no longer be required to prepare any of your meals. Any meals he does prepare under any form of duress will taste as bad as this if not worse." Turning to Harry Remus smiled and said, "Now, Harry, since they have a record of the spell I just cast on your uncle's food could you please be so kind as to remove it so they do not think we are abusing your relatives?"

It was more of a statement than a question but Harry didn't mind; this was just too funny. Remus stepped aside as Harry pulled his wand and pointed it at his uncle's plate. He glanced over at Remus for confirmation and when Remus nodded and smiled broadly he muttered, "Finite Incantatum."

A jet of golden sparks shot from Harry's wand and struck his uncle's plate. "There," Remus said, "I think that should about do it. And to prove that we are nowhere near as bad as you seem to think I will prepare the rest of this meal myself."

Using his wand Remus prepared Dudley's massive breakfast, Petunia's light breakfast and moderate meals for both Harry and himself. All the while Harry was smiling broadly while struggling not to laugh.

Vernon Dursley hurriedly ate the rest of his breakfast and was on his was out the door when Remus stopped him. "Oh, and by the way, sir, you needn't worry about the price of food this summer. Since we are taking a more active interest in Harry's welfare we will be paying for all of the food this summer. What you buy is your affair and will come out of your pocket." Harry just smiled and shook his head. Yes, he thought, this was going to be an interesting summer.

After breakfast Harry and Remus went up to Harry's room and closed the door. Remus put a privacy charm on the door, made Harry's bed with a flick of his wand and, as Harry sat down at his desk, took a seat on the edge of the bed. Harry's smile finally broke and he burst out laughing. "Remus, you are one dangerous wizard," he laughed.

Remus looked at him quizically and said, "What? I didn't hurt anyone did I?"

"No," he laughed, "but the looks on their faces were priceless and Uncle Vernon . . ." Harry struggle to contain himself but failed miserably. "You are so subtle it's scary."

"Why thank you," Remus said as a mischievous grin spread across his face. "I learned from the best."

A minute later, after Harry had recovered from his laughter and was once again sitting in his chair, he turned to look at Remus and said, "Remus, I want to know the truth about my dad."

Remus leaned forward, rested his elbows on his knees and studied his hands for several seconds, periodically chewing on his lower lip as if trying to decide where to begin, before raising his head and looking into Harry's eyes. "I won't lie to you, Harry," he finally said. "Your father was a good man; one of the best. And he was a good friend. But sometimes he had too much energy for his own

good. Yes, he was arrogant and cocky but he didn't maliciously hurt or embarrass anyone unless he felt they deserved it. Most of his pranks were harmless. What you saw in Snape's pensive was a retaliatory strike, not for anything Severus did to us but for what he had been doing to younger, less powerful - and sometimes defenseless - muggleborns and half-bloods all year long. You see, Harry, the war was going strong while we were in school and a lot of good witches and wizards were dieing on a daily basis. Some of the Slytherins - such as Snape - wanted to bring the war into the halls of Hogwarts. When we - that is to say the marauders - got wind of this, your dad and Sirius decided to take matters into their own hands. Since the perpetrators were hardly ever caught and the teachers refused to take any action based on accusation alone, without any hard evidence, your dad and Sirius would talk to the victims, find out what happened and get descriptions of the assailants which, since they were both fairly observant, gave them a pretty good idea as to who the perpetrators were.

"Like I said, most of their pranks were harmless but occasionally they could get out of hand. I was made a prefect to try to keep them under control but I knew why they were tormenting Snape that day and I wasn't about to get in their way. Besides, the bonds of friendship between us were very powerful."

"So Snape wasn't an innocent victim?" Harry asked. Remus snorted and shook his head. "No, Harry, far from it. Severus was far from an innocent victim. He was about as far from being an innocent victim as you can get."

"So why did my mother try to defend him?"

"Your mother tended to side with the teachers. She didn't believe in punishing anyone without any hard evidence and since no hard evidence was ever found she couldn't justify what we were doing. I honestly don't think she knew why they were doing it. Oh, she may have suspected something but I don't think she really knew or understood all of the reasons behind our madness."

"What changed her mind?"

Remus paused, hesitating for a moment, then said, "I think it was a lot of things really. Before your father became head boy he was approachable in an unofficial capacity because while the teachers would listen they wouldn't do anything. James would not only listen but he would do something about the accusations. When he became head boy he went out of his way to make sure that he was still approachable. Only this time it was in an official capacity. I think when Lily saw that side of him - the sensitive, caring side that was willing to stand up and fight for what was right - she realized that she may have misjudged him. But I think the clincher was when a little third year Huffelpuff girl was raped. James almost started a war over that one and Lily was on his side. That's what really brought them together and the three Slytherins who gang raped that poor girl never knew what hit them. After that your parents were inseparable. That's when Lily became the unofficial fifth Marauder. I think when she realized that there was a method to our madness and that our most viscous pranks were reserved for helping the little guy she began to understand your father and, while she may not have agreed with some of his tactics, she did agree with his ideals. She was a very powerful witch, Harry, and when those two got together on a prank all hell would break loose. Of course, James was more than willing to take credit for their stunts because with credit came blame and he didn't want your mother to ruin her reputation. They argued about it a few times but James won out in the end."

Harry sat in silence, staring blankly at nothing more important than a singular point in space for almost a minute while absorbing this new information. When he finally looked up relief was clearly visible in his eyes. "Thank you," he said.

"Not a problem," Remus said, smiling at the expression on Harry's face and the unspoken message in the tone of Harry's voice.

"Can you teach me some of your pranks?"

Remus laughed. "You've got much more important things to think about than pranking a bunch of lousy Slytherins, Harry; but I'll see what I can do. For right now, however, we have got to see what we can't do about defeating a certain dark lord."

Harry smiled to himself then lowered his gaze to once again stare at that singular point in space. "Alright," he said. "Where do we begin?"

Remus looked thoughtfully out the window for several seconds before responding. "The first thing we have to do is define our goals."

Harry looked incredulously over at his former teacher. "Defeat Voldemort, of course," he said.

"Yes, yes. That is our ultimate goal. But there are many smaller goals we must set and achieve before we can take that final step. The members of the Order are working on gathering intelligence and are involved in the fighting. The Daily Prophet and The Quibbler are helping us spread the word and keeping people informed. Fudge is still being something of a git about a lot of things and I fear he may strive to lash out at both you and Albus in some way before it's all over because once it became known that he knew of Voldemort's return more than a year ago and said nothing his popularity began slipping. You see, Harry, one of the things people like Fudge seem to forget is that sometimes hiding the truth can cause more harm than might otherwise have occurred."

"Boy, you can say that again," Harry grumbled.

Remus looked over at Harry who was turning to stare vacantly out the window. Stepping over to sit on the edge of Harry's desk he said, "Harry, I know what Albus did seems wrong and I tend to agree with you. But he was trying to give you a chance to grow up normally."

Harry turned his head and looked up into the werewolf's amber eyes, his own eyes starting to fill with tears. "If that's so, then why did he leave me here?" he almost screamed.

Remus sighed. "You know that as well as I do, Harry. As long as you can call your aunt's house home for a few months out of the year you will be protected by the magic that can only exist between two blood relatives."

"Did Dumbledore tell you that?" Harry groused.

Remus hung his head and looked at his tattered shoes. "We had to drag it out of him. It wasn't easy and he wishes there had been some other way but unfortunately, for the magic to work, there was none."

"Do you understand how it works?" Harry asked.

Remus looked over at Harry, the only living legacy of the Marauders, and softly smiled. "Yes, I do. It is a very complicated spell that has its roots in some of the most ancient magic on record; but what it boils down to is a two-way protective charm. So long as both you and your aunt are alive and can call the same house home for at least one month a year - preferably the month of July as that is the month of your birth - your aunt's house will be a safe haven - a sanctuary if you will - for the two of you. Your uncle and cousin are, in a manner of speaking, just along for the ride."

Pulling a copy of the Daily Prophet out of his back pocket Remus laid it on the bed and began leafing through it's pages. "I thought you might want to see this," he said as he reached the Ministry Business section of the paper and carried it over laying it on the desk. Harry turned around and his eyes widened as he read the headline.

> Black Cleared of all Charges!

Several of You-Know-Who's supporters, known as Death Eaters, were taken into custody last month after a lengthy battle in The Department of Mysteries. The names of the combatants are being withheld as many of them were underage witches and wizards who are currently attending Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

When questioned under the influence of Veritaserum several of the Death Eaters stated that Sirius Black never was one of their number and that he was framed for the murders of twelve muggles and one Peter Pettigrew by none other than Peter Petigrew himself who is alive, a Death Eater and an illegal animagus whose form it that of a rat. It would seem that after Mr. Pettigrew framed Mr. Black for betraying Lily and James Potter he cut off one of his fingers before blowing up the street, transforming into his rat form and escaping into the sewers, effectively faking his own death. It was also learned that Pettigrew was the Potter's Secret Keeper and it was he who betrayed the Potters to He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.

Sadly, Mr. Black died in the aforementioned battle before his name could be cleared. As of yesterday evening, however, Mr. Sirius Black has been cleared of all charges and his name has been officially removed from the Ministry's Most Wanted List.

The Ministry deeply regrets the false imprisonment of an innocent man. The mystery as to how Mr. Black escaped from Azkaban Wizarding Prison, however, still remains. **(For a related story please see Death Eaters Among Us on page E5.)**

Harry looked up at Remus and smiled, his eyes brimming with tears of happiness. "Good," he said. "It's about time."

Remus smiled, nodded his head and pulled Harry into a hug. "Yes it is, cub," Remus whispered then began to chuckle softly. "That's just like old Padfoot, though. He always wanted to leave 'em guessing."

Walking back over to Harry's bed and getting back to the subject at hand Remus said, "Now, what you and I need to figure out is what we are going to do and how we are going to contribute to the cause."

Harry turned around and leaned forward. Resting his elbows on his knees he stared down at the loose floorboard under the bed. He hadn't put anything under there yet as the summer had only just begun and for a moment he wondered if he would be using it at all this summer. Then his

thoughts turned to the wizarding world and to the task of defeating Voldemort. He thought about what Remus had said and realized that there was much more to fighting and winning a war than simply going out and killing the bad guys. There was a lot of planning and preparation that went into an operation like this. He suddenly realized how foolish - how immature, young and childish - he had been to think that it was all just a matter of kill or be killed. True, it would probably come down to that in the end, in the final battle, but before that battle could take place there was a lot of work that needed to be done.

As he turned his head to look towards the foot of his bed Harry began thinking about what his immediate goals should be. He knew that there were a lot of defenseless witches and wizards out there, not to mention muggles, and he knew that there were only so many aurors, hit wizards and members of the Order arrayed against an unknown number of Death Eaters and other dark forces. He had already lost his parents and Sirius to Voldemort and his followers and he had seen Cedric killed just because he had been a 'spare'. He didn't want anyone else to die. "I guess," he said thoughtfully after several minutes of introspective silence, "I want to find some way, some spell or charm or something, to block the Unforgivables."

Remus looked up suddenly. "What?" he said incredulously. "Block the unforgivables? That's never been done before."

Harry looked up, a twisted smile on his face. "So. That doesn't mean it can't be done does it?"

Remus looked thoughtful for a moment then shook his head. "No. It doesn't mean it can't be done; all it means is that some of the greatest minds in the wizarding world have been trying to solve that problem for years and no one has been able to find the answer."

"Have they ever looked beyond the wizarding world to find a solution?"

"I don't know," Remus confessed. "I doubt it, though, because it is primarily a wizarding problem, created by wizards, and most of the researchers seem to think it should have a wizarding solution."

Harry thought about this then slowly said, "Alright then. Then let's start looking at muggle solutions."

After a lengthy silence Remus said, "Where should we start?"

Harry thought about this for a moment then jumped up and ran to his trunk. Throwing it open he began rummaging through the many loose pieces and scraps of parchment he had accumulated over the years. "What are you looking for?" Remus asked.

"Hermione's telephone number," Harry said excitedly. "She's a muggle-born and the smartest witch I know! If anyone will have an idea where we should start looking it will be her." Flipping open one of the books from his first year a small scrap of parchment fluttered to the floor. Picking it up he read the note and jumped up. "Come on!" he said throwing the door open and running down the stairs and into the kitchen.

His aunt, Petunia, looked up apprehensively as he raced into the kitchen and Dudley scooted back from the table, his eyes filled with fear that Harry might turn him onto something unnatural or, worse yet, give him another pig's tail. "Aunt Petunia," Harry breathed excitedly, "could I use the telephone?"

The horse-faced woman seemed to struggle with her desires and fears for several seconds before reluctantly agreeing. "All right then," she said harshly. "But don't be too long and don't abuse it."

"I won't," Harry said as Remus calmly sauntered into the kitchen.

Placing the scrap of parchment on the counter next to the phone he lifted the receiver and punched in the numbers. Three rings later a familiar voice answered, "Granger residence."

"Hermione?" Harry asked.

"Harry?" Hermione's surprised voice said. "How are you? It's so good to hear your voice . . ."

Harry cut her off. "Er, . . . Hermione, Remus is here and we need to ask you a question."

"Remus? As in Professor Lupin?" Hermione asked. "What's he doing there?"

"Yes," Harry said. "Remus as in Professor Lupin. It's a long story but we need to ask you a question."

"All right," Hermione said hesitantly. "What is it?"

Harry hesitated briefly as he caught his breath. "This might sound crazy, Hermione, but we are trying to find something that will be effective against the Unforgivables. According to Remus most of the research in this area has centered around trying to find a magical solution to a magical problem." Petunia and Dudley both gasped but Harry ignored their reactions. "What we want to know is if you can think of where we might start looking in the muggle world."

Hermione was silent for several seconds then said, "That's going to be some very ancient and some very powerful magic, Harry. My guess is that it is going to be some of the most ancient on record, if it has ever even been recorded." After falling silent again she said, "All I can think to say is that you begin by studying muggle spiritual philosophy as they are some of the oldest muggle texts on record. I think the oldest of these are the Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Christian and Muslim faiths. They aren't easy reading, Harry, but they can be quite interesting. Do you want any help?"

Harry thought for a moment. "Uh, sure. What books would you recommend?"

"Well," Hermione pondered, "They all say the same thing really. They just have different ways of going about it. It all kind of depends upon how you think and what you like to read."

"Er, like I said, any suggestions?"

"Well, I've read all of them myself so they really aren't all that difficult for me any more so how about if I take the Buddhist and Hindu philosophies and you and Professor Lupin take the Jewish, Christian and Muslim philosophies. Christianity and the Muslim faith are actually offshoots of the Jewish religion so they are probably best studied together. I'll tell you what, is there anyway I can meet either you or Professor Lupin at a bookstore so we can go shopping sometime in the next couple of days?"

Harry rolled his eyes. Leave it to Hermione to think about going to a bookstore on her first full day back from school. He had to admire her determination though. "I'll let you talk to Remus about that. I've got Occlumency lessons with Dumbledore this afternoon so maybe you can get together then."

"Alright then," Hermione said and waited while Harry handed the receiver to Remus and explained how to use it.

"Hermione?" Remus said into the handset. "Hermione, please. I haven't been your professor for more than two years now. Please call me either Remus or Moony. . . Yes, Harry has Occlumency lessons with Albus from one to four this afternoon. . . Yes, I think Harry will succeed. Albus really is a much better teacher than Severus and I think Harry is a bit more motivated now that he knows what can happen. . ." He said this last with a cautious glance at Harry who grimly nodded in response. "Yes, I can be at your house a little after one. . . Yes. . . Where do you live? Yes. . . Yes, Hermione, security has been increased. I'm not at liberty to say how, just that it has. . . Okay. . . Would you like to speak to Harry?"

Remus handed the phone back to Harry. "Hi, Hermione," Harry said.

"Are you alright, Harry?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "Yes, Hermione," he said shaking his head at Remus, "I'm fine."

"Okay," she said uncertainly. "You know we care about you."

Harry smiled to himself and nodded. "Yes, Hermione. I know you care."

"Good," she said with an almost inaudible sigh of relief. "Don't be a stranger this summer and please write."

"I will."

"Good. I look forward to seeing Hedwig at least twice a week."

Harry smiled and shook his head again. "Alright," he said. "I'll write."

"You had better," Hermione said sternly.

Harry laughed. "Alright, Hermione. I promise. I'll write."

"Alright then, Harry. I'll see you in a few weeks."

"Okay," Harry smiled. "I'll see you later. Bye."

"Goodbye then, Harry."

Harry placed the handset back in the cradle, thanked his aunt for letting him use the phone and, turning to Remus, said, "Well, now what?"

Leading the way out of the kitchen and back up to Harry's room Remus said, "Now I think we had better get you ready for your first class with Albus."

After lunch Harry and Remus walked over to Mrs. Figg's house. On their way they picked up two more bodyguards. Tonks stepped out of the shadows at one point and joined them, Harry noticed that she looked fairly attractive as a brunette, and Mad-Eye Moody, invisibility cloak in tact, joined them a few minutes later as they approached Mrs. Figg's door. Remus had reached out and was about to raise the brass knocker when the door flew open to reveal Harry's batty old baby sitter

who was a squib as well as a member of The Order of the Phoenix. She was holding one of her many cats while another wound itself between her feet. Several others were occupying the various couches in her living room. The unreasonable stench of cat fur and cabbage assaulted Harry's nose as she quickly ushered them in and closed the door behind Moody with a snap. "Oh, thank heavens you made it!" Mrs. Figg gasped as she plunged the foursome into the relative darkness of the dimly lit room.

"That bad, eh?" Harry said as his eyes adjusted to the dim interior.

"Not yet," the familiar voice of Albus Dumbledore said from the far corner of the room where he was sitting on a small couch, contentedly caressing a cinnamon colored cat. "It would seem your little trip to the Department of Mysteries last month has bought us some time. We don't know how much but Severus seems to think we might have a few weeks before things start heating up again. Many of Tom's top lieutenants were taken into custody in that battle and he is currently trying to regroup."

The old wizard looked up from the cat and motioned for the others to make themselves comfortable. Harry, still somewhat apprehensive about the events in the headmaster's office on the morning after their trip to the Department of Mysteries, seated himself on the long couch nearest the door and furthest away from the aging headmaster. Remus sat next to him as a fluffy, white cat jumped up onto Harry's lap. Harry began running his fingers through its soft fur and turned his attention back to Professor Dumbledore. "This may prove beneficial to your lessons as well," the headmaster said. "We may have time, while he is otherwise occupied, to help you learn Occlumency. However, I must impress upon you, Harry, that you must practice."

Harry nodded. "Yes, sir. I know that now. I just wish someone had explained what was happening beforehand so we could have avoided that trip." Harry and Remus had agreed not to talk about that fateful night until they were both ready and that time had not yet arrived.

Albus Dumbledore bowed his head and Harry could tell that the old man was dealing with some internal demons of his own. "Yes, Harry," he said with a sigh of resignation. "I am sorry I kept you in the dark for so long. I hope you can forgive me."

Harry silently stoked the cat which had curled up in his lap and who was contentedly purring for several seconds before responding. "I forgive you, sir," Harry said softly. "However, I must ask you to please not keep me in the dark any longer. I know I don't need to know everything that is going on but if it is anything that can help me defeat Voldemort then I would like to know about it."

Tonks and Mrs. Figg both gasped when Harry said Voldemort's name and Harry noticed that the cat in his lap tensed briefly as well. He had expected this but what he had not expected was Moody's reaction. "What do you mean, help you defeat Voldemort?" Moody asked. "Surely you don't think you can beat this guy by yourself?"

"I am afraid that is Harry's story," Dumbledore said tiredly. "If he wants you to know he will tell you. It is something he has to deal with and I will not interfere in his decisions. Therefore, I would appreciate it if you let Harry tell you if and/or when he wants you to know what we have discussed."

Dumbledore looked down and stroked the cat on his lap for several seconds before raising his eyes and speaking again. "I accept your terms, Harry, and I will do everything in my power to get you the

information you need as quickly as possible."

Remus stood up. "I'm sorry, ladies and gentlemen, but I have a date with a certain young witch who is going to help Harry and me solve a problem. So, if you will excuse me . . ."

Dumbledore nodded and Remus disapparated out of the room. "Alastor, Nymphodora," Dumbledore said, "if you could resume your posts. . . Arabella, Harry and I will be in your study."

Professor Dumbledore stood up and led Harry into the small room that was just off the living room and closed the door.

The room was small with a wooden desk, a number of low bookshelves and several framed pictures - mostly of cats - adorning the walls. Dumbledore walked around and sat behind the desk and motioned for Harry to be seated. Harry pulled up one of the wooden chairs and sat opposite the aging professor, looking nervously across at the old man in front of him. "Er, sir," Harry began tentatively, "are you upset that Remus didn't ask your permission before coming to see me yesterday?"

"I was," Dumbledore confessed. "But I understand your needs. The two of you were probably closer to Sirius than anyone else and you need time to grieve. I wish he had told me of his plans so that some arrangements could have been made. But I am not blind, Harry, and we have adjusted our schedules to accommodate your needs.

"So tell me," Dumbledore asked, skillfully changing subjects, "what is this problem you and Remus are trying to solve?"

Harry looked up hesitantly. "We are going to try to find something that will be effective against the Unforgivables." Dumbledore looked up with interest. "We are going to try to find a muggle solution to a wizarding problem. We spoke to Hermione this morning and she suggested we start looking in some of the more ancient muggle spiritual philosophies. That's where Remus is now. He and Hermione are going to go to a bookstore to pick up some books. I think she said that she was going to be searching the Buddhist and Hindu philosophies while Remus and I search the Muslim, Jewish and Christian philosophies."

Dumbledore steepled his fingers and looked thoughtfully over his half moon glasses at Harry, an interested twinkle appearing in his blue eyes. "Interesting," he said. "I wish you luck. You have your work cut out for you. But then again you are motivated so I have no doubt that you will succeed. Now, on to the task at hand. . ."

"Uh, professor," Harry said, interrupting his mentor's train of thought, "What about Snape?"

The sense of loathing in Harry's voice was enough to make even Dumbledore's eyes fly open with surprise and a certain amount of shock. After he had calmed himself and reconciled himself with Harry's hatred of the Potions Master Dumbledore sighed and hung his head. "Professor Snape, Harry," he said softly. Then, after looking around the room briefly, almost as if he feared looking into Harry's eyes, he looked at Harry and said, "As I said, Harry, I am not blind. I have spoken with Professor Snape and he knows that I am not pleased with either his actions or his teaching methods. He is still a member of the Order because we need him; and he is still our Potions Master because we need to keep him safe; but he knows that I will no longer tolerate any of his reckless and childish behaviors."

Breathing a sigh of relief Harry closed his eyes and relaxed against the back of his chair. "Thank you, sir," he said.

Dumbledore stood and walked around the desk. Standing in front of Harry he leaned back, resting on the front edge of the desk, and looked down at Harry. Although they still sparkled with life, the aging headmaster's eyes were worn with age and the lines of concern which currently marred his features revealed that much of what he was about to say would break his heart as it meant that the teenager seated before him would not have a chance to grow up normally and have a happy, care-free childhood. "Harry," he said, "I think it is time you and I have a little talk."

Harry looked up at the most powerful wizard in the world. "Sir?" he asked.

"Harry," Dumbledore sighed, "it is time I told you something of myself and my experiences in the war against Grindelwald so that you can get an idea as to what you should expect the next time you and Tom meet and so that you can prepare. In addition, you are going to be receiving additional training in Dueling and Advanced Defense Against the Dark Arts this summer so that you will be better able to defend yourself in your next meeting with his followers."

Harry looked thoughtfully out the window for a moment. "Where will I be practicing," he asked.

Dumbledore looked at the young man before him and smiled. "There is a grove of trees in a park near your aunt's home. We are in the process of establishing a number of muggle-repelling charms, similar to those used at the Quidditch World Cup two years ago, so that you can practice in private without fear of being discovered. We have already installed an Order member as the groundskeeper for this particular park so you needn't worry about that.

"Starting tomorrow your days are going to be beginning earlier than usual. At five o'clock in the morning you will be going for a half-hour run to warm up so I suggest you plan on getting up at around four-thirty. After a light breakfast you will be studying, learning and practicing tumbling, gymnastics and ballet for three hours. After a short break you will begin learning and practicing some of the most advanced Defensive and Transfiguration spells known as well as a number of charms that may come in both useful and handy. After that you will break for lunch. After lunch, on days you are scheduled to be with me, you will come here. On the days you are not, except for on the days of the full moon, you will have your time with Remus to talk, study, read or do homework."

Harry let his mouth fall slightly open at this news. "Ballet, sir?" he asked.

Dumbledore chuckled and smiled. "Yes, Harry, ballet. To be a top dueler you must be both flexible and fast on your feet. Tumbling, gymnastics and ballet will help you reach those goals."

Harry shook his head and smiled to himself. Of all the things he had thought it would take to become a master dueler ballet had not been one of them. "Um, sir?" Harry asked.

"Yes?"

"Am I going to be the only one receiving this training?"

"On the one hand," Dumbledore said as he worked his way around a direct response, "you will be the only one learning Occlumency. However, Mister Longbottom has requested additional training in dueling so he will be joining you in your morning sessions."

Harry nodded his head. It only made sense that Neville should want to become a master dueler after what the Lestranges did to his parents. "Who will be teaching us?"

The headmaster smiled. "Ah, but that would be telling now wouldn't it? Since you asked, however, your instructors will be Remus, Miss Tonks, Kingsley Shacklebolt and Alastor Moody."

Harry nodded, happy that he would be working with people he already knew. "Okay," he said.

"Now," Professor Dumbledore said as he returned to his seat, "on to the business at hand."

For the next two and one-half hours Harry and Professor Dumbledore visited about the war against Grindelwald and discussed the fine art of Occlumency. Despite his previous experiences with Snape, Harry found the subject interesting and attributed this to Dumbledore's approach and considerable teaching ability. At four o'clock there was a light tapping on the door and Mrs. Figg stuck her head in. "Albus?" she interrupted, "It's time."

Dumbledore looked up and nodded. "Very well. You have done surprisingly well today, Harry. Now I want you to go home and practice what you have learned. You and Remus have set yourselves an enviable task and I wish you all the luck in the world; but you have still got to practice Occlumency because we cannot afford to let Tom use his connection with you to ruin our plans. The sooner we are able to break this bond the better because so long as it is in place the coming war will have no end."

Harry nodded. "Yes, sir. I understand and I will not let you down."

The headmaster nodded, stood up and, after walking around the desk, led Harry out into the living room where Remus and Mrs. Figg stood waiting for them. Remus was holding a shopping bag from a bookstore in Oxford. He shook his head and said. "Sometimes I wonder about that girl. We spent almost two hours going through one small subsection of one bookstore before she settled on just three books. Needless to say the store manager was a bit put out by our purchases. I think he was hoping we would buy more than we did."

Harry chuckled. "I'm surprised you didn't wind up buying the entire store. But then again, Hermione does have a tendency to know what she is looking for. You should see her in the library some time. There may be fifty books on a particular subject she is interested in but she will sit there and pick through them for hours until she finds the one she is looking for."

Remus smiled wryly. "I can tell. She is very organized."

Chapter 3. Let the Training Begin

At 4:30 the next morning Harry's alarm sounded and he reached over to turn it off. Unfortunately, however, even though he had gotten a peaceful night's rest, he was lying too close to the edge of his bed and fell to the floor, securely entangled within his blanket and bedsheets. After struggling to free himself for almost a minute he stood up and turned off the alarm. Reaching for his glasses he looked out the window and saw that it was still dark. "Why did I get up so early?" he asked himself groggily. Then, remembering his conversation with Dumbledore the previous afternoon and the training schedule the headmaster had told him about, he groaned. It began today.

Walking over and turning on the overhead light Harry checked Hedwig's cage to see if she had returned home from her nightly hunt. She hadn't. He got dressed in his newest set of Dudley's hand-me-downs, put on his trainers, made his bed and sat down at his desk looking out the window at the seemingly deserted street below and waited. He knew that somewhere down below two members of the Order of the Phoenix were guarding the house and Privet Drive and that he would probably be safe waiting outside but didn't feel like waiting in the cool, damp predawn air of Little Whinging. So he waited for whomever it was that was going to be running with him to arrive. He thought about writing a letter to either Ron or Hermione but what would he tell them? 'Hi, guys, its 4:40 AM, the sun isn't up yet but I am.' He shook his head at the thought and chuckled softly to himself. No, that wouldn't be a very good idea because then they would start asking questions and he didn't want to lie to them. He couldn't tell them that he was receiving additional training because then they would ask about the restriction on the underage use of magic and he couldn't tell them that it had been lifted in his case. With that thought he wondered if the restriction had been lifted for Neville as well.

At 4:50 Hedwig returned from her hunt and soared through the open window with a fat field mouse clutched firmly in her beak. Five minutes later he saw a small burst of red sparks shooting up from somewhere down below. Taking that as his signal he stood up from his desk, closed the window and left the house as quietly as possible so as not to wake the Dursleys. As he was about to descend the steps he checked to make sure that he had his wand and wondered what Moody would think of his improvised leg holster?

As Harry left the house he heard an unfamiliar yet friendly voice say, "Morning, Potter."

Harry didn't know who it was or where they were hiding but he turned in the direction of the voice and said, "Good morning and thank you."

The disembodied voice gave a slight sniff, as if to clear its sinuses, then, in a tone that was a mixture of surprise and pleasure, said, "You're welcome, Harry. They are waiting for you at the end of the drive."

Harry nodded and said, "Thanks," before turning and walking down to the end of the drive.

When he reached the street he heard Remus' disembodied voice say, "Stop." Harry stopped and stood still. A moment later first Neville then Remus appeared before him. Neville was dressed in a navy blue jogging suit with white stripes down the legs and arms and Remus was dressed in a set of grey sweats. "We're going to have to get you some proper clothes, Harry," Remus said. "We'll do that this afternoon but these will do for now. We're going to take it easy this morning because neither of you has properly warmed up. So, we're just going to do a light jog around the neighborhood and

down to the park. If either of you feels a cramp coming on please say something so we can stop. I will be teaching you some stretches later on that should help you become more limber and will help you with the rest of your training. For right now, however, just a light jog."

Half an hour later, as dawn was beginning to break over the horizon, Harry, Neville and Remus were jogging towards a thick stand of trees at the top of a low rise in one corner of a nearby park. Winding their way through these trees, following an unremarkable and almost invisable path, they soon found themselves in a small clearing that was effectively hidden from public view by its surroundings. As they entered the clearing Harry noticed that Kingsley, Tonks and Moody were standing around its perimeter casting a variety of spells. Harry guessed that they were putting the final touches on the muggle repelling charms.

A picnic table was set up in the center of the clearing near a small boulder and a medium sized hamper was resting on the table. After she finished casting a particularly complicated spell Tonks turned around and, upon seeing Remus, Harry and Neville making their way into the clearing, called out, "Wotcher, Harry?" as she quickly crossed the clearing and pulled him into a sisterly hug, her hair once again vibrantly pink.

Harry smiled and hugged her back. "I'm doing fine, Tonks," he said, smiling despite himself. Then, seeing the look of apprehension on Neville's face, said, "Tonks, I don't think you've met Neville Longbottom yet. Neville, this is Tonks. I would tell you her first name but it would probably get me hexed or cursed or worse."

Neville stepped forward and nervously extended his hand. "P-pleased to meet you," he said, his voice quavering slightly.

Tonks scowled at Harry as she firmly yet graciously shook Neville's hand. "And I'm pleased to meet you, Neville. Don't listen to Harry, though. I'm not really all that bad as long as you don't call me by my first name."

Neville smiled nervously. "Why's that," he asked.

Harry and Remus stifled their laughter and covered their mouths with their hands as they turned away. Tonks glared at them then turned back to Neville. "Never you mind, Neville." Then, as she turned to lead them to the picnic table she grumbled, "Why my mum ever gave me that name I'll never know."

Harry and Remus burst out laughing and had to lean on each other for support. Upon reaching the table Tonks opened the picnic basket, pulled out a sandwich and threw it at Harry and Remus who were still laughing at her discomfiture. "Hey!" Remus said, a smile still evident on his face and in his voice, "That's my breakfast you're throwing around you know?"

Tonks smiled innocently. "Why so it is. Here, do you want the rest of it?" she asked as she pulled another sandwich from the hamper.

"No, no, no," Remus said, throwing his hands up in surrender. "That's quite alright. I'll behave."

Tonks turned to Harry and, in a threatening tone of voice that could not be mistaken for anything other than the warning it was, said, "Harry?"

Harry quickly sobered himself but the mirth was still evident in his eyes and he could not stop smiling. "I'll behave," he said merrily.

"Good," Tonks said as she lay their breakfast out on the table.

When Kingsley and Mad-Eye Moody came over Harry introduced them to Neville. When Moody heard Neville's last name he looked Neville in the eye and said, in his usual gruff, gravely voice, "Longbottom, eh? Any relation to Frank and Alice?"

"Y-yes, sir," Neville said hesitantly. "They are my parents."

Moody's expression softened a bit. "And good people they are, too. I'm sorry about what happened to them, Neville." Harry could tell that something - perhaps the memory of what had happened to Neville's parents - was bothering the old auror. "We couldn't get there in time to save them and I'm sorry you had to witness it."

Neville looked hesitantly at the grizzled man before him and asked, "You knew my parents?"

"Aye," Moody nodded. "I knew them. Two of the best they were. I just hope that someday they will find a cure for them."

Neville smiled sadly. "Yes, sir. Thank you, sir. I do too."

As Moody sat down at the end of one of the benches he said, "Dumbledore told us that we would be having a second student, besides Potter here, but I had no idea it was going to be you; and to tell you the truth, Longbottom, I'm glad it is because of all of the people I know you two have more reason than most to want to fight Voldemort and his Death Eaters."

Neville squeaked slightly at Moody's casual use of Voldemort's name but quickly recovered. "Yes," Kingsley said, his deep, rich, baritone voice filling the clearing with a sense of belonging. "No matter what anyone tells you, Neville, your parents are good people. If you will let us we will teach both you and Harry to be Master Duelers. It will take time and you will have to relearn many of the things you thought you knew. The training will be difficult and you may question some of our techniques but it is for your own good. We want you to succeed."

Harry bristled slightly when Kingsley said that it was for their own good but let it pass. He knew that they had to learn to fight and if Kingsley, Tonks, Remus and Moody were willing to teach them then he was willing to put up with a little emotional discomfort.

After a light breakfast - which consisted of sandwiches, juice and milk - Remus, Tonks and Kingsley spent the next three hours teaching Harry and Neville the stretches they would need to practice on a daily basis to properly warm up for their exercises and training as well as a few basic ballet, gymnastics and tumbling moves and rolls. One of the first things they learned was how to fall without getting hurt. Most of it was relatively easy for Harry as he was fairly thin and light. Neville, however, had a more difficult time with parts of it. But Harry was surprised at how quickly his friend picked it up. There was no doubt about it, Neville was determined to fight.

After a short break and a light snack Moody called them over to where he was standing at one end of the clearing. "The first thing you have got to learn about dueling," he growled, "is how to hold your wand." Harry and Neville looked at the retired auror as if he had lost his mind. Moody noticed

this and growled. "Don’t they teach you this in school anymore?" he asked.

Harry and Neville shook their heads.

Moody grumbled, "First they don’t teach you proper wand care, now they don’t even teach you how to hold your wand properly! What is this world coming to! How are we going to win this war if they don’t even teach the basics!

"Alright," he growled. "Wands out!"

Harry pulled his wand out of his leg holster. "Interesting," Moody commented. "I’ve seen better but it beats getting your buttocks blown off."

Neville fished around in the small backpack his gran had insisted he bring and pulled out a long, thin, black box. "New wand?" Moody asked.

Neville nodded. "Y-yes, sir. I was using my father’s wand but it got broken in the Department of Mysteries. My gran took me in to Ollivander’s yesterday so I could get my own."

Moody’s expression changed to what Harry suspected was a smile and said, "Good. Proper dueling can only really be done with your own wand. Do you mind if I ask what’s in it?"

"Holly with phoenix feather, eleven inches," Neville said proudly.

"Two holly and phoenix feathers, eh?" Moody chuckled. "This ought to be an interesting summer."

"Now, which is your wand hand?"

Harry and Neville both raised their right hands.

"All right," Moody growled, "palms up!"

Following Moody’s example Harry and Neville lowered their arms, with their elbows bent at right angles and turned their hands so that their palms were facing up.

"Now lay your wand along the crease line that is formed when you bring your thumb across toward the center of your hand."

Once again following Moody’s example the two future duelers lay their wands as instructed.

"Now close your hands around your wands and let them rest across the second pad of you index fingers."

Harry and Neville followed the old auror’s instructions.

"Now I want to make sure you’ve got the grip right so I am going to be inspecting from time to time and I am going to be watching as you cast your spells. I know it might feel a bit uncomfortable at first but it is actually the best grip for casting most spells." As the old man hobbled forward Harry and Neville looked at each other nervously. "Don’t worry, boys," Moody growled. "I’m not going to eat you. I just want to make sure you’ve got the grip right."

Moody went to Neville first and had him perform a series of wand movements then, after telling

Neville to hold tight, tried to pull his wand out of his hand. When he was satisfied he walked to stand in front of Harry and had him repeat the actions. When he went to try and pull Harry's wand out of his hand, however, he stopped and growled. "LUPIN! TONKS! SHAKLEBOLT!" he bellowed. "GET OVER HERE!"

Harry looked up in surprise, not knowing what to think. When the others had gathered around Moody grabbed Harry's hand and demanded, "Where did you get this scar, Potter?"

Harry looked down and saw the words "I must not tell lies" clearly etched across the back of his hand. He immediately tried to hide it but knew that it was already too late. "I, um," he hesitated, "got it in detention."

"With who?" Moody demanded.

Harry looked at his hand for several seconds then, building his resolve, said, "Umbridge. But it's really nothing to worry about . . ."

"LIKE HELL IT'S NOTHING TO WORRY ABOUT!" Moody yelled. "THAT'S A BLOOD QUILL! THEY'VE BEEN ILLEGAL FOR ALMOST FIFTY YEARS!" Moody's face was bright red now and he was shaking with rage. "Oooooooo!" he fumed. "Fudge is going to pay for this one."

As Moody stalked off towards the center of the clearing, too angry to teach, Remus looked into Harry's eyes, a sad expression on his face. "I'm sorry, Harry. She shouldn't have done that, to you least of all. The use of a blood quill in any form of detention or torture is almost as unforgivable as using one of the Unforgivables."

Harry looked down at his shoes. "It's not like she didn't try," he said.

"WHAT!" Remus and Tonks exclaimed together.

Harry looked up. "I said it's not like she didn't try to use one of the Unforgivable curses."

"What happened?" Tonks demanded, her voice shrill and demanding.

Harry lowered his gaze and looked off to the side, remembering the night they were caught in Umbridge's office. "That night," Harry said, referring to the night of the battle in the Department of Mysteries, his voice numb, "we broke into her office to use her fireplace because I had had a vision of Sirius being held captive in that room with all the prophecies during the History exam. I wanted to talk to Sirius to see of he was all right, to see if it was true. But the only one in the kitchen at the time was Kreacher and he said that he was the only one there.

"When Umbridge and her goons caught us she wanted to know what we were doing and who I was talking to. When I wouldn't tell her she started talking to herself, debating as to whether or not she would be forgiven for using a particular curse. She never said what the curse was but I'm pretty sure it was one of the Unforgivables. I think she had made up her mind that she would be forgiven and was about to cast it when Hermione stopped her by telling her about some secret weapon that Dumbledore had hidden in the Forbidden Forest." Harry smirked as he recalled the centaurs' reactions to being called half-breeds and abominations. "I don't even want to think about which curse she would have used but I'm pretty sure it was one of the Unforgivables."

"Knowing Dolores Umbridge," Kingsley said, his voice tense with anger and loathing, "it was

probably the Cruciatus Curse. How many witnesses were there to this event?" he asked.

Glancing over at Neville, who nodded his assent, Harry said, his voice still numb, "Including Hermione, Neville and myself there were twelve. But six of them were Slytherins and I don't think you are going to get anything out of them so, six."

"We shall see," Kingsley said, his rich voice rolling around the clearing. "That is no way to run a school and testimony such as this will surely seal their fates."

Harry groaned. "I won't have to testify will I?"

Remus shook his head. "No, you won't have to testify but you will have to give statements to representatives of the Wizengamot. They will take it from there."

Harry sighed and dropped his chin to his chest. "If that's all they want then okay. I know I wasn't the only one she used her quill on. I'm sure that if you ask around you can find any number of people - students - who would be willing to make statements."

"Oh, we will, Harry," Tonks seethed. "You can count on that. People can't learn anything in an atmosphere of fear. And if that's how Fudge wants to play then by the gods he's going to pay!"

Remus lifted Harry's chin up so that he was looking him in the eye and said, "It's nothing to be ashamed of, Harry. You did the best you could in a difficult situation. That's all anyone has a right to expect."

Harry smiled weakly. "Thanks," he said.

"That's right!" Tonks said her voice still seething but her expression softening. "And right now the best we can do is find out how much you boys know so we can get an idea as to what you already know and what you are going to have to learn."

With that, a nod from Kingsley, and an encouraging smile from Remus they spent the rest of the morning reviewing the curses, hexes, charms and transfiguration spells they already knew while Moody watched from the sidelines. Neville was slightly behind Harry but with his own wand and a determination born of a fierce desire to exact his revenge upon Bellatrix Lestrange for his parents' condition he was rapidly catching up.

When it came time to perform the Patronus Charm, Neville was only able to produce a small amount of silvery mist which was all most witches and wizards were capable of and which would do in a pinch. But when Harry's stag sprang from his wand Moody, Tonks and Kingsley were impressed. "Oh!" Tonks squealed. "I've never seen a full-fledged corporeal patronus before. You must be a very powerful wizard, Harry!"

Harry groaned. "Yeah, right," he said sarcastically. "I may be powerful but I'm not very smart."

"That's why we're here, Harry," Remus said gently, "to help you learn so that you can use your power wisely."

After dropping Neville off at Mrs. Figg's so he could floo home through a series of hops Harry and Remus were walking along Privet Drive when Remus asked, "I'm just curious, Harry, what were you thinking about when you produced your patronus?"

Harry looked down at the sidewalk and remained silent for several strides as he tried to recall what he had been thinking about. Finally he said, "I don't know, Remus," he said. "I was just thinking and trying to remember what it felt like to be happy. The image that came to mind when I cast the charm was of Sirius laughing at his house last Christmas."

Remus put his arm around Harry's shoulders and looked over at the boy who was obviously still hurting. "Harry," he said, "I know neither of us is ready to talk about it yet but I want you to know that I think you have taken the first steps. Sirius would want to be remembered as the happy-go-lucky kid that he was and not as the desperate and lonely man who escaped from Azkaban only to be held prisoner in his own house."

As they were walking up the drive to number four Harry turned to Remus and asked, "Remus, could you tell me about the good times; the fun things you and Sirius and dad did while at Hogwarts?"

Remus smiled. "Yeah, sure. You had better go get cleaned up though because Tonks and I are taking you out to lunch in Diagon Alley. After that we are going to go shopping in London to see if we can't find you some decent clothes."

Harry smiled. And when they reached the house he bolted up the stairs and into his room. Less than a minute later, as Remus settled down to begin his review of the Muslim spiritual philosophy, Harry was in the bathroom and taking a shower.

Twenty minutes later, as Harry and Remus were approaching Mrs. Figg's house for the second time that day, Remus said, "Tonks will be meeting us at Fred and George's shop, Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes."

"How are we getting there?"

"Floo powder, of course," Remus said. When he heard Harry groan and saw the look of consternation on his face Remus chuckled. "Don't worry, Harry," he said, "Towards the end of the last war the Floo Network was almost completely shut down. People were afraid to use it. A lot of good people disappeared never to be seen again. To help alleviate some of those fears the network was broken down into several smaller, interconnecting networks with only a few public access fireplaces. They are in the process of reinstating that policy. Arabella's fireplace is currently only connected to Dumbledore's office, headquarters and ninety-three Diagon Alley so even if you mispronounce it or forget to say one of the words there is a pretty good chance you will get where you are going and you will be safe when you arrive."

Harry ran his fingers through his hair, relieved that he wouldn't wind up in Knockturn Alley again. "Okay," he said, quickly moving on to the next question in his mind. "So what's the address?"

"The full address," Remus began, "is Ninety-three Diagon Alley. But since Arabella's fireplace has such limited access we should be able to get away by just saying 'Diagon Alley.' I am going to go first because I want to be sure the coast is clear; but I don't think there should be any problems."

As they reached the stoop of Mrs. Figg's house the door flew open and two sets of arms reached out and pulled them into the dimly lit room. "Oh, thank goodness you arrived safely!" Mrs. Figg said as the door slammed shut behind them.

Harry immediately reached for and drew his wand. "Whoa! Slow down there, Harry. We're the good guys, remember?"

Remus, whose reflexes were quicker and whose eyes were able to more quickly adjusted to the diminished amounts of light, had also drawn his wand but wasn't casting any spells. Instead he growled softly as he surveyed the scene before him, taking in the two unexpected arrivals. "Password," he demanded.

The tall, slender man with longish red hair pulled back into a pony tail and sporting an earring with a fang dangling from it said, "Golden Phoenix."

Remus let out a sigh of relief. "What are you doing here, Bill, Dedalus?"

"Bad news, I'm afraid," Dedalus Diggle said nervously. "It would seem that our beloved Minister is more interested in holding onto power than defeating You-know-who. He has used his executive privilege to pardon Malfoy."

Harry gasped then groaned, "Why am I not surprised?"

"That's not the worst of it," Bill Weasley said solemnly. "There's nothing definite yet but the word on the street is that Malfoy is out to get you, Harry."

Harry groaned again. "So there goes lunch," he thought out loud.

"No," Bill said matter of factly. "Lunch is still on but instead of two armed guards you are going to have four. We know how important it is for you to have a relatively normal summer this year, Harry, so we are going to do everything we can to help you lead as normal a life as possible."

"Yeah, right," Harry grumbled sarcastically. "Most normal people don't have armed guards with them wherever they go because most normal people don't have the most evil dark lord of their time trying to kill them and all because of some stupid prediction a batty old fraud made sixteen years ago!"

Remus flinched then turned to face Harry. Resting his hands on Harry's shoulders he looked him in the eye. "You do understand why we have to do it, though?" he asked.

Harry hung his head and sighed. "Yes, I understand. I don't like it but I understand."

"Good," Bill said gently. "Listen, Harry. For what it's worth, I'm sorry it's you. You're a good kid and you don't deserve to have this kind of pressure on you. No one does. But I want you to know that I'm here for you."

"We're all here for you," Remus said, bending down to look up into Harry's eyes.

Harry smirked then weakly smiled at the man who was trying to cheer him up.

Breaking the silence that was beginning to hang in the air Mrs. Figg said, "Well, what are you waiting for? This young man needs something to eat. And from the looks of it he could use some new clothes as well."

"Right you are, Arabella," Bill said. I'll go first to make sure the coast is clear. Then Dedalus then

Harry then Remus."

Harry smirked at Remus. "So much for your idea of you going first," he said.

Remus smiled and clapped Harry on the shoulder. "That's quite alright, Harry. Your safety always comes first."

Bill took a pinch of floo powder from the pot on the mantel of Mrs. Figg's fireplace, stepped in, threw the powder down and called out, "DIAGON ALLEY!"

Dedalus went next then Harry took a pinch of the green-grey powder, stepped into the fireplace, threw the powder down at his feet and yelled, "DIAGON ALLEY!"

He pulled his arms in as he began to spin through the limited network and two grates later felt himself being helped to his feet by four strong hands. "You don't like traveling by floo do you?" Bill asked, as a mischievous grin spread across his face.

"That evident, eh?" Harry asked as Remus stepped gracefully out of the fireplace behind him.

Bill laughed. "I've seen worse. Not many, but a few."

"Oi!" came a familiar voice from another room. "Who's there?"

Bill, Dedalus and Remus grabbed Harry and pushed him to the back, forming a human shield around him. "Shhh!" Bill hissed as one of the twins stepped into their back room laboratory. "Is Tonks here?" he whispered.

"Oh," the twin said, his voice suddenly softer. "Yeah. Just a minute; I'll go get her."

Harry peaked over Bill's shoulder. "What's going on?" he asked.

"Sorry, Harry," Bill whispered over his shoulder, "but unfortunately we can't be too careful."

Harry groaned.

Moments later Tonks rushed into the back room, said the password and pulled a faded red baseball cap out of her back pocket. Pushing her way through to Harry she flipped the hat open and pulled it down over his head. Her hair was bright, stoplight red and stood out at odd angles all over her head. Her shirt was a vibrant, metallic rainbow of colors that seemed to shift and change as she moved. It fit her nicely and adequately accented her feminine features without being overly flirtatious. Her slacks were a soft, faded shade of blue that reminded Harry of a light blue sky. They looked to be tight and form fitting but not too tight. Harry looked her over once and said, "Erm, looks nice, Tonks."

Tonks smiled. "That's the idea, Harry," she said in a business-like tone. "If they see me maybe they won't notice you."

Bill laughed. "Oh, I don't think we'll have to worry about that, Nymph."

Tonks glared up at the oldest Weasley boy. "Listen, buster," she growled, "just because I like you doesn't mean I won't hurt you."

Still laughing, Bill held his hands up in surrender. "Alright, alright," he chuckled. "You got to admit, though, that you are a sight to behold."

"Why thank you," Tonks said, smiling warmly at Harry.

As they made their way out of the back room and through the store, Bill led the way, his eyes continually scanning for hidden dangers. Harry was next, followed closely by Tonks and Remus as Dedalus brought up the rear. Harry glanced around the shop on their way through and was surprised at the variety of pranks the twins had developed. There were Canary Creams, Fake Wands, Portable Swamps, Skiving Snack Boxes and at least fifty other prank items the twins had developed. Harry was pleased to see that they had even developed their own line of fireworks - Weasley Whiz-Bangs.

Harry was also pleased to see that they were fairly busy. The shop was crowded with customers and while George and Lee Jordan were describing various products to the customers Fred was manning the till. Fred smiled and gave Harry a thumbs-up as they walked past the cash register but didn't say anything. Harry smiled and nodded as he mouthed, "Looks good. Congratulations."

Fred's smile grew even broader at that and Harry knew that he had struck the right chord.

Out on the street Bill stayed in front but Tonks moved up and linked arms with Harry and Remus moved up to walk on his other side while Dedalus stayed back to serve as Harry's rear guard. As they made their way down Diagon Alley, towards the Leaky Cauldron Harry noticed several aurors intermingled throughout the people going about their shopping. He recognized Kingsley standing outside Quality Quidditch Supplies talking to a young wizard in dark green robes. The auror looked up as they approached and, nodding his head, smiled. Remembering that both Kingsley and Tonks had been injured in the Department of Mysteries Harry leaned into Tonks and said, "Tonks?"

"Yes, Harry?" she asked, leaning in closer.

"Erm, how are you doing? I mean you and Kingsley were injured in that battle weren't you? I want to know how you are doing."

Tonks squeezed his arm and smiled warmly up at him. "You really do care don't you?" she asked

Harry nodded. "Mm hmm."

Tonks squeezed his arm again. "We're fine, Harry. It's part of the job you know. We don't like getting injured but that's the chance we take."

"I'm really sorry you got pulled into that mess," Harry said solemnly as they approached the wall separating Diagon Alley from the Leaky Cauldron.

As Bill tapped the bricks and the entrance revealed itself Tonks cooed into his ear, "Don't worry about it, Harry. It's over and done with now. We're healed up and back in action. That's all that really matters."

"How does Kingsley feel about it?" he asked.

Tonks laughed as they stepped through the opening. "Kingsley is older and wiser than me by a long shot. I'm sure he feels the same. But you can talk to him about it tomorrow if you like."

Once inside the Leaky Cauldron they made their way to a dimly lit booth in the back corner which gave them the advantage of being able to watch both entrances while providing them with a clear view of most of the pub. Harry sat in the back of the booth, with his back to the wall, Tonks and Remus sitting on either side of him. Bill was next to Tonks and Dedalus sat next to Remus, leaving the front of the table open so they could watch the goings on in the pub. When Tom came over a few minutes later to take their order Harry, who had been instructed to keep his head down, said nothing and let Tonks order for him. "Oh, we'll just split a fish 'n' chips," she chirped. "I think he would like his own butterbeer, though." Tom chuckled and shook his head as he wrote down the order and muttered something about the poor kid letting a woman walk all over him.

A few minutes later, after their meals had arrived, Harry was in the middle of taking a bite when he suddenly found himself on the floor, trapped behind Tonks and Remus' legs with two other sets of legs obstructing his view of the pub. "Stay still and be quiet," Tonks hissed.

"I guess Gringott's is out then." Remus said darkly.

"Gringott's?" Bill asked.

"Yes, we've got to go into London to get Harry some new clothes."

"How much do you think you'll need?"

Tonks and Remus still had Harry pinned behind their lags. "Oh, I think three hundred Pounds ought to do it," Tonks said.

"Do you have your key?" Bill asked, nudging Harry with his foot.

Harry squirmed around a bit, reaching into the pocket of his oversized jeans, and produced the key to his vault. Handing it up between Tonks and Remus' legs, as they had scooted together to cover for Harry's sudden disappearance, Tonks reached down and took it, handing it to Bill. "There you go," she said sweetly, making it sound as though nothing was out of the ordinary.

"I'll just finish up here and go get your money then, shall I?"

"That's awfully gracious of you, Bill," Remus said calmly. "You really don't have to you know."

"Ah, it's no trouble at all," Bill said jovially, carrying on the act. "I'm almost finished anyway and I've still got half an hour before I have to be back at work."

A few minutes later, as Bill was getting up to leave, Remus and Tonks released Harry and made room for him on the bench. "What happened?" he asked as he climbed out from under the table and slid back up onto the bench.

"Malfoy," was Tonks' one word answer.

Twenty minutes later Bill was back with three hundred Pounds and Harry's key. "They're in Knockturn Alley," he whispered. "No surprise there but you may have to find an alternate way home. Give yourselves a couple of hours. I'll have the twins start checking for you every fifteen minutes to let you know if the coast is clear in an hour and a half. Wait in the bookstore next door. One of them will find you."

"Are you coming, Dedalus?" Remus asked as they stood up to leave.

Dedalus looked up nervously. "Oh, no. I'm sorry but I have to get back to work as well."

Remus softly chuckled at the man's nervousness but didn't say anything. Turning to Harry and Tonks he said, "You two wait outside. I'll go pay Tom and be out in a minute."

As they left the Leaky Cauldron and stepped out onto Charing Cross Road an elderly woman, who was walking by at the time, cast a disapproving glance at Tonks and spat, "Tart!"

Tonks pulled a face at the woman as she passed, which, coming as it did from Tonks, looked a lot like an extremely ugly gargoyle. Harry smirked. To his mind Tonks looked somewhat sexy but Harry knew, or at least thought he knew, that she had only dressed this way to draw attention to herself and away from him. "Er, Tonks," he asked, "if you don't mind me asking, where's your wand?"

Tonks looked at him and smiled. "You've never been in a knife fight have you?"

"Uh, no," Harry confessed. "Why?"

Tonks casually reached up as if to scratch the back of her neck then suddenly pulled her hand over her head, wand at the ready. "One of the first things you learn in auror training is all of the places a person can hide a wand. The next thing you learn is how to draw your wand from all of those places." As she carefully slid her wand back into it's hiding place she said, "There are times, when I'm on assignment, that the only reasonable place I can hide a wand is on my back. So, I've gotten pretty good at drawing from there. And this way I can use either hand so my opponent never knows which side the spell is going to be coming from."

"Are you ambidextrous?" Harry asked.

Tonks smiled mischievously and quickly nodded her head. "Mm hmm. One of the few."

Fifteen minutes later Remus, Tonks and Harry were walking into a sporting goods store where they spent the next half hour finding and buying a good pair of trainers that fit Harry comfortably and, with a little help, would last him a lifetime as well as several pair of sweats, several pair of socks and some jogging shorts. They easily spent half of his money in that one store alone.

Their next stop was a department store where they picked up three pair of loose fitting jeans, several t-shirts and several pair of pants. Tonks wanted him to buy a dress suit but reason prevailed and he wound up buying one pair of dress slacks and two dress shirts.

They still had a little money left when they reached the bookstore next to the Leaky Cauldron so, at Remus' insistence, they went to the Physical Fitness section and started looking through the books. Ten minutes later they were standing at the cash register buying two copies of one book on stretching and another on isometric exercises - one set for Harry and the other for Neville - when George walked in. "All clear," he whispered. "But Bill told me to stay with you until we reach the shop."

Dividing Harry's packages evenly amongst themselves, but only letting Harry carry the books in case they had to make a run for it, the two adults and two teenagers left the bookstore and reentered the Leaky Cauldron. Keeping his head down so as to avoid recognition Harry followed

George through the pub, with Tonks at his side and Remus bringing up the rear. In Diagon Alley they walked as casually as they could through the throng but Harry could tell that everyone's senses were tuned for any signs of trouble. When they reached the entrance to the brightly painted Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes Fred opened the door for them and the four rushed in. They didn't stop until they were in the back room and even then they didn't say anything until the door was closed and George had cast a privacy charm on the entire room. "Whew!" George said at last, as he let out an explosion of air. "I never realized how intense it could get until Bill told us that it was a matter of life and death now that Malfoy is out. But don't you worry, Harry," he said reassuringly, "we're a part of the old crowd now and we are pretty much dedicated to keeping you safe."

Harry groaned as he took the cap off and handed it to Tonks then smiled weakly and sighed. "Yeah," he said softly. "Thanks. I guess I've got to get used to it. How are Ron and Ginny doing; and have you heard anything from Hermione?"

"Ginny's doing fine and the last we heard Hermione is doing fine as well. As for Ron . . . well, he's still got a bit of scaring on his arms, chest and back and he seems to be struggling with a bunch of memories that are not his own. It's almost like those brain things implanted their memories in his mind. It's scary really: He now knows more than the rest of us combined but he doesn't know how or why he knows it."

Harry looked down at his shoes. After chewing on his lower lip for several seconds he looked up at the ceiling and, obviously struggling to control his emotions, said, "Tell him I'm sorry; and tell him I'll write as soon as I can."

Tonks reached out and took hold of one of Harry's hands. Leading him over to a bench along the wall furthest from the door she sat him down then joined him on the bench. When Harry wouldn't look up she got down on her knees in front of him and looked up into his tear filled eyes. He immediately closed his eyes, wiping the tears with the sleeve of his shirt, and leaned back against the wall looking up at the ceiling. Tonks stood up and, gently resting her hands on his shoulders, pinned him to the wall. "Look at me, Harry," she said gently. When Harry refused she squeezed his shoulders a little tighter and pressed him harder against the wall so that his head would have to come down. "I said look at me, Harry," she said still gently but with a renewed sense of urgency in her voice.

When Harry opened his eyes and looked at Tonks her hair was a dark honey blond that hung loosely about her shoulders and her eyes were a soft, caring blue that reminded Harry of the deep, limpid pools of water he had seen in a magazine once as a child while waiting with Aunt Petunia and Dudley in a doctor's office for Uncle Vernon. Tonks smiled warmly. "This is me without all the tricks," she said. "I know it hurts, Harry and I know you feel guilty about it. I remember how I felt when I lost my first partner. I blamed myself for months and it almost tore me apart. I almost stopped being an auror because of it. I was so depressed that I couldn't even get out of bed for a week. It took me months to get over it. I still think about it every once in a while and it still hurts because a part of me still wants to blame myself for what happened in that raid. But we have to keep going, Harry. We can't give up just because we make a few mistakes.

"I know that doesn't sound very comforting but it's true. We all make choices and we all make mistakes and sometimes either we, or someone we love, gets hurt or killed. When that happens all we can do is try to learn from our mistakes and hope it never happens again."

Harry hung his head in silence for a minute then looked back up into Tonks' eyes. "Thank you," he whispered then stood up.

Tonks pulled him into a hug and whispered into his ear, "I know it’s hard, Harry, but you’ll do fine. Most of us have been through it before, Harry, and we’ll always be here for you."

Harry nodded his head as Tonks released him and said, "Thanks."

Putting her arm around his waist Tonks led Harry back to the fireplace where Remus and George were waiting for them. They had shrunken most of the parcels and placed them all into two easy-to-manage bags. Remus mouthed a "Thank you" to Tonks as they approached and then turned to Harry. "It’s getting late, Harry. I think we had better get back if we want to do any reading. And you’ve got to get an early start tomorrow so you might want get to bed before midnight tonight."

Harry smiled weakly and wondered how Remus knew about his sleeping habits but then he remembered that he was being watched by the Order and that they would probably be watching to see when he turned the lights off in his room. Surprisingly. He found that he didn’t really mind all that much. True, it was a bit irritating but then again they were just doing their jobs. As he thought about this curious turn in his thinking he realized that sometime in the past few days he had resigned himself to the prophecy and accepted the fact that there were people out there who really did care about him.

Chapter 4. Letters and a Confession

Harry had gotten used to sleeping with his window open so that Hedwig could come and go as she pleased - another benefit of Mad-Eye's little warning that had taken place at King's Cross Station a few days earlier - and was rudely awoken at four o'clock the next morning by the incessant twittering of a particularly annoying little owl not much larger than a tennis ball with two letters attached to its leg. Harry rolled out of bed, put his glasses on and switched on the lamp. Looking around he spotted Pig flitting about near the window. After grabbing the bird, being careful not to injure him, Harry untied the letters and set Pig down next to Hedwig's cage. Hedwig was still out and he didn't think she would mind if Pig got some water and a quick nap before heading home.

Yawning and running his fingers through his hair Harry walked over and turned on the light while looking curiously at the two envelopes in his hand. He was fairly certain that one of them must be from Ron but whom could the other one be from? Returning to his desk he looked at the envelopes. One of them was definitely from Ron with his messy scrawl. The writing on the other one, however, was much more delicate, almost dainty. He wondered whom it could be from. Shrugging his shoulders he set the second letter aside and opened Ron's first, hoping it would reveal the author of the second.

Dear Harry,

I heard about your trip to Diagon Alley from Bill and the twins. Rotten luck that Malfoy Sr. got out but Dad says Fudge is getting desperate. He even says that there are rumors of someone calling for a recall vote later in the summer. I hope he gets canned! For what he's done they ought to throw him in Azkaban and throw away the key.

George told me that you are still pretty upset about what happened in . . . well, you know. He also told me what Tonks said. She's right you know. I can't imagine what it must be like for you but I want you to know that you are still my best mate. I'm dealing with these memories and it is slowly getting easier. I don't hold you responsible for what happened. I don't remember all of it and no one will tell me everything that happened. I think I'm starting to understand how you felt last summer when we couldn't tell you anything.

We will be going back to where we were last summer in a couple of weeks. Mum wants us - Ginny and me - to get the Burrow cleaned up before we leave and turn it over to Bill, Fred, George and Percy. Yeah, that's right, Percy's back. GIT! He came crawling in the day we got back, begging for forgiveness. Mum, Dad and Bill seem to be able to forgive him but it will take more than asking for me to forgive him. I want a formal written apology and I want him to admit that he was wrong. Even then I don't think I will be able to forgive him because of what he did to Mum and Dad.

Well, I had better close before this gets too long. In case you are wondering, the other letter is from Ginny. She won't tell me what is in it so I'd be careful if I was you. She can be as bad as the twins if she wants to be and I don't trust the look she has in her eyes right now.

Your friend,

Ron

P.S. Like I said, please don't worry about what happened because I'm dealing with it. I have an appointment with some of the Unspeakables from the DoM next week to see if they can help me figure out what is going on and maybe help me adjust to whatever it is.

P.P.S. How are the muggles treating you?

Harry was relieved that Ron wasn't blaming him for what happened but it still bothered him that it had happened at all. Inwardly, however, he was privately pleased that Ron was beginning to know what he had felt like the year before. He still didn't understand why Dumbledore had insisted that they not tell him anything but on some level he had come to terms with that as well and it no longer really bothered him. He was also glad that Ron was going to be getting help with whatever those brain things had been. Maybe, with time and understanding, Ron could deal with it more effectively and it wouldn't have too many lasting results.

As he read the letter a second time he felt he could understand Mr. and Mrs. Weasley's willingness to accept Percy back into the family. He was, after all, their son. He didn't know Bill well enough to make any firm judgments on that particular bit of news but he suspected that it might have something to do with him being the oldest sibling and wanting to set a good example. And given Ron's temper he could easily understand his view of Percy's return.

On the third reading he looked over at the other letter. Ginny had never written to him before. In fact, until recently she had been too shy to even speak to him without blushing. Last year she had been going out with Michael Cornor until they had broken up after the quidditch final. Then, on the train, she had said that she was dating Dean Thomas. So why was she writing to him? Laying Ron's letter aside Harry shrugged his shoulders and picked up the envelope with Ginny's letter and opened it.

> Dear Harry,
>
> I am writing to let you know that I am NOT a Scarlet Woman, as Ron calls it. I just said that I was going out with Dean Thomas to get on his nerves. I am still pretty broken up about Michael. I really thought we had something but I guess I was wrong. I am not really looking to get involved with anyone right now but under the circumstances - what with Sirius' death and all - I thought you could use a friend who has been through something similar, not completely identical by any measure but similar. I was also hoping that we could take some time to get to know each other and possibly become friends.
>
> I know I can't know what you are going through but I can at least try. I think I went through something similar during the summer after my first year. It was horrible! I was blaming myself for everything that happened that year. I don't think I could have lived with myself if anyone had died. It still haunts me sometimes but I am slowly getting over it. I have a feeling that this is what it is going to be like for you.
>
> I'm sure you are probably sick and tired of hearing this, Harry, but it really wasn't your fault. We've all made choices and we've all made mistakes. What's done is done. All we can do now it pick up the pieces and try to move on. Ron, Hermione, Neville, Luna and I chose to follow you. That was our choice, Harry. Please don't blame yourself for what happened. I know you probably don't feel like talking about Sirius yet (it took weeks for me to even begin to want to talk about what could have happened but didn't) but I want you to know that I will be here for you when you are ready.
>
> Love,
>
> Ginny

Harry was so stunned by Ginny's letter that he read it three more times. A part of him - the part that he didn't understand yet - was glad that she was not dating Dean and that she had only said that to get on Ron's nerves and he smiled as he remembered Ron's reaction. But more than that he was amazed at her maturity. Perhaps he had been misjudging and underestimating her all along. And something told him that maybe . . . just maybe she could understand what he was going through.

He checked the time and was about to open a drawer to retrieve a quill, some ink and a sheet of parchment to respond to Ginny's letter when a tawny owl flew in through the window, dropped a letter on his head, turned around and flew back out. Picking up the letter he saw that it was from Hermione.

Dear Harry,

I have been thinking about what happened in the Department of Mysteries and I want you to know that I really am sorry. I know you don't want my sympathy but I don't know how else to say it. I know you think I'm smart and all but if the truth be told there are just some things I cannot figure out. Unfortunately, one of those things is telling people how I really feel. Oh, sure, I can make all kinds of potions and cast all kinds of charms and spells and stuff but when it comes to telling people how I really feel about them I'm just not very good at it. I care about you, Harry. I really do. I love you like a brother and it hurts me when you hurt. Professor Dumbledore told us that you probably wouldn't want to talk about . . . well, you know, for a while because of what happened but I want you to know that I am here for you if you should ever want or need to talk about it.

I have been rereading the Buddhist spiritual philosophy. It is really quite interesting. I am taking notes, trying to sift through all of the information and get to the main points but it isn't going to be easy. Hopefully I should have my outline finished by the end of the week.

I got a letter from Ron this morning and he says he is almost finished with his homework. Excuse me? Ronald Weasley voluntarily doing homework? Something really strange must have happened to him when he was attacked by those brain things.

I should probably tell you that I am fine. I haven't told Mum or Dad anything about our trip to the DoM yet because they would probably go ballistic and try to pull me out of school. I don't want that to happen because I would still be a target (because I am a muggle-born witch) and I wouldn't be able to defend myself. I'm sure they know something is going on but I don't think they know what yet.

I am going back to where I was last summer in about three weeks. I haven't head anything about when they might be coming to get you but one can always hope.

Well, I guess I had better let you go so you can get to work on the Jewish and Christian philosophies.

With love from,

> Hermione
>
> P.S. Please take care of yourself.

Harry smiled at Hermione's honesty. And it was nice to know that she thought of him like a brother; but he didn't think she would understand, not like Remus or Tonks or, possibly, Ginny. He appreciated the offer though. Then he thought of the statement about outlining the entire Buddhist philosophy in a week. Well, he thought, if anyone can do it it will probably be her.

Looking at his clock again he saw that it was almost 4:30 so he lay Hermione's letter on top of Ron and Ginny's letters and place a bottle of ink on top of them so they wouldn't blow away if a sudden gust of wind came up while he was out. Getting dressed in a light grey set of sweats with a matching sweat shirt and his new trainers he reviewed the stretches he and Remus had gone over the night before and started warming up for the day. Hedwig returned a few minutes later and, upon seeing Pig napping in her cage, gave a disgruntled hoot but made room for him as she returned to her perch. Harry looked up and smiled, knowing that while Hedwig might not think highly of the excitable little owl she harbored no ill will towards him. At five o'clock Harry saw a small jet of red sparks shoot up from the street below. He quietly turned off the lights, left his room and made his way down the stairs and out of the house. Once outside he heard the disembodied voice from the previous morning greet him and direct him to the end of the drive where he met Remus and Neville. "Morning, Harry," Neville said.

"Morning, Neville, Remus," Harry greeted.

"Were you able to warm up?" Remus asked.

"Yes," Harry said. "Pig showed up at four o'clock so I read my mail then did some stretching."

Remus chuckled. "Good little alarm clock, that one. All right then! A little bit faster and a little bit farther."

Harry and Neville groaned at Remus' enthusiasm but quickly fell into step behind the werewolf.

They learned many new hexes, curses and charms that day and Moody started lecturing them on the finer points of dueling and casting spells while tumbling, running or rolling. They also quickly learned that to become Master Duelers they would have to learn to incorporate Transfiguration and Charms as well as any number of curses, hexes, and jinxes into their dueling strategies. Towards the end of the morning Harry approached Kingsley and asked him how he was doing and if his injuries were healed. Kingsley chuckled. "Ah, yes. Tonks told me you might be asking about that. Rest assured, Harry. I am fine and I do not hold you responsible for what happened in the Department of Mysteries."

Harry smirked and said, "Thanks." Then he remembered something else and asked, "Uh, Kingsley? Aren't you an auror and don't you have to work during the day?"

Once again Kingsley chuckled. "Yes, I am and I do. Tonks and I have the afternoon patrol in Diagon Alley so what we do with our mornings is our own affair. You and Mister Longbottom are providing Tonks and me with and opportunity to brush up on our dueling skills so we thank you, Harry." Before Harry could ask his next question Kingsley held up his hand. "Yesterday was Tonks' day off," Kingsley said, in anticipation of Harry's question, "so no harm done."

Harry shook his head and smiled up at the tall black man. "I want to thank you all the same, though," Harry said. "So, thanks."

Kingsley smiled and clapped Harry on the shoulder. "You are a fine young man, Harry Potter, and it is an honor to be of service to someone with such a strong and pure heart."

After dropping Neville off at Mrs. Figg's house Harry and Remus made their way back to Privet Drive. Upon entering the Dursleys' home Harry and Remus were on their way past the kitchen door when Aunt Petunia called out to them. "Harry, Remus," she called out softly. The two wizards stopped and looked curiously into the kitchen where Aunt Petunia was sitting at the table, facing the door, her hands nervously working a napkin. "Could we talk?" she asked.

Harry and Remus looked at each other, both recognizing that everything about Aunt Petunia - from her uncharacteristically polite tone to her fidgety body language to the frightened look in her eyes - said that what she had to say was important and potentially dangerous and that she was frightened by the mere thought of what she was about to say. Harry entered first and sat down in the chair facing the window. Remus took the seat across from him and they both turned to look at the frightened form of Petunia Dursley whose hands were starting to shred the napkin on the table in front of her. "Yes, Aunt Petunia?" Harry asked gently, sensing that something was not right with his normally harsh aunt.

Petunia looked nervously over at Harry, her eyes searching his face for any sign of rejection then glanced apprehensively at the door, over at Remus and out the window before returning her gaze to the napkin in front of her. "I didn't really hate your mother you know." Harry's head shot up and he was about to retort and say something mean but a threatening glance from Remus stopped the words before they could form on his lips. "I know that what I've said in the past wasn't very nice," Petunia continued, "but we were scared and we don't really understand your world so we did everything we could to avoid it. And Vernon, as you know, doesn't want anything to do with . . . your abilities."

Harry could see that his aunt was struggling with her words and that this confession was not easy for her so he sat still and silently listened as she continued her story. "When you saved Dudley from those dementors last year one of my worst nightmares - that they would find us and attack our family because of you - was realized. I don't blame you," she said quickly to stem the flow of any argument, "because I knew it was only a matter of time until something like that happened and I thank you for saving my Dudley's life.

"When I got that howler that night I was rather forcefully reminded of the magical contract I signed when we took you in. I don't understand all of it but I do know that so long as we are both alive and you are able to call this house home for any length of time we will all be safe from this Voldemort character and his followers.

"If what you say is true and he is back and gaining strength then I'll be honest with you, Harry, I am frightened. Terrified, in fact, that something will happen to my family. I'm sorry it has taken so long for me to realize this but you've got to understand that it hasn't been easy. I will try to be a better aunt but I'm afraid you will still have to deal with Vernon and Dudley." Petunia's eyes were watering and her voice was about to crack. "I'm sorry, Harry," she sobbed into the shredded napkin and blew her nose into its remnains. "I hope you can forgive me."

Harry looked at his aunt and suddenly realized that she had been under a lot of pressure to keep what she knew about the wizarding world hidden for a lot of years. As he watched her start to fall apart before his eyes he knew that there was only one thing he could do. Reaching out he gently touched her arm and said, "It's okay, Aunt Petunia. I understand and I forgive you."

Petunia looked up into his eyes - tear filled blue meeting emerald green - and mouthed a heart felt "Thank you."

Remus fixed the three of them a comfortable lunch and they ate, for the most part, in silence, Petunia occasionally opening up and Remus helping her come to terms with her years of denial while Harry listened and learned more about his aunt than he had ever known existed. At ten minutes to one Remus looked up at the clock and said, "We've got to get going, Harry."

As they stood up Harry looked at his sweaty clothes then looked at Remus. Remus shook his head and smiled. "I can see that I'm going to have to teach you some cleansing charms," he said as he took out his wand. After stepping out into the hall to avoid being seen by any passers by or prying eyes Remus cast several cleansing charms on both Harry and himself and their clothes. Before they left Remus turned to Harry's aunt and said, "I'll be back. I think you need someone to talk to so after I drop Harry off at his lessons I'll come back so we can talk some more."

Aunt Petunia didn't say anything but smiled weakly and nodded her head.

That evening, after Occlumency lessons, visiting with Remus about his days at Hogwarts and several hours of reading, Harry looked at the letters he had received that morning and decided to write to his friends. After reading each of them again he decided to respond to Ginny's first. Pulling out a piece of parchment and a quill he wrote:

> Dear Ginny,
>
> Thank you. I am glad to hear that you are not a "Scarlet Woman." I think the twins may have rubbed off on you a bit. As to our being friends, I think that would be nice. As you probably already know, I have been talking around the subject with a few of our friends. I don't think I'm ready to talk about it just yet but when I am I will most definitely let you know. You were right last December when you told me that I was not the only one who has had dealings with Voldemort. You have been through things I cannot even begin to imagine and I am sorry I wasn't there for you.
>
> I think you should know that I was temporarily possessed by Voldemort towards the end of the battle. He wanted Dumbledore to kill me so he possessed my body and begged him to do so. I don't know exactly what happened but somehow I was able to get rid of him. I think it might have something to do with the fact that I was thinking about how much I love Sirius. I don't think he can stand it when people love each other.
>
> As you probably already know I am not a great people person. I try but it's not easy. I would like to give our friendship a chance. Please write.
>
> Your friend,
>
> Harry

After putting Ginny's letter in an envelope Harry turned to Hermione's letter and, after reading it yet again, took out another piece of parchment and began writing.

> Dear Hermione,
>
> Thank you. Now that I think about it, I guess I kind of think of you as the sister I never had.
>
> Are you sure it was Ron? Somehow the idea of Ron doing his homework just doesn't make sense. You are right, something really strange must have happened to him in the DoM. Actually, I know something strange happened to him in the DoM because he said that he has a meeting with some of their representatives next week to see if they can figure out what is going on.
>
> Remus and I have been spending a lot of time together, talking about his days at Hogwarts and some of the pranks they pulled. Some of them were really quite funny. Of course, Dumbledore was upset at first but I think he understands our need to talk.
>
> Remus is going great guns on the Muslim philosophy and I am starting to get into the Hebrew faith but there is so much extraneous information that it is going to take a lot of time to get through it all. Don't get me wrong; the books you picked out are wonderful and easy to read but holy cow! Hasn't anyone ever thought to make this stuff easy to understand?
>
> I'm glad to hear that you are all right. I know you can't help but worry about how your parents might react and I really don't know what to tell you on that score. But maybe if they knew the truth and understood that there is no escape they would be more understanding. You already know that you can't help who you are and that hiding won't do any good. I'm not about to tell you what to do but you can at least think about it.
>
> Your friend,
>
> Harry

Hedwig was watching him as he stuffed Hermione's letter in an envelope and addressed it. Sensing an imminent delivery she hooted softly and hopped down from the bureau, landing on the corner of his desk. Harry looked over at her and smiled. "You up for a delivery tonight, girl? I've got one more to write and then I'll let you have them."

Turning his attention to Ron's letter he read through it again and, pulling out a third piece of parchment, wrote:

> Dear Ron,
>
> Don’t worry about the muggles. If Moody’s warning wasn’t enough then regular visits by a certain werewolf have certainly made a lasting impression.
>
> I’m really sorry about what happened in the DoM, Ron. I hope it is nothing permanent but I want you to keep me posted on what you find out. Hermione says you are almost done with your homework. Now, Ron, please don’t take this the wrong way but something is definitely not right if you are doing your homework on the first day of holiday.
>
> Don’t be too hard on Ginny. After all, it did take a while to get that bat bogey hex she put on Malfoy cleared up. I would hate to see something like that happen to you. She just wants to be my friend and somehow I get the feeling she might be able to understand what I am going through more than most.
>
> I don’t know what to tell you about Percy. I think I can understand where your parents and Bill are coming from and I think I can definitely understand where you are coming from. How does Ginny feel about it?
>
> Well, take care of yourself, Ron, and please keep me posted on what you find out.
>
> Your friend,
>
> Harry

After reading this letter over he decided that he wasn’t betraying too many of Ginny’s confidences, put it in an envelope, addressed it to Ron and then handed all three envelopes to Hedwig. As the Snowy Owl clutched the letters in her scaly talons he caressed her head and carried her over to the window. "These go to Ron, Hermione and Ginny," he said.

As Hedwig took off and flew through the window Harry turned away, got ready for bed, turned off the light and crawled under his bed covers. His dreams that night were a mixture of dueling, Occlumency, Diagon Alley, the Marauders' pranks and hiding from Malfoy.

Chapter 5. O.W.L.s

A little more than a week later, on one of Harry's off days - days when he was not meeting with Dumbledore for Occlumency lessons, Harry and Neville were starting mock duels against their instructors. They had both progressed rapidly and were now using some of the most advanced hexes and curses available and their shielding charms were steadily improving. Harry was still quicker than Neville in the gymnastics and tumbling aspects of their training but Neville wasn't far behind. They were both getting the hang of the ballet they were learning and found it very useful when doing some of their leaps and dives.

As they left the park and turned towards Mrs. Figg's house Remus said, "You will be having lunch with us this afternoon, Neville. Albus spoke with your gran last night and she has agreed."

"Er, okay," Neville said hesitantly. "Why?"

Remus smiled reassuringly down at the boy. "Your O.W.L. results have come in and Albus and Minerva would like to go over them with you and help you and Harry select which courses you will be taking next term."

Harry and Neville glanced at each other with questioning looks on their faces then shrugged their shoulders. They had become pretty good friends over the course of the last two weeks and were beginning to work and train as a team. While Harry helped Neville with the curses, hexes and charms, thus giving the seemingly timid youth more confidence in his abilities, Neville was always willing to listen whenever Harry felt like talking. At times it almost felt to Harry as though he was sharing his fate with the other person the prophecy could have pertained to.

As they approached Mrs. Figg's house Harry noticed a strange tabby cat sitting on her porch. It looked familiar but he couldn't remember where he had seen it before. Then, as they were about to step up onto the porch he recognized the curious markings around it's eyes and realized that it was professor McGonagall in her animagus form. "Hello, Professor," he said to the cat as Remus rang the doorbell.

When the door opened the cat quickly ran inside and into the kitchen. Moments later Professor McGonagall emerged from the kitchen and nodded to Harry. "Hello to you too, Mister Potter."

Dumbledore, who was again sitting in the chair in the furthest corner from the door, chuckled softly. "Ah, Minerva my dear, I fear your disguise can no longer be used to fool young Harry."

Professor McGonagall turned and glared sternly at the aging headmaster, her lips pressed firmly together in an expression that clearly communicated her displeasure at his joke. "It would seem not," she said tersely. "However, we are not here to discuss the merits of my disguise. If I remember correctly we came here to discuss Harry and Neville's O.W.L. results."

Chuckling to himself, Dumbledore pushed himself up out of the chair and, reaching into his robes, said, "Yes, yes. Right as always, Professor." Withdrawing two envelopes from an inside pocket he glanced at them briefly then handed one to Harry and the other to Neville. "Your results," he said.

Harry took his envelope and sat down at the end of the couch nearest the door and turned on the lamp. Turning the envelope over in his hands he looked at the seal on the back and saw a stylized

"WEB" inside of a circle and around the outside edge of this ring were the words "Wizarding Evaluation Board, Ministry of Magic, Great Britain." Quickly opening the envelope and retrieving the letter within he unfolded the parchment and read:

> Dear Mr. Potter,
>
> Below are the results you earned on your recently completed Ordinary Wizarding Level (O.W.L.) Exams at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. The scoring is as follows:
>
> **O** Outstanding
>
> **E** Exceeds Expectation
>
> **A** Acceptable
>
> **P** Poor
>
> **D** Dreadful
>
> **T** Troll
>
> Where applicable, your results have been broken down into Theory and Practical scores. In these instances the first score will reflect you performance on the Theory portion of the exam and the second will reflect you performance in the Practical portion of the exam.
>
> O.W.L. Results for: Harry James Potter
> School: Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry
> Date: June, 1996
>
> | | |
> |---|---|
> | **Transfiguration** | O-E - 1 OWL |
> | **Charms** | O-E - 1 OWL |
> | **Potions** | O-O - 1 OWL |
> | **Defense Against the Dark Arts** | O-O - 1 OWL |
> | **Herbology** | O-E - 1 OWL |

Care of Magical Creatures	O-E - 1 OWL
Astronomy	A-A - 1 OWL
Divination	P-D - 0 OWL
History of Magic	D - 0 OWL

TOTAL 7 OWL's

Sincerely,
Griselda Marchbanks,
Chairwitch, Wizarding Examination Board

Harry was stunned to say the least. His mouth fell open and he stared at the parchment, not willing to believe his eyes. "Well?" Remus said as Neville gasped at the other end of the couch.

Harry looked up at Remus, still numb with shock. "Seven owls," he said.

"WHAT?" Remus almost shouted as he grabbed the parchment away from Harry, studied it for a few seconds then started dancing around the room. "WOO HOO!" he shouted. "Seven owls! You did it, Harry! You did it!"

Professor Dumbledore smiled at Remus' youthful exuberance, his eyes twinkling and dancing merrily. Professor McGonagall, however, pursed her lips and shook her head. Harry could have sworn he saw her smile briefly, however. After closing his mouth Harry turned to Neville and saw that his mouth was hanging open from either shock or disbelief or both. "How did you do, Neville?" he asked happily.

Neville looked over at Harry, his eyes threatening to bulge from their sockets. "I got an 'O' in Potions," was all he could say.

Harry's mouth fell slightly open again but he quickly closed it again. "So did I," he said, smiling.

Professor McGonagall's mouth fell open when she heard this and turned towards Professor Dumbledore. "Albus, how . . ."

But Professor Dumbledore cut her off. "I believe there is more to these two than our Potions Professor gives them credit for."

When all of the excitement had died down Harry and Neville compared their scores and discovered that they had each received seven owls and that while Harry had scored higher than Neville in Transfiguration and Charms, Neville had scored higher than Harry in History of Magic and Herbology.

Mrs. Figg brought out a large platter with a variety of sandwiches on it, a large carafe of pumpkin juice, six paper plates, six paper cups and a stack of napkins as they got down to the business of

selecting their classes for the coming term. "I thought you should know, Harry," Professor Dumbledore said as they began going over the class being offered, "that all of the fifth and seventh year students who were in your defense group received Outstandings on their exams. No other single group did nearly as well which is why we are instituting a new program next year. In addition to our regular Defense Against the Dark Arts classes, all students will be required to attend a laboratory course so that they can practice what they have learned in class. Various professors will be teaching these classes but I would like you to continue teaching the remaining members of your class."

Before Harry could object Professor Dumbledore held up his hand and continued. "You have earned the respect of your peers, Harry. Much as your father did before you. Although I must say that I am pleased that you were able to do it in a less destructive manner. I do not think we could have handled another James Potter."

Remus snorted then coughed to hide his laughter and Professor McGonagall glared at the laughing werewolf but said nothing. Professor Dumbledore's eyes danced merrily as he glanced around the room at the people in attendance. "We are not asking much, Harry. Just two hours, one night per week. We need to teach everyone how to defend themselves, and the best teachers are those who have had experience and those who have earned the respect of their pupils. You have both of these qualities, Harry, and I would like you to consider my offer."

Harry quickly ran through the arguments both for and against continuing the class then, deciding that Dumbledore was right and that they did need to teach as many people as possible to defend themselves. He looked up, a determined glint in his eye, and said, "I'll do it."

Professor McGonagall let out a sigh of relief and Remus let out a small whoop. Professor Dumbledore, however, simply smiled and nodded his head. "Good," he said. "I knew I could count on you."

For the next hour Harry, Neville, Professor Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall worked out which classes the two students would be taking during their sixth year while Remus and Mrs. Figg looked on, proud of Harry's achievements. Harry and Neville would both be taking the advanced courses in Defense Against the Dark Arts, Potions, Charms and Transfiguration and, at Dumbledore's insistence, a special Divination course being taught by Firenze. They would also both be taking a special lab so that they could continue their training once the school year began. The only differences in their schedules were that while Neville would be taking Advanced Herbology, Harry would be teaching a lab in Defense Against the Dark Arts.

As Harry and Remus were getting up to leave Professor McGonagall said, "Not so fast, Mister Potter. I have some additional news for you."

Harry sat back down and waited as Professor McGonagall left the room and returned moments later with his broom. "I believe this is yours," she said handing him his Firebolt, a small smile creeping across her face. Harry gingerly took the broom in his hands and lovingly inspected every centimeter of its length. "Don't worry," Professor McGonagall said. "We sent it back to the company for inspection and they have assured us that all of the various hexes and curses Dolores Umbridge placed on it have been removed. It is perfectly safe." Then under her breath she added, "And Dolores Umbridge will pay for what she tried to do to you."

"Thank you," Harry whispered, overwhelmed by his emotions.

"I thought you might also like to know that your lifetime ban on quidditch has been lifted."

Harry didn't know what to say. He looked from McGonagall to Dumbledore to Remus, all of whom were smiling, and, after a lengthy pause, forcefully shoved his fist into the air and screamed, "Yes!"

That night, as he was getting ready for bed, Pig flew threw his open window and slammed into his chest, almost knocking him over. Harry caught the excitable little owl and untied the parchment from its leg. He was about to sit down and read it when Hedwig glided through the window, landing gracefully on the bed beside him, a piece of parchment tied to her leg as well. When she extended her leg Harry relieved her of her burden, a letter from Hermione, at which time Hedwig flew over to her cage and, upon seeing Pig resting in her cage, turned to look dolefully at Harry. Harry looked at her and shrugged. "I'm sorry, girl, but he just got in. I'll respond to Ron's letter and he will be out of here before you know it."

If owls could sigh then Harry could have sworn that Hedwig sighed deeply before turning back to her cage and climbed in, being careful not to disturb the small ball of feathers that was resting next to her water dish.

Setting Hermione's letter aside for the moment he turned back to Ron's letter and unrolled it. He knew that Ron had met with the Unspeakables from the Department of Mysteries that day and he wanted to know what they had said. As he unrolled the parchment, however, a second letter fell out and dropped to the floor. Bending down he picked it up and saw that it was from Ginny. He smiled to himself and resolved that on his next trip to Diagon Alley he would buy Ginny her own owl. Setting Ginny's letter aside as well he unrolled Ron's letter and began to read:

> Dear Harry,
>
> How you doing, mate? Mum and Dad and Ginny and I will be moving in a few days. I guess Hermione will be joining us in about a week. No word on when you might be able to come, though. Mum wants you here yesterday but Dad says Dumbledore has his reasons for making you to stay with those stupid muggles and said we shouldn't get our hopes up any time soon. I hope he will let you come soon, though, because it's going to be dead boring without you.
>
> The meeting at the DoM went well. They told me that the brains belonged to some of the greatest wizards in the past two hundred years. They said that the one that got me seems to have transferred all of its knowledge to me. Their emotional memories weren't transferred (thank God) but I did get a full dose of their knowledge and intellectual memories.
>
> It's really confusing, mate. I have all of this knowledge and all of these memories running around inside my head but I don't know what to do with any of it. They say they are going to teach me some kind of meditation or something that is supposed to help me sort things out. I hope it works because this is really confusing.
>
> I got my O.W.L. results today. Can you believe I got seven? Mum is ecstatic. I guess all of Hermione's nagging was good for something. But I don't think I would have gotten the 'O' in DADA without the your help. The only bad thing about it is that I also got an 'O' in Potions and Mum wants me to take Advanced Potions next year. Oh well. I guess. I'm not looking forward to two more years of the greasy git but . . . I'm beginning to think that maybe the brain attack wasn't such a bad thing after all. I can't explain it but for some reason I seem to have an in-depth understanding of potions now. The weird thing is that Dumbledore sent a note with my O.W.L.s and wants me to sign up for a Divination class With Firenze. I wonder what that is all about?
>
> I guess we'll be seeing you in about a week. Apparently we were named in Sirius' Will and are supposed to attend the reading.
>
> Your friend,
>
> Ron

Harry read the letter again. He was glad that Ron seemed to be coping with the brain attack fairly well. He was also glad that Ron was going to be in his Potions class. And from the looks of it Ron

would be in his Divination class as well. And, yes, he had to admit that Hermione's nagging had paid off. He didn't know if he was ready for the reading of Sirius' Will though. He and Remus had just started talking about Sirius' death that afternoon and it was still pretty painful.

Pulling out a piece of parchment and a quill Harry opened the bottle of ink on his desk and began writing a letter to Ron. He knew he couldn't tell him anything about Neville because that would lead to too many questions and he couldn't tell anyone about the additional training they were receiving. He could, however, tell him about his O.W.L. results and the classes he was taking. He could also tell Ron about getting his broom back and the fact that his quidditch ban had been lifted.

Fifteen minutes later, after finishing his letter to Ron, Harry turned to the letters from Hermione and Ginny. He was pretty sure what Hermione's was about, O.W.L.s and the charm they were working on, but he didn't have any idea what Ginny's would be about because he was only just discovering how complex and wonderful a person she really was. He decided to save Ginny's letter for last so that he could spend more time learning about the brave young girl who had already been through so much. His stomach gave a little flip as he thought about her but he ignored it because she was still Ron's little sister in his mind and there was no way he was going to start feeling that way about her.

True to her word, Hermione had completed her outline of the Buddhist's spiritual philosophy by the end of their first week back. He knew that she was currently working on the Hindu philosophy and that she was hoping to have it finished by the end of this week. Apparently she was putting her homework on hold to help them find the kinds of information they were looking for. As he unrolled Hermione's letter he couldn't help but smile at her opening statements.

> Dear Harry,
>
> I DID IT! I GOT TEN O.W.L.s! I GOT OUTSTANDINGS IN ALL MY CLASSES!
>
> Have you heard from Ron yet? I wonder how he did? I hope he did well. He has been awfully quiet lately. Do you know how his meeting at the Department of Mysteries went? I hope it's nothing too serious.
>
> I am working on the Hindu philosophy and should have it done by the end of next week. I haven't found anything that might be useful yet but I will keep looking. I may have overlooked something but I will keep searching until we find something. I just know there has got to be something to counter the Unforgivables.
>
> I will be traveling to London at the end of next week. Apparently I was named in Sirius' Will and they want me to attend the reading. Hope to see you there. After that I will be moving to where we were last summer. Still no word on when you might be able to join us though.
>
> With love from,
>
> Hermione

Harry wrote a quick letter to Hermione, congratulating her on her O.W.L.s and telling her of his results. He then told her about his progress with the Jewish and Christian philosophies and said that, even though there was nothing concrete yet, he and Remus were starting to find some interesting possibilities. He then told her that he would be at the reading of Sirius' Will and that it didn't sound like he would be leaving Privet Drive any time soon because Dumbledore wanted him to stay as long as he possible this summer.

After the ink had dried on Hermione's letter he rolled it up and set it aside. Turning to Ginny's letter he broke the wax seal and unrolled it, holding it up to the light.

> Dear Harry,
>
> I really don't know what to think about Percy's coming back. A part of me wants to forgive him but another part of me wants to hex him so bad he will never show his face in public again. What he did to Mum and Dad is unforgivable. But then again, Mum and Dad and Bill seem to be able to forgive him so I guess I will have to at least think about it.
>
> Hermione has told us what you and Professor Lupin have been doing. I hope you are able to find something.
>
> Ron went to the Ministry of Magic today to meet with some Unspeakables. I hate to say this, Harry, but it sounds like he is going to turn into another Hermione. Not that there's anything wrong with Hermione, mind you, but I don't know if I will be able to handle living with a walking encyclopedia. I can handle Hermione because that's just the way she is. But this is Ron we're talking about! I'm used to him being a prat.
>
> I don't know what to tell you about Sirius, Harry. From what little time I spent around him, however, I think Professor Lupin is spot on: Sirius would want to be remembered for the good things in his life, not the sad or depressing things, and most definitely not for the years he spent in Azkaban.
>
> Ron probably already told you that we will be moving at the end of the week and that we will be at the reading of Sirius' Will so I really don't have much more to add. Besides, Mum is calling me to help Ron degnome the garden.
>
> Hope to see you soon!
>
> Love,
>
> Ginny

Harry smiled at Ginny's letter and for some reason actually found himself looking forward to going to Diagon Alley for the reading. He wasn't looking forward to the act of listening to the provisions of Sirius' Will but rather seeing his friends again. His aunt Petunia was trying to be nice and she was actually opening up to him a bit and telling him about his mother and what she knew of the wizarding world but it wasn't the same as being around people who he knew cared about him.

After crafting a quick, yet thoughtful, letter to Ginny he rolled it up with Ron's and sealed all three letters with candle wax. Then, after tying Ron and Ginny's letters together, he roused Pig, tied the letters to his leg and sent him on his way. Next he asked Hedwig if she felt up to a delivery while

holding Hermione's letter up for her inspection. When Hedwig opened her eyes and saw that Harry had something for her to deliver she hooted softly, hopped out of her cage and extended her leg.

Harry tied the letter to her leg, told her the letter was for Hermione, thanked her and watched her as she vanished into the night sky. Fifteen minutes later, after practicing occlumency and clearing his mind, Harry was sound asleep and resting comfortably

Chapter 6. Diagon Alley

The afternoon before Harry and Remus were to travel back to Diagon Alley for the reading of Sirius' Will Remus handed Harry an envelope. Harry looked at it and saw that it was addressed to him then turned it over and saw a wax seal in the shape of a dog's paw print on the back. "It's from Sirius," Remus said in response to Harry's questioning look as he sat down on the bed to watch his young friend's reaction. "I believe he wrote it some time along in May or early June. He asked me to give it to give it to you in the event of his death."

Harry looked at the envelope and turned it over several times in his hands, not wanting to open it because it would mean that Sirius really was gone. He and Remus had been talking about it for about a week now and he had pretty much come to terms with the idea that he would never see Sirius again; but this, opening this letter, would mean so much more. It would mean that he had truly lost the only father figure he had ever known.

"Would you like to be alone?" Remus asked.

Harry looked up in surprise. He had been so lost in his thoughts that he had forgotten Remus was even in the room. "Huh?" Harry asked. "Oh. No," he said softly, shaking his head, "I was just thinking."

Remus nodded. "I understand."

Opening the top drawer on his desk Harry found his penknife and slit the seal. Laying it aside he opened the envelope and pulled out the parchment that contained the last letter Sirius had written to him. Unfolding the parchment and laying the envelope aside Harry laid the letter on his desk and stared at it blankly for several seconds before beginning to read.

> Dear, Harry,
>
> Since you are reading this then I guess it means that I am dead. Please don't cry for me, Harry. You can cry for yourself if you want but please don't cry for me. Hopefully I am with your parents now and we are in the process of planning some kind of great Cosmic Prank. I don't know how I died but I hope I went down fighting. If I did then it was my choice. Please don't blame yourself. There are less honorable ways of dieing and I would rather die fighting for something I believe in than just withering away (which is what makes staying in this house so damned depressing).
>
> I want you to do me a favor, Harry. If Remus is still alive please take care of him. I know your life hasn't been easy but you are a survivor. You and Remus are both survivors. If at all possible I want you to please take care of each other.
>
> As the last of the Blacks it is my right and so I am leaving almost everything to you - the house in London, most of the Black Family Fortune as well as all

of our other holdings in England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales and on the continent. You are a very wealthy man, Harry. All I ask is that you let Remus (if he is still alive) live wherever he wants (room and board included) for the amount of one galleon per year. I would also like you to appoint Remus (again, if he is still alive) as your executor at least until you are of age. It is a large estate and you are going to need all the help you can get and I think Remus is just the man for the job. I would like the house on Grimmauld Place be used as the headquarters for the Order until such time as it is no longer needed. I also want you to make sure Remus gets some new robes. He is a stubborn old werewolf so you might have to drag him kicking and screaming into Madam Malkin's. If he gives you too much grief tell him that I have given you permission to transfigure all his robes into tutus if he doesn't behave.

Now, as to what you saw in Snape's pensive all I can say is that you shouldn't judge the events until you know all of the facts. Yes, we were mean to Snivellus. But we had our reasons. Snape and his crowd were tormenting and torturing the muggle borns and half-bloods. But since there was never any evidence the teachers, including Dumbledore, refused to do anything about it. I think Dumbledore knew what was going on but since he couldn't catch them at it he couldn't legally do anything. When James and I got wind of what was going on we decided to take matters into out own hands. We had a pretty good idea who was behind the attacks and when we heard about an attack we would investigate before retaliating. I guess you could say that we were the poor man's aurors and since Snivellus was one of the most active offenders he was on the receiving end of a lot of our pranks.

If memory serves, your parents got together in our seventh years after a young, third year Huffelpuff girl was raped. The teachers wouldn't do anything and both James and Lily were furious. That's when they joined forces and your mum became an honorary Marauder. James wouldn't let her become a full-fledged Marauder because she had a reputation to uphold and we didn't.

In closing, Harry, if you are reading this it means that I am dead. I'm sorry. I can only hope and pray that you will be able to find happiness, live a full life and find some way of helping the people with the Black Family Fortune. God knows I would like to but until my name is cleared I won't be able to do anything.

> Love,
>
> Sirius

Harry looked at the letter and stared at it for several seconds as the finality of Sirius' death sank in. As his eyes began to fill with tears and his vision blurred he promised Sirius that he would make him proud, that he would defeat Voldemort and that he would find a way to turn all of the assets in the Black Family Fortune to the forces of good.

Wiping his eyes he handed Remus the letter and said, "There's a message in there for you."

Remus took the letter and read it then laughed. "That old dog," he laughed. "He knows I don't like accepting charity. But just this once I think I can accommodate him."

The next morning - after a quick run, a short workout and thirty minutes of dueling practice - Harry and Remus dropped Neville off at Mrs. Figg's house before returning home to get cleaned up for their trip to Gringotts for the reading of Sirius' Will. Since the Black Family Fortune was so large the reading would be taking place in a secure location inside Gringotts and additional security measures were being taken to ensure the safety, security and privacy of those involved.

Tonks was waiting for them when they entered Mrs. Figg's house and five minutes later they were regrouping with Fred and George in the back room of their shop before heading over to Gringotts. Five minutes later, faded baseball cap in place and flanked by his guards (Remus, Tonks, Fred and George), Harry found himself in the main lobby of the Diagon Alley branch of Gringotts Wizarding Bank. Remus approached one of the tellers and, after a brief conversation, returned to the group saying, "They are sending someone around to take us to the meeting chamber."

When the uniformed goblin appeared a few minutes later it led them through a maze of hallways and corridors to a conference room near what Harry supposed was the back of the building. Upon entering they saw several familiar redheaded Weasley faces, Hermione, Professor Dumbledore and a few faces they didn't recognize. Tonks almost immediately broke away from their small group and raced across the room towards a modestly dressed blond haired whitch who looked to be in her late forties and dark haired man dressed in a muggle business suit. "Mum! Dad!" she called out happily. "I'm sorry I haven't written but I've been kind of busy."

Tonks' mother - Andromeda Tonks - just laughed. "So I hear, Dora. So I hear." As Fred, George, Harry and Remus walked towards the front of the room Ron and Hermione raced around the large table. Hermione burst through the twins' protective barrier and threw her arms around Harry's neck. "Oh, Harry," she squealed, "I'm so glad you're all right!"

Gasping slightly Harry coughed and said, "I'm fine, Hermione. I just need a little air."

Hermione released her vice-like grip on his neck and lowered herself to the floor. "Oh," she said as a bright blush flooded her cheeks. "I'm sorry."

"That's okay," Harry said, a gentle smile appearing on his lips. "I'm glad to see you too."

Hermione looked up and smiled, a look of relief on her face that Harry supposed was her way of saying that she was glad he wasn't going to blow up at them like he did last year.

"Hey, mate!" Ron said with a smile on his face as he stepped forward.

"Hey, Ron!" Harry said smiling. "How's things with the new genius?"

Ron blushed. "Not bad really," he said quietly. "It's going to take some getting used to but the meditation is helping. How have you been doing?"

Harry glanced quickly over at Remus, uncertain as to how much he should tell his friends of his summertime activities then said, "Oh, you know. I've been doing a little reading and a little studying. That's all."

Ron gave him an appraising look and said, "It looks like you've been working out a bit too."

This time is was Harry's turn to blush. "Well, yeah," he said modestly. "I guess you could say that. I've been getting a bit of exercise."

Ron snorted. "More than just a bit I'd say. You look like you've been working out almost continuously since we got back."

Ginny stepped up beside Hermione and looked Harry up and down as a mischievous twinkle came into here eye. "You look good, Harry. Almost good enough to eat."

Ron's mouth fell open as he turned to look at his little sister. "Ginny!" he said, his voice filled with mock outrage.

Ginny smiled up at the youngest of her older brothers. "Yes?" she asked as both she and Hermione burst into fits of laughter.

"I think you had better watch out, Harry," George said.

"It looks like our little sister . . ." Fred continued.

"Might have designs . . ."

"On your body."

Harry rolled his eyes and grimaced at the twins' insinuations. "Purely platonic I assure you," he said then smiled at Ginny. "Hi, Ginny. How's it going for you this summer?"

Between fits of giggling laughter Ginny said, "It's been going okay. I get to push Ron's buttons a lot more now that it's just the two of us. It's kind of quiet without Gred and Forge around all the time but they are helping."

"She has volunteered to help us test our products on our dear brother," Fred stage whispered in his ear.

Ron scowled and glared at his brothers. "Just you wait," he growled, his face burning with a bright red blush. "I'll get even some day."

Fred and George hid behind Harry, shivering with counterfeit fear, and said, "Oh! Save us Harry! Big bad Ronniekins is going to turn us into toads."

"You'll be lucky if that's all I turn you into," Ron growled.

Moments later a man dressed in finely tailored business robes swept into the room and placed what looked like a miniature crystal ball on a small golden stand at one end of the table. He looked, in Harry's opinion, to be a very self-absorbed and self-important man. He reminded him somewhat of Percy but he didn't want to draw too many conclusions without having met the man so he let those first impressions fall by the wayside and watched as the man set things up for the reading of Sirius' Will. "Good afternoon," the man said in a pleasant enough voice. "My name is Nigel Nolan. I am an attorney at law in the wizarding world and I was retained by Mister Black - under circumstances of strictest secrecy - to see to the proper execution of his Last Will and Testament."

Looking around he said, "I trust that everyone is here so if you will please take your seats we can begin."

Harry looked at Remus who was fidgeting nervously, his eyes downcast and a look of complete emotional exhaustion playing out across his features. Walking over to the last true Marauder he put his hand on Remus' shoulder and said, "Are you going to be all right, Remus?"

Remus looked up at the ceiling. "Yes. I'll be fine," he choked out as he wiped the tears from his eyes. "I just need some time."

Harry nodded his understanding and slowly turned away, walking to the table and sitting down, saving a space for Remus beside him.

When everyone had found a seat Mister Nolan took out his wand and, while muttering an incantation under his breath, tapped the crystal three times in rapid succession. The torches dimmed and the room grew dark as the energy from the crystal was released.

The crystal glowed briefly before a bright, white, ethereal mist began to issue forth from the crystalline structure and gradually grew to assume the size and shape of a ghostly Sirius Black. The apparition walked the length of the conference table then turned around and paced back to the center. The ghostly Sirius stopped and looked slowly around, its sad eyes seeming to stop and rest momentarily upon each person seated around the table in turn. "Ladies and gentlemen," the shadowy figure said, "I thank you for coming. I don't know how many of you are still alive but at the time this was recorded you were all alive so I guess we will just have to go by that. For the record, my name is, or was, Sirius Black and I was the last of the Black line. As such it falls to me to dispose of the Black Family Estate as I see fit. I don't want to make this any more complicated than it has to be; but at the same time I want to make it complicated enough to keep all of the Black Family monies, heirlooms, properties and possessions out of the hands of those the rest of my . . . family associated with."

"Before I get to the to the distribution of these assets I would like it to be known that if any of the people named herein are no longer alive at the time of this reading then the assets that were to go to them are to be divided equally amongst those who are still alive.

"To my cousin, Andromeda Tonks, I leave the sum of fifty thousand galleons. To her husband, Ted Tonks I leave an additional fifty thousand galleons. And to their daughter, Nympadora Tonks, I leave the sum of fifty thousand galleons.

"To Molly Weasley I leave the sum of fifty thousand galleons. And to her husband, Arthur Weasley, I

leave an additional fifty thousand galleons. The two of you love my godson, Harry Potter, in ways I never could. All I ask is that you continue to be there for him when he needs a parent figure. I know we may have had our disagreements, Molly, but I do respect you and ask that you please watch out for Harry.

"I am also leaving fifty thousand galleons to each of Molly and Arthur's children - Bill, Charley, Percy, Fred, George, Ronald and Ginevra. I thank you for being Harry's friends, if only for a little while. The only stipulation I will make on the payment of these funds is that Percy reconcile his differences with his family and realize that Cornelius Fudge is a blithering idiot who is more interested in holding onto power than actually serving the people he was chosen to represent.

"To Hermione Granger I leave fifty thousand galleons as well as all of the assets in the Black Family Library. You are one smart witch, Hermione. Don't ever sell yourself short and don't ever let anyone tell you that you are less than the best. I thank you for being Harry's friend.

"To Remus Lupin (Moony) I leave the sum of one hundred thousand galleons and a permanent home in my ancestral home in London. If you are still alive, Moony, you are the last of the true Marauders. You were always the levelheaded one and I dare say that very few of our pranks would have worked without your calming influence and attention to detail. If you are still alive, Moony, could you do old Padfoot a favor and watch out for Prongs Junior for me? You may have to tag team with Arthur on some of those father-son talks I never got around to having with him but I have faith in you, Moony. You will do just fine. I am also leaving a certain trunk that is in the back of my personal vault to you. It has all of the notes from our days at Hogwarts. You can do what you want to with it, Moony. All I ask is that you please not let the legend of the Marauders die.

"And now to my godson, Harry Potter. Everything else is yours, Harry. Aside from the rest of the Black money there are lands and estates in England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales and on the continent. All I ask is that you let Moony live in my ancestral home in London, or wherever he may choose, for the sum of one galleon per year. Moony can be a stubborn old coot, Harry, and he is loath to accept charity. But I give you permission to hex him if he does not accept your hospitality.

"Well," the apparition said as it stopped pacing and turned to look at the crystal, "I guess that's it. All of the titles and deeds to all of your properties are in the Black Family vault, Harry. You might want to have Bill check it for curses before entering, though, because the Blacks weren't a very trusting lot and I don't want to see either you or anyone else get hurt because of their paranoia." With that the apparition vanished.

"As you can see," Mr. Nolan said, "the Blacks were a very wealthy family. Even with these bequests, Mister Potter is still the single wealthiest wizard in all of Great Britain."

Harry looked up, his emotions spent, then, with a sigh, looked down at his hands as they rested in his lap. Several seconds later, while turning towards the attorney, he said, "Mister Nolan, I was wondering if you could do me a favor?"

Nigel Nolan looked over at Harry. "I don't know, Mister Potter, what do you have in mind?"

Harry looked hesitantly around the room then said, "I want you to establish a one hundred thousand galleon fund that will provide Wolfsbane Potion to any and all werewolves who cannot afford it."

The room was silent for several seconds before Mr. Nolan said, "Might I ask why you wish to establish this fund, Mister Potter?"

Harry looked into the attorney's eyes. "Because," he said, "I do not believe, based upon my own personal experiences, that werewolves are dark creatures. I am of the opinion that the only reason they turn dark is because people have been taught to fear them and therefor refuse to give then a chance at a decent living." The room was silent. "And if the Ministry of Magic is going to go out of its way to make life difficult for them then I am going to do everything in my power to make it easier for them so that they will know that we are not all blind fools." This last was said with such contempt that there was little doubt in anyone's mind that Harry was referring to Cornelius Fudge and Dolores Umbridge. "Some might look upon this as charity, but I do not. I want it to be known that I personally look upon this fund as an investment in people's lives."

Mr. Nolan smiled and nodded his head as well. "I believe you, Mister Potter and happen to agree with you as one of my best friends was bitten by a werewolf last December and has since lost almost everything he had worked so hard to achieve. I will perform these duties without charge. What would you like to call this fund?"

Harry glanced over at Remus then said, "I would like it to be known as The Marauder's Wolfsbane Potion Fund." Remus' head jerked up. "And if you could tell your friend that if he is willing to side and work with us in the war against Voldemort I may just have a job for him. You can also tell him that I am going to be asking a few of my friends, one of whom is a werewolf, to look through all of the lands, holdings and properties I have just inherited to find the best and most luxurious accommodations available. Once they have been purged of all signs of dark activity and remodeled to suit the needs of their new occupants I will be turning them over to those werewolves who will take care of the land and who will promise - through magical contract - to help us defeat Voldemort. You can also tell him that we will be establishing a werewolf information service for new and existing members of the werewolf community and that these services and this aide will remain in place until such time as it is no longer needed - not just until the war is over but until it is no longer needed. And finally, I want you to make sure that he understands that this is not charity. I look upon it as an investment in the lives of those whom society has deemed less than worthy. Tell him that one of my best friends is a werewolf and that I am doing this as a . . . a labor of love because I know that werewolves are just ordinary people who happen to go furry once every twenty-eight days and who, if given the chance, can lead relatively normal, happy and productive lives."

Mr. Nolan looked over at Harry, his face alive with wonder and amazement, and said, "You are a very wise man, Mister Potter. I will do everything in my power to see that this is done both legally and properly. And once again I will not be charging you anything for this service as I will be doing it as much for my friend as for you."

Harry nodded then said, "Alright, but I want you to know that while I will be keeping track of the expenses I will help you in any way I can."

Nigel nodded. "Perhaps we could have lunch sometime to discuss what you hope to achieve."

"Perhaps," Harry said. "I will have to talk to a few of my friends first but I think that can be arranged."

Fifteen minutes later, as the reading broke up, Professor Dumbledore approached Harry and said, "That was a very courageous move, Harry. Might I ask what made you think of it?"

Harry smirked. "Actually, you did, sir."

Dumbledore’s eyebrows shot up. "I did?" he asked.

"Yes sir. In almost all of your war stories one theme keeps emerging; and that is that people respond to kindness much more readily than they do to threats and fear. I am in a position to offer them hope, a light at the end of the tunnel, if you will. So that is what I am going to do. I am going to use the monies Sirius left me to offer the werewolves as much hope as I can and hopefully remove them from the ranks of Voldemort’s forces while I am at it."

"Ah, yes," Dumbledore sighed happily. "Good thinking, Harry. I have a feeling your godfather would be very proud of what you have chosen to do with his bequest."

"I know he would," Remus said. "Sirius would have loved to stick it to his relatives and all their pure-blood righteous indignation by doing something like this. But unfortunately he couldn’t even touch his own money while he was in hiding."

They spent the next few hours going through Sirius' and the Black Family’s vaults, overseeing the transfer of funds and gathering up various items of interest. Harry was stunned when he saw the size of the three main Black Family vaults and realized that each of them was almost completely filled with gold and silver. As they stopped at his own, personal vault - not the Potter Family vault - to refill his moneybag he decided that financing the upcoming war shouldn’t be much of a problem. And that is what he decided to dedicate the Black Family Fortune to, defeating Voldemort and, if there was any money left over, helping to rebuild the wizarding world.

At three o’clock that afternoon, as he, Remus, Tonks, Dumbledore, the Weasleys and the Grangers sat down to a late lunch in one of the Leakey Cauldron’s private dinning rooms, Harry turned to Professor Dumbledore and said, "Professor, I want you to turn Black Manor into a proper command center. I want it to either rival or surpass anything and everything the Ministry has. I want you to be able to run the entire war from that house if need be. Of course I want there to be rooms and dormitories for Order members and I want it to be comfortable for whoever is staying there. But first and foremost I want it to be a proper headquarters."

Dumbledore nodded his head and smiled. "I wish . . ." he faltered. "I wish we had had this kind of commitment thirty years ago. Then we might have defeated Tom and you would not be facing this future."

Harry looked down at the table and then around the room at all of the laughing and smiling faces then sighed. "Yes, sir," he said. "I do as well. But you didn’t. And now you do. I don’t even want to think about what has changed in me to make me so determined to beat Tom but whatever it is I can only hope and pray that it is worth it and that we are successful."

"As do I, Harry," the aging headmaster said tiredly. "As do I."

Half an hour later, as pudding was being served, Harry excused himself and walked over to where Remus and Tonks were visiting with her parents. "Excuse me, Remus, Tonks," he interrupted politely. "I hate to interrupt but could I ask you to accompany me back out to Diagon Alley for a bit?"

Remus and Tonks looked up and saw the serious yet somber expression on Harry’s face. "Sure,"

Tonks said. "What's up?"

Harry smirked more than grinned and smiled more than smirked and said, "Oh, nothing major. I just want to pick out a present for a friend and I want her to do the picking."

Tonks' eyes flew open and a wide grin spread across her face. "Have you got a girlfriend, Harry?" she asked.

Harry groaned then, turning to Remus, said, "Remus, why is it that whenever a guy wants to buy a girl a present everyone thinks you are going steady? Can't a guy just have a girl who is a friend without everyone thinking there is more to it than that?"

Remus stood up and put an arm around Harry's shoulders. "I'm afraid not, Harry; at least not until you are married and settled down. That's just the way things are."

Harry groaned and rolled his eyes. "Alright," he said. "Come on."

With his two bodyguards in tow Harry walked over to stand behind Ginny and cleared his throat. "Erm, Ginny?" he said. "Could you come with us for a few minutes?"

Ginny turned around and looked up at Harry, Remus and Tonks. "Sure," she said uncertainly. "What's up?"

"Er. I want to buy you something but I want you to pick it out. And unfortunately I'm not allowed to go anywhere without a bodyguard."

Ginny looked at her parents briefly. They nodded their consent and Ginny folded her napkin and tossed it on the table next to her plate as she got up to leave. "Alright then," she said. "What have you got in mind?"

"You'll see," Harry said mysteriously as he led the way to the door. As they approached the door Harry pulled out his faded baseball cap and pulled it down over his head effectively concealing his scar and hiding his face from prying eyes.

"Do you have to do that every time you go out?" Ginny asked.

Harry nodded. "At least for now. Apparently Lucius Malfoy is out to get me for ruining his good name."

Ginny harrumphed and shook her head. "He did that all on his own."

"Yeah, I know," Harry said, "but he holds me responsible for him getting caught."

"But we were there too!" Ginny said indignantly.

"I know you were," Harry said quickly, striving to head off an encounter with the infamous Weasley temper, "but I would rather he blame me and forget that you guys were there because I want you guys to stay safe and because . . . well, I'm kind of used to being hunted."

Ginny said a soft, "Oh," then slowly reached over and took hold of Harry's hand. "But we don't want you hurt either, Harry," she murmured.

Harry squeezed her hand and smiled down at the beautiful redhead walking beside him. "I don't either," he said, "but one target is a lot easier to protect than ten."

Ginny squeezed his hand and leaned into his arm. "Alright then," she said softly. "But you be careful."

"Don't worry about that," Harry almost laughed. "I really don't have much choice in the matter."

As they walked through the Leaky Cauldron Tonks took the lead while Harry and Ginny walked side-by-side in the middle, Harry turning loose of Ginny's hand so that he could draw his wand if necessary, and Remus brought up the rear. Everyone's senses were alert for any signs of danger.

While the bricks were moving aside to form the entrance to Diagon Alley Tonks asked, "Where to?"

"Eeylops Owl Emporium," Harry said as he drew his wand and prepared to step through the barrier.

At that moment the back door to the Leaky Cauldron opened. Harry, Remus and Tonks all spun around and dropped into a fighting stance, leveling their wands at the intruders. It was just Neville and his grandmother. Ginny squeaked with surprise at the rapidity of their movements, Neville raised his hands in surrender and Neville's gran gasped upon finding herself confronted with three very nervous witches and wizards. Tonks let out her breath. "Whew!" Tonks breathed. "It's only you. Do you have your wand, Neville?"

"Yes, I do," Neville said confidently.

"Then you might want to draw it," Remus said. "I can't explain it but something just doesn't feel right."

Neville drew his wand and he and his gran joined the others as they entered Diagon Alley. "How are you today, Mrs. Longbottom?" Remus asked the aging matriarch of the Longbottom family.

"I'm doing quite well actually, Mister Lupin. I want to thank you for everything you have been doing for Neville. He tells me that you and Harry are the two best defense teachers he has had."

Harry and Remus both blushed. "Er, thank you," Remus said. "But that's not really saying much." Then, turning to Harry, he asked, "What have your teachers been like, Harry?"

"Well, let's see," Harry said, "the first was possessed by Voldemort; the second was an incompetent fool; the third was, of course, you, Remus; the fourth was a Death Eater; and the fifth was a bureaucrat who couldn't fight her way out of a wet paper bag and who wouldn't teach us anything."

"What was Dumbledore thinking when he hired all those others?" Mrs. Longbottom asked indignantly.

"He wasn't," Remus said. "Of the five, I am the only one he personally hired. All of the others were appointed by either the Ministry or the Board of Directors."

"We'll just have to see about that then won't we," Mrs. Longbottom growled. "I don't want my grandson graduating from Hogwarts not knowing how to defend himself. And with Voldemort back there is no excuse for not teaching proper defense!"

Harry noticed that Mrs. Longbottom had no fear of Tom's fictitious name and that neither Neville nor Tonks nor Ginny reacted to her using it. Inside he was secretly pleased with these developments because he knew that at least these four, as well as himself and Professor Dumbledore would be able to fight without fear.

"Where are you heading, Neville?" Ginny asked.

"The stationary shop," Neville said. "I ran out of parchment and I still have an essay to do for Professor Snape."

"You made it into Potions then?" Ginny asked. "I'm impressed."

"I'm shocked," Neville said brightly. "I didn't think I would ever want to take Potions again but after what happened in the Department of Mysteries and the fact that you have to have Potions to be an auror I'm going to give it everything I've got."

Harry smiled at the determined tone in Neville's voice and knew that his once timid friend was rapidly becoming a determined young man. "What about you? Where are you guys going?" Neville asked.

"We're going to stop by Eeylops Owl Emporium," Harry said. "I need to get some owl treats for Hedwig and I want Ginny to pick out an owl of her own."

Ginny's mouth fell open as she looked up at Harry. "I've learned some very surprising things about this young woman over the past month," Harry said. "I know it's not much but this is my way of letting her know that I am truly sorry for ignoring her over most of the past four years." Ginny's mouth snapped shut and she cocked her head to one side, looking up at Harry with an extreme look of consternation on her face. Harry laughed and threw his arm around her shoulders. "Come on, Ginny'. I want to apologize."

Ginny leaned into Harry's side and muttered, "Boys! I'll never understand them."

Tonks laughed. "I don't think we're supposed to, Ginny. They are just strange."

Harry was about to say something about girls being just as strange when Remus cut him off. "I don't like this, guys," he said urgently. "Harry, Neville, you two are a team. If anything happens I want you to stay together and fight. Ginny, Mrs. Longbottom, if anything happens I want you to take cover and stay there until one of us comes to get you."

Harry looked worriedly over at Remus and knew that his wolf senses must have picked something up. Pulling Ginny close he nodded towards Neville who nodded back. Even their senses were beginning to tingle in anticipation of trouble. As a group, Harry, Ginny, Neville and Mrs. Longbottom made their way into Eeylops Owl Emporium as Tonks and Remus stood guard out front and motioned for Kingsley and the other aurors on duty that day to get ready and to be alert for any signs of trouble.

Harry, Ginny, Neville and Mrs. Longbottom had just stepped behind a row of cages, effectively screening themselves from view when it happened. An explosion came from the entrance to Knockturn Alley, blowing a large hole in the side of one of the nearby buildings, shattering several windows up and down both streets and knocking several innocent bystanders - witches and

wizards and their children - to the ground, injuring more than just a few. It took less than a second for both Harry and Neville to react. Neville grabbed a nearby stool and gently yet forcefully set his grand mother down, telling her to stay put until he returned. Harry shoved his moneybag into Ginny's hands, pushed her down to sit on the floor next to Neville's gran, told her to stay put until either he or Neville came to get them, drew his wand, turned his cap around and pulled it down and back to keep the hair out of his eyes and raced to the front of the store, with Neville close on his heals, to see what was going on.

When they reached the door curses and hexes were already flying fast and furious. Remus and Tonks were defending the front of Eeylop's. They could see Kingsley dueling with at least two Death Eaters down in front of Quality Quidditch Supplies. He was holding his own but they could tell he was out numbered. Crouching down and opening the door Harry and Neville crawled out behind Remus. "How many?" Harry asked.

"At least fifty!" Remus said.

"Alright. Neville and I will take this section and lay cover for you and Tonks to get down to where you can help Kingsley."

"Alright," Remus said. "You two keep together and be safe. Don't be afraid to hurt them, Harry. We don't care what kind of shape they are in when we take them in. All we care about is that they are alive"

"Alright," Harry said shortly. "We'll be fine. You just help Kingsley and please … be safe."

"Will do," Remus said. Then calling to Tonks above the screaming crowds, yelled, "TONKS! ON THE COUNT OF THREE!"

Tonks glanced over briefly to see where they were going and nodded her head when Remus indicated Kingsley.

"ONE!" Remus yelled. "TWO!"

"THREE!" Harry finished for him as he and Neville rolled out into the street and began firing curses, hexes, jinxes and a few charms at the Death Eaters. Neville laid cover for Remus and Tonks as they ran up the alley to assist Kingsley while Harry covered his back.

Their Ballet, Gymnastics and Tumbling training definitely came in handy over the next 45 minutes as they ducked and rolled and jumped and dodged to avoid being hit while helping as many people as they could into the safety of buildings. Between the two of them they accounted for 15 of the 53 Death Eaters that attacked Diagon Alley that day and helped at least 30 injured civilians to safety. All in all they worked very well together as a team. So much so that even some of the veteran aurors who had fought in the last war against Voldemort were impressed by the fluidity of their movements.

Harry and Neville were still standing back to back, slowly making their way down the alley in the aftermath of the attack, their faces blackened and smudged from the smoke of fires and explosions and their clothes covered with dust, when Harry felt a hand on his shoulder.

Jumping and turning to face his 'attacker' Harry came face to face with a slightly disheveled Remus

Lupin. "Whoa, slow down, Harry," Remus said, holding his hands up in a gesture of surrender. "It's over. We won."

Harry waited for his heart to stop racing and his breathing to return to normal as he slowly lowered his wand. "You two did very well for your first time out," Remus said gently.

"Yeah," Tonks laughed nervously. "I don't even want to think what you are going to be capable of when you are fully trained"

Harry and Neville turned to look at each other and nodded their heads with satisfied grins on their faces. Then, picking their way through the rubble, worked their way back to Eeylop's Owl Emporium where they found Mrs. Longbotton and Ginny as well as at least twenty others huddled together in the aisles of the shop. "Well," Harry asked with a mischievous grin on his face when he reached Ginny, "have you picked one out yet?"

At first Ginny was surprised and just glad to see him but then the reality of what he had asked sank in she frowned and glared up at him. "Harry Potter," she scolded. "How do you expect me to look at owls when you're out there trying to get yourself killed?"

Harry smiled and, shaking his head, laughed. "Don't worry about it, dear," Mrs. Longbottom said as Neville and Harry helped her to her feet. "His father was the same way."

Fifteen minutes later Ginny had picked out a male snowy owl for herself and named him Henry. When they approached the cash register the clerk didn't want to let him pay but Harry insisted saying, "I don't fight for pay. And I'm sure you are going to need to make a few repairs after that little skirmish. Take this money and put it towards those repairs."

The man smiled and nodded his head. "Yes sir, Mister Potter. And thank you."

Harry smiled and shook the man's hand. "You are most entirely welcome, sir. And, please, my name is Harry."

As they left the store Mrs. Weasley saw them and came running up the street. "Harry! Ginny!" she screamed. "Are you all right? We heard the explosion but no one could get through the wall until just a few minutes ago. What happened?"

Harry was about to say something when a familiar voice called out, "Harry Potter, Rita Skeeter from the Daily Prophet. Could you tell us what happened?"

Harry froze for a moment then turned an icy glare to the reported. "Rita," he asked, "does that deal you had with Hermione still stand?"

Rita hesitated for a moment then said, "Yes it does."

"Alright then," Harry sighed. "I'll tell you what. If he will let you, you can interview Neville Longbottom. I don't want my name in the paper because I am getting kind of tired of all of the publicity and I have some very good reasons for wanting to stay out of the papers. If you will print Neville's story that should be good enough. Be warned, however, I will know if you exaggerate or distort anything."

Rita looked cowed for a moment then said, "Fair enough. You don't want your name in the paper at

all then?"

"That’s right," Harry said. "I don’t want my name, or even any descriptions of me, in the paper."

"Where is Mister Longbottom?"

"He’s in the stationary store," Harry said. "I’ll go tell him that you want to talk to him."

After hugging Ginny, Mrs. Weasley and Hermione goodbye, Harry made Ginny promise to write him as soon as she got home. Then, once again with Remus and Tonks in tow, he entered the stationary store and told Neville about Rita’s desire for an interview.

"Why don’t you do it?" Neville asked.

Harry hung his head and sighed. "After everything that went on last year," he said, "I just don’t want my name in the paper any more. I trust her because I know something that she does not want made public but I just don’t want any more publicity. If you do decide to give her the interview I will suggest you make her let you proof read it before it goes to press."

Neville nodded grimly then said, "Okay. Thanks, Harry. I’ll think about it."

Chapter 7. Aftermath

That night, as Harry lay resting in bed in the moments before sleep took him, Hedwig and and a second snowy owl flew in through the open window and perched on the headboard of his bed. The second owl remained silent (in deference to this being Hedwig's domain) and waited patiently for her to rouse her master. Hooting softly in his ear, Hedwig brought her master back from the edge of slumber. Hopping down she landed on the pillow next to his head and gently nipped Harry's ear until he came fully awake. Then, as her master sat up on the edge of his bed groping for his glasses, she took flight, soaring across the room and coming to rest moments later on her master's desk.

As soon as Harry found his glasses he put them on and stumbled tiredly over to the door. Turning on the light he turned around and saw who he at first thought was Hedwig perched on the headboard of his bed with a note tied to her leg. But then he saw Hedwig perched on his desk and took a second look. Upon closer inspection he noticed that the markings on this new owl, although strikingly similar, were slightly different. "Henry?" he asked.

The new owl hooted happily and hopped down, gliding the length of the bed and coming to rest on the footboard. Harry untied Ginny's letter and sat back down on his bed to read. Hedwig flew over, landing on the bed beside him and let out a welcoming hoot. Henry hopped down and waddled across the bed to stand on Harry's left while Hedwig stood guard on his right. Harry looked at them, noticing that Henry was slightly smaller than Hedwig, and said, "What? Do you two think I need body guards while I'm reading a letter from Ginny?" Hedwig and Henry both turned to look at him and hooted their agreement. Harry couldn't help but grin, shake his head at their loyalty and laugh softly to himself. "Some people." Them stroking each of the owls asked, "What am I going to do with you two?"

Hedwig and Henry both turned their enormous amber eyes on him and hooted impatiently as they waited for him to open and read Ginny's letter. Shaking his head in amusement at their seemingly united front Harry broke the simple wax seal and unrolled Ginny's note.

> Dear Harry,
>
> Remus, Tonks and Kingsley filled us in on the battle in Diagon Alley this afternoon. They said that you and Neville acted like you had been working together for years. They said that they had never seen anything like it. Kingsley says that all of the Ministry aurors who were involved in the battle were very impressed and that the Department of Magical Law Enforcement is going to be keeping their eyes on you two. Needles to say, Mad-Eye Moody was very impressed with their reports. It's a good thing Remus' senses told him that something didn't feel right. Otherwise they might not have had any warning. It is also a good thing Neville was there so you could team up with your training partner.
>
> Yes, they told us about your training, Harry. Ron was a little jealous at first but he got over it pretty quickly when Mum reminded him that he is still working with the Department of Mysteries on the brain thing and doesn't have time to train. Professor Dumbledore promised him that there will be plenty of opportunities to train at school next year. Do you know what he is talking about?
>
> Mum is disappointed that I didn't make Prefect but Gred and Forge are happy for me. They say it will give me more time to cause trouble. Mum almost went ballistic when they said that and started telling me how to booby-trap the sinks. Honestly, I don't know what Mum is worried about. I would never do anything like that (wink, wink).
>
> Thank you for buying Henry for me, Harry! He is a wonderful owl. I hope he turns out to be as smart as Hedwig. I hope they - Henry and Hedwig - get along.
>
> Please write.
>
> Love,
>
> Ginny

Harry laughed at Ginny's feigned innocence and hoped that he was never on the receiving end of one of her pranks because if Fred and George were going to be feeding her ideas he doubted he would survive. Getting up and walking over to his desk he pulled out a fresh piece of parchment and a quill and opened the bottle of emerald green ink he had started using to respond to Ginny's letters when it became apparent that she was going to be one of his regular pen pals this summer. He didn't know why he started using this special ink for her letters. It just felt right somehow so he didn't question it.

As he settled down to start crafting a response (for some reason he also felt that Ginny's letters deserved a little more attention so, rather than simply writing to her, he tended to look upon it as crafting a letter to someone who deserved the best he had to offer) Hedwig and Henry flew over and took up positions on either corner of his desk and turned to watch him as he began his response. Harry looked up at them and shook his head, "Alright you two," he said. "Give me some room so I can write or we are going to be here all night." The two owls scooted back slightly but still watched him intently as he began crafting his response

> Dear Ginny,
>
> I don't think you have to worry about Hedwig and Henry getting along. They are ganging up on me to make sure I read and respond to your letter. While I was reading it Hedwig was on one side of me while Henry was on the other. And right now they are perched on the back corners of my desk watching to make sure I don't make any mistakes. Somehow I get the feeling they like each other and that my life will never be the same.
>
> So I guess the cat is out of the bag. Yes, Neville and I have been receiving additional training this summer. I couldn't tell you before because I wasn't supposed to say anything to anyone who didn't have an absolute need to know and unfortunately you didn't absolutely have to know. I'm sorry.
>
> According to Professor Dumbledore all students will be taking additional laboratory classes in Defense Against the Dark Arts next year. I will be teaching one of those classes because he wants me to continue with the D.A. I guess that means you, Ron, Hermione, Neville, Luna and the rest of them will be in my group. I hope you guys will be ready to work and learn how to defend yourselves because with everything Neville and I are learning you are going to be learning a lot more than a few simple spells. You are going to be learning how to move and fight.
>
> The only thing I can say about any pranks you might be pulling over the next couple of years is please be careful. You don't want to go pranking the wrong people. For example, I really don't think you want to prank me because while you may have Fred and George on your side I have all of the experiences of Padfoot, Prongs and Moony (the three true Marauders) on my side. Sirius was Padfoot; my dad was Prongs and Remus is Moony. And from what I have seen so far this summer you don't want to mess with Moony.
>
> I'm glad you like Henry. Like I said, I wanted to buy you something to let you know that I am sorry for ignoring you for so long. You really are a

> wonderful human being, Ginny, and I don't think I will ever be able to look at you as Ron's little sister ever again. There is more to you than meets the eye, Ginny, (not that what meets the eye is all that bad to begin with) and with your permission I would like to spend some time getting to know you better when we get back to Hogwarts.
>
> I don't know if Professor Dumbledore will tell you everything but you can still ask. All I can say for sure is that I am going to have to stay here as long as possible this summer. I hope we will be able to see each other at least once or twice between now and September first but . . .
>
> Love,
>
> Harry

Harry read the letter over and even though he didn't like leaving the last thought unfinished he felt that under the circumstances it was appropriate. Then he looked at the way he had signed it and wondered if he really did feel that way about Ginny. The more he thought about it the more he realized that it must be true. He found that he cared about her in a ways he had never expected to care about anyone. He wanted to get to know her for herself. He wanted to protect her without being a prat and trying to dominate her life. And, most of all, he found that he felt comfortable around her and wanted to share his life with her. He didn't want to force anything because he wasn't sure how Ginny felt about him. Oh, sure, he knew she had had a crush on him in his second year (her first) but he was pretty sure she was over that.

Not knowing what else to do and not wanting to start over he decided to leave the letter alone and send it on its way. With an almost fatalistic air about him he rolled the parchment up, sealed it with a few drops of wax from a rose scented candle and tied it to Henry's leg. "Take this to Ginny," he told the smaller of the two snowy owls. Then turning to his owl he said, "Hedwig, I want you to fly escort for Henry because I don't want anything happening to this letter."

Both owls hooted their reassurance and took off through the open window. After watching them disappear into the night Harry walked over and turned the light off. Five minutes later, after checking to see that the wards around his thoughts and memories were still in place, and reinforcing them ever so slightly, to make sure Tom would not be able break in and discover his feelings for the youngest Weasley, he was asleep and dreaming about a certain young redhead who had captured his heart.

As Harry, Neville and Remus entered the clearing the next morning Mad-Eye Moody hobbled over and looked the two teenagers over from head to toe. "Not bad," the retired auror said after a prolonged silence. "I hear you boys think you know how to fight. I heard about that little scuffle in Diagon Alley yesterday and I must say that I am impressed. It wasn't much but then I guess you have got to cut your teeth on something. But you are nowhere near ready for an all out war. You have proven yourselves against a few rookies but now that they know what you are capable of they are not going to go quite so easy on you. So from here on out you are going to be working twice as hard and will be learning twice as much so that you will be ready the next time they come looking

for you."

Harry and Neville looked at each other and shrugged their shoulders, smirking at the not unexpected response to their achievements.

During breakfast Harry read the Daily Prophet account of the fight in Diagon Alley and was pleased to see that Rita had kept her word. Their names did not appear anywhere in any of the many articles and there were no pictures or descriptions of either himself or Neville anywhere in the paper. Whenever they were mentioned they were simply referred to as either "the boys" or "those boys." Harry suspected that Dumbledore must have gotten to the editors and convinced them to keep their names out of the paper.

After breakfast they went through their regular warm-up exercises and then spent the next three hours running, jumping, spinning and leaping through a magical obstacle course that Moody had devised to test their agility and sharpen their reflexes. Not only were there physical obstacles to overcome but there were many magical traps as well. To make matters even worse, or "more realistic" as Moody liked to say, stunners were fired at them from every conceivable angle at random intervals throughout the exercise. When they were finally given a few moments to rest Harry and Neville, dripping with sweat, collapsed to the ground, exhausted from their ordeal.

As they lay sprawled out on the ground Tonks walked over and stood over them. "Whew!" she said, wrinkling her nose. "You two stink! But I'm impressed. I had to stop after only one hour my first time through Moody's maze."

Neville glared up at the impishly smiling auror. "You mean we had a choice?" he asked.

Tonks just smiled and laughed. "Not really, but you could have asked."

Harry groaned while rubbing his aching arms. "I ought to hex you, Tonks," he groaned. "Why didn't you tell us we could ask for a break?"

Tonks smiled down at him and sweetly said, "Because you didn't ask."

"Neville?" Harry asked flatly.

"Yeah?"

"Do you think it's time we taught Tonks here a lesson?"

Neville was silent for a moment then as they both rolled over and sprang to their feet, casting a variety of harmless charms at Tonks, he said, "Yeah!"

The effect was both instantaneous and hilarious to behold. Tonks' clothes were transfigured into a ballerina's tutu; her shoes were transfigured into heavy wooden clogs; her hair started waiving wildly about, as though it had a mind of its own; her ears started flapping wildly back and forth; and she started running around the clearing flapping her arms and squawking like a chicken. Remus, Kingsley and Mad-Eye, who were sitting at the table, looked up to see what all the commotion was about and couldn't help but laugh at Tonks' predicament. "Remind me never to get on your bad side!" Remus gasped out between fits of laughter. "Padfoot and Prongs would be proud."

Harry and Neville released Tonks after a few seconds because they didn't want to incur her wrath. But as they removed the last of the charms they looked at each other and nodded, satisfied that they had taught their teacher a lesson.

"You two are a force to be reckoned with." Kingsley chuckled, his deep, rich voice booming with laughter. "I would hate to be a Death Eater on the receiving end of one of your joint pranks."

Moody even looked to be smiling but when Kingsley made the comment about pranks his eyes took on a determined glint as he looked thoughtfully around the clearing. Almost a minute later he looked over at his fellows and said, "Lupin, I think the time has come for you teach these boys how to prank their enemies into submission." The others looked curiously at the retired auror but he ignored them. "Most of the Death Eaters you will face," he explained, "will be expecting you to try to disarm them with a variety of curses, hexes and charms. None of them will be expecting a prank attack. I understand you were pretty good at it while you were in school, Lupin. Do you think you can teach these boys the finer points of being a prankster?"

Remus looked up and thoughtfully studied the two boys standing across the table from him for a few seconds then, as an evil grin spread across his face, said, "Yes, Alastor, I think I can. In fact I have recently come into possession of a trunk filled with the prank notes we took while in school. I'll have to look through it but I think they are fairly complete and some of them could be quite useful."

For the next three hours Remus lectured Harry and Neville on the finer points of pranking and began teaching them how to combine a variety of spells into cohesive units which would be unexpected yet highly effective in disarming their opponents. He also taught them the theory and practice of spell modification giving several examples, from his days at Hogwarts, of how spells could be tampered with and modified to meet a variety of needs. By the time he was finished Harry and Neville had a new appreciation for the genius that went into creating an effective prank.

Chapter 8. Sweet Sixteen

With Professor Dumbledore's help Harry had learned to block Voldemort's attacks on his mind and had been thwarting all of the dark wizard's efforts to gain access to his thoughts and memories for almost a week and a half prior to the evening of July 30, 1996, the eve of Harry's sixteenth birthday. He could still dimly sense Tom's emotions but any more most of them were fraught with frustration. He also still knew whenever Tom cast one of the Unforgivables but their impact upon him had been greatly reduced to a minute twinge with a certain twist in the magical signature that let him know which curse was being cast. The past several lessons had been centered around learning how to erect impenetrable barriers at speed so that Harry would be able to stand and fight the next time they met rather than having to rely upon someone else for his salvation because he was being incapacitated by pain.

The headmaster had told him several stories about the war against Grindelwald and the first war against Voldemort. He knew the old wizard didn't like reliving those memories because there had been several times when Dumbledore had had to stop. The memories were just too painful. But at the same time he liked hearing the stories because they brought out the human side of Albus Dumbledore, the side that told Harry that the most powerful wizard in the world was, first and foremost, a human being.

At 11:59 he got up and walked over to the window. The sky was clear that night and the full moon bathed the rooftops in an eerie, almost surreal glow. In the distance he could see five owls winging their way towards his open window burdened with what looked like at least two cards or letters and three packages. Of the five owls he was sure that the lead owl was Hedwig and that the smallest - the one that seemed to almost bounce in mid air - was Ron's owl, Pig.

Shaking his head at the antics of the tiny owl Harry stepped away from the window as four of the five owls gracefully soared through the window and landed on his bed. The fifth owl - Pig - excitedly shot through the window and, had Harry not snatched him out of the air, would have collided with the far wall.

Pig stopped struggling almost as soon as Harry's hand closed around his feathery form. The package wasn't large but it was fairly heavy. Walking over to his desk Harry sat down and relieved the tiny owl of its burden. Opening the letter he read:

> Dear Harry,
>
> Happy Birthday, mate! It was good to see you at Diagon Alley. I wish I could train with you and Neville - Tonks, Remus and Kingsley are still talking about the show you guys put on and whether he says anything to you guys or not, around here we can tell that Mad-Eye is impressed - but I am still working with some of the Unspeakables from the DoM. It's really getting kind of interesting. It seems that they have been using those brains to store the memories of a lot of witches and wizards, sort of like a giant pensieve. Some of them were famous and some of them were not so famous. Right now, now that I've figured out whose memories I have access to, they are helping me sort and store them for easy access. I can't wait for Potions class because one of the people whose memories are currently stored in my brain was one of the greatest Potions Masters who ever lived. I can't wait for old Snape to ask me one of his usual stupid questions. This time I will have an answer that will blow his socks off. I think Hermione is getting a little jealous, though, because she has to study to get the information and all I have to do is search my own memory banks. Ginny says I have turned into a walking library of encyclopedias whereas Hermione is just a walking encyclopedia. I think she's jealous.
>
> We still aren't able to attend any of the meetings but we do know that something is going on and we have been told to tell you to be extra careful.
>
> This is not my whole present because the whole thing is too big. I will give it to you when we see you next.
>
> Later, mate!
>
> Your friend,
>
> Ron

Laying the letter aside Harry opened the package and found that it was filled with chocolate frogs and a box of Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans. As he went to open a chocolate frog the other owls hooted, bringing him back to the present.

Walking over to his bed he began with Hedwig and started relieving the other owls of their burdens. As soon as she was relieved of her burdens - a package and letter from Hermione - she flew over to her cage and began quenching her thirst. The next owl was a Hogwarts owl. By the writing on the envelope and package he could tell that it was from Hagrid. The third owl was another Hogwarts owl and from the looks of it, it was carrying his Hogwarts letter. The Hogwarts owls took off and flew through the window as soon as they were relieved of their burdens, which

left Henry and an owl he didn't recognize perched impatiently on the headboard. He relieved Henry of his burdens - a letter and a package form Ginny - and turned to study the strange owl. He looked at it for several long moments but couldn't remember having ever seen it before. Heeding Ron's advice he pulled out his wand and approached the owl. "I'm not going to hurt you. All I'm going to do is use a little magic to get that letter off of your leg."

The owl seemed to understand his concern and blinked its assent. Harry raised his wand and, pointing it at the bird's outstretched leg, muttered an untying charm. As soon as the envelope fell from its leg this owl too flew out the window.

Harry began to wonder if Mad-Eye was starting to rub off on him due to the many precautions he was taking with this unknown letter but then, with some of the horror stories Dumbledore had told him over the past few weeks, he felt justified in taking these precautions. Levitating the envelope he examined it from every angle. The writing was crisp and clear, easy to read and the seal was a simple blob of red wax.

Lowering the envelope to his bed he magiced it open and used an extraction charm to remove the letter. After magicing the letter open he levitated it into the light and began reading

> Dear Harry,
>
> Happy Birthday!
>
> You will not be receiving your present from me until after class today but I wanted to wish you a happy birthday anyway so HAPPY BIRTHDAY!
>
> With love,
>
> Remus

Harry shook his head and laughed at himself for being so paranoid. Maybe Moody was rubbing off on him. But then again, maybe he was beginning to realize just how serious a business this war really was. He was going to have to talk to Remus and ask him why he used the strange owl.

Turning back to the collection of letters and the packages still lying on his bed he picked up Hermione's card.

> Dear Harry,
>
> Happy Birthday!
>
> It was so good to see you last week and I was glad to see that you were able to smile. I know it couldn't have been easy for you to sit through the reading of Sirius' Will and I know that I cannot even begin to presume to tell you how to think or feel but I want you to know that we all love and care about you.
>
> I must say that I am impressed with what you and Neville did in that battle. I've been reading the paper every day since it happened - I'm still keeping tabs on Rita Skeeter - and I must say that they are doing a very good job of keeping your names out of the paper. And most of the stories - especially Rita's - are fairly low key and, according to Professor Lupin, Tonks and Kingsley, pretty accurate. That must have been some battle. I'm glad I wasn't there to witness it but at the same time I am glad you and Neville were there to lend a hand. Everyone we've talked to says that without you two the battle could have either lasted twice as long or gone the other way.
>
> I have been accompanying Ron to the Department of Mysteries for his appointments with the Unspeakables and I must say that while I do not envy him his situation I do find what they are doing quite interesting. I think I may try for a position in the Department of Mysteries after we are finished at Hogwarts.
>
> I don't know if Professor Dumbledore told you or not but everyone who was a member of the D.A. and who took either their O.W.L. or N.E.W.T. exams last year received Outstandings on their DADA exams. The members of the D.A. got together and bought you this book. Since Professor Lupin is one of your dueling coaches this summer I asked him (after everyone contacted me about buying you an appropriate birthday present) what he thought you might like and this is what he suggested. I hope you like it.
>
> With love from,
>
> Hermione

Turning to the package Harry hefted it and reasoned that it felt like a book. Untying the string and tearing off the plain brown wrapping paper he found that it was a handsome, leather bound edition of Dueling Through the Ages, The Definitive Guide to the Tricks and Techniques of Master Duelers by Wilbert Slinkhard. Harry checked the table of contents and saw that the book covered

everything from curses, hexes, charms and transfigurations to stretches, physical exercises, tumbling moves and where to hide your wands. He saw that the book recommended having at least three wands hidden on your person so that even if you should be disarmed and separated from your primary wand you would not be defenseless. Next he checked the index and saw that it was fairly complete and that it was well organized. He decided that he would be committing this book to memory.

Next he turned to Ginny's letter and package. He smiled at the thought of her and wondered how she was doing. Carefully opening her letter so that he could re-seal and save it he read:

> Dear Harry
>
> Happy Birthday!
>
> I've been thinking about it and while I do understand why you had to leave so soon after the battle in Diagon Alley last week I'm sorry you couldn't stay for at least a few more minutes. I never got to thank you properly. According to Remus, Tonks and Kingsley, you and Neville made all the difference. They say that the two of you brought down 15 of the 53 attackers. According to some of the eyewitness reports (although you were never named) you two worked as single unit. You covered each other's backs and, while there were very few weaknesses in either of your dueling styles, you covered each other very well.
>
> Neville's gran was so impressed with his performance and how well he handled himself with that Rita Skeeter woman that she was actually crying tears of joy for her grandson. She kept saying that Neville's parents would be so proud. I think she wants to thank you for helping Neville find himself. I don't know if you realize it or not, Harry, but you do inspire people and make it so that they want to succeed.
>
> After you left Mum and I wandered around for a while looking for something for you for your birthday. We found this book in Flourish and Blotts. I know it probably isn't what you are expecting but Mum says it is full of information every young wizard should know. I hope you like it.
>
> Love,
>
> Ginny
>
> P.S. I don't know what's going on but certain people around here are starting to get nervous. Mum and Dad don't seem to know what is going on either (I can see it in their eyes) and they are very worried about you. Dumbledore says that you are safe for now but somehow I get the feeling that even he is starting to get worried. Please be careful, Harry. I am finally getting to know you for who you are - Harry Potter, not The-Boy-Who-Lived. You are too good a person, Harry, and I don't want to lose you.

Harry was stunned. He read Ginny's letter a second and then a third time. He more than appreciated her sentiments and feelings towards him; but if Dumbledore was worried something must be happening. If Ginny was right and they didn't know what was going on then something must have happened to Snape. As Harry thought about it he realized that even though Snape was a

greasy-haired git who didn't seem to be able to let go of the past he didn't want him hurt. Out of the picture maybe but not hurt and most definitely not killed.

Turning his attention to Ginny's gift he carefully unwrapped it and saw that it was a new copy of A Complete Guide to Household and Personal Care Spells, Charms and Transfigurations by Miranda Goshawk. Opening this book he studied its table of contents and discovered that it had charms for everything from dusting and snow removal to personal hygiene, clothing care and furniture transfiguration. Checking the index he saw that this book was also thoroughly indexed and would be easy to use.

Smiling to himself he set the book aside and turned to Hagrid's gift. Removing the letter that was tucked beneath the strings he opened it and read:

> Happy Birthday, Harry!
>
> It's hard to believe you're sixteen already! I talked to Professor Dumbledore the other day and he says you are doing as well as can be expected. I hope your relatives are being nice to you because I won't need magic to deal with them if they aren't.
>
> I'm really sorry about Sirius and I wish there was something I could say or do to help but I really don't know what you need. We all grieve in different ways and what works for one might not work for someone else. Sometimes the best thing for a body to do is let a person know that they care and that they are always willing to listen when their friends feel like talking. I'm sorry I didn't remember that when you came to me after it happened but I really do care, Harry, and I am always willing to listen whenever you feel like talking.
>
> Hagrid

Harry set the letter down and thought about Hagrid, his first ever friend in the wizarding world. The more the thought about his half-giant friend the worse he felt. Hagrid had only been trying to help and he had yelled at the man as though the half-giant were little more than an insensitive dolt. Harry made up his mind then and there that as soon as he got off the Hogwarts Express on September first he would find Hagrid and apologize.

Opening Hagrid's present he was not surprised to find the traditional, inedible rock cakes. He was about to throw them away when it occurred to him that Dudley would at least try to eat just about anything. He set the box aside with an evil grin and decided to leave it on the kitchen table in the morning. As he reached for the letters from Hogwarts he secretly wondered how many of the cakes Dudley would get through before he broke a tooth

The first letter was the usual reminder about catching the Hogwarts Express on September first. This time, however, there was a note explaining that due to He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named's return additional security measures were being taken and that all students should arrive at least one-half

hour early.

The second letter was from Professor McGonagall.

> Dear Mister Potter,
>
> Congratulations! You have been chosen to serve as Captain of the Gryffindor Quidditch Team. Enclosed you will find the Captain's Badge. Under the circumstances - yes, I have visited with the Headmaster about your particular situation - I have decided to appoint a co-Captain. Your co-Captain will be Mister Ronald Weasley. You two will need to hold tryouts shortly after your return because you are going to have to find three chasers and two beaters (as Messers Kirke and Sloper have elected to retire) as well as a complete reserve team. Once again, congratulations, Mister Potter, and I look forward to working with you in the coming year.
>
> Sincerely,
>
> Minerva McGonagall,
> Deputy Headmistress,
> Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Turning the envelope upside down Harry watched in amazement as the Gryffindor Quidditch Team Captain Badge fell out and landed in his hand. It was almost like a dream. In the past two years he had only played one game of quidditch and yet here he was, captain of the Gryffindor Quidditch Team. He would most definitely have to work with Ron on rebuilding the team because he wanted to be a part of a winning team again this year.

Looking at his clock he saw that it was now 1:00 AM and realized that if he was going to get any sleep that night, as his alarm was set for 4:15 AM, he would have to go to bed, otherwise it promised to be a very long day. It was going to be a long day anyway but he figured he could probably take a nap that afternoon. Placing all the letters and gifts on his desk Harry turned off the light and crawled into bed.

At 4:15, when Harry's alarm went off, he turned it off and groggily groped around for his glasses. As his world came into focus he pulled on his sweats, socks and trainers and began warming up. This was going to be a long day. Like clockwork, at 4:55 a small shower of red sparks appeared above the street in front of Number Four and he knew that he wasn't going to get a break. So, picking up the box of rock cakes and turning off the light in the smallest bedroom, he quietly made his way down the stairs. After leaving Hagrid's rock cakes on the kitchen table for Dudley he turned with a smirk and made his way out the front door. "Long night, Harry?" a familiar voice asked.

Harry turned towards the voice and nodded. "You could say that," he said. "How are you doing this morning, Josh?"

The invisible man chuckled. "I'm doing fine, Harry. Oh and, by the way, happy birthday."

Harry smiled. "Thanks, Josh," he said then sighed, "I guess . . ."

The voice Harry had come to know as Josh chuckled again as Harry trudged down the driveway to meet Tonks and Neville and begin the day in earnest. It had been a full moon that night so Remus was taking the day off. "Happy birthday, Harry," Tonks said as she lifted the disillusionment charms, first off Neville then off herself.

Harry growled then, remembering that Neville's birthday was at the end of July as well, said, "Hey, Neville? Isn't your birthday around the end of July?"

Neville blushed then said, "Yes it is. It was yesterday, but how did you know?"

Harry smiled mysteriously. "I have my sources," he said. Then, not wanting to make Neville feel uncomfortable, added, "Actually I just think I heard that we were born around the same time once. So happy birthday, Neville. Do you think we can talk them into going easy on us seeing as it is our birthday?"

Tonks laughed. "Not hardly, Harry. If anything we are going to push you harder today because we are going to start adding transfigurations into the mix."

Harry groaned but started running their regular route. "Okay, boss, whatever you say," he said as they rounded the first corner.

Thirty minutes later, as dawn was beginning to break, the three friends were running an obstacle course through the trees surrounding their training area. It consisted of rope bridges, tire mazes, wall climbs, barrel crawls and Moody's random stunners. When they emerged from the maze ten minutes later Harry was awake. Numb but awake.

For the next six hours Harry and Neville practiced incorporating transfigurations into their dueling strategies. They started by transfiguring sofa pillows into a variety of objects and banishing them towards their opponents. After that they moved on to transfiguring the pillows into a variety of plants and animals and sending them off to either attack or distract their opponents. On the few occasions snakes were used Harry held the definite advantage as he could talk to them and the others could not. Moody had been the first to conjure a snake but when Harry had stopped it using paresltongue he had not known what to think. Apparently Dumbledore had warned them that Harry was a parselmouth but none of them had known what to expect. At the end of the session Moody said, "That was a good session, boys. You two are going to be formidable forces by the time school starts. You are both doing very well and you are learning faster than most of my former students. But I must warn you, Potter, that while your parseltongue abilities do hold a certain shock value they can get in your way because if your opponent uses it to distract you from the battle, especially since you seem reluctant to harm even a conjured snake, it could be viewed as a weakness and used against you. You aren't always going to be dueling with a partner and more often than not the stakes are going to be much higher than simply disarming your opponent so you are going to have to grow a thick skin and be willing to hurt a few people if you expect to survive."

Remus stepped out of the shadows, where he had been watching since his arrival several minutes earlier and said, "He's right, Harry. I know its not a pleasant thought and I don't like it any more than you do but the time will come when you will have to fight for your very survival and simply disarming your opponent will not be enough."

Harry sat down on one of the picnic table benches and thought about what they had said. After a minute he let out a heavy sigh of resignation. "I know. You're right, of course, and I know that the time will come when I will actually have to kill someone. But that doesn't mean I have to like it."

Remus sat down next to him and looked at him with a look of concern etched across his face. "What do you mean? Why do you think you will have to kill someone?" Harry looked up and out across the clearing, watching as Tonks and Kingsley gathered the sofa pillows together into a large wooden crate. "How much has Dumbledore told you guys about the prophecy?" he asked.

Remus looked up at Moody who had come around to stand in front of Harry. Neville was standing near the end of the table pouring himself a glass of lemonade. "Not much," Remus said. "He told us that it concerns you and Voldemort and that it is your tale to tell if you want to. He asked us not to ask you about it because the fewer who know about it the better."

Harry nodded his head. "Yeah," he said softly, his voice catching in his throat. "Well what it boils down to is that it is either me or him. One of us has to die."

Neville dropped his glass and it shattered as it struck the table. Harry and Remus jumped up and turned around. "S-sorry," Neville stammered. "D-did you say that it is either y-you or V-Voldemort?"

Harry smiled weakly and nodded. "Yes, Neville," he said. "That's what it comes down to. Neither can live while the other survives."

Startled, Remus and Moody looked at each other and let their mouths fall open slightly. "Holy . . ." Remus said bowing his head. "I'm sorry, Harry."

Harry grimaced.

"We'll teach you everything we can," Moody growled.

"And we'll support you in any and every way we can," Remus added.

Harry smirked. "Thanks, guys, but this is something I am going to have to do on my own. I know there are going to be more battles and I know more people are going to die; but this is between me and Voldemort. I either have to kill him or die trying."

As Harry, Remus and Neville approached Mrs. Figg's house several minutes later the conversation had, thankfully, turned away from the war and the coming confrontation. It wasn't that Harry wasn't interested in it or in what was going on, he just didn't want to think about it right now. "Say, Remus," Harry asked when they were still about a block away, "what was the idea of sending your birthday greeting with that strange owl?"

"How did you open it?" Remus asked smiling mischievously.

"With magic."

"Why?"

"I don't know," Harry said shrugging his shoulders. "I guess Moody is starting to rub off on me with all of his talk about constant vigilance."

"Good," Remus said. "You passed the test."

"Test?"

"Something is going on, Harry. We don't know what it is. Snape doesn't even know what it is. All we know is that something is going on. I sent you that greeting with that owl as a warning. Don't even touch a letter from an unfamiliar owl unless you recognize the handwriting. And even then be extremely careful. But if you don't mind my asking, why did you use magic to open it?"

Harry smirked and blushed slightly at this question. "The first letter I opened was from Ron and one of the things he said was that I should be extra careful."

Remus let out a sigh of relief and said, "Good."

Moments later, as they walked up the path to Mrs. Figg's door Harry thought he saw one of the curtains fall back into place. He didn't think much of it though because it was getting close to their usual time for arrival and Mrs. Figg was getting to be notorious for watching for them. It was one thing with Malfoy on the loose but with this new threat Harry couldn't help but wonder how much tighter the security was going to get. But even with the heightened security it had already been the best summer of his life that he could remember and he appreciated the fact that the members of the Order were trying to protect him without smothering him. But then again he couldn't help but wonder how much longer it would last.

Shortly after Remus rang the bell Mrs. Figg opened the door and greeted them with her customary, "Oh, thank goodness you made it!"

Once Harry, Neville and Remus were inside Mrs. Figg closed the door. And as soon as the door was closed the lights came on and Harry and Neville were greeted a loud chorus of "SURPRISE!"

The next thing Harry knew Hermione was throwing her arms around his neck. "Happy birthday, Harry," she cried out.

Harry staggered back into Remus who gently steadied him. "Air . . ." he gasped. "Hermione, I can't breathe."

Hermione released her grip and stepped back. "Oh. Sorry," she blushed.

"Happy Birthday, mate!" Ron said as he came forward.

Harry could swear Ron had grown another ten centimeters since school let out. "Thank you!" Harry said happily as he looked around the room. Along with Ron, Hermione, Mrs. Figg, Neville and Remus, Mrs. Weasley, Tonks, Kingsley, Moody, Ginny, Luna Lovegood, Professor Dumbledore, Professor McGonagall and Mrs Longbottom were all there as well. "Where did you all come from? I mean, I'm not sorry you are hear or anything but . . . Well, where did you all come from?"

Professor Dumbledore chuckled softly. "I'm afraid that's my doing, Harry. For a long time my primary concern was your physical safety. As we have gotten to know each other this summer, however, I have re-learned that there is more to being alive than simply being safe. I knew this a long time ago but as I have aged I seem to have forgotten about the most important part of being alive: friendship and love. You now know why I had to place you with your aunt and her family. I wish things could have been different but, alas, for the magic to work you have got to spend some

time with them each year until the danger has passed.

"I know that I have hurt you in the past and I am sorry. I should have been more open and honest with you from the start but . . ."

Harry couldn't believe his ears. He knew that Dumbledore was sorry for what had happened and he knew that he was doing everything he could to make it up to him. But this was almost too much. The greatest wizard of the age was apologizing for being human. Looking around he saw that everyone was watching the Headmaster with a mixture of awe, shock, amazement and surprise. Stepping forward he said, "Er, sir. There's no need to apologize any further. I wish things had been different as well but at least now I understand why you did it. All I ask is that we keep the lines of communication open and that you not try to hide anything from me."

The stately wizard smiled and nodded his head at Harry's acceptance. "That is as it should be, Harry. As I said at the beginning of the summer, I will no longer hide anything from you and, whenever possible, you will be the first to know whenever something of importance comes to my attention."

"Thank you."

Most of the others were unsettled, to say the least, by Dumbledore's assertions and were looking between Harry and the Headmaster with a mixture of wonder and awe and an uncomfortable silence began to fill the air. Before it could become a stifling presence, however, Dumbledore laughed and clapped his hands. "I believe today we have come to celebrate Harry and Neville's birthdays," he said. "I know I didn't come all this way to stand around and do nothing so I suggest we have a party."

With that the ice was broken and after a while everyone was laughing and talking. It was the best birthday party - well, the only real birthday party - Harry had had since he turned one and he was more than happy to share it with Neville.

At one point Mrs. Longbottom approached Harry and said, "Harry, I want to thank you for everything you have done for Neville. for many years we were afraid he might be a squib. But with the confidence you have given him over the past year I can tell that our fears were groundless.

"I don't know if you know this or not but your parents and Frank and Alice were very good friends and until you and your parents went into hiding you and Neville used to spend a lot of time playing together. I just want you to know that it does my old heart good to see you two working together just as your parents did."

Harry could hear the pain in Mrs. Longbottom's voice when she spoke of her son and daughter-in-law and wanted to reach out to her but didn't know what to do. Finally, after several tense moments the silence between then had grown so painful that Harry had to break it. Reaching out he put a hand on Mrs. Longbottom's arm and said, "Thank you. I never knew about that but now that I think about it, it only makes sense." Then he added, "And I want you to know that I'm sorry about what happened to Neville's mum and dad. If there was any way I could change it I would. But until then Neville and I have a war to win and I want you to know that I am going to do everything in my power to make sure Neville makes it safely home after the fighting is over."

Mrs. Longbottom's usually stern exterior faltered for a moment and she smiled softly, her eyes

brimming with the unshed tears of grief she felt for both Neville and his parents. "Thank you," she whispered.

Professor Dumbledore presented Harry with his first gift. It was a box wrapped in the Gryffindor colors with a bright red and gold bow that seemed to glow with its own inner light. Harry looked curiously up at the Headmaster who smiled and nodded for him to go ahead and open it. Carefully unwrapping the package he lay the paper, ribbon and bow aside and opened the box. Inside was a pensieve. Harry looked at it then looked back at Dumbledore who was smiling. "With all that has been going on in your life, Harry," Dumbledore said, "I feel the time has come for you to begin setting aside some of your memories for further review when you have more time. A pensieve will not completely remove a memory but it will deaden the pain of some of your most painful memories so that you can move forward and deal with them when you have more time."

The next present was from Ron and Fred and George. It was a new set of Seeker Pads and gloves as well as a complete set of all of Fred and George's most recent creations. It had several of their improved portable swamps as well as a number of skiving snack boxes and a large selection of the twins' own line of fireworks. A note from Fred and George said:

> Dear Harry,
>
> Sorry we couldn't be there for your birthday but we are helping our neighbors' (in Diagon Alley) clean up after the attack. You have our permission, not that you need it of course, to use any and/or all of these pranks on your next DADA teacher if they are anything like that Umbridge cow.
>
> We are counting on you, Harry. Someone has got to give Filch something to complain about and it might as well be you.
>
> Gred and Forge

At one point Professor Dumbledore let his curiosity get the better of him and ate a Canary Cream. Ron and Harry tried to stop him but it was too late. For five minutes the Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry was a giant yellow canary. Professor McGonagall was dumbfounded and wasn't sure if she should floo Madam Pomfrey or not. Mrs. Weasley was upset to say the least and threatened to hex both Fred and George to within a millimeter of their lives for creating such a dangerous treat. It took a laughing Professor Dumbledore another five minutes to calm her down after he had molted and returned to normal. Remus, however, was impressed and made a note to talk to the twins to see what else they had on hand. Tonks gave both Harry and Neville a collection of wand holsters; Kingsley gave each of them a pocket foe glass; and while Remus gave Neville a copy of Dueling Through the Ages, The Definitive Guide to the Tricks and Techniques of Master Duelers he turned to Harry and, handing him a box roughly the size and shape of a large paving stone, said, "This is actually from Padfoot, Prongs, Tiger Lily, and myself," he said. "It was in that trunk Sirius left to me."

When Harry removed the wrapping paper and opened the box he saw a large, leather bound book entitled The Marauders and Their Mayhem by Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot, Prongs and Tiger Lily. "It

was written after we graduated and, so far as we know, before Peter went over to the dark side. This is the only copy of this book. It contains most of our pranks and the reasons behind them. It also contains comments by all of us, including your mum. Your dad and her were dating at the time and she really got to know him while we were working on this book. I figured that this was the best way for you to learn the truth about your parents."

Harry's mouth fell open. Of all the things he could have wished for, since he couldn't have either his of parents or his godfather, this was it - a written record of their thoughts as they got to know each other. He closed his mouth and pulled Remus into a hug. "Thank you," he whispered. "I know you are still recovering from the full moon but thank you. This is more than I could have ever hoped for. Thank you."

Remus chuckled and patted him on the back. "You are most entirely welcome, Harry. That book was meant to be passed on to the next generation of Marauders when they came of age. Lily made us promise not to pass it along until you graduated but under the circumstances I think she would understand. However, I don't want to hear about you pulling any of our pranks over the next two years unless it is on a Death Eater. If I hear of even one prank that sounds like something we did I will hunt you down and turn all of your robes pink."

Harry stepped back and looked Remus in the eye. "Even if it's justified?" he asked with a mischievous twinkle in his eye.

Remus smirked then smiled. "Well," he said as he cautiously glanced over at the Headmaster, "I'll have to think about that one. It will kind of have to depend upon what you mean by justified."

Professor Dumbledore looked around the room. "I seem to have gone temporarily deaf," he said. Everyone laughed. "I do, however, draw the line at the destruction of school property."

The next several packages combined to make up a complete new wardrobe for Harry that actually fit. There were several dress shirts in various shade of green that set off his eyes, several t-shirts, several pair of trousers, some jeans, as well as a few pair of dress slacks. These were all from the various members of the Order of the Phoenix. Professor McGonagall told him that many more had wanted to come but that they had decided to keep it small.

The last gift he received was from Mad-Eye Moody. After everything else was opened and the clutter taken care of he reached unto his robes and pulled out what looked like a miniature trunk. Placing it in the center of the floor he gruffly said, "Now that you've got all this stuff, Potter, you are going to need someplace to keep it," and with a wave of his wand he enlarged the tiny box until it became a rather large red and gold steamer trunk with seven locks. Harry's name was painted in gold lettering on the front of the lid and above the locks. Reaching into his pocket the retired auror pulled out a flimsy ring with two keys dangling from it and handed it to Harry. "I suggest you keep one of these hidden somewhere safe at all times because you never know when you might need it."

Harry took the keys and began opening each of the different locks. Since Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Neville and Luna had never seen a multi-chamber trunk before they watched with interest as Harry opened each of the chambers. He loaded the first three chambers with his other presents, categorizing as he went. They were naturally impressed with the trunk's versatility; but when he opened the sixth and seventh chambers and saw what amounted to two small rooms they were more than just mildly impressed. "Wow," Ron said. "What are you going to do with those?"

Harry glanced over at Mad-Eye and Remus and then over at Professors Dumbledore and McGonagall before turning his attention back to the trunk. After thinking it over for a few moments he said, "You know, Ron, I think I'll turn one of them into a library and the other into a private study. I mean, after all, we only have two more years left to go at Hogwarts and our N.E.W.T.s are coming."

Ron's jaw fell open. "Harry?" he asked. "Are you alright? Hermione, call a healer! I think something is wrong with Harry!"

Everyone laughed. "I actually think that's a good idea, Harry," Remus said, "I think Padfoot and Prongs would appreciate your sense of humor. And I know Tiger Lily would appreciate your practicality."

"Actually, Potter," Moody said, "that is exactly what I used mine for when I was in school."

A few minutes later, after they had helped Harry organize and pack his new trunk, Professor Dumbledore said, "Harry, we seem to be having a slight problem with a pair of house elves at Hogwarts. It seems they that their magic has been getting weaker since they have found their freedom. They do not mind working at the castle - in fact they quite enjoy it - but they do not like the fact that their powers have been steadily decreasing. They have petitioned me to allow them to work - without pay - for two of my students. Now, understand that I am loath to allow any of my students to bring house elves from home because I do not wish to set a dangerous precedent. However, under the circumstances I think we can make an exception to this rule."

Harry glanced over at Hermione who was scowling. "Ah, yes, Miss Granger," the Headmaster said. "There is something you should know about house elves before you go trying to set any more of them free." Hermione looked up in surprise. "Their magic, indeed their very existence, is tied to their ability to serve. I do not doubt that your efforts are of an honorable intent. However, I would ask that you learn everything you can about what you are dealing with before endeavoring to fulfill your dreams. I am not saying that there is anything wring with your dreams; I'm just saying that you would not be ill advised if you were to ask a few questions before jumping to conclusions. You have a wonderful mind and a keen intellect. I would hate to see your reputation ruined by an ill-conceived plan to free the house elves when they truly do not wish to be free. There are those who richly deserve to be … relocated but to free them against their wishes is not advisable for you will be taking away their magic, their happiness, their joy and, ultimately, their lives."

Hermione looked down at her feet and blushed. "I'm sorry, Professor," she mumbled.

Professor Dumbledore smiled reassuringly and rested a comforting hand on her shoulder. "That's quite alright, Miss Granger. I do, however, hope that you will learn to research things a bit more carefully from now on."

"Yes, sir," Hermione mumbled.

"Anyway," the aging headmaster said, "as I was saying, these two house elves have requested that they be allowed to work for two of my students. It would seem that you, Harry, and you, Miss Weasley, have curried favor with these particular elves."

Ginny's mouth fell open as all eyes turned towards her. She stumbled forward, not knowing what to say, and sat down on the floor beside Harry who was leaning against his closed trunk. Moments

later, before anyone could say anything, two loud cracks sounded, signaling the arrival of two very hopeful looking house elves.

Dobby and Winky looked timidly up at Harry and Ginny who glanced at each other and then curiously up at their headmaster. "They are yours to accept or reject," Dumbledore said.

Hoping Ginny would take the lead and set the example Harry waited for her to say something. But when she didn't Harry noticed the looks of uncertainty and fear that were beginning to spread across the house elves' faces. Turning to Dobby he said, with an air of uncertainty in his voice, "You want to serve me, Dobby?"

Dobby smiled and vigorously nodded his head.

Harry looked down at the floor and chewed his lower lip for several seconds as he considered what to say next. He wanted Dobby to be happy but he had never had a house elf before and he didn't know how to even begin treating one. Finally making up his mind he got down on his knees next to Ginny and said, "Alright, Dobby. I'll accept on two conditions."

Dobby's smile grew even wider. "Anything, Master Harry Potter Sir!" the excited house elf almost screamed.

Ginny looked at Harry, seemingly curious as to what the two conditions Harry was going to set on Dobby's servitude would be. "The first," Harry said, "is that you are to treat me as your friend and equal. I want you to call me Harry, just Harry. I don't want you to call me Master ever again. The second condition I am going to set is that you are never to punish yourself because you think I, or anyone else, might be upset at something you have done or are thinking of doing."

Dobby threw himself into Harry's arms. "Oh, thank you Ma - Harry. Thank you! Thank you! Thank you! Dobby is going to be the best house elf for Harry Potter."

Harry looked over at Ginny and shook his head in bewilderment then turned to return Dobby's hug.

Ginny smiled at Harry and turned to Winky. "Do you want to serve me, Winky?" she asked.

Winky nodded her head, her lower lip quivering with fear and anticipation.

Ginny smiled and opened her arms to the frightened house elf. "Then I will accept if you will accept the same two conditions Harry just set for Dobby except that I want you to call me Ginny."

Winky burst into tears and ran into Ginny's arms, hugging her as tightly as she could. "Thank you, … Ginny!" she cried. "Winky will be a good house elf!"

Harry and Ginny looked at each other and shrugged and out of the corner of his eye Harry could see that Hermione was smiling. Apparently she was pleased at the results. Then a slight problem occurred to Harry. "Erm," he began,"Dobby? I'm pleased that you want to . . . be my . . . friend but, um, I can't really keep a house elf hear in Little Whinging. I'm not saying you can't visit or anything but you just can't stay here all the time. So, um, would it be too much to ask if I asked you to help out around my house in London until school starts?"

Dobby stepped back and looked at Harry with a stern expression on his face. "Dobby can see that it is going to take Harry Potter some time to get used to having a house elf," Dobby said then smiled.

"But Dobby understands and will do as Harry asks."

Harry let out a breath he didn't know he had been holding and said, "Good. While you are there I want you to do everything Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, Remus Lupin and Professor Dumbledore ask you to do. I would also like you to come over to Privet Drive two or three nights a week so we can visit and get to know each other."

Dobby smiled and his enormous eyes were brimming with tears of happiness and joy. "Dobby will do as you ask, Harry! You is a great wizard, Harry, and Dobby looks forward to getting to know you as his equal."

Harry smiled and shook his head. This was going to be an interesting relationship.

When it came time for cake and ice cream Hermione, Ginny, Mrs. Weasley and Mrs. Figg disappeared into the kitchen and emerged moments later with an enormous chocolate cake with an icing picture of Hogwarts in the center and "HAPPY BIRTHDAY HARRY and NEVILLE" spelled out in gold letters across the top. Along the bottom was a sugar model of the Hogwarts Express. Two sets of sixteen candles were placed along the sides of the cake and as they entered everyone began singing Happy Birthday to Harry and Neville.

A chill ran up his spine as they sang the traditional song and he involuntarily shivered as he realized that there really were people in this world who loved him for who he was. He smiled despite himself and his eyes began to prickle with unshed tears of joy. Ginny and Hermione must have seen him fighting to control his emotions because they both came over and hugged him, telling him that it was alright, and giving him a kiss, Hermione on the right cheek and Ginny on the left.

As the party was winding down Dobby apparated to Harry's room with his new trunk and returned to Mrs. Figg's house. While he was gone Winky came up to Harry and told him that she had not really believed all of Dobby's tales of his greatness but that now, after seeing how he treated a lowly house elf, she was convinced that Dobby was telling the truth. Harry Blushed at this and was about to turn away when Ginny grabbed his hand and said, "She's right, you know. You really are a great wizard, Harry." Motioning to Luna who got up and walked over to stand in front of Neville she said, "Now, Harry, Neville, you knew that Mrs Longbottom and I were in Eeylop's Owl Emporium while you two were out helping in the fight against those Death Eaters last week. But what you didn't know is that Luna was trapped inside Flourish and Blotts and since we are celebrating your birthdays today we thought we would take this opportunity to properly thank you for saving our lives." And with that Ginny wrapped her arms around Harry's neck and kissed him full on the lips while Luna did the same to Neville.

Harry didn't know what to do and he doubted Neville did either. At first he was very tense but as he felt the tip of Ginny's tongue tease at his lips he closed his eyes and relaxed into the kiss, wrapping his arms around her waist and pulling her close while deepening the kiss. He was so involved with the beautiful redhead in his arms that he totally lost track of time and forgot that they had an audience. It took Remus clearing his throat and patting him on the back for him to remember where they were and to reluctantly end the kiss.

Blushing furiously he looked into Ginny's eyes and murmured, "I'm sorry."

Ginny smiled up at him and, with the light of love in her dark eyes, softly said, "I'm not."

Harry's stomach was doing flip-flops and summersaults. He was so distracted by Ginny's presence that he didn't even notice that everyone was staring at them until Mrs. Weasley cleared her throat and said, "Yes, well. I think we had best be going. We've still got a lot of work to do to get Harry's house ready for his arrival and we've only got a few weeks to do it in."

Harry glanced nervously over at Ron who threw his hands up and shook his head. "I've been warned to keep my mouth shut, mate," he said as a broad smile spread across his face. "Besides, to be honest with you I couldn't be happier. You just make sure you treat her right." At this offhanded remark Hermione, Ginny and Mrs. Weasley all wheeled around to glare at the youngest Weasley boy. "See what I mean?" he gulped as he cowered under the enraged scrutiny of three very powerful witches. "I think I had better just leave it there." With a curt nod from his mother, Ron took a pinch of floo powder and stepped into the fireplace. Throwing it at his feet he called out, "DIAGON ALLEY!"

After everyone else had left Professor Dumbledore transfigured his robes into a pair of lightweight trousers and a long sleeved cotton shirt and cast a privacy charm around himself, Harry and Remus. Then he, Remus and Harry left Mrs. Figg's house to walk over to the Dursley's.

As they walked the three and a half blocks to Number Four Privet Drive Harry turned to Dumbledore and asked, "Professor? So far today I have been warned at least three times to be more careful but no one will tell me why. What's going on?"

Dumbledore frowned. "I'm afraid we don't know, Harry. All we know for sure is that the threat level has increased. We know that Cornelius Fudge is in a fight for his political life and that he has pardoned Lucius Malfoy - a known Death Eater - in hopes of finding some political favor and financial support among the wealthy and well to do. We also know that the word is out that Lucius Malfoy is out to for revenge and that he holds you responsible for his fall from grace."

Remus snorted.

Dumbledore glanced over at the werewolf and smirked briefly before continuing his dissertation. "Our intelligence also indicates that Tom has begun recruiting and training for a major attack. Although I hate to say this, because I do not like to hear of anyone dieing needlessly, apparently most of the attacks thus far this summer have been little more than training runs. The attack on Diagon Alley was one of the few exceptions to this rule."

They walked on in silence for a bit then Harry said, "So what's he up to?"

Dumbledore breathed deeply. "That's just it, Harry. We don't know. We have an idea that he might be aware of the magic that is protecting you while you are here and that he may try to neutralize it at some point. But to be honest with you, we really don't know. That is why we want you to be extra careful. I am more than pleased with the progress you and Mister Longbottom are making in your training but I must ask you please not to take any chances. If you find yourself alone and in a dueling situation I would rather you flee than try to hold them off on your own until help arrives." Harry was about to protest but the Headmaster cut him off. "I know it goes against your better judgment and your desire to strike back but please try to understand that you must exercise both caution and restraint. You might think you are ready to fight but so far you have only been fighting battles where the goal has been not to harm but to disarm your opponent. Granted there is a lot that can be learned in these battles but in the future you will be up against people whose goals are

to harm, disarm and kill their opponents."

"Any idea when I will be getting out of here?" Harry asked as they started up the drive.

"We are working on that," Dumbledore said. "We hope to have an untraceable means of transportation in place by the nineteenth or twentieth because, sadly, Tom is growing more powerful and our means of transportation are becoming severely limited. Even closed floo networks can be broken into and attacked. So, needless to say, we are using them sparingly. And even then we must use indirect routes to reach our destinations. We cannot risk using a direct means of transportation, even in our closed network, for anything other than special occasions - such as the occasional trip to Diagon Alley, which does not sit well with Miss Granger or the younger Weasley children - until we are satisfied that the security charms we have placed upon it cannot be broken. And, sadly, that will take some time because there are very few unbreakable charms and we are having to develop many of our own security measures. Most of the old ones have been broken so we are having to build new ones."

Harry leaned against the door and looked down at the sidewalk, thinking. After about a minute he looked up into Dumbledore's eyes and said, "Thank you, sir. Would you like to come in? I don't know how my aunt would react to meeting you but we can always try."

Dumbledore chuckled softly. "Thank you for the offer, Harry, but I am afraid I must get back to school. We have been receiving several inquiries from concerned parents about safety and a variety of other issues as well as letters of acceptance from next year's crop of new students and I simply must return to help get the school ready for start of term."

Harry nodded his head and smiled. "I understand, sir," he said. Then, as the Headmaster began to turn away he said, "Oh, sir, before you leave, do you mind if I ask why you apologized again, in front of everyone? You didn't have to, you know."

Dumbledore smiled and said, "As you know, we have found ourselves on a rather difficult situation. It is imperative that you get the kinds of information you will need to defeat your adversary as soon as possible. I made that somewhat public apology so that it will make the next few steps I must take slightly easier by comparison."

Even though the old man's habit of couching his words in an air of mystery bothered him slightly Harry found that he had a new respect for what Albus Dumbledore had been through and promised himself that he would learn everything he could from the ancient wizard. "Thank you sir," he said.

After lifting the privacy charm and bidding Harry and Remus a good afternoon Dumbledore turned and walked down the driveway and Harry could swear that he heard his Headmaster humming a nonsensical tune as he made his way back towards Mrs. Figg's house. Smiling and shaking his head he opened the door and led Remus into the entryway. Just as they were about to mount the stairs Harry's aunt Petunia stuck her head out of the kitchen and said, "Very funny, Harry." Harry looked at her, confused. "Where did you get them?" she asked.

"Get what?" Harry asked innocently.

"Those rock things you left on the kitchen table this morning?" Harry couldn't help himself but burst out laughing. "I'm sorry," he said as he tried to compose himself, " but did Dudley eat any of

them?" he said between gasps of air.

"No," she said sternly. "He tried but they were just too hard."

Still laughing Harry said, "A friend of mine from school sent them to me."

"It wouldn't happen to be one of those red-haired people would it?"

"No," Harry said as he tried to stifle his laughter. "This is actually what this particular friend considers to be good home cooking."

Remus, who had been watching the exchange - amazed at Harry's aunt's restraint, looked at Harry and asked, "What did you leave on the kitchen table this morning?"

Harry looked at Remus, his face bright red from suppressed laughter, and gasped, "Hagrid's rock cakes."

Remus cringed and looked at Mrs. Dursley. "Ooooh," he said. "I'm sorry, Petunia. That's even low for me. You see, Hagrid is a half-giant and his rock cakes are all but inedible for anyone but him."

Amazingly, Petunia smirked. "That's quite alright. I may actually have to ask for his recipe because maybe then my son would be motivated to lose some weight. The doctors say he is at a high risk for a heart attack and I am starting to get desperate."

Harry, seeing the concern in her eyes and hearing the panic in her voice, looked at her and said, "Would you mind if I sent an owl to my Potions professor to see if there is anything we can do?"

Petunia looked at him with hope in her eyes. "Would you?" she asked.

Harry nodded his head and said, "I'll get right on it," before running up the stairs and into his room.

Chapter 9. The Attack

The workout and training session on the morning of August seventeenth had gone exceptionally well. After warming up Harry, Neville and Remus had run a fast eleven kilometers. Then, once in their protected clearing, had spent three hours running through a wide variety of gymnastics and tumbling drills. After that it had been a free-for-all duel between Harry and Neville and Remus, Tonks and Kingsley with Moody officiating from the sidelines. The duel was fairly evenly matched, even with two relatively inexperienced students going up against two experienced aurors and one very determined werewolf. Harry suspected that Remus, Tonks and Kingsley were taking it easy on them but was too busy defending himself while trying to disarm his opponents to give it much thought.

After the first hour the only person without a wand was Tonks. Harry had gotten her with two rapid-fire curses and a tickle charm while leaping to avoid one of Kingsley's binding charms. She had been able to block the curses but the tickle charm had been unexpected and had gotten through. Neville had then hit her with a simple disarming spell while Harry fired curses, charms and a number of transfigured objects at Remus and Kingsley to keep them occupied. As soon as Neville had her wand he banished it to the picnic table, which had been moved to one side of the clearing. Under the rules of engagement for this contest Tonks was then declared out for the duration.

Thirty minutes later Neville and Kingsley were both out of the running. By some strange fluke, a pair of stray curses had ricocheted off of the boulder near the center of the clearing as well as a pair of trees, catching both Kingsley and Neville unaware. They had both gone down stunned and disarmed. This left Harry and Remus standing to battle it out to determine the victor.

They dueled for an additional twenty minutes, both combatants tiring but neither showing any sign of relinquishing their wands without a fight. When Harry transfigured the boulder into a large, black, shaggy, grim-like dog the shock value was enough to give him the split second he needed to disarm his friend.

As he caught Remus' wand in his outstretched hand Harry smiled apologetically and said, "Sorry, Remus. I just couldn't think of any other way. You were blocking everything and the only way I could think to get through your defenses was to distract you long enough to let one spell get through."

Remus walked over and, laughing, clapped Harry on the shoulder. "That's quite alright, Harry," he said. "It was a duel. You have nothing to apologize for. If I had thought to use it I probably would have done the same thing. Personally I think Sirius would be proud to know that you used Padfoot to defeat me in a duel."

After a brief critique of their performance, during which he found very little wrong with their presentations, Moody called it a day and told them that they could have the next day off but that they would be hard at it again on Monday morning so they had better not do any slacking off.

Harry had pretty much mastered the art of Occlumency and was able to keep Voldemort from entering his mind. He had felt several of Tom's attempts over the past two weeks but was able to successfully block him with little or no effort. He had gotten in the habit of erecting a number of protective wards around his mind on a regular basis and could feel Voldemort's frustration at not

being able to break through these barriers. In the interest of training and getting some much needed rest he had learned to ignore the twinges in his scar every time there was an attack. He always made note of them and wrote them down so that the members of the Order knew what was going on but he had learned not to let them bother him any more. He had heard of people, like Moody, who had developed thick skins when it came to dealing with adverse situations and he supposed that he was developing one himself. It wasn't something he was proud of and it wasn't something he wanted to talk about anytime soon but it was useful.

The week previous he and Remus had developed a charm they were fairly certain would rebound the Unforgavables but they couldn't know for sure unless or until it was tested against them and the only way they were going to be able to test it against any of the Unforgivables was in an actual combat situation. They had tested it with a few minor curses and a few fairly powerful charms and it had worked wonderfully but neither of them was looking forward to testing it against the Unforgivables.

After dropping Neville off at Mrs. Figg's house Harry and Remus walked over to the Dursleys' where they were greeted by a very pompously dressed Uncle Vernon who was impatiently strutting around the living room. When Harry and Remus walked into the entry the first thing they heard was, "BOY, GET IN HERE!"

Harry and Remus looked at each other and, shrugging their shoulders, walked through the kitchen and into the living room where Harry looked around and noticed that all three of the Dursleys were dressed in their finest apparel. "Yes, Uncle Vernon?" he asked.

Harry's walrus of an uncle glared at Harry as if trying to find something wrong with what he had said. When he couldn't he settled for a scowl and said, "None of your lip, boy. Your aunt and cousin and I are going into London this afternoon to attend the opera." He said this last as if simply attending an opera once a year would place them in the same social standing as the Queen. "I want the garden completely weeded by the time we return. We have let you slack off most of the summer but no more. You will weed the garden or you will find yourself out on the street." Leaning dangerously close and breathing down Harry's neck his beefy uncle growled, "And no funny business."

After the Dursleys left Harry turned to Remus and said, "I knew it was too good to last."

Remus smiled sympathetically. "I wish I could stay and help, Harry; but I've got an assignment in London this afternoon."

Harry nodded his understanding. "That's okay, Remus," he said. "It's nothing I'm not used to. You just take care of yourself alright."

Remus nodded and smiled. "Will do, Harry. You take care of yourself and I'll see you bright and early Monday morning."

Harry smiled and shook his head. "Remus," he said, "it's still dark out when you get here."

Remus laughed. "Hmm. So it is. Well then I guess I'll see you dark and early Monday morning."

Harry let out and exasperated humph but laughed as he let Remus out.

After taking a shower to rinse the morning's sweat away and changing clothes to something a little more comfortable for working outside in the heat of the day Harry slid his wand into his leg new holster, made himself a reasonably sized lunch of two ham and cheese sandwiches with a large glass of milk and went out into the garden to enjoy a quick break before he started on the weeds.

Almost two hours later, as his guards were changing, Harry was on his hands and knees pulling weeds in the narrow space between the low hedge and the garden wall. Suddenly and without warning he felt a tingling sensation in his scar and a brief silver flash of magical energy caught his eye as the protective wards around the Dursleys' home came crashing down. He threw himself to the ground and waited, listening for some sign that members of the Order were coming to get him out of there. The next two sounds he heard, however, almost caused him to give up hope because he knew that whoever his guards had been they were now dead. Then, just as suddenly, he heard several soft pops as an unknown number of witches and wizards appearated into and around the gardens at Number Four Privet Drive.

The next thing Harry heard were several pairs of boots walking up the path towards the Dursleys' home. Struggling to peer beneath the bushes and through the flowers while remaining hidden and out of sight himself Harry watched in horror as the front door exploded into a hail of splintered wood and glass and metal fragments and as the unmistakable figure of Lucias Malfoy arrogantly strode into the entryway. Harry silently cursed Fudge for pardoning a known Death Eater and turning him loose on the world.

"Search the house!" Harry heard Malfoy order his cohorts. "I want him found!"

Harry wondered briefly what had happened to the Order of the Phoenix but realized that if his ears had not deceived him his guards were now dead and he was on his own. In that same instant he realized that since the wards had come down and he was still alive his aunt Petunia must be dead. Otherwise the Death Eaters never would have been able to get anywhere near Privet Drive. He wondered what had happened to them but then, in the same instant, realized that his life was in danger and that he could not stay where he was.

Spring up from his hiding place he vaulted the low wall and began running down the street towards Mr. Figg's house. "There he is!" he heard someone yell.

"Get him!" bellowed both Lucius and Draco Malfoy.

Harry ran down the center of the street and through one intersection, dogs barking as he passed and a few neighbors peering out their windows at him as he ran past. He ran out into the next intersection but came to a screeching halt when he found his path blocked by a line of cloaked and hooded figures. He quickly turned to his left then right and found those routes blocked as well. "Prepare to die, Potter," he heard Malfoy's hiss coming from behind him. "But first I believe my son would like to see you suffer."

Thinking quickly, Harry remembered the charm he and Remus had developed and quickly activated the one bit of wandless magic he knew. As an unearthly calm washed over him everything seemed to slow down. He felt three Cruciatus Curses as they were being flung at him; but instead of experiencing the pain of a thousand burning knives piercing his skin all he felt were the uncontrolled emotions of anger, hatred and rage and the burning desire to cause excruciating pain that gave these curses their power. Moments later he felt at least twenty Killing Curses being thrown at him and all of the fury behind each of them. He felt the emotions of those who had cast

the Killing Curses as they cast their spells; their shock, fear and apprehension as they realized that their curses were being rebounded back upon themselves; and the deafening silence that followed as the curses reached their targets and their casters died. The three who had cast the Cruciatus Curses were still writhing in agony as all of the energy they had initially poured into the spells continually circulated between the shield Harry had thrown up and their casters.

Harry didn't know how long it lasted. All he knew is that it lasted long enough for help to arrive. When he finally sensed the presence of friendly forces - one he knew was Remus and the other he felt certain was Dumbledore - Harry dropped the shield and collapsed to the ground, blacking out as he fell.

Chapter 10. Maturo Auctus

At first there was darkness. Nothing more. Nothing less. Just darkness. In his mind Harry turned, spinning around in every conceivable direction, to see if there was anything more but there was nothing. Just darkness. He didn't know how long it lasted. All he knew was that as soon as he began to wonder if this is what it meant to be dead a tiny pinprick of white light appeared in what he thought was the distance but couldn't be sure.

The light gradually moved closer, or grew larger as the case may be, until it became a part of him and he a part of it. The next thing Harry knew he was moving along a golden path bathed in white light, lush green meadows and fields stretching off into the distance on either side of the path and in front of him he could see a glowing white castle. It looked a lot like Hogwarts only larger.

He didn't know how long the journey took if, indeed, it took any time at all because time seemed to stand still while passing at the same time - it was an indescribable sensation of eternity. Before he knew it he found himself walking through the gates of this Hogwarts and crossing the castle grounds. In the distance the castle doors swung open and a large, shaggy black dog came bounding out followed by two people dressed in what looked like wizarding robes. The dog leaped down the steps and sprang across the lawns, skidding to a stop less than a meter from him. Harry looked at the all-too-familiar dog and, stunned, stepped forward. Scratching behind the dog's ears he asked, "Sirius?"

The enormous dog closed his eyes and stretched, luxuriating in the attention he was receiving from Harry. "Er, Sirius," Harry said, still hesitant but more confident than before. "I hate to tell you this but you're fat."

The dog immediately transformed into a much younger version of Harry's godfather. He looked at Harry with a hurt expression on his face but a smile on his lips and laughed. "I'm not fat, Harry!" he exclaimed. "I'm just healthy."

"No. Padfoot," one of the other two people who had come out to greet him called. "Harry's right. You are fat."

Sirius pulled Harry into a warm hug and said, "Welcome to Hogwarts, Harry."

Harry pulled back and looked up into his godfather's eyes. "Hogwarts?" he asked.

Sirius nodded. "Yes. You see, everything that exists out there - on the other side of the veil - is an inexact copy of its counterpart on this side."

Harry looked up at the castle then back at his godfather. "So I'm dead then?" he said, more as a statement than a question but with the implied question still remaining.

Sirius fidgeted slightly then said, "Well, yes and no. You are and you aren't." Glancing back up at the castle and the two approaching figures Sirius added, "I'm not so sure I'm the one to explain this to you, Harry, but . . . um you seem to have been give a rare opportunity to learn from the best and to grow in ways most will never either comprehend or understand. In the wizarding world it is called Maturo Auctus or 'accelerated growth.' If my understanding of it is anywhere close to being correct, you are being given the opportunity to learn about and internalize all branches of magic while you

are here but you will have to go back because you are the only one who can defeat Voldemort, and even Salizar Slytherin himself doesn't like what his heir is doing."

"Salizar Slytherin?" Harry asked.

"Yes, Harry," a soft, woman's voice said. "As you know, Salizar Slytherin was one of the four founders and was one of the greatest wizards of his age. He will be one of your teachers while you are here and, if you will, you can learn a lot from him. All you have to do is keep an open mind."

Harry turned to look at the woman who had spoken to him and his mouth fell open as his knees gave way. "Mum?" he asked, looking up at her from his position on the ground. Lily Potter swooped down and pulled her son into the warm, motherly kind of hug that Harry had only really experienced once before, in the Hospital Wing after the third task of the Tri-Wizard Tournament. "Yes, Harry, it's me," she said as she held him close and rubbed his back while he cried into her shoulder.

"And what am I," the man standing behind her asked, "chopped liver?"

Lily turned her head and gave her husband a scathing look but Sirius cut her off before she could retort. "No, Progsie old boy, I'm afraid you're veal," he laughed.

James Potter scowled and took a friendly swipe at his old friend. "Thanks a lot, Padfoot. Next time I want a comment from the peanut gallery I'll be sure to let you know."

Sirius knelt down next to Harry and Lily and said, "You had better be careful, Harry. I think he's jealous."

Harry leaned back and looked over at Sirius and then looked back at his mum who smiled and stood up. "Harry James Potter," she said with a smile, "let me introduce you to your father, one James 'Troublemaker' Potter."

"I am not a troublemaker!" James stormed. Then relenting, said, "Well, alright, so I'm a troublemaker. I didn't break any laws, though. That's gotta count for something."

After getting to his feet Harry looked at his father and laughed. "Don't worry, Dad, Remus told me all about your pranks."

James groaned, "Oh no."

Sirius laughed. "Did he give you our book?"

Harry smiled and said, "Yeah."

Lily turned Harry towards her and looked him sternly in the eyes. "I don't want to hear word one about you pulling any of those pranks while you are still at school. Do you hear me, Harry? If I hear about you pulling any of those pranks on any of your friends you will be grounded."

James smiled cheekily. "Don't listen to her, Harry," he said. "A guy's gotta have some fun while he is in school and with the Weasley twins gone I'm afraid that place might get a little boring after a while. I think what you should do is get the twins to write a book like ours and then combine the two."

"James!" Lily snapped as if scandalized by the very though of her son pranking anyone.

"Alright, alright" James said, holding up his hands in defeat. "Get your studies done first then pull a few pranks."

Lily glared at her husband who backed down even farther. "Alright. No pranks until you defeat Voldemort."

Lily folded her arms across her chest and nodded her head. "I can live with that," she said.

As they approached the castle a tall, distinguished looking figure - a man dressed in long, flowing scarlet and gold wizarding robes with long, flowing blond hair and sparkling blue eyes - stepped through the main entrance and walked towards them, stopping at the base of the steps leading up to the main entrance. Harry, Sirius, Lily and James stopped at the base of the steps, less than a meter from the regal wizard. James turned to Harry and said, "Son, I would like you to meet the Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Godric Gryffindor."

Harry's mouth fell open as he looked up at the man. "Are you really?" he asked.

The man smiled and laughed out loud. "Yes, as a matter of fact I am. Not only that, Harry," he said as he reached out to shake Harry's hand, "but if we discount the years and generations and such I am your great-grandfather something like fifty times removed and you are my sole remaining hear."

Again Harry's mouth fell open. Only this time he looked around at his parents and Sirius for some form confirmation. When all they did was smile and nod at him he turned back towards the ancient, long-dead wizard and said, "Er . . . um . . . okay . . . um . . . what am I doing here?"

Gryffindor walked over and put his arm around Harry's shoulder and began leading him up the stairs. With a small chuckle he said, "I'm sorry to spring that on you so suddenly, Harry, but I figure we had best get the dirty little details out of the way first so that we can get to work and teach you everything you will need to know so that you can go back and restore order to the wizarding world." At Harry's questioning glance the Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry said, "Oh, don't worry, Harry, it will not all fall on your shoulders but then your advice, once you defeat Salizar's heir, will be greatly sought, as was Albus Dumbledore's after he defeated Grindelwald."

"Do you know Professor Dumbledore?" Harry asked incredulously.

"Do I know Albus Dumbledore?" Godric Gryffindor asked then laughed softly to himself. "Yes, I am afraid so. He was the last wizard to go through Maturo Auctus. And I must say that even with all of his failings - and here I must say, Harry, that none of us is perfect - he has done a splendid job. I am glad to see that the two of you have worked out your differences because once you return to your body you must be reminded of everything you learn while you are here and Albus Dumbledore - as the last wizard to go through Maturo Auctus - will be your teacher. You see, Harry, the responsibilities are great. Not only will you be taught everything you will need to know to defeat Tom Riddle and rebuild the wizarding world after his fall but you must also be responsible for training the next defender of the Light."

Harry smirked and coughed as he tried to catch his breath. They were walking across the Entrance Hall now and as Harry looked around he could see what Sirius meant when he said that everything

on their other side of the veil was an inexact copy of their counterparts on this side. The Hogwarts on this side was spectacular. Rather than the dingy grey stones that made up his Hogwarts, this Hogwarts was made of glowing white marble that seemed to pulse with magical energy. When they - Godric, Harry, James, Lily and Sirius - entered the Great Hall all eyes turned towards the new arrivals and a hushed silence fell over the hall. Harry looked around nervously and whispered, "Um, sir? Who are all these people?"

The Headmaster and Head of Gryffindor House laughed. "Ah, Harry!" Godric Gryffindor said. "These are the future students of your Hogwarts. They go to school on this side of the veil to prepare themselves for what they hope to learn on your side."

"Oh," Harry said. "Erm, okay. Um, not that it's any of my business or anything but just out of curiosity are any of them related to me?"

James and Sirius laughed out loud. Lily glared at them and scowled. Turning to Harry she said, "Don't get me wrong, Harry. I love your father to death but sometimes he can be such a prat."

Harry chuckled. "That's what Remus has been telling me."

James stopped laughing. "What has Moony been telling you?" he asked accusingly.

"Everything," Harry said. "After I saw what you did to Snape at then end of your fifth year he thought it best that I know the truth."

James hung his head and looked down at his feet. After sighing heavily he looked at Harry and Harry could see the regret in his eyes. "About that," he said softly. "If you get a chance could you tell Severus that I'm sorry. I'm sorry about all of the stuff we did to him because I didn't know how rough he had had it while growing up and we didn't realize how mean we were being to him. To us it was just a game. I know we were trying to help the muggle-borns but some of the stuff we did was inexcusable."

"Same here," Sirius said. "I know we didn't necessarily see eye to eye on a lot of things but things on your side of the veil are far from perfect. I only wish we had all prepared ourselves to be better listeners before going through to your side."

"And that is one of the things you are going to learn while you are here," another, older looking wizard with flowing white hair and beard and wearing powder blue robes with a matching hat that rose to a peak almost a full meter above his head.

Harry looked at this new arrival as he approached from the direction of the Head Table and his jaw almost hit the floor. He had seen pictures of this man - one of the most famous wizards of all time - but he had never expected to meet him. "Merlin?" he asked.

The ancient wizard nodded his head. "Yes, Harry. That is one of my names. I will be one of your instructors while you are here and my hope is that you will learn as much as you can while you are here because even though time does not work the same on two sides of the veil we do still only have a limited amount."

"Yes, sir," Harry said, awed by the presence of one of the most powerful wizards of all time. "I will do my best, sir."

Merlin chuckled and stepped forward, placing his arm around Harry's shoulders. "Yes, Harry," he said. "I'm sure you will. For now, however, I believe you would like to spend some time getting to know your parents, your godfather and," he hesitated, ". . . your children."

"My children?" Harry asked, his eyes bulging and his mouth falling open for the second time in as many minutes.

James and Sirius burst out laughing again. "Yes, Harry," Sirius laughed. "Someone's got to carry on the Potter name and since you are the last that task kind of falls to you."

Harry glared at his godfather for a second but couldn't force a scowl. "Don't listen to him, Harry," Lily said. "You've got plenty of time to find the right girl; but whatever you do, don't turn into a womanizer."

"Er, how long do I have?" Harry asked.

"At least six years," Lily said reassuringly as she took his arm and led the nervous teenager over to the Gryffindor House Table closely followed bye James and Sirius.

As they approached the halfway point a red haired little girl with bright, emerald-green eyes and a brown-eyed little boy with messy black hair stood up and looked at Lily. "Hello, Gran," the little girl said, "Is this our daddy?"

Lily knelt down in front of the little girl and said, "Yes, Lily, this is your daddy." Looking up at Harry she said, "Harry, I would like you to meet your children, James Sirius Black Potter who is in his second year and Lily Lupin Evans Potter who is in her first."

Uncertain as to what he should either say or do, Harry knelt down next to his mother and said, "Erm, hi. Er, nice to meet you."

His future children looked at him and, seeming to recognize his uncertainty, walked over and hugged him. "Welcome to Hogwarts, daddy," the little girl said.

"Hey! Budge over, mates!" the little boy called out. "Make room for my dad!"

For the next several hours, as the Great Hall slowly emptied out for the evening, Harry sat between his children and got to know them while his parents and Sirius sat across the table from them and got to know their son and godson.

For what in Harry's mind was several months but which, due to the time distortions, was, in reality, little more than a few minutes Harry spent a lot if time learning the soft logic of humanity. He did this by experiencing life through a wide variety of circumstances. With the aide of a special pensieve he was allowed to experience life as a werewolf, a centaur and a wide variety of other magical and non-magical creatures as well as an even wider variety of both magical and non-magical people. He did this so that he could learn what it was like to be other people and other creatures and so that he could be tolerant of their habits, traditions, activities and beliefs. He also spent a great deal of time getting to know his parents and Sirius and playing with his children. He even spent a day with Cedric Diggory who thanked Harry for taking his body back to his parents and went out of his way to make sure that Harry understood that his death was not Harry's fault but was the doing of Peter Pettigrew on the orders of Tom Riddle.

When this portion of his training was finished Harry went through another period of darkness, of indeterminable length, during which he thought about everything he had learned and internalized as much of it as he could without sacrificing himself to any of the many conflicting values. During this period he grew to have a greater understanding of, and appreciation for, the wondrous variety that is Life. He learned patience with himself and others and gained an understanding of why there were so many laws protecting the rights of the individual. He also came to an understanding of the intricacies of time and why things had to be allowed to happen in certain ways.

Upon emerging from this period of darkness Harry found himself lying at the edge of the quidditch pitch. His father, son, Sirius, Cedric and several of the friends he had made during his initial visit were standing around waiting for him to wake up. Each of them was holding a broom. Sirius, however, was holding two. "Get up ya lazy bum," he scolded. "We've gotta get you in shape for quidditch. After all, you've only really played one game in the past two years."

Harry squinted up into the sunlight and grumbled as he raised his hand to shade his eyes. "Sirius," he said, "you're incorrigible."

Sirius turned to James, Harry's father, and laughed. "Prongsie old boy," he laughed, "I do believe he's learning."

Harry scowled and sat up. Turning to his son he said, "James, how do you put up with these two?"

James laughed. "It isn't easy, Dad, but they do kind of grow on you after a bit."

James and Sirius looked at each other and didn't seem to know if they should be insulted or not. Everyone laughed at their discomfiture as Harry stood up and faced Sirius. Then, looking down at his son said, "Good one, James. I think I'm going to like having you as my son." James smiled up at his dad. "What position do you play?" Harry asked.

"I play chaser and reserve seeker," his son said proudly.

"Takes after his grandpa," the older James said proudly as he affectionately tapped his grandson on the jaw.

Harry looked proudly down at his son and smiled. Taking the broom Sirius held out to him he saw that it was a replica of his Firebolt. Mounting his broom he kicked off and yelled, "Last one in the air is a greasy git!"

Sirius and his father scrambled not to be the last one up. Unfortunately, however, Sirius lost. Harry flew over as Sirius rose into the air and snickered, "Hey, Sirius, how does it feel to be Snape?"

Sirius scowled and looked menacingly over at his godson. "Just be glad I'm on your team, Harry. Otherwise I might be tempted to send a bludger your way." Harry smiled sweetly at his godfather and flew away to get set for the start of the game.

For the next three hours Harry thoroughly enjoyed himself. His father and son and a future Weasley - one of Bill's future children - were the chasers on his team, Sirius and another future Weasley - one of Fred's future children - were the beaters on his team and one of Ron's future children was the keeper on his team. The other team, with the exception of Cedric who was the seeker, was comprised of past and future Weasleys. It was a tight match from start to finish and

when the snitch finally appeared the score was 210 - 200 in favor of the Potters. Harry and Cedric both spotted the snitch at the same time, from opposite ends of the pitch, The snitch appeared in the exact center of the pitch in the middle of a play. Harry and Cedric both turned sharply and banked into the middle of what promised to be a major wreck. "Sweet Merlin" Harry could hear some of the people in the stands gasp, "they're gonna crash!"

It was a close series of maneuvers but both Harry and Cedric weaved through the rest of the players while dodging bludgers sent their way by the opposing beaters and approached the snitch from opposite directions at breakneck speeds. At the last possible moment Cedric flinched and pulled up. Harry kept his eyes on the snitch and, as Cedric flinched, reached out and wrapped his fingers around the elusive golden ball. As they floated back down to the ground Cedric flew over to Harry, James and James and said, "You're a maniac you know that, Potter?"

All three Potters looked up and said, "Why thank you, Cedric." Everyone burst out laughing and Harry couldn't remember ever being so happy.

As soon as they touched down, however, Harry's mother and daughter raced out onto the field. "Harry James Potter!" his mother scolded, "how dare you scare your mother and daughter like that!"

Harry blanched briefly but from the look in his mother's eyes he could tell that she was happy that he was happy. Then, smiling, he said, "It's all a part of the game, Mum. You don't get anywhere if you don't take at least a few risks."

His mother just shook her head and smiled as his daughter jumped up into his arms. "But daddy," she cried, "What would Madam Pomfrey say if she knew what kinds of risks you were taking while you are over here on this side of the veil?"

Harry thought about this for a few seconds then looked his daughter in the eye and said, "She would probably just shake her head and say, 'It figures.' After all, She is kind of used to me getting hurt."

Sirius grabbed Lily out of Harry's arms and swung her around. "That's right, Lily Flower. And your daddy is a great seeker."

Lily squealed. "Uncle Sirius!" she screamed. "You put me down this instant!"

Sirius laughed and swung her around again before setting her feet firmly on the ground. "Lily," he said to Harry's mother, "I do believe you are having a bad influence on your granddaughter."

Harry's mother scowled.

For the next several months veil time Harry studied Religion, Philosophy, Psychology, Politics, Government and Muggle Relations. When he was finished with this course of study he was returned to the timeless void of darkness where he spent an indeterminate amount if time integrating these lesson into the structures of his soul. He knew that everything he was learning while in this other dimension would remain dormant until he was either reminded of it in some way or it was needed in real life. But at the same time he knew that it was his responsibility to lay the foundation and do all of the preliminary work so that he could recall it when necessary.

He went through this process - the process of learning and then integrating the lessons learned into his soul - three more times and each time he got to spend more time getting to know his parents, godfather and children. During these visits Harry was happier than he ever thought possible. It was also during these visits that Harry learned what it meant to love and to be loved. He learned that to love is to share a part of one's self with others and to care both for and about the growth, evolution and development of another's soul. And he learned that to be loved is to allow others to share a part of themselves with you and to let others care about your soul.

After he felt he had mastered the softer subjects of human relations He moved on to the more concrete subjects of Potions, Charms, Transfiguration and Defense Against the Dark Arts. He learned more about potions than he ever knew existed and, while working with Salizar Slytherin himself, Harry learned to brew many potions that hadn't been used for over five hundred years. It was during one of these sessions that he made some comment about Snape being a greasy git and a lousy potions master. At this Salizar laughed and said, "Yes, well, Severus always has been good at potions but he is not … shall we say … well endowed in the social graces."

Harry looked up at this and laughed. "Boy, you can say that again. He's good at what he does but he is most definitely not a people person."

Salizar nodded and said, "Yes, that is true. But then again he chose a difficult life for himself so you should not judge him too harshly. After all, have you not seen a few of his childhood memories?"

Harry grimaced as he recalled the scenes of a little boy shooting flies out of the sky with his wand while his parents argued. "Yes, I have," he said somberly. "And I'm sorry he had to go through that but it still doesn't give him the right to terrify a bunch of children who are trying to learn."

"No, it doesn't," Salizar said sadly. "But then again, that is one of the lessons he is trying to learn."

After he had learned everything he could about the more fundamental and basic branches of magic Harry moved on to a few of the more advanced and obscure fields of study. During these lessons he learned Wandless Magic, Spiritual Magic, Elemental Magic, Animagus Transformations (he learned that he would have two primary animagus forms and several secondary forms he would be able to access over time), Metamorphmagus Magic and Ethereal Magic (which would allow him to exist as an undetectable, ethereal being, unhindered by the usual laws of Magical Manipulation). It was during one of these sessions that he was taught how to merge more completely with his physical body's magical core so that he could take full advantage of everything he was learning.

His fifth visit to the Hogwarts-Beyond-the-Veil, as he had come to call it, was dedicated to learning all forms of magical and non-magical, armed and unarmed combat. He learned swords, bow and arrow, crossbow and bolt, throwing knives and daggers, throwing stars, karate, kung fu and judo.

On his last day there his mother took him aside and said, "Harry, I don't want you to be afraid to love or to allow yourself to fall in love because that is your greatest strength and your most powerful weapon. Tom Riddle is a twit and he will pay for all of the pain he has caused but I don't want you to be one of his victims. You know that your father and Sirius and your children and I love you deeply. You have many friends on your side of the veil who love you just as much. They know the risks and they are willing to take them so please, don't chase them away. Besides, you have two wonderful children over here who are counting on you and we will all be rooting for you."

Harry nodded and said, "Okay, Mum. I promise not to chase them away. But if you don’t mind me asking, is there any possibility you could tell me who my wife is going to be?"

Lily threw her head back and laughed. "Oh, Harry," she laughed. "That would take all the fun out of it! But I will tell you this: You already know her and your soulmate is a very caring and sensitive young woman who loves you much more than you know. But I must caution you to take your time getting to know her because you don’t want to frighten her away."

Several minutes later, as the darkness approached for the fifth time, Harry hugged his parents and Sirius goodbye and knelt down in front of his future children. "You two be good, you hear," he said. "I don’t know if it’s possible yet but if I can I am going to check on you from time to time to see how you are doing." Looking up at his parents and Sirius he said, "You have three of the greatest pranksters Hogwarts has ever known who can teach you a lot. I want you to learn as much as you can from them. But I don’t want to hear about you causing too much trouble. And I most definitely do not want you to pull any pranks out of pure maliciousness."

Lily and James hugged their father and assured him that they would be good. But as Harry stood up he recognized the mischievous grin on Sirius' face and turned to his mother. "Mum," he said, "I have a feeling you are going to have to keep an eye on Dad and Sirius to make sure they don’t corrupt my children."

Lily scowled at her husband and his best friend. "Don’t worry about that, Harry," she said as a warning to her husband and Sirius. "I’ll make sure they behave."

After one more round of hugs Harry said goodbye to his family and stepped into the darkness.

Chapter 11. The Awakening

As Harry passed through the final band of darkness separating the two worlds he focused himself upon the tasks of fully and completely integrating everything he had learned into even the most basic structures of his soul and completely merging with his body's magical core so that he could take full advantage of his newly acquired abilities. His first task, however, was of a more personal nature. He sorted through and stored all of his memories of the times he had spent with his parents, Sirius, his children and all of the other people he had met during his Maturo Auctus and permanently placed them in a special chamber deep within his soul where he could access them at will but where they would be safe from any and/or all intrusions.

As he completed the last of these tasks he slowly became aware of several magical, spiritual, intellectual and emotional signatures that seemed to be hovering around his physical body. Two of these signatures were standing, huddled in a distant corner, discussing the health of their patient: One was concerned with the neurological implications of such a traumatic experience while the other, a matronly soul, was concerned with the overall health of her charge. Near the foot of one of the beds were two more: One, a motherly sort, was a bundle of nerves, trying to solve several problems at once while racing from one to the other, never settling long enough on any of them to consider all of the possible solutions while the other, her partner in life, was calmer and more reserved. He seemed to be trying to get his wife to calm herself and settle down long enough to think things through. The fifth soul was seated near the head of the bead: She was worried and concerned. But it seemed that years of experience had trained her to hide her emotions from the world and appear stoic and reserved for the benefit of those around her. The other two human souls were stationed outside the door to this room: They were worried, tense and concerned. One was worried that he might be in the process of losing the last link to his childhood while the other was concerned for her friend and terrified that she might lose someone she considered to be a very good friend, even though they had only known each other a short time. Both of them were good at hiding their emotions but Harry could tell that they were nervous wrecks and that his current condition was tearing them apart. These two were guarding this room and protecting its occupants from all but a few comers.

The two remaining souls were not exactly human but were no less important as each of them had a deep and abiding love for Harry that they could not deny no matter their circumstance. One of these souls belonged to a proud, yet humble, snowy owl who was currently perched on the metal rails that formed the footboard of the bed next to his own. She was intently watching her friend, master and companion, fretting for his health and welfare. The other soul was that of an excitable house elf who feared that he might lose his master and friend, a young, powerful and great wizard who insisted upon treating him as his equal and friend and who refused to treat him as anything less than human. This elf was nervously pacing the length of the room.

The next thing Harry experienced was the sudden shock and pain as his body's physical senses returned to his conscious awareness. The pain was so intense and excruciating that he wanted to scream out but he had not yet regained control of his physical abilities so he had no choice but to wait it out.

Gradually the pain subsided and he became aware of his physical surroundings: He was lying in a bed; the room was warm yet cool and smelled of a variety of medicinal potions. The sheets were soft yet crisp. The sounds came next and the most prominent of there were the hushed

conversation being carried on at the foot of his bed and the worried hoot of an owl nearby. "What's going to happen to him, Arthur," a woman's voice whispered urgently. "He has no family now. I don't know how he survived; but You-know-who is sure to try again. What if he never wakes up? Oh, Arthur! What's going to happen?"

"Calm yourself, Molly," a man's voice said gently. "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it. All we can do right now is wait and hope and pray."

Slowly opening his eyes and letting them adjust to the sudden flood of light, Harry saw that everything was a blur and then remembered that in this world he needed to wear glasses to see clearly. He decided that he would have to see what he could do about rectifying that situation as soon as possible. Carefully testing his voice he hoarsely whispered, "Um, hello?"

The room suddenly fell silent. Then, in rapid succession, Arthur's voice said, "Harry;" the woman sitting next to his bed stiffened in her seat, bumping her chair against the bedside table as she turned towards him and said, "Mister Potter;" Molly's voice gasped, "Thank God;" the two people at the end of the room - the medical people - began running towards his bed; the owl hooted happily as the house elf screamed, "HARRY POTTER IS ALIVE;" and the door banged open as the two guardians ran into the room.

Harry brought his hands to his face and rubbed the sleep out of his eyes. "Um, where am I," he asked.

"You're at Hogwarts." The woman next to him said.

"Where?"

"You are at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry," a second man's voice said in carefully measured tones.

Suddenly Harry's mind was flooded with memories: the memories of Hagrid and the cabin at sea, the sorting hat, Ron, Hermione, Professor Quirrel and the Sorcerer's Stone, Ginny Weasly and the fiasco with Tom Riddle's diary, Quidditch, Professor Lupin, dementors, confronting Sirius Black who turned out to be his godfather, the Triwizard Tournament, the death of Cedric Diggory, Voldemort's return, his trial at the Ministry of Magic, Dolores Umbridge, Professor Snape, Sirius' death, Professor Dumbledore and the prophecy. Harry closed his eyes and groaned. "I suppose I'm in the hospital wing again, aren't I?" he said.

"Yes, Harry. You're in the hospital wing," the second man said gently. "How do you feel?"

"I don't know," Harry said honestly. "Everything seems to work," he said as he tested his arms and legs and hands and feet, "I'm . . . I . . . I don't know. It's like waking up from a long, complicated dream. I'm . . . I'm just a little lost. That's all. "What happened?"

"You were attacked," a third man's voice said happily despite the recognized seriousness of the situation.

Harry closed his eyes as he remembered the day twenty or more masked wizards had appeared out of thin air at Number Four Privet Drive. He remembered running down the street and being surrounded at an intersection. Then he remembered the blinding green lights issuing from his

attackers' wands as they screamed "AVADA KEDARVA!" "How many," he asked.

"Twenty-three," the third man's voice said a bit more somberly. "Apparently the charm works, Harry, and it is powerful enough to defeat multiple Killing Curses while fending off three Cruciatus Curses. I'm sorry you had to be the one to test it," the as yet unnamed but very familiar voice said, "but at least now we know it works. The twenty who cast the Killing Curse died instantaneously. The three who cast the Cruciatus Curse were held in place until you passed out."

"The Dursleys?" Harry asked.

"Dead," the woman next to his bed said stoically.

Harry sighed resignedly. "Well, I guess that's that then. All of the blood protection is gone. How much do the papers know?"

"They know that you were attacked and they know that you survived," the woman sitting beside his bed said tiredly.

Harry suddenly recognized her voice and, turning to face the woman, said, "Professor McGonagall, how are the rest of the students?"

"They are nervous, Mister Potter. They are all very frightened and very nervous." she said as she handed him his glasses. Then, glancing at her watch, she stood up suddenly and said. "I must be off. The sorting ceremony is about to begin and Albus asked me to inform him of your status as soon as you awoke."

Putting his glasses on, Harry sat up on the edge of his bed. He felt a little dizzy at first but it soon passed. "And where do you think you are going, Mister Potter," Madam Pomfrey said sternly as she stepped in front of him, placing her hands on his shoulders to steady him and then gently push him back down.

Harry braced himself and then looked tiredly up into her eyes. "I'm sorry, Madam Promfry, but this is important. One of Voldemort's main weapons is fear. It may not be much but if I can give the students and their families even a little bit of hope by showing up at the feast tonight then that is a sacrifice I am willing to make. I may be weak and I may need help getting there but this is something I feel I have got to do."

Madam Pomfrey loosened her grip on his shoulders and looked over at the doctor from St. Mungo's for an answer, but he had none. After a lengthy pause Remus stepped forward and said, "He's right, Poppy. A part of every war is the psychology of fear and uncertainty. Right now Voldemort holds all of the cards. Anything we can do to give our people hope is worth the effort."

An unfamiliar looking man, a man who had been carefully observing him from a distance stepped forward and said, "I will have to agree with you, Mister Lupin. However, I must insist that he drink this restorative draught before going any further. My name is Doctor Francis Stone, Mister Potter, and my specialty is the neurological effects of spell damage. And I must say that I have never seen anyone come through anything even remotely similar to this in my life. You are now the only person in the history of our world to survive the killing curse, not just once but twenty-one times."

Harry looked at Dr. Stone warily then groaned. "Great. That's all I need. Next time why don't we

make it a hundred and twenty-one?"

Tonks, in her natural state and with a smile plastered on her face that Harry felt sure would take more than just a crowbar to remove, stepped forward and looked him in they eye. Gripping his shoulders firmly she very nearly blubbered, "Harry Potter, don't you dare talk like that. I don't think I could stand the thought of losing you again," as tears streamed down her cheeks.

Harry grinned sheepishly then, as he began to blush with the realization as to how much his friendship really meant to the clumsy auror, said, "Don't worry, Tonks. I won't do it again unless absolutely necessary." Then, turning expectantly towards Madam Pomfrey, looked at her questioningly for several seconds until she finally gave in.

"Alright," Madam Pomfrey said reluctantly. "But I insist on accompanying you, Mister Potter."

Harry looked cautiously between the two medical professionals and said, "Fair enough." Then, looking at the vial in Dr. Stone's hand, asked, "What is it?"

"This," Dr. Stone said, "is a restorative draught that counteracts the effects of prolonged comas. But I must warn you: It makes Pepperup Potion seem mild by comparison."

Harry looked apprehensively at the vial then, closing his eyes, lifted it to his lips and drank the contents in one swift gulp. His eyes flew open and bulged as steam rose from every pore on his body, obscuring his view as a dense fog rose around him. The stench that surrounded him as the fog lifted was enough to make him gag but before he could either say or do anything he felt himself being enveloped in a refreshingly cool, soothing breeze that removed the stench and cooled and dried his skin. Looking up he saw Dobby standing on the bed across from him with a broad grin spread across his face. "Hey, Dobby," he said. "Thank you for that."

"You is most welcome, Harry," the excited house elf squeaked. "Is there anything else Dobby can do for you?"

Harry thought for a moment then said, "Er, I could do with some clothes if you have a moment."

"Dobby smiled knowingly, glad to be able to once again serve his master after fifteen long and painful days of uncertainty, and snapped his fingers. What appeared to be a freshly laundered and folded school uniform appeared on the bed next to Harry. "There is your clothes, Harry," Dobby said happily and Harry could not help but smile at his friend's obvious joy.

Looking apprehensively into Remus' eyes Harry smiled shyly and said, "Well, at least we know it works."

Tears of joy sprang into Remus' eyes as he realized that Harry was going to be all right and that his sense of humor was intact. The werewolf jumped forward, pulling Harry into a bone-crushing hug that Harry felt could easily rival one of Hagrid's rib crushers. Returning the hug, although with somewhat less vigor, Harry couldn't help but smile.

Several minutes later, after Remus, Mr. Weasley and Doctor Stone had helped Harry change into his school uniform Harry, with Hedwig on his shoulder and flanked by Tonks and Remus and closely followed by Molly and Arthur Weasley, Madam Pomfrey and Dr. Stone, followed Dobby out of the hospital wing and began walking slowly towards the Great Hall. Every so often they could hear

muted cheers as the first years were sorted into their respective houses. Then, a little later, they heard the school song being sung to at least a hundred different melodies. When the last notes died away there was a brief silence.

As they entered the final leg of their journey Harry could hear Professor Dumbledore delivering his start-of-year announcements. "And finally," he said as they approached the Great Hall, "you will notice that we do not have a Defense Against the Dark Arts Instructor this year. This is due to the fact that with Voldemort's return I have decided to take this course in hand myself. I may teach a few of your classes but for the most part you will be taught by a number of people who are experts in their fields and, if I am not mistaken . . ." he said, glancing up as Harry and his entourage crossed the threshold into the Great Hall, "one or two of your peers as well.

"Ah," he said peering over his glasses at Harry and smiling in acknowledgement, "Harry. It's good to see you up and about." The Great Hall was suddenly silent as everyone turned towards Harry and his entourage. "A word, if you please. I believe the Acting Minister of Magic would like a formal statement."

"Stay close," Harry whispered to Tonks and Remus. "I get the feeling it is important for them that I enter under my own power. But stay close in case I need you. Let me do as much of it as I can on my own."

As Harry slowly walked the length of the Great Hall towards the teacher's table he picked up two additional guards as Kingsley Shacklebolt and Mad-Eye Moody stepped in behind him from their posts on either side of the enormous double doors and was supremely conscious and uneasily aware of almost everyone in the room watching his progress. He wanted to look for Ron and Hermione but was afraid that if he moved his head too fast he would lose his balance. He was so focused on walking that he didn't even hear the first claps. But as the applause grew louder he became aware of the fact that he was receiving a standing ovation from most of the students and almost every teacher. Even Professor Snape, whose mouth hung open in shock and disbelief and whose face was even paler than usual, was standing. He wasn't clapping but the look on his face was enough to tell Harry that he had earned his respect.

When they reached the teacher's table Professor Dumbledore motioned them towards the door leading to the chamber the champions had used at the beginning of the Tri-Wizard Tournament almost two years previous. Beads of perspiration began pouring down his face as he walked the final few meters to this door and as he placed his hand on its latch he whispered hoarsely, "Help!"

Tonks and Remus were immediately at his sides, supporting his weight and helping him through the door.

A few moments later Harry found himself sitting in an armed chair at the head of a long table. Dobby disappeared briefly but quickly returned with a large, steaming bowl of soup and several bagels. Winky appeared at his side moments later with a large goblet of pumpkin juice, and placed on the table before Harry.

The applause was still ringing in the Great Hall several seconds later when the door closed and Professor Dumbledore walked over and sat down in the chair nearest him and to his right. "Well done, Harry," he said softly. "They needed that more than you know. In fact, I think we all needed that."

As Harry dipped one of the bagels into the soup Madam Bones, the Acting Minister of Magic, took a seat along the left-hand side of the table, and looked at Harry with nothing but respect in her eyes. "Oh my God," she said softly. "And to think that anyone ever doubted you."

Harry took a bite from the saturated bagel in his hand and looked up at the Minister. He chewed the soggy bread slowly as he carefully weighed his options then swallowed. Then, with a sigh, said, "What would you like to know?"

Madam Bones was caught so totally off guard by the levels of maturity and experience in Harry's voice and demeanor that she didn't respond at first. Then, as if coming suddenly to her senses, turned to her assistant. "Are you ready," she asked.

The young woman, apparently Percy's replacement, unrolled a blank piece of parchment, opened a fresh bottle of ink and trimmed the tip of her quill. "Yes, ma'am," she said.

"Now, Harry," the former head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement began, "we need to know what happened on Privet Drive on August seventeenth. All we know for certain is that twenty-three wizards and witches apparated to your address that afternoon and that several seconds later three Cruciatus Curses and twenty Killing Curses were cast at an intersection near the Dursley's home. Aside from that, all we know is that when help arrived twenty known or suspected Death Eaters lay dead and that three students - who have since been expelled and sentenced to life terms at Azkaban - were being held in the grip of their own curses. What we do not know is how you, without the use of your wand, as it was still in your leg holster when the aurors arrived, were able to defeat twenty-three witches and wizards. Whatever defensive maneuver you used was so powerful that it was off the charts. No one had ever seen anything like it before. Could you please fill us in on what happened?"

With Remus' help, Harry spent the next hour describing the research they and Hermione had done on the defensive charm and its development and the events leading up to the attack. "We had only tested it against a few basic charms and curses before the attack," Harry concluded, "but since I was outnumbered and I knew they were going to try to kill me anyway I had no choice but to put the charm to the ultimate test."

Picking up the last bagel and dipping it in his soup Harry looked over at the Madam Bones and said, "I know I probably broke several laws while defending myself this summer, ma'am," Harry said, "and if you want to take me in I will go peacefully."

"No, Harry," Madam Bones said softly while shaking her head. "No. You are not going to be expelled and you are most definitely not going to go to prison. Professor Dumbledore has informed me of your circumstance and in my opinion you did what you had to do. We are here to help. You tell us what you need and we will do the best we can. But first we need to know about this charm. What are its components and how does it work?"

For the next hour Harry, again with Remus' help, described the charm he had used to defend himself against the Death Eaters. When they were finished Professor Dumbledore smiled and nodded his approval. "Well done, Harry," he said, obviously pleased. "It would seem that you, Professor Lupin and Miss Granger have solved a centuries old wizarding problem using muggle means."

"Yes," Madam Bones agreed. "This is very advanced and, I might add, very powerful magic."

"I don’t know about that," Harry said tiredly, "but I do know that I would like to go over it with Professor Flitwick before we release it. I don’t want all of its inner workings released just yet but as soon as we get it perfected I would like it released to the public through all media outlets."

"Good idea," Madam Bones said as Professor Dumbledore excused himself and returned to the Great Hall. "Now, Harry," she began hesitantly, "we have to figure out what to do with your guardianship."

"My what?" Harry asked, looking up in surprise.

"Your guardianship," the Madam Bones said uncomfortably. "Technically, and under the law, you are still a minor. With the Dursleys' deaths you have no legal guardian. There is no real problem so long as school is in session; but you still have two years to go. We need to find you a family."

Harry’s mouth fell open and he sat in stunned silence for several seconds before he could think of anything to say. Finally, after what seemed an eternity, he began to stammer. "I . . . I . . . What am I going to do?" he asked vacantly.

Mr. Weasley, who had taken Dumbledore’s seat, leaned forward and said, "Molly and I have been thinking about this and if it’s alright with you, Harry, we would like to adopt you," he said carefully.

Harry, his mouth still hanging loosely open, looked over at Mr. Weasley and became aware of Mrs. Weasley who was standing behind her husband with a warm smile radiating from her face. "It’s just a formality, of course," she said hopefully. "You are already almost like one of the family. And with Fred and George living in Diagon Alley we have more than enough room."

Harry closed his mouth and drank the last of his pumpkin juice. Then, after studying his hands for several seconds as he considered the possibilities and looking over at Remus who smiled encouragingly and nodded his head, he looked over at Mr. and Mrs. Weasley and then over at Madam Bones. "Alright," he said softly. "But I want the records sealed and I want it to go no further than this room. Voldemort killed my parents trying to get to me. Sirius died trying to protect me from him. And his followers killed the Dursleys in an attempt on my life. I don’t want anyone who doesn’t have to to know about this because I don’t want anyone else hurt because of me. My guess is that he already knows that he can’t kill me without getting hurt himself. I don’t want him hurting any more of the people I care about." Then, with a determined look in his eye punctuated his acceptance. "I want the records sealed and placed in a 'need-to-know' security vault in the most secure building on Earth. I don’t want to take any chances. And as soon as Professor Flitwick and I get this charm perfected I want to be allowed to teach it to all of the Weasleys and Hermione Granger."

Madam Bones let out an explosive sight of relief, as though she had been holding her breath for several minutes. "Good," she said. "That’s settled then. If there is anything else the Ministry can do for you, Harry, please do not hesitate."

Professor Dumbledore chose that moment to re-enter the room. "Most of the students have left, Harry," he said merrily. "However, it would seem that you have a loyal following and several are refusing to leave without welcoming you back personally. I believe most of them were in your study group last year."

Harry smiled and stood up. Mr. Weasley stood up as well and shook Harry’s hand. "Welcome home,

son," he said confidently; and Harry could feel the love in his voice.

Mrs. Weasley stepped around her husband and wrapped her arms around Harry in an embrace that told him that he was now officially a part of the Weasley family. "Welcome home, Harry," she said. "You're one of us now."

"Thank you," Harry said softly, finding it difficult not to smile stupidly. "Thank you."

Chapter 12. Revelations

A small group of students was gathered near the end of the head table in the Great Hall and just outside the antechamber door. As the door opened and Harry entered they looked up as one and Harry recognized them as the members of Dumbledore's Army. They were all smiling and looking at him with a mixture of gratitude and uncertainty on their faces. Marietta Edgecombe and Cho Chang were even there, although they were standing nervously towards the back of the group. Harry saw this and made a special effort to look their way and smile to let them know that all was forgiven. Before he could say anything, however, a fireball with long, flaming red hair broke from the pack and raced toward him. Ginny threw herself into his arms and began crying into his shoulder. "Oh, Harry!" she sobbed softly, "I was so worried." Then, seeming to remember where she was, extricated herself and stood in front of him, blushing. "I mean," she stammered, "we were all worried . . . but . . ."

Harry put his hands on her shoulders and looked into her tear-filled eyes. Then, letting his hand slide down to gently hold her arms, smiled and said, "That's okay, Ginny," he said softly, "I understand." And, strangely, somehow he found that he did understand. In that moment he could feel her love for him and the past two weeks of her life were revealed to him in an instantaneous flash of understanding.

Remus' sudden yet muffled chuckle broke the spell they were under and Harry looked up as Ron, Hermione, Neville, Luna and the rest of the D.A. surged forward to welcome him back. "We were all so nervous," Hermione said as she reached his side, smiling broadly despite her quavering emotions.

"Boy, you sure know how to scare a guy don't you," Ron said enthusiastically while clapping Harry on the back.

Neville just smiled and nodded his head. "Thank you," he said.

Harry looked over at his training partner. "How's it going, Neville?" he asked.

Neville's smile grew wider. "I wish I could have been there," the now confident dueler said.

Harry thought for a moment then shook his head. "Nah, too many muggles. The Ministry would have had its hands full modifying all of their memories and repairing all the damage."

Most of the members of the D.A. looked curiously between the two friends because they had no idea that Harry and Neville had been training most of the summer. But Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Neville and Luna couldn't help themselves. They laughed at the hidden joke and Harry could not help but feel that these were his true friends, friends that would stand by his side no matter the odds.

Looking over at Cho, Harry smiled and said, "Cho, I have a message for you. Don't ask me where it comes from because it is a very long story and there is really only one other living wizard," he said with an almost imperceptible nod towards Dumbledore who was watching him carefully with a merry twinkle in his eye, "who can fully appreciate what has happened. I hope this doesn't upset you too much but I want you to know that Cedric sends his love and that I am fighting this war - for this truly is a war - as much for Cedric as for anyone else. In fact, I am going to propose that our official battle cry be 'Remember Cedric' because he was the first to die in this second war against

Tom Riddle and his Death Eaters."

Most of the members of the D.A. looked confused at the mentioning of Voldemort's given name but the significance of what Harry had just done was not lost on Albus Dumbledore. "Yes," the aging headmaster said lightly, as if an idea had just occurred to him. "I believe you are correct, Harry. Tom has terrorized far too many people over the years with his fictitious name. I believe the time has come for us to reveal this little truth about our foe." When he had everyone's attention Professor Dumbledore completed his thought. "I believe the time has come for the people to know that Voldemort's real name is Tom Marvolo Riddle."

Harry could feel Ginny tense slightly at the mentioning of the dark lord's true identity so he pulled her into a tender embrace and whispered, "It's all right, Ginny. If we are going to beat him the people have got to stop fearing him."

Ginny looked up into Harry's eyes and nodded her head. "I know," she murmured. "It's just that his name still haunts me."

Harry hugged her a little tighter. "I know," he murmured. "And I'm sorry."

Ginny returned his hug and rested her head against his chest. In that moment, as Ginny shivered in his arms, Harry knew that he wanted to protect this beautiful creature from the man who had tried to destroy her during her first year at Hogwarts.

Several seconds passed as those who did not know of Ginny's involvement in the Chamber of Secrets fiasco looked on with curiosity at Ginny and Harry's reactions and those who did know of her involvement looked on with sympathy and understanding. Cho Chang finally broke the silence. "Remember Cedric," she said as if trying it on for size. "Yes. I like that. Remember Cedric."

The others nodded their agreement and the new battle cry was quickly adopted. As they voiced their approval of the new slogan Harry turned to Hermione and asked, "How are you doing, Hermione?"

"I'm doing fine, now," she said as tears of happiness threatened to spill from her eyes and a broad smile spread across her face.

"How are your parents?" he asked.

Hermione's smile suddenly vanished and she wiped the tears from her eyes. "They're terrified," she said.

"How much do they know?"

"Not much," she admitted, sadly shaking her head. "I don't want them to be afraid but I don't know how much to tell them. They know something is going on and they know it has me frightened but I don't know what to tell them. I don't want them to be afraid but …"

Harry stopped, turned back to the Acting Minister of Magic and in a strong, clear, commanding voice said, "Madam Bones, we need to talk. Now!"

The Great Hall grew suddenly silent and time seemed to stand still for several seconds as everyone turned to look at the new Harry Potter. Even Peeves, who had been lurking in the shadows, stopped

and stared at the sixteen-year-old student who had just addressed the Minister of Magic so forcefully. Madam Bones' worked her way through the small crowd of onlookers. "Yes, Harry?" she asked. "What can I do for you?"

"We have got to lift the veil of secrecy," Harry said forcefully. "The muggles, especially the parents of the muggle-born students have got to know what is going on. I'm not saying we should reveal ourselves to everyone in the muggle world but we have got to let the people know what is going on. One of Voldemort's greatest weapons is fear. Our greatest weapon in combating fear is understanding. It may not make it any easier for them but at least they will have some idea as to what is going on and what we are up against. And since one of Voldemort's main weaknesses is a blatant disregard for anything muggle we might be able to enlist a few of them to our cause. And they might just be able to find something we can use.

"I also want you to dispatch teams of hit wizards - in muggle clothing of course - to guard the families of all of the muggle-born and half-blood students at Hogwarts. This is a war, ma'am. And we are going to begin treating it as such."

Turning to Ron he said, "Ron, you are a Chess Master, correct?" Without waiting for an actual response Harry said, "I want you to start thinking about this war as a real life game of wizard's chess. What I want you and Hermione to do is conduct a little research and learn everything you can about Voldamort's capabilities. I know you don't particularly care for Professor Snape but he is going to be one of your most valuable resources and I want you to use him."

Turning to Hermione he said, "Hermione, you grew up in the muggle world. I know its asking a lot but I need you to organize all of the muggle born students at Hogwarts and brainstorm to see what technologies exist in the muggle world that might be of some use. I want you to explore every possibility. I want no stone left unturned."

Turning to face the headmaster he said, "Professor Dumbledore, I know I'm probably overstepping my bounds here but I need you to contact the headmasters of all of the wizarding schools and ask them to organize themselves along these lines and prepare for war. I want them to tap all of their resources because I want Ron to have a chess set that cannot be beaten."

And finally turning back to face the Acting Minister of Magic he said, "And finally, Madam Bones, I would like you to please contact every Minister or Secretary of Magic in the world and enlist their aide. Use whatever diplomatic channels you deem appropriate but I want everyone onboard."

A stunned silence filled the great hall for several seconds. Gradually he became aware of the stares of disbelief he was receiving from his friends and the other members of the D.A. Then he became aware of Ginny who was standing beside him with a look of shock, disbelief and admiration on her face and a glow of love in her eyes. He turned to face her, took her hands in his and looked into her eyes. "Ginny," he said softly. "He's hurt you. He's hurt me. He's hurt a lot of people; but this time Tom Riddle has gone too far. If he wants a war then that is what he is going to get and I'm not going to stop until he is utterly and totally defeated."

Then he looked over at Cho and nodded. "Remember Cedric, Cho," he said. "Remember Cedric."

"I will," Cho said bravely. "We all will."

Peeves swooped down and floated at attention a few meters above and behind the small knot of

people at the head of the Great Hall and saluted. "Private Peeves reporting for duty, sir!" he barked militarily.

Harry looked up at the poltergeist and smiled. "Why thank you, Peeves," Harry said warmly. Then after a brief pause said, "Peeves, I'll need your help organizing the ghosts, ghouls and poltergeists. Like I said, I want no stone left unturned. We are looking for ideas and principles as well as talents, abilities and spies. I want you to start with the Hogwarts ghosts and use your connections to organize and recruit as many of the ghosts, ghouls and poltergeists as you can. I want you to start here in Great Britain then branch out into Western Europe, Eastern Europe, The Middle East, The Far East, Africa, The Pacific Islands and the Americas. I want you to tap every resource, Peeves. And I want you to report directly to either me, Ron, Hermione, Ginny or Professor Dumbledore."

"Yes, sir!" Peeves barked.

"Dismissed," Harry said with a quick nod.

Peeves turned smartly on his heel floated quickly out of the room. "Wow," Zacharias Smith whispered in amazement.

"I think the time has come for bed," Professor Dumbledore said with his usual twinkle. "We all have our tasks and school starts tomorrow. So, off you go."

As most of the others left the room Harry, while still holding on to Ginny's hands, turned to Professor Dumbledore and said, "Sir, could we talk?"

"Yes, of course, Harry," the aging headmaster said.

The three hung back as the others made their divergent ways to their chambers and dormitories. "Er, what happened to Minister Fudge?" Harry asked.

"Ah, yes," Dumbledore said, chuckling softly. "I'm afraid our dear Cornelius did not survive the recall vote that took place last week. He tried to forestall the inevitable but when the activities of his High Inquisitor came to light and were made public I am afraid he didn't stand much of a chance. And then when Lucius Malfoy's wand was tested and was found to have cast the Killing Curse I am afraid his fate was sealed and it drove him quite mad. He and Ms. Umbridge are currently enjoying some much needed time off, in padded cells in Saint Mungo's Psychiatric Ward," he added the last with a mischievous wink as his eye sparkled and danced with amusement.

When everyone else had left and Harry and Ginny were alone with the headmaster Harry was still holding onto Ginny's hand because he did not want her to leave just yet, if ever. Harry said, "Maturo Auctus, sir. And I'm ready whenever you are." The smile on the aging Headmaster's face grew wide and his eyes sparkled with life. "Very well, Harry," he said with an unstated happiness and calm and an almost inaudible sigh of relief. "It would seem we are going to be quite busy this year."

Harry smiled and nodded his head. "Yes, sir,. Oh, and Merlin, Godric, Salizar, Helga and Rowena said to say hi."

Ginny looked questioningly at Harry as if he had lost his mind. "Why thank you, Harry," Dumbledore said jovially. Then, noticing the look of confusion on the youngest Weasley's face, said,

"Ginevra, Harry has just undergone something I experienced many long years ago. A Maturo Auctus is a spiritual journey beyond the veil in which the . . . chosen are trained by none other than Merlin, Godric Gryffindor, Salizar Slytherin, Helga Huffelpuff and Rowena Ravenclaw, among others, at an accelerated pace. There are normally no more than two members of this . . . order alive at any one time. One is usually the mentor while the other is the pupil. Our purpose and goal is to ensure that the balance of power remains intact and that all souls are given every opportunity to live life to its fullest and enjoy themselves while living up to their full potential as human beings. My mentor died a very long time ago and now the time has come for me to pass on what I have learned to the most recent member of our group."

"That's as good a description as any, I guess," Harry said as he reassuringly squeezed Ginny's hand. Then, looking into her eyes, said, "The way it was explained to me is that for every dark lord there is one member of our . . . order. We may be a bit more powerful than most but that does not make us any better than anyone else. Each of us has, at a minimum, two major tasks set before us. The first is to help defeat the current dark lord. And the second is to train our successor. We are not gods. We are merely mortal beings - witches and wizards - who have been chosen to fulfill certain prophecies and complete certain tasks. But we cannot complete any of our tasks without help. We may have our appointed rounds but this does not relieve anyone else of their responsibilities. Our job may be to help make it possible for you live up to your potential as humane human beings but you must do the living."

Then, looking even more deeply into her eyes, said, "I need you, Ginny. I meant every word I said this summer. But I don't want to rush into anything. I want us to take our time getting to know one another; but I need you. I can't do this alone and if you will work with me on this I promise that I will do everything in my power to make up for my past insensitivities to you a hundred fold."

Professor Dumbledore smiled and his blue eyes twinkled merrily, with more excitement than they had seen in many long, arduous, and sometimes painful, years. "Very well," he said happily. "But now the time has come for bed. School starts tomorrow and we all need our rest."

As they made their way out of the Great Hall, still holding hands, Harry said, "I'll need to talk to the centaurs because they need to take a stand and because they might know something we can use. But I will need you to talk to the house elves. There will be others, such as the faeries, but I want you to start with the house elves. You know how we've been treating Dobby and Winky; well, I want you to start building bridges of friendship and trust between our peoples. I need you to listen to them. Find out everything you can about their culture and write it down. Don't try to change them; just listen. Become their friend. I hate to say this because I don't like using anyone, but use our relationships with Winky and Dobby to help you. I know they are all fairly eager to please but we need to go beyond these surface features and dig for understanding. We need to get to know them from the inside out so that we can, but only if absolutely necessary, add them to Ron's chess set."

As they left the Great Hall Harry suddenly wished that he had something to give her. It didn't need to be big or fancy or anything, just something he could give her to let her know how much he cared. But what would she like, he thought. He was just getting to know her for herself but had no idea what she liked. As these thoughts passed through his mind Harry felt a lump in the pocket of his trousers and, as memories of the Sorcerer's Stone replayed in his mind, he reached in to retrieve whatever it was that had suddenly appeared in his pocket.

As he pulled his hand out he glanced down and saw that it was a short, squat, purple, scented

candle that smelled of some kind of fruited berry. Stopping on the stairs several steps below the portrait of the fat lady he looked into her eyes and handed it to her.

"What's this," she asked.

"I don't know," he said nervously. "Just something I thought you might like." Then, taking a deep breath, he steeled himself and plunged ahead. "Ginny," he said softly, "I know I've said this before but I really am sorry I ignored you. I know this may not sound very convincing because I'm really not very good at these things but I want to get to know you, Ginny. I want to get to know you as you, not as my best friend's little sister, or as anyone else's little sister for that matter. I just want to get to know you as you."

He closed his eyes and waited, not sure what to expect. As the seconds ticked by he could feel his heart pounding in his chest and he held his breath waiting for some sign from Ginny that it was all right to breathe again.

Then he felt it. Her hand was gently caressing his cheek. "I'd like that," she said softly. "I'd like that very much."

When he opened his eyes she was smiling up at him and the look in her eyes told him that everything would be all right.

As they climbed the few remaining steps to the portrait of the fat lady she looked at them and said authoritatively, "Password?"

Harry looked at Ginny then, seeing that she had no idea what the password was either, turned to look at the fat lady. "Heck, I don't know," he said. "General quarters?"

"Lucky guess." The fat lady scowled as the portrait swung open.

Harry chuckled and Ginny laughed as he handed her through the hole. The Gryffindor Common Room was empty as they entered so Harry walked Ginny over to the bottom of the steps leading to the girls' dormitory and looked into her eyes. "I'll see you in the morning then?"

"Yes. Alright," Ginny almost whispered. "I'll see you in the morning." She then turned and walked slowly up to her room, turning back occasionally to look at Harry as if to reassure herself that this was really happening.

When her door closed Harry turned and ran across the common room and up to the sixth-year boys' dormitory.

Chapter 13. A Confrontation with Pansy

After his shower the next morning Harry spent several minutes standing in front of the mirror in the boys bathroom trying to get his hair to behave. After several unsuccessful attempts the masculine mirror said, "Give it up, lad. It’s a lost cause. Your father couldn’t do anything with his hair either."

"Thanks a lot," Harry scowled and stomped back out into the sixth-year boys' dormitory where Ron was waiting to go down to breakfast with him.

"Hey, Harry," Ron said cheerfully as he shouldered his book bag, "I don’t know if you noticed it or not but Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle aren’t here this year. I wonder what happened. Do you think they finally transferred to Durmstrang?"

Neville, Dean and Seamus looked up to see what Harry’s response to this good news would be. They were expecting him to at least be happy about it but were unprepared for what came next. "Try life sentences in Azkaban," Harry said dryly. "They were there."

"Oh," Ron said quietly. "I’m sorry. I had no idea."

"That’s okay," Harry said softly, shouldering his bag. "You had no way of knowing."

The other three looked over at their friend with a mixture of curiosity and respect. Whatever had happened to him over the summer had moved and changed him deeply. He seemed different somehow. He seemed calmer, quieter, more reserved and yet more confident and determined than ever before.

Harry felt the play of these emotions but chose to ignore them. He had changed and he knew it. He would help them if he could but they would have to deal with the changes on their own terms and in their own ways. He had more important things to worry about.

At the bottom of the stairs Ron pulled Harry out of the flow of traffic and into the center of the common room. "Shall we wait for the girls?" he asked.

"Uh, sure," Harry shrugged, wondering if Ron had any idea how he felt about Ginny.

They didn’t have to wait long as Ginny and Hermione descended the stairs moments later, their book bags slung over their shoulders, deep in a whispered conversation. "Mind letting us in on your conversation," Ron asked as Ginny and Hermione joined then in the center of the room.

"Its just girl talk," Hermione said as she winked at Ginny. "You wouldn’t understand."

"You want to try me," Ron said, rising to the challenge.

"No," Hermione said flatly.

Ron was about to respond with a sarcastic retort and Harry could feel an argument coming on. So, before Ron could reply, he stepped in and said, "Ron, Hermione, please. We don’t have time for this. There will be plenty of time for you to argue later. But right now I need you two to work together, as a team. I mean if Snape and Sirius could do it for a year the least you can do is try."

Ron and Hermione stopped and looked at Harry then, blushing furiously, looked at each other. "Truce?" Ron asked, extending his hand.

"Truce," Hermione said with a nod and shook Ron's hand.

"Thank you," Ginny said. "I don't think I could have put up with another year of those two constantly bickering."

"We do not bicker!" Ron retorted loudly.

"What else would you call it," someone called from near the portrait hole and the entire room erupted into laughter.

Ron and Hermione were blushing brightly when Harry turned to Ginny. "Hi," he said as a timid smile began to spread across his face.

"Hi," Ginny said just as timidly, smiling demurely and begining to blush ever so slightly.

It seemed an eternity to Harry but in reality it could not have been more than a few brief seconds. Their eyes met and he knew that he had found love. What's more, he knew that she knew.

Then it was over. "Shall we?" Hermione asked, tugging on Ginny's arm.

The four of them left the common room together and made their way down to the Great Hall. Along the way Harry noticed that Ron kept casting curious glances at him. Upon entering the Great Hall they made their way over to the Gryffindor House Table and found seats across from one another. Ron was seated next to Hermione and Harry sat beside Ginny.

Harry looked at all of the wonderfully prepared dishes and watched as Ron, Hermione and Ginny filled their plates but found himself at a loss. It all looked and smelled wonderful but he just wasn't hungry. He looked at his goblet and considered filling it with either milk or juice but found that even the thought of that felt too heavy.

Ginny seemed to notice that he wasn't eating and her voice was filled with concern as she slid her hand into his under the table. "What's wrong, Harry," she asked as she turned to study his face as if searching for come clue as to what might be going on in his mind.

"I . . . I don't know," Harry said honestly. "I . . . I'm . . . I'm just not hungry."

Both Ron and Hermione had stopped eating now and were watching him intently, expressions of concern etched on their faces. "You have to eat something," Ginny said softly, concern still evident in her voice. "Even if you're not hungry you have to eat something so your body can keep functioning."

"Yes, I know," he said. "But for some reason I just don't feel like I can do it."

At this point Ginny took charge. Tapping the center of Harry's plate with her wand she said, "Dobby! This is Harry Potter's plate!"

Moments later Dobby's smiling face appeared as a reflection in Harry's plate. "Good morning, Harry," the excitable house elf said. "How are you feeling today?"

Harry smiled meekly down at his friend's reflection. "Good morning, Dobby," he said. "I . . . Uh . . . I guess I'm fine. I just don't feel like eating."

Dobby scowled. "Harry Potter must eat!" he said sternly.

"Dobby?" Ginny interrupted. "Do you have that special diet Doctor Stone told us about last week?"

Dobby smiled and nodded his head vigorously, his ears flapping as he did so. "Yes, Ginny. Dobby is ready for Harry's order."

Harry looked curiously over at Ginny who glanced over at him then smiled down at Dobby's reflection. "Good," she said smiling warmly. "Harry isn't sure what he wants to eat yet so could you please prepare a simple, light breakfast for him."

Dobby smiled and looked from Ginny to Harry and then back to Ginny. "Yes, Ginny! Dobby will have it ready in a minute." Then looking back at Harry he said, "Dobby is glad you is alive, Harry."

Harry smiled and blushed slightly at the adoration. "Thanks, Dobby. I'm glad to be alive." Before he could say anything else Dobby's reflection vanished. Turning to Ginny he asked, "Special diet?"

Ginny turned to look at him then looked down at her hands. "We really didn't know if you were going to survive," she murmured, tears evident in her voice. "But Dumbledore kept insisting that you would. I'm not saying it was easy on him because it wasn't. We could see the pain and fear etched in his eyes. . ."

By this time Harry could tell that Ginny was crying so he gently tilted her chin up and looked into her tear filled eyes. "Hush, Ginny," he whispered gently. "It's all right. I'm here now and I'm not going away."

Ginny looked into his confident eyes and smiled briefly before throwing herself into his arms and crying into his chest as she clung to him. Wrapping his arm around her and rubbing her back to comfort her he looked over at Ron and Hermione for support. Hermione was watching Ginny and Harry could tell that she was on the verge of tears as well. Ron looked over at his friend and said, "It wasn't easy, mate. And I hate to say this but I think it was harder on her than anyone."

Harry nodded his head in understanding and then turned his full attention to the girl in his arms, rubbing her back and occasionally running his fingers through her hair, all the while rocking her back and forth and whispering reassuringly into her ear. Five minutes later, after Ginny had recovered and his breakfast had arrived the familiar swoosh of wings filled the Great Hall as the owls arrived with the mail. A tawny grey owl landed in front of Hermione, delivering her copy of the Daily Prophet. As she rummaged through he bag for the correct change Harry was surprised when Hedwig swooped down and landed on the table in front of him, a small roll of parchment tied securely to her leg. He untied the light green silk ribbon and retrieved the sealed roll then tore one of his bagels in half and offered it to his faithful companion. Hedwig gently nipped his finger, took the offered bread then hopped up onto his shoulder.

"I think she missed you," Ron said as the owl that had delivered Hermione's paper took off.

"We all did," Hermione admitted softly.

Harry shrugged his shoulders slightly. "Sorry about that," he said while reaching down to gently

squeeze Ginny's hand. "Now," he said, turning his attention to the roll of parchment, "I wonder who this is from."

Picking the parchment up he turned the roll over in his hands and noticed that it had an official, Ministry of Magic seal on its flap. Sliding his butter knife under the seal he opened the parchment and unrolled the letter. With Hedwig on his shoulder and Ginny at his side he read the Acting Minister of Magic's official response to his demands of the previous evening.

> From: The Desk of Amelia Bones, Acting Minister of Magic
>
> To: Harry James Potter, Student, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry
>
> Dear Mr. Potter,
>
> Professor Dumbledore and I spoke at some length after you and Miss Weasley retired last evening and we are in agreement that all of the security and recruitment measures you mentioned are steps that need to be taken. This note is to let you know that by the end of your classes today teams of aurors and hit wizards will have been dispatched to guard and protect the families of all muggle-born and half-blood students at Hogwarts; that I will have spoken directly to the Prime Minister of England about opening a dialogue between the magical and non-magical communities; that owls and/or emissaries will have been sent to the official representatives of all magical communities the world over, asking for their assistance; and my staff will have begun work on opening the lines of communication between all branches of the magical and non-magical worlds so that Mister Weasley will have his "chess set."
>
> In addition, Mister Potter, I thought you should know that we are using your name in many of these letters because, whether you like it or not (and I have been assured that you do not), you really are much more famous than you realize.
>
> Sincerely,
>
> Amelia Bones,
> Acting Minister of Magic
>
> P.S. We will all remember Cedric.

"Well," Ron asked. "Who's it from?"

Harry looked up as Ginny squeezed his leg under the table - she had been gripping it since he had

unrolled the parchment and begun reading. He held onto it for a few more seconds so she could finish reading then looked over at Ron and Hermione. "Let's just say that when I said 'jump' last night Madam Bones asked 'how high.'"

Ron's mouth fell open and he said, "What?"

Harry handed the parchment across to Ron and Hermione and as they read the letter Hermione's eyes began to tear, Ron's mouth fell even further open and their heads gradually came closer together until they were just centimeters apart. As they read, Harry turned to Ginny and whispered, "They look good together, don't they."

Ginny nodded her head slightly then whispered back, "Yes, they do. I just wish they would realize it."

"Thank you, Harry," Hermione said softly, her voice beginning to crack, as the two of them lowered the parchment to the table.

Ron just looked at his friend in amazement. "Wow," he finally said after a prolonged pause.

"Well," Harry said as a mischievous smile spread across his face, "you always said you wanted to do something no one else in your family had done. And here's your chance: How many of your brothers can say that they were a general playing a real life game of wizard's chess where the stakes are so high?"

Before Ron could answer Professor McGonagall stopped behind Harry and Ginny and handed all four of them their timetables. "Professor Dumbledore would like a word with the four of you in his office after dinner tonight," she said softly enough that only the four of them could hear before proceeding down the table, presenting the rest of the Gryffindor students with their timetables.

Harry retrieved, re-rolled and stuffed his letter from the Acting Minister of Magic in his bag before picking up his timetable to begin studying it. Hedwig hooted softly on his shoulder then lifted off to return to the owlry. Harry watched her leave and silently thanked her for being such a loyal friend.

"What!" Ron exclaimed as he stared in disbelief at his schedule. "NEWT Potions, NEWT Charms, NEWT Transfiguration and Divination are bad enough but two Defense Against the Dark Arts classes? And what's this," he asked peering down towards the bottom of his timetable. "What's Military Tactics and Strategies?" he asked softly.

Harry studied his schedule for several seconds and noticed that his schedule sounded a lot like Ron's except that he had early morning Dueling classes five days a week and something called 'M.A. Training' with Dumbledore on Thursday evenings. As he studied his timetable he saw that a two hour time slot on Tuesday evenings had been blocked out with the notation "Defense Assotiation, Room of Requirement 8:00-10:00 PM." "Consider yourself lucky," he said, handing over his timetable for his friends' inspection.

Ron and Hermione compared their schedules with his while he studied Ginny's over her shoulder. "It looks like you've got the Defense Assotiation as your second defense class," he said. "It also looks like you've got that military class, whatever that's all about." Then, remembering all of the homework he had had in his fifth year, added, "You know we'll help if you want us to."

Ginny smiled warmly up at him. "Thanks," she said, "I may take you up on that."

"Holy cow," Ron said after studying Harry's timetable. "When are you going to be able to eat, mate? I mean our timetables are almost the same except for Thursday evenings; but you've got Dueling Practice every morning."

Just then Neville came over and stopped behind Ron and Hermione. "Moody said that we could have this week off so we could get started on our classes."

Harry looked up and nodded. "Thanks, Neville. What's your timetable look like?"

Neville studied Harry's timetable over Ron's shoulder for a few seconds then said, "It's pretty much the same as yours except that I have Thursday evenings free and I have NEWT level Herbology on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons while you have those times off."

Harry sighed. "It looks like we are going to be busy this year. I hope you are ready to study, Ron. How about you, Hermione?"

"Our schedules pretty much coincide," Hermione said reassuringly, "except for your early morning workouts, that Thursday evening class and while I have Arithmancy and Ancient Runes on Tuesday and Thursday mornings you and Ron have . . ." she hesitated, "Divination."

They ate in relative silence for a few minutes when they suddenly heard a very clipped walk coming up the aisle towards them and a near hysterical girl was screaming at Harry. "I hope you're happy, Potter," she screamed. "Why didn't you just kill him too? We all know you hated him. Why didn't you kill him when you had the chance?"

Ron glanced up then looked back at Harry. "Uh oh," he said softly. "It looks like Pansy is a little upset that her darling Draco is in Azkaban."

Ginny and Hermione looked up with curious expressions on their faces but before they could say anything Pansy stopped behind Harry and cuffed him violently on the shoulder.

Harry slowly stood up, stepped over the bench and turned around to face his accuser. "Pansy, he said gently, a practiced calm overtaking his demeanor, "I want you to sit down for a minute. I want to explain something." When she was sitting down next to Ginny, with her back to the table, Harry squatted down on his hams and faced her. He gently looked into her eyes and said, "Pansy, the charm I used to defend myself was a purely defensive charm. It cannot be used to attack anyone. The nature of it is such that the curses that were hurled at me were rebounded back upon their casters. Draco, Vincent and Gregory all hurled Cruciatus Curses at me while their elders were trying to kill me with Avada Kadarva. I won't say they got what they deserved because I really don't know. All I know for sure is that they were on the receiving end of the curses they cast at me.

"If you think I enjoyed it all I can do is ask that you please think again. It was not a pleasant experience. I felt all of the anger and hatred that went into the casting of those curses. I also felt the horror and revulsion their casters felt when they realized that their curses were being rebounded back upon them. But it saved my life. For those who died there was nothing after that: I simply felt them die and it was not a pleasant experience. But for Draco, Vincent and Gregory there was pain, anger and hatred beyond belief. I almost wish I could communicate some small portion of the anger and hatred Draco felt as he cast his spell because I want you to know what you were getting

yourself into. Suffice it to say, Pansy, that before you get seriously involved with anyone else I can only suggest that you take a good, long, hard look at that which lies within because you are going to have to deal with their inner worlds on a daily basis. Oh, you may have gotten some of Draco's money, power and prestige but the emotional price you would have paid would have destroyed you in the end."

As he stood up he noticed that the Great Hall was as silent as it would have been in the dead of night and yet it was packed and full. He also noticed that Professors Dumbledore, McGonagall and Snape were standing a few meters away, poised and ready to break up any fights that broke out but with bemused and curious expressions on their faces. He helped Pansy to her feet and nodded towards Professor Snape who came forward and took Pansy back to her seat at the Slytherin table. Professor McGonagall let out the breath she had been holding, shook her head and walked back up to the teacher's table. Professor Dumbledore nodded, smiled and winked at Harry before he too returned to his seat at the teacher's table.

"Wow," Heamione breathed as Harry sat back down. "Where did that come from?"

Harry looked at her tiredly and shook his head. "Please don't ask because you really don't want to know."

Ron's eyes were wide and his mouth was hanging open yet again. Harry looked over at his best friend. "You might want to close your mouth, Ron," he said, "because we aren't going to feed you and if you aren't careful Pig might mistake it for a new roost or something." Ron snapped his mouth shut and then shook his head as he laughed nervously at the depths of the wisdom his friend was showing.

Ginny rubbed her hand along Harry's thigh, took his hand in her own and leaned her head on his shoulder. "Now I know why I've loved you all these years," she said softly to herself; but Harry heard her anyway and gently squeezed her hand.

Chapter 14. Professor Potter

Retrieving his timetable from Hermione, Harry glanced at it briefly and said, "It looks like we've got Defense first then Charms. And after lunch its Transfiguration and Potions." Then, turning to Ginny, he asked, "How about you? What does your day look like?"

Ginny studied her timetable for a moment longer then said, grimly, "I start out with Potions" This was met with groans of sympathy from the other three. "Then its Herbology." Then, brightening, she continued, "But this afternoon I have Defense and Charms."

As they got up from the table a few minutes later and prepared to leave the Great Hall, Harry turned to Ginny and said, "Thank you."

"What for," she asked in surprise.

"For just being you," he nodded as a small, grateful smile began to fill his features.

Beaming up at him, Ginny's eyes sparkled as they met his and a warm smile of friendship and love spread across her face. "You're welcome."

Harry felt himself falling forward into the depths of her eyes as time seemed to stand still for them. It was almost as if the rest of the world had been put on hold and their two hearts were becoming one. The atmosphere was charged with an energy he could not explain and he felt himself opening up to the world around him, and to this beautiful girl in front of him in particular, more thoroughly than he had ever thought possible. It was as if nothing else - none of the sad and sometimes painful events of the past fifteen plus years of his life - mattered any more, as though he had been given an new lease on life and a chance to start all over. This was home and this girl standing in front of him was love, all of the love he had been missing out on since his parents had been taken from him so long ago.

He didn't know how long it had lasted when the spell was suddenly broken as another student accidentally brushed his shoulder on their way to class and twisted his torso just enough to cause him to break eye contact. Harry blushed and smiled again. "Sorry about that," he said.

"That's quite alright," Ginny said, blushing shyly. "I guess we had better get to class."

"Yeah," Harry whispered. "Will I see you at lunch?"

"Of course."

Out in the hall Ron pulled Harry aside and said, "You fancy her, don't you."

It was a statement more than a question and Harry didn't know how to respond. This was Ron, after all, and Harry had no idea how he would feel about his best friend falling deeply and madly in love with his little sister. Finally, after several seconds of sheer panic, Harry decided that telling his friend the truth would probably be the best approach. "Yeah," he said apprehensively. "I can't explain it, Ron, but its like . . . its like . . . its like I've finally found what I've been looking for all my life. It's peace. It's life. It's love. It's acceptance. It's . . . it's indescribable really. And to top it all off it's like going home. I can't explain it, Ron, but I think I love her."

"You do," Hermione said from behind him. "And she loves you too. She always has and I think she always will."

Blushing, Harry turned to face his other best friend. "Yeah," he said, "I just hope I'm good enough for her."

"The important thing," Ron said, "to me anyway, is that she's happy. The only thing I ask, Harry, is that you treat her right."

"Ron!" Hermione scolded sharply.

Harry laughed and smiled despite himself. "You two," he laughed. "When will you ever learn?" Then, still smiling, said, "Don't worry, Ron, I learned a lot last summer and I promise that I will treat her with all of the tenderness, love, devotion and respect she deserves."

Ron smiled and nodded his head, seemingly a little surprised at Harry's words, and said, "That's all anyone can hope for, Harry. And it's not that you need them or anything but you have my blessings."

"Thanks," Harry said. Then, putting his arms over the shoulders of the two people with whom he had shared so many adventures, said, "Now if we don't hurry we are going to be late and I really don't want to miss this class." With that the tree friends strode off to class and an aura of glowing white light seemed to envelope and energize them as they made their way through the crowded corridors.

Professor Dumbledore stood up from where he had been resting on the teacher's desk as they entered the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom and calmly strode over to close the door. Harry, Ron and Hermione scanned the room for empty seats and found three in the back row between Neville Longbottom and a Ravenclaw boy Harry did not recognize. As they made their way to their seats Professor Dumbledore cleared his throat. "Now that we are all here," he began confidently, "I fear that I must issue an apology." The room fell suddenly silent as all whispered conversations stopped and everyone turned their attention to the Headmaster. Harry, Ron and Hermione quickly found their seats and, sitting down, gave all of their attention to the man standing before them. "For the past five years you have gone through five Defense Against the Dark Arts professors. The first proved to be potentially more lethal than anyone could have imagined. The second proved to be little more than a pompous fraud. The third . . ." and here he paused, "was perhaps the best teacher you have had thus far but has the unfortunate handicap of being a werewolf. The forth, although many of you did learn a few things from him, was, in the end, proven to be a fraud. And last year's . . . professor was little more than an overzealous bureaucrat." Professor Dumbledore hung his head briefly and when he looked up again Harry could see a tear trickling down the headmaster's cheek. "I am sorry," he said. "You have a lot of catching up to do; and, with the tragic events that took place this past summer the Ministry of Magic and this school have officially been placed on a wartime footing.

"With this in mind, the Board of Governors has granted me permission to expand the staff and to hire the people I deem most highly qualified to teach you what you will need to know and the Ministry of Magic has graciously consented to allow me to recruit from within the ranks of their aurors. To this end you will now have five Defense Against the Dark Arts professors. In addition, as many of you have noticed, you now have two Defense Against the Dark Arts classes. The first will be a series of lectures in which you will be presented with the background information behind the

spells you will be expected to learn. The second will be a laboratory course in which you will be given the opportunity to practice these spells and hone your skills."

Walking around to stand behind his desk the Headmaster quickly glanced back at the four shadowy figures standing silently in the gloom against the wall at the front of the room. Harry hadn't noticed them before but now that he did he felt a certain sense of foreboding, almost as though he was about to be introduced to four of the most difficult taskmasters he would ever face.

"Before we begin, however, I believe a number of introductions are in order," Dumbledore said with a hint of sternness in his voice.

"The first person I would like you to meet is Miss Nymphadora Tonks." Hermione gasped delightedly. "Miss Tonks is an auror and a metamorphmagus, which means she has the ability to change her appearance at will. She will be teaching courses in concealment and disguise." Tonks stepped forward, her blue, shoulder length hair sparkling in the torchlight, and smiled sheepishly. As she stepped aside her hair cycled from blue through violet to red, orange, yellow, green and back to blue."

Lavender and Parvati giggled while most of the others gasped audibly. Harry, Ron, Hermione and Neville however, just smiled in appreciation as their friend left the stage. One of the tree remaining shadowy figures growled, "Show off!" One of the other figures chuckled softly with a deep, rich, baritone voice.

Professor Dumbledor winked merrily at Tonks and turned back to his students. "The second person I would like to introduce," he said brightly, "is also and auror. He has a broad range of experiences and will be teaching you many spells as well as helping you hone your abilities and helping you learn to become sensitive to the presence of danger. I give you Mister Kingsley Shacklebolt." A tall, bald, solidly built, black wizard with a gold hoop dangling from his right ear stepped into the light and bowed courteously. Lavender and Parvati swooned and the others applauded politely.

As soon as Kingsley had retreated back into the shadows Professor Dumbledor cleared his throat and proceeded with the next introduction. "Two years ago I hired Alastor Moody to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts. Unfortunately, however, he was kidnapped before he could fill the post and was held captive while an imposter, posing as Professor Moody, took his place. The real Alastor Moody - this Alastor Moody - has agreed to come back and give you the benefit of his many years of experience as an auror during our current foe's last reign of terror."

With the familiar clump of his wooden leg, Mad-Eye Moody stepped out of the shadows and into the light, his magical eye spinning in its socket and the many scars on his face casting odd shadows that made him look even more frightening than he really was. Three of the four Gryffindors in the back row, who had had many encounters with the retired auror, applauded enthusiastically. Harry, who still occasionally had nightmares about the fake Moody and what might have been had Professors McGonnagall, Dumbledor and Snape not arrived when they did, applauded as well, but not as enthusiastically. The others applauded politely.

Professor Moody hobbled back into the shadows and sat down. It seemed to Harry that it was getting more difficult for the old man to get around and his heart went out to him.

"Your fourth Defense Against the Dark Arts instructor was here three years ago and has graciously consented to return. Yes, as many of you will undoubtedly recall, Professor Lupin is a werewolf.

However, he is one of the best teachers I have had the pleasure of working with in all of my many long years. He has a way about him that communicates patience, understanding and confidence." Smiling shyly, Remus stepped forward and nodded quickly. To his obvious surprise he received a standing ovation accented with the occasional whistle and cheer. Harry could not help smiling as his friend blushed in accepting his warm welcome.

Professor Dumbledore motioned for Tonks, Kingsley, Mad Eye and Remus to join him in front of the teacher's desk. Tonks, who settled on her natural state, stepped forward and conjured a chair for Professor Moody and then hiked herself up onto Dumbledor's desk and sat there swinging her legs while the others stepped forward and conjured chairs for themselves. Moody grumbled something about not being an invalid to which Tonks replied, "And I love you too, Mad-Eye." Professor Dumbledor listened to this exchange and then shook his head and laughed softly to himself.

"Your fifth instructor - for it is not to be me," he continued, "is a young wizard who has faced dangers most full-grown wizards could not have handled and come through with flying colors. And, I am told, both he and his partner are exceptional duelers. And whether he knows it or not, he is an excellent teacher who instills confidence in his pupils. He will primarily be responsible for teaching one of the Tuesday eveming labs. However, as time allows, he will be circulating through all of the classes and labs to teach you all a new charm he and two of his friends have recently developed and assist the other teachers with their lessons. He needs no further introduction because most of you already know him." Then, looking squarely into Harry's eyes, he smiled and said, "Ladies and gentlemen, I give you Professor Harry Potter."

Harry's eyes bulged and his mouth fell open. His heart skipped a beat and his mind fogged over. He couldn't believe what he had just heard. The world suddenly went into slow motion as he looked around in stunned disbelief. Then, as he slowly became aware of his surroundings, he realized that everyone in the room was giving him a standing ovation. His friends were cheering him and Ron and Neville were patting on the back while pulling him to his feet. And when he looked down towards the teacher's desk he saw that Tonks' hair color was cycling rapidly through the colors of the rainbow and even Mad Eye Moody was giving him a standing ovation. When he looked at Professor Dumbledor, Harry saw that he was motioning for him to come to the front of the room.

Harry slowly made his way up to the front of the class where he was met by Remus, Tonks and Kingsley. Blushing brightly he looked at each of them then said, "Professors."

Shaking his hand firmly, Remus said, "We're on equal footing, here, Harry, so please, when we're teaching it's just like it was this summer. We are Remus, Kingsley, Alastor and . . ."

"Tonks," Tonks cut in. "If you ever use my first name I promise that I will hex you into next week." Harry looked at Tonks and smiled. Her hair was still cycling through the colors of the rainbow and he had to stop himself from laughing. "Does it always do that, Tonks," he asked, stifling a laugh.

"Only when I feel like celebrating," she said as she leaned in and kissed him on the cheek. "Welcome to the club, Harry."

Harry walked over and stood in front of Mad-Eye and shook his hand. "Er . . . Professor."

Moody scowled and growled, "Weren't you listening, laddy? When we're like this its Alastor."

"Okay," Harry said softly, quickly apologizing. "I just wanted to hear it from you."

"That’s quite alright, lad. It’s good to have you aboard."

As the applause died down Tonks, Remus and Kingsley returned to their seats and Tonks budged over to make room for Harry to sit beside her on the desk. Professor Dumbledore nodded so Harry walked over and sat next to Tonks. Leaning over, he whispered out of the corner of his mouth, "You know, Tonks, I kind of prefer your natural state. I mean the fact that you can disguise yourself is nice but I like you just the way you are."

Tonks laughed merrily and her hair immediately returned to the soft blond color it had been before she started celebrating.

Professor Dumbledore held his hands up for silence. "My part in this class is largely ceremonial. These five people will be your Defense Against the Dark Arts professors this year and, hopefully, next. For the remainder of this period I will step aside and listen as they tell you a little bit about themselves and what they are going to be teaching you this year."

The blood drained from Harry’s face and he looked over at Tonks for support. As Remus stepped forward and started telling the class about his experiences, not as a werewolf but as a 'freelance' auror, Tonks leaned over and whispered into his ear, "Just pretend you are standing in front of one of your D.A. classes and relax. Tell them about the charm and go from there."

Harry nodded and whispered back, "Thanks."

After Remus came Kingsley then Mad Eye then Tonks. With fifteen minutes left to go Harry stood up and, looking nervously out at the sea of faces before him, tried to start. "Er . . . um . . . er . . ." he faltered then glanced back over at Tonks.

"Go on," she mouthed encouragingly. "Go on. Just relax and talk about what you know."

Harry shook his head, squared his shoulders, looked up, cleared his voice, made eye contact with Ron and began. "Most of you probably already know how I got this scar so I won’t talk about that. And most of you probably remember the three tasks of the Triwizard tournament so there’s no use talking about that either. What most of you probably don’t know about, however, apart from rumor and gossip, is what really happened when I was helping to protect the Sorcerer’s Stone, what happened when Ginny Weasley and I were down in the Chamber of Secrets, what happened the night Sirius Black - my godfather," he emphasized, "escaped, what happened the night Cedric Diggory died or what happened in the Ministry of Magic last year. This is my chance to set the record straight so I guess that is a good place to begin."

For the next ten minutes Harry summarized these events and experiences to an attentive audience, leaving out certain details so as not to embarrass Ron, Hermione or Professor Snape. It hurt him to talk about Cedric’s death and his voice cracked several times in the retelling of that story but he somehow managed it. Then he shifted gears and told them about his decision to fight back, how he, Remus and Hermione researched and developed the new defensive charm and about the day the Dursleys died. When he was finished he came back to himself and realized that he was now looking into Lavender Brown’s eyes and that everyone, teachers included, was looking at him with the utmost expressions or respect on their faces.

The bell rang a few seconds later and the rest of the students slowly left the room. On his way by, Ron held up Harry’s book bag so that Harry could see that he had it. When it was just himself and

the other teachers in the room, Harry turned to them and softly asked, "What happened? How did they find me; and how did the get by the Order?"

"As to how they found you, Harry," Dumbledor said, "we do not know. We suspect Cornelius Fudge may have sold that information to Mister Malfoy but we have no proof as of yet. As to how they got past the Order, all we can say for sure is that they must have been watching both you and us for quite some time because we tried to vary our shifts enough to keep anyone guessing. But as it turns out all of our precautions were not enough. They caught us at a shift change and killed four of our people as they were comparing notes."

"Oh," Harry said, biting his lip and looking down at his shoes.

Ron and Hermione met him just outside the door as Harry left the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom and as Ron handed him his book bag he smiled and said, "Bloody brilliant, Harry! You're a professor now."

Harry shushed him and sternly reprimanded his friend. "Keep it down will you, Ron. It'll be all over school before lunch but I don't want to make a big deal out of it. I'm just in charge of the D.A. I'd rather leave the teaching to those who know what they're doing."

"But, Harry," Hermione said, smiling up at him, "you do know what you're doing. You should have seen the looks on the other teacher's faces while you were talking. Even Professor Moody was impressed."

"Yeah," Ron laughed. "And I thought Tonks was going to wet herself when you were telling about Voldemort's return."

Hermione glared reprovingly at Ron for several seconds. "That wasn't funny, Ron," she scolded.

"I know his return wasn't funny and I know the process wasn't funny," Ron said apologetically but still laughing, "but Tonks was priceless."

Hermione threw her hand up in frustration. "Oh!" she said in exasperation. "Boys!" She then turned and stormed off towards the Charms classroom.

Ron glanced sideways at Harry. "What's wrong with her?" he asked.

Harry just shook his head and smiled. "I think she's just being Hermione." "Yeah," Ron agreed dreamily, "Hermione."

"I think we had better catch up to her or we're going to be late," Harry said as they set off through the crowded corridors. While they were making their way to the Charms classroom Harry realized that Ron had said Voldemort's name without so much as a flinch and made a note to ask him about it later on.

Hermione was still fuming when they found her in Professor Flitwick's classroom and sat down on either side of her. "You're going to have to learn to lighten up a bit, Hermione," Harry said softly as he took out a fresh roll of parchment and prepared to take notes. "For what lies ahead, we are all going to have to find some reason to laugh."

"I know," she said, tears beginning to fill her eyes. "Its just that sometimes Ron can be such a prat."

"I’m sorry, Hermione," Ron said tenderly while rubbing her arm. "I know I should be more sensitive but I . . . I . . . I just can’t help being who I am."

Hermione turned and smiled up at Ron, wiping the tears from her eyes. "Thanks," she said. "I wouldn’t have you any other way."

Ron smiled and then turned to open a fresh bottle of ink.

Tiny Professor Flitwick entered the room, climbed to the top of his chair and perched himself atop the pile of cushions he used to see over the top of his desk. Clearing his fruity, squeaky voice he said, "Welcome back. As you know, Hogwarts is now, officially, on a military footing. This year, in addition to your regular coursework, you will be learning a number of defensive charms. Some of these charms are old and have not been used for years. Some of these charms are obscure and have only been recorded in the ledgers of certain volumes of family magic. Some of them are new; so new, in fact, that they have yet to be officially tested and recognized.

"In addition, this year you will begin developing and testing your own personal charms. These charms will be graded on their usefulness, effectiveness and reproducibility. This is why documentation is so important. It doesn’t matter that you can produce these charms so much as it matters that your fellow students can reproduce them. That is why, it is so important that nothing be left out of a charm’s documentation."

The tiny professor shifted slightly in his seat and turned to look at Harry. "It would seem that one of your classmates has developed a highly effective rebounding charm. Professor Dumbledore and the Acting Minister of Magic have asked me to help Mister Potter test this charm, prepare its documentation and get it ready for release. With Mister Potter’s permission and assistance I would like him to give us a basic understanding of this charm and how it works and then provide us with a brief demonstration."

Harry looked up and grimaced resignedly. "This is getting out of hand," he grumbled. Then, pushing his chair back from the table, stood up and reluctantly made his way to the front of the class. Professor Flitwick nodded, turning the class over to him. Harry took a deep breath, once more made eye contact with Ron and began. "This charm is a purely defensive maneuver," he said. "It is a rebounding charm based upon some of the principles associated with a few of the muggles' more spiritual philosophies. Its component parts, therefore, if the texts are to be believed, are as old as time itself." He paused and briefly scanned the faces of his fellow students. Hermione, he could see, was watching him with rapt attention. He knew that she knew most of the inner workings of the charm but he was still grateful that she was such an attentive listener.

"Now I will grant that it is not an easy charm to master as it is equal parts philosophy, faith and magic. The philosophy boarders on religion; the faith is a matter of degree; and the magic lies in the orderly arrangement of the pieces within your hearts and minds. This charm will not shield you from experiencing the thoughts and emotions of the person or persons casting the spells but it will shield you from the effects of those spells. In addition, the effectiveness of this charm depends, in large measure, upon the uses to which it is put.

"This charm is not a toy and should not be used lightly. In a few minutes I will use it to demonstrate its power. After Professor Flitwick and I have completed its documentation and have begun teaching it you should use it for learning and practice purposes only unless or until you find

yourself in a situation where you need it to defend yourselves against hostile forces.

"Before we launch ourselves into a full blown discussion of this charm there are a few more things you should know about it. The first is that it is a powerful piece of wordless and wandless magic. The second is that the use of this charm taps directly into the infinite power of Creation and your body becomes, in essence, your wand. The third thing you should know about this charm is that it is a very powerful bit of magic and can be very draining in cases of prolonged exposure. After all," he quipped with a friendly smile, "the last time I used it I wound up in the hospital wing for two weeks."

A nervous laughter rippled through the room as Harry strode to the blackboard and pulled out his wand.

For the next hour Harry described the charm in detail, using his wand to create illustrations and three-dimensional models as he went. Professor Flitwick watched in silence and closely studied the charts, diagrams and models Harry was using to illustrate the finer points of the charm, obviously impressed with what he was both seeing and hearing. When it was over Harry looked up and said seriously, "I need a volunteer. I need someone to cast a spell and try to hurt me. I don't want anything too dangerous because this charm is very effective. After all, twenty death eaters gave their lives in the original proof and I don't want anyone hurt. Neither do I want anyone to get sick or belch slugs for an hour. The spells you cast should be something you can deal with and should have an easy counter curse."

Several seconds passed as Harry's students glanced nervously around, wondering who would be the first to volunteer. Finally, Harry, after scanning the sea of apprehensive faces, said, "Ron, Hermione, Neville, Dean, Seamus, Parvati, Padma, Lavender. Could you all come forward please."

As the eight members of Dumbledor's Army slowly rose from their seats, wands in hand, Harry smiled at them reassuringly. When the last of them reached the front of the room Harry stepped to center stage and directed the others to fan out around him in a rough oval. Professor Flitwick moved to one of the vacated desks and perched himself on the tabletop, dangling his legs freely in the open air.

"This is just like in class, guys," Harry said, glancing reassuringly into Neville's eyes and laying his wand on Professor Flitwick's desk. "On the count of three I want you to cast your spells. One… Two… Three."

The room was suddenly filled with the shouts and screams of eight sixth-year witches and wizards simultaneously casting a number of different spells at one of their own. As the eight bolts of brightly colored beams of energy raced towards their target Harry stood quietly, his eyes closed and his head slightly bowed. Just as the hurtling bolts of energy would have made contact with his body a blinding flash of white light erupted from somewhere within Harry's body and the casters fell victim to their own curses.

Harry looked up when it was over and smiled sheepishly. Looking around he saw that Ron, Dean and Padma had tried the jelly legs curse; that Neville and Hermione had tried a binding curse, that Seamus and Parvati had tried petrification spells; and that Lavender was covered by a swarm of pink butterflies. He couldn't help but laugh at Lavender's predicament and through a bout of suppressed giggles asked her where she had learned that spell.

"In the library!" Lavender screamed as she struggled to get away from the swarming butterflies. Harry picked up his wand and flicked it expertly, causing the butterflies to vanish. Walking around the stage Harry released his friends from their curses, complimenting each of them on their progress. When he got to Neville he could see that Neville was struggling uselessly against the ropes that bound him at least as tightly as Wormtail's ropes had bound him to the headstone a little more than a year previous. Releasing his dueling partner and friend from his self-inflicted confinement Harry reached out his hand to help Neville to his feet. "Looking good, Neville," he complimented. "You'll have to catch me up on the last two weeks of training sometime."

Before Neville could respond Professor Fitwick squealed in delight and jumped down off the desk he had been sitting on. "Very good, Mister Potter!" he exclaimed. "Very well done indeed! I can see that this is going to be one of the easiest documentations I have ever done. And I think you should be able to start teaching it sometime next week."

Harry blushed as the bell rang, thanked Professor Flitwick, retrieved his books and headed off for the Great Hall and lunch with Ginny.

Chapter 15. First Signs

Ginny was already eating lunch when they entered the Great Hall. Harry slid his book bag underneath the bench and sat down beside her as Ron and Hermione took the two vacant seats opposite them. Ginny smiled and teasingly whispered, "Good afternoon, Professor Potter."

Harry groaned. "Oh, no. Not you too."

Ginny laughed and smiled. "I'm only kidding," she said leaning into his shoulder. "I know you don't like all the attention, Harry," she said reassuringly which somehow had the added effect of soothing his nerves, "but it really is quite an honor."

"Yeah, right," Harry grumbled. "I wish they would bestow that honor on someone else."

"I'm sure they would if they could, Harry," Ginny said sympathetically. "But right now you're the best man for the job."

Ron glanced up from his plate and smiled mischievously. "I'll bet you say that to all the boys," he grinned with an expectant twinkle in his eyes.

Ginny quickly loaded her spoon with a heaping consignment of mashed potatoes and launched them into Ron's face, expertly aiming it at the center of his forehead. Harry's eyebrows shot up in surprise at this startling revelation of Ginny's ferocity. "You'd better be careful, mate," Ron laughed, wiping the mashed potatoes off of his face and out of his hair. "I have it on good authority - namely from Charlie - that her temper is comparable to a Chinese Fireball's and that her bite is worse than a Norwegian Ridgeback's."

Hermoine scowled and said, "Give him one for me, Ginny."

Ginny was starting to load her spoon again when Ron leaned back from the table and held his hands up defensively. "No, no. No more, Gin," he pleaded laughingly, "I was only kidding."

After things had settled down a bit Harry once again found himself at a loss for what he should be doing. He looked up and down the table at all of the deliciously prepared foods and beverages but couldn't bring himself choose any of it for himself. After several seconds of confusion he nudged Ginny and mumbled, "Uh, Ginny?"

"Yes, Harry?"

"Help," he squeaked.

"What?" she asked. Then noticing that his plate and goblet were empty, said, "Oh." Pulling out her wand she tapped the center of his plate and said, in a surprisingly confident and commanding voice, "This is Harry Potter's plate!"

A moment later Dobby's reflection once again appeared in his plate. "Hello, Harry," Dobby squeaked. "What would you like for lunch?"

"Er, . . . what are my choices?" Harry asked hesitantly then immediately regretted it as the excitable house elf began listing a variety of dishes. Harry smiled to himself then held his hands up,

interrupting Dobby's recitation of the meals on his "special diet." "I'll tell you what, Dobby," he said as a friendly grin spread across his face. "I'm free Tuesday afternoon. If you have some time we can meet in the seventh chamber of my trunk and go over the menu. Until then why don't you just surprise me. You know my tastes and I trust you. But I must say that those bagels are really quite good."

Dobby smiled up at Harry and said, "Yes, Harry! Lunch will be ready in a few minutes."

Harry looked back at Ginny, the confusion in his eyes communicating a desire to understand. "Dobby has been given a list of recipes and a special meal plan to help you adjust, get your appetite back and, according to Professor Dumbledore, provide you with the extra energy you will need while you are learning about your new abilities. Like I started to explain at breakfast," she said after a brief pause, "Professor Dumbledore was sure that you would survive and come back to us. With the help of some of the Unspeakables from the Department of Mysteries and the Dieticians at St, Mungo's he and Doctor Stone developed a special diet for you and made sure that both Dobby and Winky could prepare all of the meals on every menu."

"Both Dobby and Winky?" Harry asked.

"Mm Hmm," Ginny nodded. "Winky insisted that she be allowed to help. She may technically be my house elf but she is also my friend and I want her to be happy so, when she asked to be allowed to help . . ."

"I get the picture," Harry smirked. "So how do I go about placing an order?"

"All you have to do is tap the center of your plate and say, 'This is Harry Potter's plate,' and either Winky or Dobby will prepare your meals for you."

Harry sighed deeply and bowed his head. "Why me?" he asked softly. "Why can't I be just like everyone else for a change?"

Ginny squeezed his hand and looked up into his eyes. "You already know why, Mister Maturo Auctus," she said softly

Harry groaned. "Yeah, I know. That doesn't mean I have to like it though."

Before Ginny could respond Ron looked up and uncomfortably and asked, "Erm, Harry? How much of this past summer do you remember?"

Harry looked down at his plate and began picking at the salad that had just appeared. It was several seconds before he responded but when he did he looked tiredly into his friend's eyes and saw the concern written on his face. "I don't know. Most of it I guess, why?"

"What do you remember about the attack?" Hermoine asked hesitantly.

Harry looked into her eyes and could feel her nervousness and apprehension. He knew that she did not want to be the one to have to ask this question. But at the same time he knew that she felt that it was her duty and obligation to him as a friend.

He sighed and put his fork down. "Hermoine," he began gently, "what can I tell you. I remember seeing the wards coming down and hearing the pops as the Death Eaters appararet into the

Dursley's garden. I remember jumping over the wall and running down the street. I remember being surrounded, activating the charm and feeling the curses as they were cast and the effects they had on their casters. I also remember most of what happened afterwards, on a spiritual, level but that is still kind of private so I would really rather not go into that just now."

Ron nodded meaningfully. "Dumbledore said something like that might have happened," he said earnestly. "You, my friend, have had what the muggles call a Near Death Experience. He said that we might be noticing some changes in your personality, which we have by the way. He also said you will need us now more than ever to help you come to terms with who and/or what you have become."

Harry looked around at his friends and could feel their unease. After several painstakingly silent seconds he squeezed Ginny's hand and smiled across at Ron and Hermione and said, "Thanks, guys. You don't know how much that means to me."

For the rest of the meal Harry ate in silence as he contentedly listened to Ron, Hermione and Ginny recount their holiday adventures, which weren't really all that exciting as they had spent most of their time cooped up at Order of the Phoenix headquarters redecorating. He learned from Ron that the headquarters had, indeed, been transformed into a major command post from which Dumbledore could easily manage the entire war if need be. From Ginny, he learned that the entire headquarters had been redecorated, in accordance with Sirius' wishes, in Gryffindor colors and that Phineus' portrait had been moved into the Situation Room so that Dumbledore could more easily communicate with Order members in times of crisis. And from Hermione he learned that Buckbeak had been renamed Witherwings and returned to the Forbidden Forest and Hagrid's care.

As the meal ended they retrieved their book bags from beneath the benches and Harry and Ginny walked side-by-side down one side of the long table while Ron and Hermione did the same along the other. At the entrance to the Great Hall Harry, Ron and Hermione bid farewell to Ginny who smiled and headed off for her first Defense against the Dark Arts class of the year while they shouldered their bags and proceeded to Professor McGonagall's classroom and Transfiguration. On their way to class Harry noticed that while Ron was reluctantly trudging through the corridors Hermione was quietly encouraging him and patiently explaining some of the finer points of Transfiguration. He also noticed that her voice was unusually soft and gentle. He wondered at this and was about to say something when Colin Creevye's camera flashed in his face.

"Hi, Harry!" the excitable fifth year Gryffindor boy chirped.

Blinking his eyes as he struggled to regain his sight Harry groaned. "Hi, Colin," he said, smiling weakly.

"I'm really glad you're alright," Colin said excitedly. "I understand you are going to be teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts this year, Harry! Sounds like fun!"

Harry frowned and looked to Ron and Hermione for support. Ron just rolled his eyes and shook his head while Hermione smiled weakly and looked sympathetic. "Yeah," Harry mumbled sarcastically. "Loads of fun."

Professor McGonagall was pacing nervously in front of her desk when they entered the Transfiguration classroom and looked up as the last of her students found their seats. "These are not normal times," she said tersely, the strain clearly showing on her face. "We are at war. As such,"

she continued, "we will be spending a great deal of time this year learning some of the most advanced transfigurations that can be used to disguise both yourselves and your equipment as well as a number of conjuring techniques and transfiguration's place in the dueling environment. We will begin by reviewing some of the transfigurations you have already learned and then move on from there." For the next several minutes she listed some of the transfigurations they had to look forward to over the coming months. Then, looking seriously into their eyes, said, "The last thing we will study this year is the animagus transformation. It is a very complicated combination of spells and I do not expect many of you to be able to achieve its levels of proficiency. However, Professor Dumbledore has asked me to give you the benefit of my experience and to teach as many of you as I can so that if you should ever need to use it you will have the ability."

Harry, Ron and Hermione looked at each other in surprise. "This must really be serious if they are going to be teaching the animagus transformation in sixth year," Ron whispered to Harry.

"I assure you, Mister Weasley," Professor McGonagall said sternly, "that this is very serious. And I expect you all to apply yourselves to the learning of these transformations," she said, turning back to address the entire class, "because someday your lives may very well depend upon your ability to use them."

Walking back up to the front of the room Professor McGonagall approached a black sheet that seemed to be draped over a large crate in a corner of the room behind her desk. Lifting the sheet she revealed a series of stacked cages, each of which contained a single guinea fowl. "Mister Weasley and Mister Potter," she said, turning back to face the class, "Since you have so kindly volunteered your services, could you please come forward and distribute these birds amongst your classmates."

Harry and Ron grudgingly got to their feet and walked to the front of the room. A few minutes later, after everyone had a bird and Ron and Harry had returned to their seats, Professor McGonagall's expression softened slightly and she said, "Today we are going to begin by reviewing the transfiguration of guinea fowl into guinea pigs."

After a quick, five-minute lecture, during which she reminded them of some of the things they had learned the previous year, she turned them loose and told them to begin. Harry looked at the bird in front of him and started thinking about what he was supposed to be doing when he felt himself sip into a kind of hypnotic stupor. He remembered what he had learned about magic during his Maturo Auctus and wondered if any of it could be applied to transfiguration. As he mentally reviewed his notes and thought about the transformation he was supposed to be working on he heard a soft popping sound.

"Harry!" Hermione gasped. "Your wand!"

"Huh?" Harry asked, shaking his head to clear his mind of the seemingly impenetrable fog that was clouding his conscious thoughts.

"Your wand. You didn't use your wand," she whispered in shocked surprise.

Professor McGonagall, who was across the room helping a Ravenclaw girl, looked up and quickly strode over to stand in front of Harry's desk. She glanced down at the perfectly transfigured guinea pig in the cage in front of him and noticed that his wand was lying quietly on the table. "What did you say, Miss Granger?" She asked.

Hermione looked up at her favorite professor with a confused expression on her face and said, "I was just picking up my wand to begin the transfiguration when I heard a soft pop. When I looked up I saw that Harry had already finished it. Then I saw his wand and realized that he hadn't used it."

Professor McGonagall cocked her eyebrows and looked inquisitively at Harry for several seconds. Finally, after what seemed an eternity to Harry, she looked at him even more sternly than she had before and said, "Can you perform the reverse transfiguration, Mister Potter?" she asked.

"Er . . .," Harry began and reached for his wand.

"No," she said, quickly placing her hand over his wand so that he couldn't retrieve it. "I want you to do it without your wand."

"Er . . ."

"Just do what you did before," she said more softly. "Only this time transfigure the guinea pig into a guinea fowl."

Harry had the uncomfortable feeling that every one in the room was watching him but he did as he was told and, closing his eyes, allowed himself to fall back into the trance he had experienced before. He had no sooner closed his eyes than he heard a soft pop which was immediately followed by Ron's awestruck voice saying, "Wicked!"

Harry opened his eyes and saw that the guinea fowl had been returned to its original state. It was looking at him a little reproachfully but for all intents and purposes seemed to be fine.

"Very well, Mister Potter," Professor McGonagall said. "It would seem that you are able to perform wandless and wordless magic, which usually takes years to master. I will suggest that you keep it under wraps for now. We will discuss this development with Professor Dumbledore this evening. And for the rest of you," she said, turning to address the class, "what you have just seen does not leave this room." As an added precaution she waved her wand while muttering something under her breath and a moment later everyone in the room, except for Harry and herself, had vaguely pleased expressions on their faces. While the others were recovering from the effects of her memory charm she handed Harry his wand and said, as if nothing extraordinary had happened, "Alright, Mister Potter, let's see what you can do?" Catching his eye she mouthed the words, "with your wand."

For the rest of the period Harry used his wand and performed the rest of the review transfigurations Professor McGonagal had planned for them that day. What none of the others realized - except, perhaps, for Professor McGonagall - was that he was using wandless magic, only channeling the energy through his wand and only halfheartedly saying the words so that the others would not realize what was happening.

Looking past Ron as they left the Transfiguration classroom and headed for the dungeons for Potions and Professor Snape Hermione looked admiringly over at Harry . "I'm impressed, Harry," she said with a smile. "You got all of the transfigurations right on the first try."

Harry smiled weakly. "Yeah, well . . ." Harry stumbled over his words, remembering McGonagall's warning about keeping quiet about his wandless magic abilities. "I got lucky."

As they passed through the Entrance Hall Ginny stopped them, smiling happily. "This is going to be so much fun!" she said, bubbling over with excitement. "Tonks and Kingsley and Mad Eye are teaching Defense! And Professor Lupin is back! This is gong to be a fun year!" Harry could not help but smile at Ginny's excitement. She was happy and that's all that really mattered right now.

The line outside the Potions classroom was an odd mixture of students. There were four Slytherins, three Ravenclaws, two Hufflepuffs and, including themselves, four Gryffindors. The fourth Gryffindor was, of course, Neville.

As they lined up outside the door Harry seemed to be the only one who was not surprised to see Neville. "Hey, Neville!" he said. "Are you ready for this?"

Neville looked up and said, "Oh, hi, Harry," then sighed. "Yeah, I guess. I'll need it if I'm going to become an auror. So, we've got two more years of Professor Snape. I'm glad you guys are going to be taking it with me, though, because I don't know if I could handle it on my own."

Harry chuckled. "Oh, I don't know, Neville. After this summer I don't think there is much you couldn't handle on your own. Some of those duels were pretty intense and you've got to remember that we were outnumbered more often than not."

Neville smiled wistfully at the memory of their dueling practice then said, "Yeah but this is Snape."

Harry chuckled as a mischievous glint came into his eye then said, "I'll tell you what, Neville. Do you remember what we did to Tonks after our first run through Moody's Maze?"

"Yeah," Neville said as an irrepressible smile spread across his fate. "Why?"

"Well, I was just thinking that the next time Snape starts giving you a hard time just try to imagine what he would look like in that outfit."

Harry and Neville burst out laughing at the image of their beloved Potions Master dressed in a frilly pink tutu and wooden clogs. "And if that isn't enough," Harry laughed, "imagine him running around like a chicken with his hair spinning and his ears flapping!"

Harry and Neville were so consumed with laughter that they almost didn't hear the Potions classroom door slam open and almost missed the greasy haired visage of Professor Snape, black eyes blazing from an encounter with a particularly rebellious student in his previous class, appearing in the opening. Glaring furiously at this class of sixth years he nodded curtly and stepped aside to let them enter. As Harry and Neville made their way past their Potions Master, barely able to suppress their laughter, Snape scowled and barked for them to be quiet.

When they had all taken their seats and gotten out their quills, ink and parchment Snape stepped in front of his desk and scowled before calling roll. Harry noticed that Snape's perpetually dark, yet pallid, features did not change much as he called the roll and glared at each student in turn.

When he had finished taking attendance Snape laid the parchment aside and glared at his students as if daring them to breathe. The nostrils of his overlarge nose flared in contempt as he stared angrily into their faces. "For the past five years," he began silkily, "you have been learning the basics of the fine art and exact science which is potion making. The potions you have brewed thus far have been little more than childish games. Over the next two years, however, you will be

learning some of the most advanced potions ever created. You will be learning several medicinal potions, several restorative drafts and several healing compounds. In addition you will be learning to brew the Wolfsbane Potion as well as the Polyjuice Potion. You will be learning these potions because you are being prepared for war."

He paused dramatically for several seconds before continuing. "You will also be learning how to tailor a potion to a specific individual, as no two people and no two situations are identical and you must be prepared to deal with any eventuality. In conjunction with your Herbology Professor, if you are taking Herbology this year, I will be teaching you to identify and harvest the plants you will be using in the field and you will be learning how to make substitutions when necessary. This is no longer a game and I suggest you learn your lessons well because your lives may very well depend upon what you are able to learn in this class."

He paused again, but only briefly this time. "Since some of the potions you will be learning this year take several weeks, if not months, to brew I thought we would begin with those and let you work on them independently - and I do mean independently - while you are practicing and preparing many of the less complicated potions."

Glaring menacingly at the four Gryffindors he said, "Let us begin with the Polyjuice Potion, shall we? Tell me, Mister Potter," he spat, "what do you know of this potion, its uses and its preparation?"

Harry gulped as he tried to remember the potion they had brewed in Moaning Myrtle's bathroom in their second year. Then, as he was about to open his mouth, he felt a calm wash over him as he remembered everything Salizar Slytherin had taught him about the Polyjuice Potion. For the next fifteen minutes he delivered an impromptu lecture on the origins and history of the potion as well as its ingredients and their properties. He described the brewing process and even mentioned several possible substitutions and their effects. When he was finished almost everyone in the class was looking at him as though he had grown a second head.

"Very good," Professor Snape seethed resentfully when Harry had finished with his presentation. "Tell me, Miss Granger, how long does it last and what kinds of transformations should it be used for?" Snape sneered.

To his amazement, which only served to increase Harry's respect for her, Hermione let Snapes obvious reference to her mishap with Millicent Bulstrode's cat slide. "The Polyjuice Potion is to be used for human transformations only and, when properly brewed, each dose should last one hour."

"Anything else to add, Mister Weasley" Snape snarled.

Ron smiled mischievously and then launched into a lecture, similar to Harry's except that he focused primarily upon the transformation process and the various ways of knowing when it was beginning to wear off. Needless to say, Professor Snape was furious. Two of his students had just lectured him on aspects of the Polyjuice Potion that only Master Potions Masters should have access to. Fuming, he turned back to the rest of the class and hissed, "Copies of this potion's instructions have been placed on reserve for you in the library. Madam Pince is expecting you so I suggest you pick them up after class today and begin working on them immediately. You will be testing your Polyjuice Potions on Halloween."

For the next hour and a half Professor Snape lectured them on the intricacies of the Polyjuice Potion, its preparation and the things that could go wrong if any mistakes were made, essentially

repeating everything Harry and Ron had already said. He described the history and development of the potion and its proper, ethical uses. He also mentioned some of its more illegitimate uses. Before releasing the class he said, "We will begin work on other potions and projects on Wednesday. I want three feet on the Polyjuice Potion, its preparation and use by next Friday."

The four Gryffindors held back, as the other students left the room, and hovered uneasily around Professor Snape's desk awaiting his acknowledgement. After several tense minutes, when they hadn't left, Snape looked up and glared at them as if hoping his gaze would frighten them away. "Well," he growled when they refused to leave, "What do you want?"

Hermione, looking nervously about, stepped forward. "Er . . ." she began, "is there any possibility I could get a pass from you so I could check some books out of the Restricted Section in the library?"

Snape scowled but wrote a pass for her and thrust it into her hand then turned to Ron and said, "Mister Weasley?"

"Er . . . Nothing," Ron said as he stumbled back from the professor's desk.

Stammering slightly, Neville stepped forward and said, "I . . . I want to thank you, sir."

Harry, Ron and Hermione looked at their friend with surprised expressions on their faces as Professor Snape raised an inquisitive eyebrow and curled his lip. "For?" the snarling Potions Master asked.

"For helping me see the connection between plants and potions," Neville said confidently.

Snape glared at Neville for a few seconds and then grudgingly said, "You're welcome."

As Neville left Harry looked at Ron and Hermione, nodding his head toward the door, silently telling them to leave because what he was about to say was between himself and Professor Snape and he didn't want them to hear it.

When they were alone Harry walked over, closed the door and returned to stand in front of the Potions Master's desk. Snape looked up and glared into Harry's eyes for several seconds. Harry could feel Snape striving to gain access his mind but calmly held him off. Finally, after realizing that Harry no longer feared him and that Harry could easly block any intrusion into his mind, Professor Snape quickly lowered his eyes. "What do you want, Potter?" he asked sharply.

"I wanted to say I'm sorry," Harry said softly. "I know how cruel some children can be and I know how painful those experiences can be and the devastating effects some of our youthful experiences can have on our lives. But, sir, if you must hate me, all I can do is ask that you hate me for myself and not for the sins of my father."

Snape slowly raised his head and looked up at Harry. When their eyes met again Harry reached out and easily broke through Snape's defenses but stopped himself from going any further. Snape seemed to realize that Harry was at least honorable enough to respect his privacy and did not look away. "I don't know what happened to you while you were dead, Potter," he grudgingly mumbled, "but I thank you."

"Let's just say that I understand things a little more clearly now," Harry said. Then, as he broke eye contact and headed for the door, stopped and said, "And you are welcome, sir."

Chapter 16. Six New Members

At dinner that evening Harry and Ginny once again sat across from Ron and Hermione. "Er . . . Ginny," Harry asked hesitantly, "how does this plate thing work again?"

"All you have to do is tap the center of your plate with the tip of you wand and say, 'This is Harry Potter's plate,' and either Dobby or Winky will take your order," she explained gently.

Harry looked into her eyes and smiled a thank you then glanced over at Ron who shrugged his shoulders. Hermione was watching him expectantly so Harry took out his wand and hesitantly tapped the center of his plate and, somewhat uncomfortably, said, "This is Harry Potter's plate."

Moments later a reflection of Dobby's face appeared in his plate. "Dobby is pleased to see you, Harry. How was your day?" Dobby squeaked.

Harry smiled down at his friend and said, "It was actually pretty enjoyable, Dobby. Thank you. How has your day been going?"

Dobby smiled back and then looked quickly to his side. "Dobby is having a wonderful day, Harry! Winky and Dobby has been helping the other house elves and making sure Harry and Ginny's things are in order. Dobby and Winky is hoping you like what we did to the last two chambers of Harry's trunk."

Dobby was suddenly pushed out of the way as Winky's face appeared as a reflection in his plate. "With Harry's permission," the tiny house elf squeaked, "Winky would like to prepare Harry's dinner."

Harry couldn't help himself as a broad grin spread across his face. "Hello, Winky," he said. "How are you doing?"

Winky smiled up at Harry then briefly scowled off to the side before looking back and smiling pleasantly. "Winky is doing fine, Harry," she said. "Dobby is being a bad house elf but Winky is doing fine. What would Harry like for dinner?"

"Er, . . . like I told Dobby at lunch today, I really don't know what I want to eat yet. You two already know more about this diet than I do so why don't you surprise me." Winky smiled at this and was about to step away to begin preparing Harry's dinner when he stopped her. "Er, Winky," he said, "Dobby and I are having a little meeting about this diet tomorrow afternoon. Would you like to join us?"

Winky smiled broadly and Harry could swear he saw tears of joy beginning to form in her eyes. "Oh, yes, Harry!" Winky exclaimed. "Winky would like to join you very much!"

Harry smiled down at the second house elf he hoped to call friend and said, "Good. That's settled then. You can fix whatever you think I might like for dinner and I will see both of you in the seventh chamber of my trunk tomorrow afternoon."

Winky nodded happily, her ears flapping wildly, told Harry that his dinner would be ready in a few minutes and disappeared.

Half an hour later, as he placed a bowl of vegetables inside an empty soup bowl, he noticed that Ron and Hermione seemed to be getting along quite well. True, he thought, they might just be honoring their truce. But somehow this seemed different. There wasn't the usual tension in the air that seemed to follow them around everywhere they went. Something was different. He couldn't put his finger on it but somehow something seemed different.

After dinner, as they were walking up towards the Gryffindor Common Room, Ginny stopped. "Oh!" she gasped. "We've got a meeting with Professor Dumbledore tonight!"

The others stopped and looked at her then, as realization dawned, they all turned and began running through the castle, towards the headmaster's office.

"There's no reason to run," Remus chuckled as they skidded to a halt in front of the gargoyle entrance to the Headmaster's Office. "The meeting doesn't start for another five minutes."

The four young Gryffindors looked sheepishly at their friend and professor whose amber eyes twinkled with an impish mirth that more accurately reflected his age than his prematurely greying hair and haggard look. Chuckling to himself, Remus muttered the password and the stone gargoyle sprung aside revealing the slowly rising spiral staircase behind. The five friends mounted the stairs and let them carry them to the landing just outside the Headmaster's office. "Now, there's one thing you must understand," Remus said, reaching for the doorknob, "In these meetings everyone is on a first name basis. It may be uncomfortable at first but you'll get used to it."

Opening the door, Remus led the way into the entry to the Headmaster's office. He walked over to a large, contoured bookcase and ran his finger up the spine of the third book in from the right, on the fourth shelf up of the center section. "This one isn't on the map," he murmured, stepping back as the center section of shelves slid back and up into the wall revealing a large, circular room lined with bookshelves filled with books. A large fireplace interrupted the continuity of shelving on the far wall. Two tall wing-backed chairs stood before the crackling fire and it looked to Harry as though both were occupied.

A large, circular, wooden table that looked to be made of oak stood in the center of the room and several people were seated around it in various postures of repose. As they entered the library, the bookcase slid shut behind them and the room brightened considerably. Glancing around quickly Harry noticed that the sorting hat stood on a small table to his right and a tall, framed object mounted on a wooden base stood near one of the bookcases, shrouded in secrecy, hidden beneath a loosely draped brown dust cove. The room itself was warm and inviting but Harry felt a certain, indescribable, emotional uneasiness emanating from the people seated within.

As they stepped forward, approaching the five vacant seats on the near side of the table the Headmaster stood up from one of the wing-backed chairs and approached the single vacant seat on the far side. "I believe we all know one another," he said calmly, smiling across at the new arrivals, his blue eyes twinkling as he gazed intently over his half-moon glasses, "so I do not think any introductions are necessary. However," he said taking his seat, "one of the ground rules of these meetings and this room is that we are to address one another by first names only. The hoped for goal of this requirement is that this will help to mold us all into a strong, cohesive, working unit." Harry looked around at the other participants and saw that besides himself, Ron, Hermione, Ginny and Remus Tonks, Alastor Moody, Kingsley Shacklebolt, Professor Snape, Professor McGonagal, Neville Longbottom and Luna Lovegood were also in attendance. "I am no exception to this rule,"

the Headmaster continued, looking into each of the students' eyes in turn. "From now on, while we are either in these meetings or in this room, you will call me 'Albus.'" Tonks cleared her throat and Dumbledore grinned. "The only possible exception to this rule might be Nymphadora who prefers to go by her last name, 'Tonks.'"

the Headmaster touched the tips of his fingers together and gazed contemplatively over the steeple they formed at the new arrivals for several seconds before opening the meeting. Then, with a slight nod of his head, his flowing white hair and beard reflecting a pale blue in the room's light, he said, "Welcome to the Order of The Phoenix."

Ginny and Hermione gasped with delight, Ron sighed with relief, letting out a breath he had apparently been holding, and Harry, unsure of what to think, sat quietly studying the Headmaster's face while Neville looked on in confusion and Luna sat calmly gazing around the room.

"You have been chosen to join the Order, as its youngest members, because this is as much your war as it is ours. You have been chosen, Ron, because of your planning and strategic abilities as well as your bravery, courage and loyalty to your friends and your dedication to our cause. You have been chosen, Hermione, because of your willingness to stand up and fight for what is right, for your organizational abilities, your courage, bravery, loyalty, dedication, drive and determination. You have been given unrestricted access to the whole of Hogwarts main library and I am giving you access to my personal library - this library - so that you can conduct your research with minimal restriction. I will suggest, however, that you study muggle as well as wizarding texts because we want to be able - as you, Harry and Remus have done - to exploit Voldamort's weaknesses.

"You have been chosen, Neville, for your bravery, courage, dedication to the cause of defeating Tom Riddle and his followers, your loyalty to your friends and, believe it or not, for your potions abilities." Neville's mouth fell open and his eyes threatened to bulge from their sockets as he looked around the table. When his eyes came to rest briefly on Professor Snape the Potions Master smiled grimly and nodded his head. "Luna," the Headmaster said hoping to gain her attention and succeeding, "you have been chosen for your courage, loyalty, intellect and your bedside manner. You will all be learning basic first aide and a few basic healing charms but you, Luna, will be spending a great deal of time with Madam Pomfrey, learning many of the more advanced healing charms you will need in emergency situations. I am basing this decision on your natural aptitude towards the healing arts and sciences. I have made arrangements with our School Nurse for you to do your homework in the hospital wing if you wish and to spend as much of your leisure time as you desire studying, with her as your mentor and guide."

Luna looked up as a broad smile spread across her face. After what she had told him about how her 'friends' hid all of her stuff from her Harry was glad that Dumbledore was affording her this opportunity.

"You have been chosen, Ginevra, "the Headmaster said, turning to Ginny, "for your purity of heart, your dedication to your friends and to the cause, your substantial magical abilities and your compassion for beings most consider to be less … valuable than humans. And you, Harry," he said turning at last to face Harry, "have been chosen for many reason, not the least of which are your leadership abilities. As you know, the final battle, when it comes, will be a duel between yourself and Tom Riddle." Several people gasped at this news and looked quickly from the headmaster to Harry and back to Dumbledore for confirmation but Harry just held the headmaster's gaze, seeing but not seeing, thinking and remembering, calculating and figuring, for several seconds before

quietly nodding his head. "We need you, Harry. The rest of us are little more than soldiers and generals in this army but we can only do so much. You are our Commander-in-chief."

Harry looked gravely into Dumbledore's eyes as the final pieces of the puzzle in his head fell into place and once again nodded, this time with determination and resolve. "I accept," he said.

The Headmaster smiled as the sparkle returned to his eyes. "However," Harry continued, "you built the Order and you are its rightful leader. I would like you to stay on as its commander at least until this war is over; and even then I would like you to stay on as its honorary chair."

Several people seated around the table cast startled glances at Harry as if questioning his authority and shocked at his impudence in telling the Headmaster what to do. The Headmaster, however, just nodded his head in return. "I, too, accept."

The others seemed to be in shock and could not understand why the most powerful wizard in the world would take orders from a sixteen-year-old boy.

An uneasy silence hung in the air for several seconds until Dumbledor cleared his throat and said, almost airily, "Well, now that that has been taken care of I think we should get down to the business at hand."

There was an almost audible sigh of relief as the tension in the room dissipated by several degrees. "Harry," Professor Dumbledore began again, "I need you to tell me, tell all of us, what you experienced during your Maturo Auctus."

Harry relaxed into his chair and closed his eyes as he recalled the aftermath of the battle on Privet Drive. Over the course of the next hour he told those present about meeting Sirius, his parents, Godric Gryffindor, Merlin, Helga Hulffelpuff, Rowena Ravenclaw, Salizar Slytherin and all of his many other teachers and guides and about all of the lessons he had learned. He carefully avoided talking about his children and the time he had spent with his family because he wanted to keep some things to himself. When he was finished he opened his eyes and looked across the table at a broadly smiling Albus Dumbledore. He then turned to Professor Snape and said, "Severus, I have a message for you from my father and Sirius. They told me to tell you that they are sorry. They didn't know where you were coming from as a child and ask that you please try to forgive them for their ignorance. I know this may sound somewhat trite given what they put you through here at Hogwarts but they would like you to please try to understand that they were just doing what they thought had to be done in defense of those less fortunate than themselves. They also asked me to tell you that they are trying to mend their ways."

Snape stared at Harry for several seconds, his face and eyes expressionless, as he seemed to be struggling with an internal conflict. Finally, as the light returned to his eyes, he seemed to come to a conclusion and muttered, "Apology accepted, . . . Harry."

"Thank you," Harry said.

"You're welcome."

A moment later Albus pointed his wand at the center of the table and said, "Finite Incantatum." As the sparks flew from his wand and struck the surface of the table at its center a shielding charm was removed and the sword Harry had pulled from the sorting hat a little more than three years

previous appeared, lying sedately on a red and gold velvet textile. The body of the cloth was a deep, royal, scarlet-red with a golden lion, the symbol of Gryffindor, emblazoned within. The edges were fringed with gold with golden tassels at the corners.

"This is yours, Harry," Dumbledore said. "You are, after all, the Heir of Gryffindor."

"I don't think so, Albus," Harry said softly. "I haven't done anything to deserve it yet."

Dumbledore chuckled to himself. "Be that as it may, Harry, it is a part of your inheritance."

Harry looked up at the aging headmaster with a glimmer of fierce determination in his eyes. "I will accept it on your word, Albus. But I will not claim it until after I have defeated Voldamort. Until then I suggest we leave it here and look upon it as a symbol of what we are fighting for."

Dumbledore nodded. "Well said, Harry." Then, turning his attention to the others, said, "I believe the time has come for us to revisit one of my least favorite subjects.

"You all know how I feel about the subject of Divination." Hermione and Professor McGonagall both sniffed disdainfully. "While it is one of the most widely practiced . . . arts it is also one of the least understood and perhaps, by sad consequence, one of the most widely abused. However, as experience has shown, even some of the fruitiest of these flies can sometimes get lucky. Even our dear Sybil has been right twice." He paused. And as he did so Hermione raised her hand. "Yes, Hermione?" he said, smiling at her politeness.

"If you think so little if Divination, Pro. . . er . . . Albus, why are you letting Ron, Harry and Neville take Divination again this year?"

"I believe Firenze will be teaching these three something a bit more useful than simple ... divination this year," Albus said calmly. "Besides, they are free to choose their classes. I am no dictator and I will not tell anyone either what or how to think. "Anyway," he continued, "back to my story.

"One of my duties as headmaster is to keep a daily journal of the events, both major and minor, that take place both in and around Hogwarts. This tradition was started by the first headmaster. As something of a bookworm," he said as he winked and a smiled at Hermione, "I have spent many long hours reading and studying these manuscripts, searching for patterns and possible answers to a variety of questions. It would seem that shortly after Salizar Slytherin's departure a reputable seeres by the name of Ezmirelda Tanglefoot was visiting the school and while here had a vision. The headmaster at the time, Godric Gryffindor, felt it significant enough to summarize it in his journal. The prophesy went something like this: 'There shall be relative peace for a millennia. Then the two titans shall clash again and the outcome of this battle shall decide the fate of the wizarding world.'"

The room fell silent as its occupants strove to digest this information. Harry knew, and he knew Professor Dumbledore knew, what it meant but he didn't want to be the one to break the silence so after briefly making eye contact with the man seated directly across from him he let his eyes wander and studied the faces of the other people seated around the table. At one point he thought he saw the flicker of a shadow moving in one of the wing-backed chairs in front of the fireplace but when he looked again it was gone so he ignored it.

After almost a minute Severus cleared his throat, breaking the silence. "I don't see what relevance a

thousand year old prophesy has in our current situation," the Potions Master said.

"You don't?" Professor Dumbledore asked. "My dear Severus, it has everything to do with our current situation. We all know that Tom Riddle is the Heir of Slytherin. And with what Harry has just told us we now know that he is the Heir of Gryffindor. This school has, indeed, had almost a thousand years of relative peace and now it would seem that the stage has been set for the second clash of the titans and the fate of the wizarding world, if not the entire world as we know it, rests in our hands and how we ally ourselves with these two combatants."

He let this sink in for a few moments before continuing. "I trust," he said, looking around at the people seated around the table, "that we are all agreed that it is better to be afforded an opportunity to learn and grow based upon our desires than to have those opportunities taken away simply because we are unable to live up to someone else's standards of excellence."

There was a general murmur of assent around the table. "Very well then," Dumbledore said, moving on to the next order of business. "Harry, Professor Flitwick tells me that you put on an impressive demonstration of your new charm this morning. Is this true?"

Harry felt a blush coming on as he bowed his head and stared down at the table in front of him. "I don't know how impressive it was, Albus, but, yes, I did give a demonstration of its power this morning."

"Impressive, nothing!" Ron blurted out. "It was bloody brilliant! You should have seen it, sir . . . er . . . Albus. He stood in the center of the room and had eight of us hurl curses at him. None of them were serious of course because he had told us that we would be on the receiving end of them. But all the same, every one of our curses was rebounded back at the person who cast it."

Hermione and Neville both nodded vigorously and the others, save Remus who simply nodded his head knowingly, looked over at Harry with expressions communicating a mixture of curiosity and admiration on their faces. "That must be some charm," Moody growled. "I'd like to learn that one some time."

"Yeah," Tonks agreed. "When can you start teaching us, Harry?"

Albus chuckled to himself. "Yes, yes. Filius seems to think the documentation should be completed by the end of this week. Do you think you could start teaching us to use it by … oh … next Tuesday?"

Harry's head shot up. "Next Tuesday?" he asked, incredulously. Then, as he thought about it, decided that this week's D.A. meeting would be dedicated to reviewing the spells they had learned last year and that the second would be dedicated to teaching the charm to his friends and new family - people he was comfortable with - in familiar surroundings "Alright," he said after finalizing these plans in his head. "I'll start teaching it next Tuesday evening in D.A. If at all possible, I would like everyone from last year's group as well as all of the Weasleys to attend that session." Then, glancing around at his fellow Defence Against the Dark Arts instructors and the other members of the Order of the Phoenix, added, "Of course you are all welcome to attend as well, if you want to that is."

Albus smiled and nodded his head in agreement. "I think you can count on all of us attending your first class, Harry.

"Minerva tells me you have begun to develop some rather extraordinary abilities, Harry. With your permission I would like to help you fine-tune those abilities. It would seem that you are developing at a much faster pace than I had anticipated and I do not wish to let this opportunity pass us by."

Harry glanced over at Professor McGonagall for confirmation then, noting her slight nod, looked into Albus' eyes and, finding a form of comforting reassurance he new he could trust, said, "Alright."

"And with what you have told us of Your Maturo Auctus I would like to begin helping you harness your new abilities as soon as possible. That is why you have that special class with me on Thursday evenings. You and I both know our roles in the present situation and I would like your permission to begin fulfilling the requirements of my second major task."

Everyone in the room except for Harry and Ginny - who had been present when Harry and Albus had been discussing it the night before - looked curiously at the aging headmaster but Harry just smiled and nodded his head. "Alright, Albus. I will be here and ready to learn Thursday evening."

The Headmaster then pushed himself back from the table and stood up. "I believe," he said, walking calmly over to the sorting hat, "That the time has come for you to try this hat on yet again, Harry. Oh, don't worry, you are not going to be resorted; but if the journals are to be believed then I have a very strong suspicion that it may have something for you."

The headmaster lifted the hat from its pedestal and carried it around the table. When he was standing behind Harry he said, "Are you ready?"

"Yes,"

As the sorting hat was lowered over Harry's head it came to rest on his ears and sank low over his forehead. It was still a bit large but it was a better fit than it had been six years previous. As he felt Dumbledore release his grip on the hat the hat's thin, gravely voice sounded in his head. "Hello, Potter," it said.

"Hello," Harry thought back.

"Still here I see," the hat mused. "But wait, there's more. Ah, yes, much more. You have changed and yet you are still the same."

Harry waited.

"Of course you are the heir, young Potter. But are you ready?"

"I don't know," Harry thought. "I guess we'll find out."

Almost as if on cue Harry felt a light thunk as something fell from inside the hat and landed on his head. "Use it well, young Potter, and we shall indeed see if you are ready," the hat said before falling silent.

Lifting the sorting hat carefully off of his head Harry, placed it on the table in front of him and reached up, placing both of his hands on the top of his head, to retrieve whatever it was that the hat had dropped. He felt something round nested in his unruly hair. Grasping it firmly between the thumb and forefinger of his right hand he brought it down to look at it. It was a simple gold ring. As

he inspected it, holding it at different angles in the room's light, he noticed some writing on its inner surface. Upon closer inspection he was able to read "Godric Gryffindor" followed by "ab sentio quantum indolentia."

Harry looked curiously over at the Headmaster. "Well, go ahead, Harry," Dumbledore said encouragingly, "put it on."

Harry looked back down at the ring he was holding and stared at it for several seconds before cautiously slipping it on the ring finger of his left hand. As he slipped the ring on his finger he felt a sudden surge of energy as his entire body began to tingle and grow warm. Looking around he noticed that everyone else at the table was looking at him with funny expressions of hesitation in their faces; and as he looked back down at his hands he noticed a soft aura of white light. He knew that it was emanating from somewhere deep within his soul but that it was also externalizing itself through the pores of his skin. When he looked at the ring again he noticed that it was fitting itself to his finger. And as he watched, it disappeared into his skin. Looking up again he looked questioningly into Albus' eyes and said, "What just happened?"

"Apparently," Albus began with a satisfied smile on his face, "when Godric Gryffindor was very old and moving into his final days he transferred all of his magical power and ability into that ring and placed it in the sorting hat. The only person who would be able to retrieve the ring would be his one true heir and even then he would only be able to retrieve it when he was ready. He did this because he feared for the future of his school, Hogwarts - a school he had dedicated his life to building. He did not want Salizar Slytherin's heir coming back and destroying his dream, a place of learning for all members of the magical community. This additional surge of power should prove both useful and beneficial to you as you begin fulfilling your roles in the magical community and accomplish those tasks set before you.

"And now," Albus said, moving on to the next order of business, "I believe the time has come for you to take another look into the Mirror of Erised, Harry. Your initial desire has, if I am not mistaken, been at least temporarily satisfied by your Maturo Auctus. And so the time has come for you to take another look into the deepest and most meaningful desires of your heart."

The Headmaster walked over to the sheet-draped structure and, flicking his wand, caused the sheet to fall off and tumble to the floor. Harry hesitantly stood up and walked over to stand in front of the mirror as he had in his first year. When he looked into the mirror this time, however, he saw himself standing on the front steps of Hogwarts, with Ginny at his side and two small children - James and Lily - at their feet, welcoming the students back from a summer's holiday. Something about the quality of the image told him that Voldemort had fallen and that all of his Death Eaters defeated.

"Well, Harry?" Remus asked, "what did you see?"

"I . . . I saw Hogwarts," Harry edited, "after the fall of Voldemort and the defeat of the Death Eaters."

"Ah," Albus said, knowingly, "You have truly made the transition, Harry. And you are the true Heir of Gryffindor for this, in a manner of speaking, was Godric's heart's desire as well. One of the last entries in his journal was his wish that Salizar Slytherin's threats of retaliation - for there were many - should be defeated and that Hogwarts should continue in its service to the magical community.

"Now," Albus said, moving on to the next order of business, "if I remember correctly, Hermione, you used your relationship with Miss Skeeter to your advantage last year and successfully distributed Harry's story to the wizarding world through Luna's father's paper. I would like this relationship to continue. However, now that the Ministry of Magic has recognized Voldemort's return, the Order has chosen to expand upon your idea and has engaged the services of a media consultant to handle any and/or all press releases made by the Order. I want the four of you, Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ginevra, to understand that he has come to us with a history. He is young and he is still learning but he has come to us because he truly and honestly wants to help."

Harry wasn't really paying all that much attention when it happened but suddenly, as the occupant of the second wing-backed chair stood up, he could feel the tension in Ginny's body mount and heard her begin to growl fiercely as Ron grabbed the edge of the table, the knuckles of both hands going white as his entire body began to shake with rage, and snarled, "Git!"

Harry looked up and recognized the familiar horn-rimmed glasses and curly red hair of Percy Weasley. The young man's face and expression reminded him a of the haunted look on Sirius' face at their first meeting in the Shrieking Shack in his third year.

Harry could tell that Percy was sorry for his behavior the previous year and that it haunted him to know that he had been wrong. And yet he could understand the reactions of the people on either side of him at seeing their brother whom they obviously considered to be a traitor to family loyalty. Not knowing what to do or how to react, Harry smiled briefly, tilted his head slightly to one side and softly acknowledged Percy's presence. "Hello, Percy," he said softly.

Obviously shaking from the fear of retribution by his youngest brother and sister and from not knowing how their friends would react, Percy hesitantly approached the table and stood quavering between Professors Dumbledore and McGonagall. "I'm really sorry," he whispered, almost inaudibly. "I don't know what else to say, Ron, Ginny. I screwed up. All I can do now is hope and pray that you will be able to find some way to forgive me."

"FORGIVE YOU?" Ron exploded out of his chair. "YOU TRAITOR! HOW CAN WE FORGIVE YOU AFTER WHAT YOU DID TO MUM AND DAD? IT'S BAD ENOUGH THAT YOU DIDN'T BELIEVE US AND TURNED YOUR BACK ON THE FAMILY. BUT THEN YOU HAD THE NERVE TO RETURN MUM'S CHRISTMAS PREASENT UNOPENED AND THEN YOU SLAMED THE DOOR IN HER FACE WHEN SHE TRIED TO TALK TO YOU. HOW DARE YOU COME HERE AND ASK FOR FORGIVENESS…"

Harry stood up and put his hand on his friend's shoulder. "Ron, please," he said softly.

Ron turned fiercely, brushing Harry's hand off of his shoulder and glared into Harry's eyes. "WHAT?" he screamed.

"Sit Down!" Harry said in a commanding voice that, while not a shout, did fill the room and echoed off its walls.

The blood drained from Ron's face as he seemed to realize that Harry was not going to take no for an answer. He closed his mouth and shakily resumed his seat all the while glaring at Percy. "He should apologize to you more than anyone else," Ron growled under his breath. "He wasn't there. He has no idea what you have been going through. And then he chose to believe Fudge because he values his precious job more than family or friends."

Ginny was still growling so Harry reached over and put a comforting hand on her shoulder. She looked up at him as he looked down into her eyes and gave her a reassuring smile. "I realize how bad this looks, Ron, Ginny. But as Albus said, he is still young and he his still learning. Under the circumstances, granted he was working with partial and incomplete information, Percy did what he thought was right. He did what he thought he had to do to get by. It may not have been nice and it may have hurt a lot of people, which I don't doubt. But he has recognized the error of his ways and has come here begging your forgiveness. I know it won't be easy - in fact, it may be one of the most difficult decisions you will ever make - but I don't want you to make the same mistake Severus made," at this Harry smiled apologetically at Snape, "and let someone else's actions ruin your life. It is your life, Ron, Ginny. I want you to think about it long and hard before you condemn both yourselves and Percy to a life of misery."

Harry sat down and Professor Snape, apparently stunned by the depth of Harry's compassion and understanding, spoke up. Strangely, his voice was neither as harsh nor as cold as usual. "He's right you know. It's your choice. You can choose to either forgive your brother for his mistakes or hold onto your bitterness and let it eat away at you for the rest of your lives. My only wish, if I could go back and change anything in my life, is that I had chosen to forgive Black and Potter . . . and a few others. Maybe then my life would have been different and . . ." he trailed off.

A stunned, almost deafening silence filled the room for several seconds as everyone felt the impact of the Potions Master's words. Ron and Ginny looked at each other with their mouths hanging slightly open and Harry hoped that the professor's words had had the desired affect. As Harry looked across at Severus he caught his eye and mouthed, "Thank you." Severus smiled ever so slightly and curtly nodded his head.

"Er. . ." Albus hesitated, at a temporary loss for words, "Yes. Well said, Severus." He paused briefly to let the tension in the room dissipate enough so that he could continue. When it had he said, "I believe there is just one more order of business today and that is the matter of your timetables. The six of you have an additional class on your timetables called 'Military Tactics and Strategies' which meets every Friday evening after dinner." The six students nodded. "That class will meet in this room.

"Now, are there any questions?" he asked lightly

Hermione raised her hand. "Yes, Hermione?"

"If you don't mind me asking, Albus, how did you convince Mrs. Weasley to let us join the Order?"

"Albus can be very persuasive when he needs to be," Moody chuckled. Tonks and Kingsley chuckled as well but Professor McGonagall pressed her lips tightly together and shot icy glares at the three aurors, quickly silencing their mirth.

"Let's just say Molly can be a very stubborn woman," Albus said. This time Ron and Ginny snorted laughs which earned them glares from Percy. "I had to do a lot of explaining but in the end she understood and consented."

Several minutes later, as the six students were walking through the halls - on their way to the Ravenclaw Common Room, where they would drop Luna off before heading back to the Gryffindor Tower - deep in thought. Hermione cleared her throat. "Erm, . . . Harry?"

Harry's head snapped up as the sound of Hermione's voice yanked him out of his musings. "Yes?" he said, almost dropping his wand in the process.

"Erm . . . there's something Ron and I have been meaning to tell you."

Harry stopped in mid stride and turned to look into his friend's eyes. He could tell she was nervous about something but he couldn't tell what. He waited for her to summon the courage to face her fears but when she didn't seem to be able to he reached out and took hold of one of her hands. "It's alright," he said. "I'm not going to bite you."

Hermione glanced nervously over at Ron who took a step forward. "Well you see, Harry. It's like this. . ." he began.

"We've gotten to know each pother pretty well over the years and Ron and I are going together!" The words spilled out of Hermione's mouth in a rush and when she realized what she had said she clapped her hands over her mouth, her whole head blushing crimson in the process.

"We just thought you should know," Ron added, the tips of his ears burning bright red.

At first Harry's mouth fell open in shock and surprise. Then, as he realized how nervous his friends were, a genuine smile spread across his face and he laughed out loud. "Well it's about time!" he laughed, pulling his friends into a group hug. "I've been wondering when you guys would stop fighting long enough to realize that you actually like each other."

"We all have," Neville and Luna agreed.

"How long has this been going on?" Harry asked.

"Oh, a couple of months," Ron said noncommittally.

"What sealed it, though," Hermione said, "was that Death Eater attack."

"Yeah," Ron said, his voice quavering slightly. "When we didn't know if you were going to live or die we finally realized how much we really needed each other."

"And how much we meant to each other," Hermione added.

Ron blushed again. "Yeah, that too."

Hermione scowled up at her boyfriend and then just smiled and shook her head.

"If it's been going on so long why didn't you tell me?" Ginny asked accusingly.

Ron flinched. "Well, we kind of wanted Harry to be the first to know," he said apologetically.

"We would have told you if Harry hadn't lived," Hermione added comfortingly, "but so long as there was a chance we wanted to wait. Can you forgive us?"

Ginny smiled up at Harry and, seeing the glow of happiness in his face, smiled and said, "Yes. I can forgive you."

"Good," Ron sighed with relief. "After what you did to Malfoy last year I didn't want to be your next

victim."

At this Ginny tilted her head back and laughed out loud, her merriment filling and echoing throughout all of the hallways and corridors in the castle.

Turning to Neville and Luna, Harry asked, "So what about you two? It would seem that the four of us are spoken for so what are the possibilities of you two getting together?"

Neville looked nervously over at Luna who seemed to be sizing him up. "Well," he said hesitantly, "it's kind of up to her. I mean I'd really kind of like to get to know you, Luna, but . . . I . . . um . . . I don't know if you would like to get to know me."

Luna smiled warmly at Neville and said, "I'd like that, Neville. I can tell you've changed a lot over the summer and I would like to get to know the new Neville Longbottom."

Neville smiled shyly back. "Somehow I get the feeling you have changed quite a bit too, Luna, and I would like to get to know the new you too."

Gently slipping her hand into one of Neville's Luna led him away towards the Ravenclaw Common Room. "He'll see you guys back in your common room!" Luna called over her shoulder as she led Neville away.

As the four remaining Gryffindors made their way back to the Gryffindor Common Room, Harry and Ginny and Ron and Hermione holding hands, Harry got the uncomfortable feeling that the occupants of the portraits were watching him with a renewed sense of awe and urgency. When they reached the portrait of the Fat Lady she glanced up from her reading and said, "Password" then, looking again, immediately dropped her book, got to her feet and curtsied. The four teenagers looked at each other and then back at the Fat Lady. "mi Lord," she said, bowing to Harry.

The others turned to stare at him. Harry looked at his friends with a blank expression on his face then shrugged his shoulders, remembering that he was the Heir of Gryffindor. "Comes with the territory I guess."

"Must be nice," Ron smirked.

Harry scowled at Ron then looked at the Fat Lady. "Madam," he said patiently, "I am going to ask you to help me with something."

"Anything, my liege," she said only too happy to serve.

"While I am the Heir of Gryffindor I am still little more than a student. I wonder if you could pass the word along to the others that until further notice I do not want any special treatment from anyone above and beyond what is absolutely necessary while I am attending classes."

"Yes, mi Lord," she said as her portrait door swung open.

Harry scowled again. "And that includes passwords," he said in frustration. "Yes, mi Lord," the Fat Lady blushed.

"And would you please stop calling me that!" Harry cried out in exasperation.

"Yes, sir," the Fat Lady said almost as if snapping to attention.

"Argh!" Harry cried as he stepped through the portrait hole, Ron, Hermione and Ginny snickering at his predicament.

"What's wrong, Harry?" Dean Thomas called over from across the room.

"Stupid portrait," Harry scowled darkly. "Remind me to have her replaced."

Ron, Ginny and Hermione burst out laughing. "I'll tell you what, Harry," Ron laughed, "I'll remind you the day you can beat me at a game of chess."

Still scowling, Harry looked over at his friend who was holding his chess set with a hopeful expression on his face. "Yeah, sure," Harry said letting the tension fall away. Then pulling out his wand, more out of habit than necessity, looked up the stairs to the boy's dormitory and said, "Accio, chess set."

"I think I'll get started on my Potions essay," Hermione said offhandedly as Ron rolled his eyes in disbelief.

"I keep trying to get her to relax and have a little fun but nothing seems to work."

"She's scared, Ron," Ginny said as she watched her best girlfriend disappear up into the girl's dormitory.

"What's she got to be afraid of?" Ron asked with an honestly innocent and confused expression on his face.

"Think, Ron. Think," Ginny scolded. "What is Hermione's heritage; and what is this whole thing with Voldemort all about?"

"Oh," Ron said, as the realization of his girlfriend's situation seemed to materialize within his mind. "I forgot. I guess I always took it for granted that no one would question her abilities."

"Her abilities, no," Ginny explained. "But there are those who would question her right to study magic because she is muggle-born. She is afraid for her life and for her parent's lives because there are those who - like Salizar Slytherin and Tom Riddle - don't think she should be allowed. She wants to fight but she knows that the only way she can fight is by learning as much as she can before facing her enemies. That's why she studies so much. She wants to feel like she is doing something and, if at all possible, she wants to find a way to protect her parents from this bigotry."

"Oh," Ron said again as he looked guiltily down at the chess set in his hands. Then, looking over at Harry, said, "I'm sorry, mate. I never realized how important this was to her. So if you don't mind I think I'll skiv off on this game until I get my homework done."

Harry nodded knowingly at Ron then smiled at Ginny. "Alright, then. We'll meet you down here in a few with our books, Ginny. Like I said, we'll help you if we can."

"Alright then," Ginny smiled and dashed up the stairs to her room.

Chapter 17. Centaurs and House Elves

As Harry, Ron and Neville walked into Firenze’s classroom after breakfast the next morning the centaur turned to watch their approach. "Good morning, Harry Potter," he said in the centaurs' manner of formal salutation. "I see you have survived yet another brush with death."

"Morning, Firenze," Harry said, ignoring the centaur’s reference to his recent encounter with the squad of Death Eaters.

"Now that we are all here you can go ahead and close the door, Ronald Weasley," Firenze said.

Ron looked quickly around. "But there are only three of us ." he said hesitantly

"Yes," Firenze said. "There are just the three of you in this class."

Stunned, Ron closed the door and walked through the magically created forest in the first-floor classroom and sat next to Harry on the spongy turf in the small clearing near what would have been the front of the room. "Professor Dumbledore has asked me to teach the three of you the kind of everyday divination that is used by wizards and muggles alike, as well as centaurs and every other intelligent creatur." Turning to look intently into Ron’s eyes he said, "Tell me, Ronald Weasley, how is it that you are able to win so many games of chess?"

Ron smirked and shrugged his shoulders. "I don’t know. I’m just good, I guess."

Harry and Neville snorted and Ron looked at them incredulously. "What?" he asked.

"There is more to it than that, Ronald Weasley," Firenze said patiently. "There is much more to it than that.

"How is it that you are able to predict your opponents' moves five moves in advance?"

Ron cast around several seconds for an answer before looking over at Harry and Neville who shrugged their shoulders with looks of confusion on their faces. "I don’t know," Ron finally confessed. "I don’t know how I do it."

Firenze took a step back and paced back and forth across the front of the clearing several times before stopping and turning to look into Harry’s eyes. "Alright," he said. "Let us take a different approach to solving this riddle. Harry Potter, how is it that you were able to craft that spell?"

Harry closed himself off from his surroundings for several seconds and thought back to the creation of the charm. He recalled all of the reading and research they had done and all of the experimenting they had done on parchment. "Erm ." he began hesitantly, "We studied and searched for the kinds of energy we were looking for and after we had found them we studied them to see what they might be capable of. After that we tried several theoretical combinations and arrangements until we felt certain that we had gotten it right."

"Precisely!" Firenze said. "You studied and you learned about the pieces of the puzzle you were trying to solve and then you worked with those pieces, trying several different combinations, until you solved the puzzle."

Harry looked over at Ron and grinned sheepishly.

"And now, Ronald Weasley," Firenze said, returning his gaze to Ron's face, "What are the pieces you are working with when playing a game of chess?"

Ron leaned back, resting on his elbows, and grinned. "Well," he said confidently, "there's the king, the queen, two bishops, two knights, two rooks and eight pawns."

"And ." Firenze gently prodded.

Ron looked up at the centaur, uncertain as to what he should have included in his list. "And," he added hesitantly, "my understanding of the game."

"And ." Firenze prodded again.

Ron though feverishly, trying to think through the last game of chess he had played and how he had won it. Then it hit him. "And my opponent's understanding of the game and my understanding of how my opponent thinks!"

"Precisely!" Firenze said smiling. "Your understanding of how your opponent thinks, Ronald Weasley, is your most valuable tool in predicting which moves they will make in response to your own. This is why Professor Dumbledore has asked me to encourage the three of you to study the psychology of your opponents. We will start with Wizarding Psychology and then move on into an intensive study of the various dark wizards who have existed through the ages. After that we will Study the behavior patterns and abilities of the wide variety of magical creatures that have historically been used by these wizards. Next term we will be studying the Dark Arts and the charms that have thus far been used to defend against them. It is hoped that by the end of the year, Ronald Weasley, Harry Potter and Neville Longbottom, that the three of you will have a thorough understanding of our opponents' capabilities and how they think so that you can predict their actions and play them to your victory."

Harry, Ron and Neville looked at each other as the light of understanding dawned upon them and simultaneously mouthed, "Oh."

"Wait a minute," Neville said as something occurred to him. "We don't teach the dark arts here, do we?"

"No, we do not, Neville Longbottom," Firenze admitted. "However, Professor Dumbledore has made arrangements for a former Durmstrang student to teach that portion of the class. It will not be important for you to learn to use all of the spells he will teach but it will be important for you to learn their structures and uses. This will give you a better understanding of what we are up against.

"I must stress, for all three of you, that none of what you are going to be learning in this class is to be taken lightly. We have the advantage in that the activities of many of this world's darkest wizards have been well documented and much can be learned from this documentation but you do need to pay attention in class and do your homework."

Harry set his jaw firmly and glancing over at his friends noticed that Ron, apparently remembering Ginny's scolding from the night before and Hermione's reaction upon hearing the news that they were going to study and learn everything they could to help her and to help her find a way to

protect her parents, had set his jaw as well and Neville's eyes were blazing as fiercely as they had during the battle in Diagon Alley. They looked at each other and nodded their heads in unison. "We'll do it," they said with determined looks in their eyes.

"Very good," Firenze said then added, "Know this, Harry Potter. The people will unite behind your banner and they will take orders from your generals - Ronald Weasley, Neville Longbottom and others - but some may be harder to unite than others. I know for a fact that the centaurs of the Forbidden Forest are not pleased with the events of the past year and will be difficult to convince. Therefore I can only suggest that while making contact with Bane and the others you set your humility aside and exercise all of your authority as the Heir of Gryffindor."

Harry studied Firenze's eyes for several seconds, reading the anxiety within the centaur's soul, before breaking eye contact and nodding his head. "I will," he said.

For the rest of the morning they went over the books they would be reading, most of which were in the Restricted Section in the library, and the kinds of things they should be looking for while reading and studying these books.

When Firenze let them out five minutes early Harry, Ron and Neville walked out of the magically enhanced classroom and headed for the Great Hall. "This could be interesting," Ron mumbled darkly.

"Yeah," Harry said softly in the same dark tone. "This could get really interesting."

"What did he mean when he told you to set your humility aside and exercise all of your authority when confronting Bane?" Neville asked as they approached the Great Hall for lunch.

Harry sighed. "You don't want to know, Neville. You really don't want to know. But you are welcome to come along when the time comes if you want to find out."

Ron and Neville looked over at Harry and studied their friend for several seconds before responding. "We'll be there, Harry. We're your friends and we'll be there for you no matter what."

"Thanks, guys," Harry said as they entered the Great Hall, "that means a lot."

After lunch, since Harry, Ron and Hermione didn't have any afternoon classes, Ron and Hermione headed off to the library while Harry went up to the sixth year boys' dormitory and opened the seventh chamber of his trunk. What he saw when he looked down made his mouth fall open and his eyes bulge in stunned disbelief. Dobby and Winky were standing in the center of a large sitting room - a room at least three times as large as the original chamber - that was immaculately decorated in the Gryffindor colors with a polished mahogany ladder leading down from one end of the opened trunk. Harry looked at the anxious faces of the two house elves and, sensing their nervousness, smiled and mounted the ladder to begin his descent into his private study.

As Harry descended the ladder he looked through the rungs and saw that the room extended back beyond the edge of the trunk at least another seven meters and ended in a large panoramic view of the Hogwarts grounds looking west from the top of the Astronomy Tower. The walls to either side were lined with swords, bows, quivers of arrows, lances, spears, suits of armor and a variety of period costumes, mounted on mannequins, from ages past as well as a number of other artifacts. When he reached the bottom of the ladder he slowly turned around and saw that the room was

enormous. More than enormous, it was huge! And it had been tastefully decorated and divided into five seperate regions, each dedicated to a different task. The main, central area was a large sitting room lined with a variety of couches and coffee tables. He recognized that much of the furniture was at least a hundred years old and some of it much, much older than that. He also noticed that one of the tables was a chess table with a full compliment of Wizard's Chess pieces standing at the ready. This central section was at least five meters wide by seven long.

The space behind the ladder - the one with the view of the grounds - was separated from the center section by a low wooden railing and the entry to this section was guarded by two matching suits of armor, each of which was holding a long, vicious looking spear. The center of this section was dominated by a large, circular conference table similar to the one in the Headmaster's Library with several chairs arrayed around it. Four more suits of armor stood in the corners of this section as though guarding the weapons on the walls. As Harry studied the view of the grounds he noticed that it had curtains and a windowsill and that natural light seemed to be pouring into the room from beyond. "Is that a window," he asked in utter amazement.

"Yes, Harry!" Dobby squeaked happily. "It is a Wizard's Window. It can be set to any view you want."

"Wow," Harry whispered. "I like what you've done to this place."

Turning to his left, towards the back of the trunk, Harry saw a large, fully furnished Wizard's Kitchen. It, too, was separated from the center section by a low set of wooden barriers. Instead of being guarded by twin sets of armor, however, it was effectively cut off from the rest of the trunk by a low, swinging gate. Another Wizard's Window, along the back wall of the kitchen, showed the view to the south from the top of the Astronomy Tower.

As Harry turned to face away from the ladder he saw a set of soft, chiffon curtains. "That is your sleeping chamber," Dobby said excitedly, in response to Harry's quizzical expression. "We is trying to make this as comfortable for Harry as possible. We know Harry may not be using it for a while but it will be ready when Harry decides to use it"

Brushing the curtains aside Harry walked into the sleeping chamber and discovered that it was a simple, yet elegantly decorated, bedroom. There was a four-poster queen size bed against the wall to his left with deep red velvet curtains tied back to the corner posts and a small dresser on either side at the head of the bed. Another large Wizard's Window dominated the far wall with an eastern view. Two large closets dominated the wall to his right with a door sized opening between. Stepping through the opening, closely followed by two very nervous house elves, Harry walked into a large bathroom. It wasn't as large or as fancy as the Prefect's Bath but it was more than he would ever need.

Turning to look down at the two expectant house elves Harry beamed at them and said, "This is brilliant! I love what you've done to the place!"

Dobby smiled brightly at the news that Harry liked what he was seeing but Winky let out a sigh of relief as though expecting Harry to be upset by their modifications but being thankful and relieved that he was not. "Come!" Dobby squeaked excitedly. "Harry must see what Dobby and Winky has done to the sixth chamber!"

Leading Harry and Winky out of the bathroom, through the bedroom and back out into the sitting room Dobby pushed open a low gait that separated the study area - an area roughly the same size

as the kitchen with a large oak desk dominating the center of the space and a number of filing cabinets, counters and bookshelves dominating the walls - from the rest of the room. Along the back wall, towards what would be the front of the trunk, Harry saw two cabinets filled with potions ingredients and enough space for at least four cauldrons to be going at once. This, he thought, would be an ideal place for Hermione, Ron, Neville and himself to brew their Polyjuice Potions. In the center of the back wall was a large, intricately carved, wooden door. Opening the door Dobby led Harry into his private library.

The sixth chamber was at least as large as the seventh and three of the walls were lined from floor to ceiling with books. There were even several rows of bookshelves extending from the central, open section towards the walls at either end. There had to be thousands of books! The far wall was dominated by another Wizard's Window, this time with a view to the north and in the center of the room, directly in front of him, were a series of couches and tables that formed an effective reading room. Harry's mouth fell open in wonder and awe as he looked around. When he finally found his voice he said, "Where did you find all of this stuff?"

Dobby smiled broadly and said, "Professor Dumbledore is giving Dobby and Winky permission to move certain items from the Potter Family Vault to your trunk, Harry. We is hoping you isn't minding?"

Harry looked around the library again, in awe of what he was seeing, and then looked back down at Dobby. "The Potter Family Vault?" he asked.

Dobby nodded hesitantly. "Yes, Harry. The books, weapons and suits of armor is all family heirlooms. And some of the furniture is heirlooms. You isn't minding is you?" the house elf asked nervously.

Harry could see the nervous expression on Dobby's face and the almost satisfied look on Winky's, as if telling Dobby that he should not have brought so much of Harry's inheritance out of the vault. Getting down on his knees in front of the two house elves Harry smiled and shook his head. "I didn't even know the Potter's had a family vault; but, no, Dobby, I'm not upset. In fact I think it's brilliant. But why did Professor Dumbledore tell you to move all of this out of my family's vault?"

Dobby smiled - relieved that he had not overstepped his bounds too much - then said, "Professor Dumbledore is saying that the goblins is not taking a side in the war yet, Harry. So he is telling Dobby and Winky to get all of Harry's heirlooms out of Gringotts Wizarding Bank just in case."

"Is this all of it then?" Harry asked curiously.

"Yes. Except for the gold and the portraits hanging in your house in London this is all of it," Dobby said.

"Well thank you," Harry said, smiling as he stood up. "Now let's go out into the sitting room so we can discuss this diet."

As they left the library, passed through the study area and entered the sitting room Harry couldn't help but notice that Winky was fidgeting nervously. As he sat down on one of the corner couches and Dobby hopped up onto one of the nearby chairs Winky stood fidgeting, apparently uncertain as to what she should do or how she should behave. She did, however, glare over at Dobby as he made himself comfortable. "What's wrong, Winky?" Harry finally asked.

Winky looked hesitantly up into Harry's eyes and said, "Winky is not knowing what to do, Harry!" she cried. "Winky wants to please you but Winky is not knowing what to do!"

Harry got down on his knees in front of the frightened house elf and, reaching out, lifted her chin so that she was looking into his eyes. "Winky," he asked gently. "How does Ginny treat you?"

Winky smiled wistfully for brief moment then said, "Ginny treats Winky as her equal."

"Good," Harry said. " Then I will treat you as my equal as well."

"Does that mean Winky can sit on the furniture?" Winky asked.

Harry nodded. "Yes, Winky. That means you can sit on the furniture. In fact, I would prefer it if you did because it makes me nervous to have people standing around waiting on me."

Winky smiled apologetically and immediately hopped up to sit next to Dobby. When they were all settled and comfortable Harry said, "Now, tell me about this diet?"

For the next two hours Harry and the two house elves went over the diet that had been prepared for him. When all was said and done, and after breaking up several minor scuffles between the two elves, it was decided that they would manage the menus, offering him a variety of choices at each meal, and would alternate preparing his breakfasts and lunches and his dinners. It had taken some serious negotiating to get the timetable worked out but in the end everyone left happy.

After the meeting Harry climbed out of the trunk, physically exhausted and emotionally drained from the experience, and closed the lid. "Whew!" he said as he ran his fingers through his hair and leaned against his trunk.

Just then Ron and Neville walked in, Ron carrying a stack of library books and Neville returning from NEWT level Herbology. "How'd it go, mate?" Ron asked cheerfully.

Harry looked tiredly up at his friend and said, "You know, I think I need a nap."

"Sorry, mate. No can do. We've got books to read."

Harry groaned. "Since when did you start liking to read?"

Ron grinned mischievously. "Oh, I don't know. Probably about the same tome you two started dueling Death Eaters in Diagon Alley."

Harry looked at Neville as an evil grin spread across his face. "Neville?" he asked. "Shall we?"

Neville set his book bag down on his desk and started to draw his wand. When Ron saw this he threw most of the books on his bed and, taking the one book he had already started reading, ran out of the room screaming, "Nooo! You guys stay away from me with those wands!"

Harry and Neville just laughed and Harry went over to look at the books Ron had checked out from the library while Neville started on his Herbology homework.

Ten minutes later Harry was sitting across from Ron in the Gryffindor Common Room reading The Philosophy of Magic and its Many Manifestations while Ron read The Art of War and Hermione studied Most Potent Potions. All was quiet and the three friends were contentedly studying for their

classes when, a few minutes later, Hermione broke the silence. "I don't know what's gotten into the two of you but whatever it is I am both pleased and frightened."

Harry and Ron both looked up from their reading. Ron spoke first, asking the question that had appeared in Harry's mind as well. "Why?"

"Well look at you," Hermione laughed nervously, "I've never seen either of you so interested in studying before and to be honest with you the looks of determination on your faces scare me. What's gotten into you?"

Harry looked up and with a wry smile said, "Divination."

"What?" Hermione asked, wrinkling her nose in confusion.

"Practical Divination," Ron said and proceeded to explain Firenze's approach to real-word divination to her in the same way Firenze had explained it to them that morning. When he was finished a light of understanding came on in her eyes and her face told both of them that she understood what they were doing far more effectively than any words ever could. "Oh!" she said happily. "Well I guess I'll leave you two to your reading then."

Harry smiled to himself and returned to his reading.

When Ginny came bouncing through the portrait hole several hours later Harry was in the middle of a chapter entitled "Thought is Energy" and Ron was rubbing his eyes in a valiant attempt at staying awake while Hermione was in the process of completing her third foot of notes on the Polyjuice Potion. Ginny flounced over to their table and dropped her book bag on the table with a resounding thud. She had a smile on her face as she looked around at her three best friends but when none of them looked up she plopped down in her chair and stuck her lower lip out in a pout. "Well!" she huffed, "I can certainly tell you three have had an enjoyable afternoon. Doesn't anyone want to know how my afternoon went?"

Harry marked his page then closed his book and set it aside. "I'm sorry, Gin," he said as he rubbed the tiredness out of his eyes. "Firenze gave Ron, Neville and me a lot of reading assignments and Hermione has been researching the Polyjuice Potion for her essay. I didn't mean to ignore you but I wanted to get to a good stopping point." Turning his chair to face her he looked into her eyes and smiled. "So, please, tell me, how was your afternoon?" he said as he reached out for her hands.

Ginny turned to Harry, took hold of his hands, smiled so brightly that Harry felt certain she could light an entire auditorium if she wanted to and proceeded to tell him about her afternoon classes. In no time they were laughing and joking as Ginny told Harry about some of her fellow students' antics and about the dragon dung accident in Herbology and Harry told Ginny about some of the things he, Ron and Hermione had done in those classed the year before. Ron scowled a few times, at some of the more embarrassing stories, but pretty soon both he and Hermione had joined in the conversation and were taking a much needed study break.

Chapter 18. Cheering Charms in D.A.

At 7:30 that evening Harry found himself on the seventh floor pacing back and forth in the corridor in front of the enormous tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy and his ill-fated ballet dancing troll experiment thinking about his D.A. classroom. On his third pass a door appeared in the wall opposite the tapestry. Clutching the piece of parchment Professor Dumbledore had give him at dinner - the class roster - he opened the door and walked in.

The room looked much as it had the previous year. The walls of the spacious room were still lined with wooden bookshelves filled with books of hexes, jinxes, curses and counter curses; large, silk cushions still littered the floor; the shelves at the far end of the room still held the sneakoscopes, a large, cracked foe-glass and other dark detectors; and resting on a small stand next to the door was the silver whistle he had used to get everyone's attention. He picked up the whistle as he entered the room and let the door close softly behind him. As he paced back and forth in front of the fireplace at the near end of the room, trying to remember everything they had covered last year, he glanced around at the torches and wondered if there was any way he could brighten the room up a bit to make it easier to see what was going on. Almost as if on cue the atmosphere within the room began to softly glow and gradually became lighter and brighter until he was satisfied with the level of its luminous intensity. Then it stopped at a uniform level of luminosity with the torches adding their medieval accents.

He continued to pace, thinking, for several more minutes when he looked up and noticed a teacher's desk standing against the wall near the door. He walked over to the desk and found a parchment with all of the spells they had practiced the year before neatly listed in order, in emerald green ink.

At that moment the door opened and his students entered the Room of Requirement for their first Defense Against the Dark Arts Lab of the year. There were going to be five fewer students this year as Fred and George and Lee and two others had left at the end of term last year. Well, to be honest, he reminded himself, Fred and George had left a little earlier than that. But all the same, he now had an even number of students which meant he could spend most of his time teaching and only stepping in to help when necessary.

When Luna walked in Harry noticed that she wasn't quite so dreamy as she had been the night before. He wondered if her experiences in the Department of Mysteries at the end of the previous term and her acceptance into the Order of the Phoenix had taken some of the innocence and fantasy out of her life. She still had that dreamy air about her but there was a more determined look in her eye that told him she had done a lot of growing up over the summer holidays.

When Neville entered he walked over and asked, "Do you want to give them a little demonstration, Harry?"

Harry shook his head. "No," he said. "Tonight we are going to review and see where everyone is."

Neville nodded and went to sit down with the rest of the class.

When Hermione, Ron and Ginny entered the room Hermione looked around and said, "I like what you've done to the place, Harry. It's so much easier to see what we're doing, now."

Harry smirked and blushed slightly. "Yeah, well, I want to be able to see what's going on."

When everyone was settled, Harry pulled out the roster and compared names with faces. When he was finished he looked up apologetically and said, "Sorry, guys, but Professor Dumbledore told me to take attendance. It's something I have to do to make sure everyone is here. He didn't tell me how I had to do it; he just told me I had to it.

"Since we already know each other I want you to pair up because tonight we are going to review what we did last year. I am going to be observing, correcting any mistakes I see and, hopefully, helping you take your abilities to new levels. I don't want anyone to get hurt so please be careful.

"Like I said, this week we are going to be reviewing everything we learned last year. Next week Fred and George and the others will be joining us as well as several members of the faculty and the rest of the Weasley family because next week I will be teaching you the rebounding charm Hermione, Professor Lupin and I developed over the summer. So," he said, lowering his whistles' cord over his head, "shall we begin?

By 9:35 they had reviewed and practiced everything they had done the year before with the exception of the Patronus Charm. Harry found it amusing that no one wanted to partner with Neville. He was pleased to note that it was not because he was either clumsy or unskilled but because he was so good and all of his hexes, jinxes, charms and other spells were so effective. When they had practiced the disarming charm Luna hadn't even had time to say the first syllable of the charm when her wand had been ripped from her hand and flown across the room where Neville calmly took possession of it. And when they had practiced the binding curse Justin Flinch-Flechery had fallen to the floor so tightly bound that Harry had had to run over and immediately release him for fear of Justin being crushed by Neville's ropes. In the end, Neville had wound up practicing the spells on his trembling partners once or twice and then standing quietly while they practiced on him.

Harry blew the whistle and everyone stopped practicing their hexes. "All right, everyone," Harry said loudly enough that everyone could hear. "We've done everything but the Patronus Charm. Remember, it's a happy thought and 'Expecto Patronum.' I should caution you that practicing it in a controlled environment is a lot easier than using it to drive off a dementor. When you are faced with a dementor all of your worst fears and memories will be replaying themselves in your head and you will begin to feel as though you might never be happy again. It will be hard to recall a happy memory but that is the only way you are going to be able to summon a true Patronus and drive the dementors back. They want to steal your happiness at least as much as you want to hold onto it. We are going to spend the rest of tonight practicing the Patronus Charm in here But I want you to be prepared for what you might be faced with out there, in the field. I want you to make a catalogue your happy thoughts and continually review them.

"And most importantly," he continued, "and this is going to be your homework for this class, I want each and every one of you to find something humorous to laugh at every day. It doesn't have to be much but I want you to laugh every day so that if and/or when you are faced with a dementor you will be able to summon a truly powerful patronus that will have no trouble beating back those disgusting creatures." With that he looked into Ginny's eyes, let the warmth and happiness the mere thought of her love brought flood throughout his entire being, raised his wand and cried out, "EXPECTO PATRONUM!"

The silver-white stag that leapt from the tip of his wand glowed so brightly that all of his students had to shield their eyes against its glare as it pranced around the room and then trotted up to stand in front of Harry. Squinting through his eyelashes Harry reached out and patted the ethereal creature's neck and silently thanked it for making an appearance. Harry could have sworn that the silver stag had winked at him before bowing its head slightly and returning to the ethos.

Several appreciative murmurs circulated among the students until Harry blew his whistle. "Alright then," he said confidently. "A happy thought and, 'Expecto Patronum.'"

For the next several minutes Harry circulated among his students, all original members of the D.A., and helped them where he could. It diidn't take long for Hermione to be able to reproduce the otter she had created the year before and Cho's swan followed shortly thereafter. Most of the others, however, were having a rough go of it. Ginny's patronus looked like it wanted to take shape but was never quite able to consolidate its form into anything recognizable before dissolving.

Harry watched her for several minutes, wondering if what had worked for him would work for her, when Ron called him over. "Hey, Harry," he called out over the various shouts and cries, "what am I doing wrong?"

Harry walked over and watched as Ron concentrated and said the incantation several times. Each time the mist that escaped from the tip of his wand would look like it was starting to form wings but get no further before dissipating. "What are you thinking about?" Harry asked.

"I keep thinking about the happiest moments in my life, like when I got my Hogwarts letter and the quidditch match against Slytherin last year and stuff like that but nothing seems to be working."

Leaning in close so no one else could hear Harry murmured, "I'll tell you what, Ron, why don't you think about how much you and Hermione love each other? Try that and let's see what happens."

Ron looked at Harry with a confused expression on his face for a few seconds. Then, as a broad grin began to spread across his face, he raised his wand, crying, "EXPECTO PATRONUM!" The large, silver dragon that leapt from his wand and soared around the room several times before shrinking in size and landing at Ron's feet to stand guard over its benefactor. Ron hesitantly reached out and patted his patronus' head. As he did so the tiny dragon turned its face towards Ron and smiled reassuringly as it slowly closed and reopened its eyes.

Some of the students had screamed in fright when Ron's dragon had first appeared but once they had realized it was a patronus they had laughed at themselves and went back to trying to summon their own guardians-of-light. "That's all well and good," Hermione laughed, congratulating Ron on his success, "but you keep that thing away from my otter."

Ron laughed out loud and pulled Hermione into a hug. "Don't worry," he laughed. "He only eats dementors." Hermione hugged him back, laughing at his comeback. Harry just shook his head and walked away, laughing to himself.

As he walked towards Ginny he noticed that she still wasn't having much success with her patronus so he decided to take a chance. After all, he reasoned, it had worked for him and Ron maybe it would work for her as well. "Erm, Ginny?" he said stepping in beside her. "Can I ask you something?"

Ginny glanced up, a fierce look of determination in her eyes which immediately softened when she saw Harry standing beside her. "Sure, Harry," she said, "what do you want?"

"It’s kind of hard to explain really," Harry said grinning sheepishly, "but when I summoned my patronus and when Ron summoned his just now we were thinking about how much we love you and Hermione and how much that love means to us. I don’t know if you want to use that or not but its worth a try."

Ginny seemed to think about this for a few seconds. Then, as a smile began to appear on her face, she too raised her wand and cried out, "EXPECTO PATRONUM!" An enormous, silver lion sprang from the tip of her wand and bounded to the front of the room then came galloping back. It set down on its haunches in front of Ginny and looked up at her expectantly, its tongue lolling out of one side of its mouth. Ginny reached out and tentatively patted its head. Her patronus blinked its enormous eyes once and bowed its head to her before returning to the ethos. Ginny squealed with delight and threw her arms around Harry’s neck. "Oh, thank you, Harry!" she squealed. "You don’t know how much that means to me!"

Harry looked up and noticed that several people were staring at them. He blushed slightly, as though apologizing for Ginny’s exuberance, then gently pried her off. "I love you too, Ginny," he whispered, "but we’ve only got a few minutes left and I want to make sure everyone can summon a proper patronus before we close down for the night."

Ginny lowered herself to the floor and blushed a bright shade of red then smiled up at her boyfriend and nodded that she understood.

For his part, Harry gazed dreamily at her for a few more seconds, a silly grin on his face, before remembering where he was and shaking his head to clear his mind and moving on to the next person.

Neville seemed to be having a particularly difficult time with his patronus. He could get a few wispy strands of white mist to come from his wand but nothing specific. Harry walked over to him and watched him for a couple of minutes before interrupting his attempts. "What are you thinking about, Neville?" he asked cautiously, remembering that Neville’s parents were in St. Mungos and that they would probably never recognize their son because they had been tortured with the Cuciatus Curse by the Lestranges when Neville was just a baby.

"I’m trying to think about the day I received my Hogwartz letter," he said and Harry remembered how important that had been to Neville who had not shown any magical ability until his uncle had accidentally dropped him out of an upstairs window as a child and he had bounced across the lawn.

Recalling the previous Christmas, when he Ron and Hermione had been 'visiting' Professor Lockheart and had seen Neville’s mother give him the gum wrapper, Harry said, "Er, Neville, I know this is a touchy subject and I don’t want to embarrass you in any way but I want you to think back to last Christmas and your visit with your parents."

Neville paled slightly but courageously nodded his head.

"Do you remember when your mum gave you that gum wrapper?"

Again Neville nodded.

"Do you know what that tells me, Neville? It tells be that even though your mum may not be able to fully recognize you as her son, somewhere deep down inside she still knows who you are and still loves you as her son."

Tears began to well up in Neville's eyes as memories of his parents' vacant expressions flooded his soul. "I hope you're right, Harry," Neville said softly as he wiped the tears away. "I hope you're right."

"I'm sure of it," Harry said, hoping with all his might that he was. "Now, Neville," he continued in strictest confidence amid the continued yells and screams, "I want you to relax, think about that love and combine it with all of your other happy memories and try again."

Neville looked searchingly at Harry for a second or two then visibly relaxed and closed his eyes. When he opened them again he raised his wand and cried, "EXPECTO PATRONUM!" The thin vapory trails of mist that escaped from Neville's wand were not much of an improvement over his earlier attempts but at least there were more of them and they did look like they were trying to form a patronus.

Harry looked at Neville for several seconds, deep in thought, before looking his friend in the eye. "Neville," he said, "I'm going to try something. I'm going to cast a cheering charm over you and when I do I want you to try the Patronus Charm again. I know you've got the power and the ability. All we have to do is help you get through this happiness block."

Neville nodded so Harry took out his wand and, pointing it at Neville, muttered a simple cheering charm and stood back. With a smile on his face this time Neville raised his wand and yelled, "EXPECTO PATRONUM!" The effect was hilarious. The shining silver patronus that sprang forth from Neville's wand was in the shape of a huge bulldog. It reminded Harry so much of his aunt Marge's dog Ripper that he stumbled backwards and tripped, falling over Luna who was practicing nearby.

After scrambling to his feet and helping Luna up Harry burst out laughing. "I knew you could do it, Neville! I knew you could do it. But why a bulldog?"

Neville laughed nervously at first and then more openly. "Thanks, Harry," he said between gasps for air. "But why did my patronus frighten you so much?"

Harry shook his head still laughing. "It's a long story, Neville. I'll tell you later."

Looking at his watch Harry noticed that they only had five minutes left so, blowing his whistle, he called the class to order. "How many have had success so far?" he asked loudly. About half the class raised their hands. "Alright," he said confidently. "I want those of you who have successfully produced a patronus to pair up with those who haven't. We've only got five minutes so I want those of you who have produced a patronus to cast cheering charms on those who haven't yet and stand back. I know you might think this is cheating a bit but where dementors are concerned I really don't care if we cheat a little. Ready? Go!" He blew his whistle again and his students went into action.

In no time the room was filled with lions, tigers, bears, dragons, otters, swans, stallions, beavers

and bulldogs. Colin Creevey's patronus was the most unique of them all though because his patronus was a squirrel and as soon as it had erupted from his wand and checked around for any signs of danger it had scampered up Colin's robes and perched itself on his shoulder.

At ten o'clock Harry blew his whistle again and, after reminding them to watch out for Filch and Mrs. Norris, sent the remaining members of the D.A. back to their houses.

Chapter 19. Dementors, Spies and Quidditch

When the owls arrived at breakfast the next morning Hermione paid the delivery owl for her Daily Prophet and promptly opened the paper to read the morning's headlines. She had no more than opened the paper when she let out a gasp and a small scream.

"What's wrong?" Ron asked peering over her shoulder. "What's happened?"

"There's been another dementor attack," she said shakily. "This time in Devonshire."

"Was anybody hurt?" Ron asked, a note of concern in his voice.

She quickly scanned the article. "It says one man received a partial kiss and three aurors were badly shaken. All four of them are currently in St. Mungo's. They don't even have a prognosis for the man who received the partial kiss but they say the three aurors should be out in about a week. They are quoting one of the aurors as having said that there were just too many of them and that they were having trouble with the Patronus Charm."

"A partial kiss?" Ginny asked.

Hermione read in silence for a moment then said. "One of the aurors said that the dementor was bending down to kiss the man and had just made contact when it was hit by a patronus. The man still has his soul but it is so disjointed that they don't know what will become of him."

Harry shivered slightly, remembering his encounters with the dementors in his third year and on Privet Drive last year. "Are you alright?" Ginny asked, noting the sudden change that had come over him.

Ron and Hermione looked up. "Yeah, I'm fine," Harry said, still shaking. "I just hope I didn't do you guys a disservice last night by letting you use the cheering charm. I don't want anyone to get overconfident but half the battle in performing the Patronus Charm lies in knowing you can do it."

"Is it really that bad?" Ron asked.

"Yeah," Harry said, hunching his shoulders and doing everything he could to shake the memories off, "it's really that bad."

"Too bad we couldn't bottle that cheering charm," Ron said disappointedly. "It would sure make the aurors' jobs a lot easier."

Hermione laid her paper down and looked at Ron, her mind obviously working on a solution to the problem. "That's it!" she exclaimed after several seconds. "Ron, you're a genius!"

Ron looked at Hermione then looked inquisitively across at Harry who shrugged his shoulders. "Not bottling it, of course. That would be too cumbersome and would take too much time in the heat of battle but . . . Oh, Ron, I could kiss you!"

Ron looked at Harry again who once more shrugged his shoulders.

"Don't you see?" Hermione asked excitedly. "Fred and George! They have developed everything from Canary Creams to Nosebleed Nougats. Why couldn't they develop a simple, edible candy with

a cheering charm locked inside?" She stood up so fast that she almost knocked the bench she had been sitting on over along with all of its occupants. "I'm going to owl them right away," she said excitedly, stepping over the bench. "Can I borrow Pigwidgeon, Ron?"

"Yeah, sure," Ron said. "But where's my kiss?"

Hermione quickly bent down and kissed him on the cheek and turned towards the door.

"Tell them it will have to be a strong one - the stronger the better," Harry called after her.

Hermione waved her hand over her head to signify that she had heard as she raced out the door on her way to the owlry.

"What was that all about?" Professor McGonagall asked as she walked up behind Harry and Ginny.

Harry, Ron and Ginny all jumped at the sound of McGonagall's voice but Ginny was the first to recover. "Fred and George and cheering charms," she said cryptically.

Professor McGonagall looked at Ginny for a few seconds, a confused expression on her face, then said, "Be that as it may, I want to see the three of you in the Transfiguration room at seven o'clock this evening for our first quidditch meeting of the year."

Hermione caught up with Harry and Ron on their way to Defense Against the Dark Arts and as Ron pulled some toast and marmalade sandwiches he had prepared for her out of his pocket she explained what she had done. "I told them everything," she began excitedly. "I told them about the class last night . . ."

"I hope you left the part about Neville's bulldog out," Harry interrupted. "They would never let me live that one down."

Hermione ignored him. "I told them about your advice before we began working on our Patronus Charms. I told them about the difficulties some people were having and how it all tied into being able to think of a happy memory. I told them about the cheering charms we used and about our subsequent successes. I told them about the article this morning and about Ron's comments about bottling a cheering charm and your warning that it would have to be a strong cheering charm to work in an actual confrontation with a dementor."

Ron put his arm around her shoulders, handed her the marmalade and toast sandwiches and said, "Here, 'Mione. Eat. Breath."

Hermione looked at the sandwiches then up at Ron and, taking the sandwiches, smiled up at him and said, "Thank you," as she leaning into his shoulder.

Despite being preoccupied with the dementor problem Harry was able to pay attention in Defense Against the Dark Arts and Charms that morning. Well, most of the time anyway. On a few occasions, like when Tonks was teaching them the basics of a masking spell or when Professor Flitwick was reviewing the Blue Bell Flame charm, either Ron or Hermione had caught him with a closed look on his face and nudged him to bring him back to the realities at hand.

At lunch Ron and Hermione watched Harry carefully, concerned that he might be lapsing into some kind of post-traumatic stress disorder or depression. When he didn't show any signs of eating the

meager rations he had asked Dobby to send up Ron took the initiative and, leaning across the table, softly asked, "What's the matter, Harry? You've been quiet all morning. What's wrong?"

Ginny glanced up then turned to look at Harry, an expression of concern etched on her face. Harry looked into Ginny's eyes and, feeling the love that she held for him, knew that an emotional outburst wouldn't do anyone any good. So, he looked back down at his plate and played with his food for several seconds, aware that the others were watching him, then said, "The dementors . . ."

"What about them?" Ron asked.

"The Patronus charm is a defensive maneuver. That's all it has ever been and that's all it will ever be. We need to find a more permanent solution."

"What do you mean?" Ginny asked.

"Dementors are a menace!" Harry said, voicing his concerns for the first time. "They live to destroy hope and happiness. So long as they exist no one will ever truly be free of their influence. There has to be some way to destroy them.

"According to 'Magical Philosophy and its Many Manifestations' everything in the universe has some kind of energy signature and can, therefore, be manipulated through magical means. What we need to do is find out everything we can about their energy signatures and find a way to destroy them because I don't know about you guys but so far as I am concerned one dementor is one too many."

"But no one's ever been able to measure a dementor's signature," Hermione said, recalling something she had read in the library the year before. "No one's been able to get close enough to measure it without feeling its effects."

Harry sat silently thinking this over when something he had heard on the news shortly after returning to Privet Drive the previous summer popped into his mind. "What was that thing about the space-based telescope that was in the news last summer, Hermione?" he asked. "Wasn't there something about it being able to measure the energy signatures of distant galaxies even though it couldn't see them?"

Ron and Ginny looked at each other at a total loss for words and not knowing what to think. Hermione, however, looked thoughtfully at the corn on her plate for a few seconds before allowing a smile of understanding to begin spreading across her face. When she looked up the others knew that she was on to something. "Yes," she said. "It has something to do with measuring the electromagnetic energy signatures of stars. But can it be adapted to the magical world?"

"There's only one way to find out," Harry said, standing up and stepping over the bench. "Hold that thought. I'll be right back."

Harry walked quickly up to the teacher's table and over to stand in front of Professor Dumbledore. Several heads turned and watched as he passed but no one really paid all that much attention. Harry was secretly glad that, even though he had earned quite a reputation over the years and that many still stood in awe of him as 'The-Boy-Who-Lived,' his classmates and schoolmates were finally accepting him as one of their own.

Professor Dumbledore looked up as Harry approached and didn't seem at all surprised when he walked over to stand in front of him. "Yes, Harry?" he asked. "What can I do for you today?"

Professors McGonagall and Flitwick looked up in surprise as Harry leaned over the table. "Professor," Harry began, remembering the formalities of the student-teacher relationship that were to be observed outside of the Headmaster's Office, "we need your help with something."

Dumbledoor peered at Harry over his half-moon glasses, his blue eyes sparkling with interest and anticipation. Nodding his head he said, "Go on."

"We need to find some way of measuring the energy signature of a dementor. We already know that a proper reading has never been done because no one has been able to get close enough to do a proper reading without feeling the effects. But we've been talking and we think there might be a way." Harry explained about the Hubble Space Telescope and some of its capabilities and described his hope of finding a way of adapting some small portion of that muggle technology to the wizarding world so that an energy signature reading could be done on a dementor from a distance. "What I would like to know, sir," he said in closing, "is if any of the muggle-born's parents work in this field. I think they call it 'Physics.' If so, I would like to know if there is any way I could meet with them and a few Unspeakables from the Department of Mysteries, that you feel can be trusted, to explain what we are up against and what we are trying to do."

Professor Dumbledore looked into Harry's eyes for several seconds while pondering this information then nodded. "I'll see what I can do," he said.

Harry thanked him and went back to his table. As he sat back down next to Ginny and began eating ravenously to catch up with his friends Ron looked over at him and said, "Well?"

Harry looked up with an evil grin on his face and said, "Those dementor's days are numbered."

As they entered the Potions classroom later that afternoon Professor Snape looked up and snarled, "Potter! Over here."

Harry glanced apprehensively at Ron and Hermione then broke away from the line of students entering the classroom and approached the Potions Master's desk. Snape was leaning low over his desk, looking to be examining someone's summer essay. Harry looked down and saw that it was the summer essay he had written after receiving written confirmation of his O.W.L. results. "Closer," Snape hissed barely loud enough to be heard. Harry bent lower. "I want you to know that you have earned my respect," Snape murmured just loud enough for Harry to hear. "By defeating the most powerful death squad that has been assembled in many years you have given the Dark Lord something to think about. I am still struggling with the idea of forgiving your father and his . . . friends but I want you to understand that I cannot play favorites. I no longer have anything personal against you but I want you to understand that so far as everyone else is concerned, between us it is going to be business as usual. I am not the only spy in attendance at Hogwarts and I cannot afford to blow my cover."

Startled, Harry glanced up at the Potions Master and said, just as softly, "Yes sir."

Snape grabbed Harry's hand before he could stand up and hissed, "One more thing, Potter. I would appreciate it if you could explain to Longbottom that I have to appear to loath the two of you because your parents were formidable forces in their day and if I let anyone even suspect that I

respected either of you in any way my cover would be blown."

"Yes, sir," Harry said and stood up.

"And from now on, Potter," Snape said loudly enough that everyone in the room could hear, "I expect you to apply yourself to you studies because I will not accept such shoddy workmanship from my Advanced Potions Students."

"Yes, sir," Harry said more loudly, retrieving his Potions essay, that was clearly marked with an'O', and heading back to sit between Ron and Neville.

"What was that all about?" Ron whispered while Harry was busy setting up his cauldron.

"Oh, just business as usual," Harry groaned while trying to think of a way to get Neville alone to explain the situation.

At five-minutes-to-seven that evening Harry Ron and Ginny walked into the Transfiguration classroom to join their teammates and await Professor McGonagall's arrival. As co-captains, however, Harry and Ron looked nervously around when they realized that with the departures of Katie Bell, Angelina Johnson and Alicia Spinnet and the resignations of Andrew Kirke and Jack Sloper they were the Gryffindor Quidditch Team. "Uh, guys," Ron said nervously, "I think we're going to have to do a little rebuilding this year."

"Thank you for stating the obvious, Ron," Ginny said sarcastically. "The only question now is where to start."

"I think tryouts might be a good place," Harry said offhandedly.

"I agree, Mister Potter," Professor McGonagal said from the back of the room, causing all three students to jump. "We do, indeed have a lot of rebuilding to do this year and tryouts is a good place to start. This year, however, we are going to be fielding two teams. One will be the official Gryffindor Quidditch Team and the other will be our reserve team in case anyone gets hurt. All of the houses will be fielding two teams this year and the heads of house will be calling the practices. Our tryouts will be this coming Saturday evening, from six until nine, and our practice times will be on Monday and Wednesday evenings and every fourth Sunday afternoon. You should also know that all practices and games are going to be monitored for security reasons.

Yes, Mister Weasley," she added at the surprised expression on Ron's face, "security had been tightened."

Looking at the faces of the three stunned students her expression softened slightly as she said, "I'm sorry but this is how things are going to be for the next few years. I like quidditch as much you do but unfortunately we are on a wartime footing and we cannot afford to take any chances. As co-captains, and as members of the Order, I would like the two of you, Mister Weasley and Mister Potter, to use this experience to your advantage and look upon it as a learning experience in the formation of battle plans and strategies. We aren't going to have much practice time so you are going to have to pick your team members carefully. All of you will have to be willing and able to work together as a cohesive, military unit. I will, of course, have the final say but I will be relying upon your observations and suggestions."

Turning to Ginny she said, "I trust you will be trying out for the Seeker position on the reserve team?" she asked even though it was more of a statement than a question.

"Er, I was actually thinking about trying out for one of the Chaser positions," Ginny said hesitantly. "But if you want me to stay on as reserve Seeker I will."

Professor McGonagal smiled briefly. "I think that can be arranged," she said. "However, I would like to keep you on as a reserve Seeker. So apparently this year we will have two reserve Seekers, if you become one of our Chasers."

Ginny nodded briefly then looked down at the table.

"That will be all," the Transfiguration teacher and Head of Gryffindor House said. "I expect to see the three of you on the quidditch pitch at six o'clock Saturday afternoon."

"Yes, ma'am," the three teens said as they stood up and turned to leave.

"Oh, and that was a very good game you played at the end of the year last year. I hope you can repeat it again this year because I am getting used to that cup being in my office."

Ron and Ginny smiled at each other and Ron threw an arm around Harry's shoulders as Ginny gently took hold of his hand that was on her side.

Out in the hall, as they made their way back to the Gryffindor Common Room, Harry was thinking furiously, trying to think of anything but the remorse and guilt he felt for getting kicked off the team the previous year after Malfoy had purposely baited him into a fight. As they approached the portrait of the Fat Lady Ron said, "Cheer up, mate. I know it still bugs you but Malfoy isn't here anymore and with the three of us on the same team there's no way we can lose!"

Harry looked tiredly up at Ron and said, "Yeah, but do the other teams know that; and what are we going to do about the other positions?"

Ginny squeezed his hand. "I don't think we should have any trouble filling them. There really is quite a bit of talent in Gryffindor and if last year's try outs are any indication we should have a fairly decent pool to choose from."

Harry smiled at Ginny's confidence. "Yeah," he said solemnly. "I hope so."

Chapter 20. Complications

The next morning there was a crowd around the bulletin board in the Gryffindor common room as the notice had gone up over night that quidditch tryouts were going to be held on Saturday and, to Harry's surprise, Neville was among them.

Harry and Ginny were visiting at the breakfast table a few minutes later, Harry listening while Ginny told him about some of the pranks Fred and George had pulled on her and Ron as children, when Neville stepped over the bench and sat down next to Harry. "Hey, Neville," Hermione said from across the table.

"Hey," Neville said, a bit too preoccupied to give a proper response.

"So, are you going to try out for the team?" Hermione asked encouragingly.

Neville blushed slightly and said, "Yeah, I think I might. The notice says they are going to be filling three Chaser slots and two Beater positions on the main team and that they are going to be fielding an entire reserve team this year. I thought I would try out for a Beater position on the reserve team."

Harry and Ron looked at Neville in surprise. "What?" Neville said defensivly. "I'm a pretty fair flyer you know and I have been practicing."

Harry smiled and said, "I think it's a great idea, Neville."

"Yeah," Ron added, catching on to the idea of encouraging Neville to come out of his shell, "I think it's brilliant."

"Yeah," Neville said, threatening to slip into a mild depression, "but do you think anyone will notice?" he asked, quickly glancing over his shoulder towards the Ravenclaw table where Luna was chatting merrily with some of her friends.

Hermione caught this action and tried to reassure him by saying, "People will notice, Neville." she said. "The right people will notice." She then glanced at Ginny and gave her a meaningful look as if trying to communicate the idea that they needed to talk.

In Divination that morning Firenze, Ron, Harry and Neville discussed what they had read. When Ron complained that he didn't understand where all of their reading was getting them Firenze explained that since they would be going up against an opponent in a life and death struggle for survival and that there would most likely not be any rematches the most important thing they could do before the match began was come to an understanding of their opponent's abilities and how Voldemort thinks and that the best way they could do this would be to study and learn everything they could about him: his history, how he thinks, how he acts, his strengths, his weaknesses, his powers and abilities and even how he treats his subordinates. When this was made clear a determined gleam came into Ron's eye and he said, "Alright then. Let's get busy. If I'm only going to be allowed one chance at this guy I want to make sure I win."

At this Harry and Neville snickered and Firenze said, "I thought you might take that approach, Ronald Weasley," while struggling to suppress some laughter of his own.

At 6:55 that evening, as Harry approached the Headmaster's Office, no one was around and he was still several meters from his destination when he glanced up at the sound of the gargoyle moving aside. Expecting someone to descend the stairs he waited at the bottom of the steps for several seconds, listening and waiting. But when no one came down after almost a minute he cautiously mounted the steps and rode the revolving escalator up to the landing just outside the office door. Tentatively knocking on the heavy wooden door he waited for the familiar, "Come in!"

When it came he pushed the door open and walked into the Headmaster's Office. Looking around he saw that Albus was the only one present. "Er, Albus?" he asked hesitantly.

"Yes, Harry?"

"Uh, when I was approaching your office just now the gargoyle swung aside before I reached it and I didn't use the password you gave me. I thought someone was coming out but no one did. What's going on?"

Dumbledore peered curiously over his half-moon spectacles at Harry, his twinkle in full force, for several seconds then said, "Tell me Harry, have you had any other . . . interesting experiences, with the portraits perhaps, since you placed Godric's ring on your finger?"

Harry scowled and told Albus about his encounter with the Fat Lady and the numerous other encounters he had had with portraits treating him as though he were some kind of royalty and ended by saying, "I mean it's nice and all but after a while it starts to get on your nerves."

Dumbledore chuckled softly to himself then said, "I am afraid that is something you are going to have to learn to live with, Harry. You see, Godric Gryffindor's magic was so interwoven with the magic of Hogwarts that once you placed that ring on your finger and it became a part of you, the castle naturally woke up and began to recognize its master. This castle is as much a part of you as you are a part of it. While you are here you will be able to draw from its power to supplement your own in times of need. And I have my suspicions that you will begin to notice other changes as well. For example, you may suddenly find that the stairways and halls will give you the most direct route to your destinations. You may also find that the suits of armor will come to attention as you pass."

Harry scowled and groaned. "Oh, great. That's all I need, an entire castle responding to my magic."

Albus chuckled. "Ah, but, Harry, it could prove very useful if, for example, you want to get somewhere in a hurry or if you simply wish to be alone for a while. This castle holds many secrets and even I do not know them all.

"But tell me, what else have you noticed that seems to be different since your Maturo Auctus?"

Sitting down in one of the chince chairs across from the Headmaster Harry thought for a moment then said, "Well, aside from the wandless and wordless magic, my increased abilities at Occlumency and Legilimens and my increased and in-depth understanding of all of my subjects I somehow seem to be able to sense people's emotions, at least when they are directed at me."

Albus, who had been watching Harry intently while gazing contentedly over his steepled fingers, sat silently gazing at Harry for several seconds, his eyes seeming to glaze over as though recalling his own Maturo Auctus training. "Ah, yes," he finally said as he lowered his hands and sat back in his chair. "You have begun to tap into the Ethereal, Harry. The Ethereal is the magic of pure thought

and pure emotion. Your wandless magic is another manifestation of this ability. It is another one of those obscure branches of magic that is very seldom studied. There are a few of us, however, who have studied it and are proficient enough at it to be able to teach the basics and set you on the path of discovery. We will start with this and I will help you, as this is something I use quite regularly to keep track of the goings on at Hogwarts. From what you told us the other night, however, I believe there may be a few other branches of magic you would like some specialized training in as well. Is this correct?"

Harry thought for a moment then said, "Yes, Albus, there are. I'm pretty sure I understand the theory behind the animagus transformation and I'm fairly certain I can brew the potion but I would like to sit down with Minerva sometime to discus it in detail to make sure I have got it right. Another branch of magic I would like to study in some depth are the metamorphmagus abilities I studied and supposedly have. I don't know how good they are but I would like to find out."

Albus rocked back in his chair and folded his hands in his lap. After a few seconds of seeming to study the ceiling he said, "Yes. I believe Minerva and Miss Tonks would be more than happy to help you with these matters. Is there anything else?"

Harry thought for a moment then said, "Is there any way I can get rid of these glasses? I mean, if I'm going to have to go up against Tom in the final battle I don't want to be blind if I lose my glasses."

Albus leaned forward and, resting his elbows on his desk, steepled his fingers, gazing pensively into Harry's eyes. "A reasonable request," he finally said after several seconds had passed in silence. "I will look into it. The muggles, of course, have something called contact lenses but I have a feeling you are looking for something much more permanent than that."

Harry nodded his head. "If there is a permanent solution, Albus, I would be more than willing to pay for it."

"I'm sure you would, Harry," the old man said as he stood up and began walking around to stand in front of his desk. "You are much more dedicated to our cause than even I could have hoped. I will talk to the ophthalmologists at Saint Mungo's and see what, if anything, they might have that could prove either useful or beneficial to our cause." Turning around to face Harry and leaning back on his desk Albus said, "Now, Harry, are you ready to begin your training in Ethereal Magic?"

Harry nodded his head.

Placing his hands on the desk behind him the Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry silently bowed his head and closed his eyes in thought for several seconds before suddenly opening his eyes, raising his head and gazing into Harry's eyes in what Harry had come to recognize as the old wizard's teaching mode. "Ethereal Magic," Professor Dumbledore began, "is an obscure branch of magic which deals, primarily, with the expansion of one's conscious awareness through meditation and something the muggles call self-hypnosis. Ethereal Magic is, by and large, undetectable and exists outside of and beyond most of what are considered to be the Physical Laws of Magic. It has been theorized that nothing is impossible for the Master of Ethereal Magic but that is little more than theory. Theory and practice, however, are two different things. I will not tell you that anything is impossible when working with Ethereal Magic because I quite simply do not know.

"For tonight's lesson I will be introducing you to the wonders of expanded awareness, Harry. So if

you could do me the favor of slipping into a light meditative state, similar to the states you achieved this past summer while learning Occlumency, we will begin and I will guide you through these initial exercises."

Nodding his head Harry relaxed into the cushions of the chair he was sitting in and closed his eyes.

With all of the practice he had been doing it didn't take him long to reach the desired state of mind and begin focusing upon his magical core. Then, almost as though a mist was rising, or a veil was being lifted, he became aware of the entirety of the Headmaster's Office. He could see and was aware of everything. He saw himself sitting in the chince armchair. He could see Albus standing in front of his desk and could hear him talking. The words weren't making much sense but he could hear them.

Next his attention was directed towards a piece of parchment on the headmaster's desk and he found himself reading and memorizing a list of Ethereal Magic Exercises he should be doing on a regular basis. These exercises included continually expanding his awareness to ever increasing ranges; focusing his attention upon one or more area's of interest; recognizing thought patters and magical signatures so that he could seek them out and find them at later dates and in subsequent sessions; listening to, hearing and remembering everything he heard; memorizing charts and data for later transfer to parchment; and setting internal alarms so that his body could rest while he was out exploring the world and so that he would return to a thoroughly rested body at a given time.

The last thing he did before returning to his body was, to his utter amazement, pick up the parchment and turn it around. When he finally did return to his body and opened his eyes Albus was smiling down at him and his eyes were both twinkling and brimming with tears of joy. "Wonderful, Harry! Simply wonderful! It took me almost a week to get that far! I can see that this is going to be an interesting year. I would not be surprised if your ethereal abilities far surpass my own by the end of the year. Indeed, I would be surprised if they do not."

Harry blushed slightly, at a loss for words, as he stood up. What he had just experienced was far beyond anything he had ever thought possible and yet he had done it. He had left his body, experienced an expanded form of consciousness, read a piece of parchment, turned that parchment around and then returned to his body. It seemed amazing and almost impossible and yet he had done it.

Several minutes later, a book on Ethereal Magic in hand, Harry was walking past a suit of armor on his way back to the Gryffindor Common Room when it suddenly snapped to attention. He looked at it and scowled then realized that all of the other suits of armor were snapping to attention as well. Glaring at the original suit of armor he said, "At ease, soldier." When that one suit of armor returned to parade rest but all of the others remained at attention he let out an exasperated sigh then shouted, "All of you! AT EASE!"

Chapter 21. Bane

After Defense Against the Dark Arts on Friday Moody pulled Ron aside and growled, "Bring your chess set to class tonight, laddy. We're going to play us a couple o' games."

At 6:55 that evening five young Gryffindors and one young Ravenclaw found themselves approaching the stone gargoyle that marked the entrance to the headmaster's office. Harry, Ron and Neville, Ron carrying his chess set, had fiercely determined looks on their faces and in their eyes and Ginny, Hermione and Luna, while not as fierce as their male counterparts, were just as determined. Remus was waiting for them near the entrance and, seeing their approach, turned to mutter the password. But before he could say anything the gargoyle sprang aside revealing the spiraling escalator. Clearly surprised, Remus looked curiously up into the opening and then glanced back at Harry and the others. "Don't ask," Harry grumbled as he stopped at the base of the stairs and motioned for Remus to go first.

Remus chuckled and smiled down at his young friend. "Don't worry, Harry," he said, "I won't. There are things about this castle that I don't think even Albus understands yet."

Albus, Alastor, Severus, Madam Pomfrey and Minerva were waiting for them when they entered the Headmaster's Private Library. Alastor quickly motioned for Ron to join him at the small table that had been set up in front of the fireplace where he had his own chess set standing at attention; Albus motioned for Harry to join him at the main table, which was covered with file folders: Madam Pomfrey took Luna over to a set of shelves dedicated to the healing arts and began going over which texts she should be studying; Minerva motioned for Hermione to join her by a ladder where she would be giving her student a tour of the library and help Hermione find her way around the circular room; Severus took Neville aside and began discussing the role of plants and herbs in potion making and their various properties; and Remus took Ginny over to a section of books dedicated to the various relationships that have been formed between witches and wizards and the many other members of the magical community throughout history.

"These are the family files of all of the muggle-born and half-blood students currently attending Hogwarts," Albus said in response to Harry's questioning look. "Students are almost never allowed to see these files. But under the circumstances I thought an exception could be made. The first page of each file contains the student's biographical information - name, age, date of birth, home address, hobbies, interests, pre-Hogwarts educational experiences, manifestations of magical ability and the like. The second page, however, is what we are most interested in; it contains their parental information such as current careers or career paths, education, training, hobbies and interests.

"So far I have been able to divide them into three general categories. The files on the left," he said indicating the lines of files taking up the left end of the table, "are in what I call the 'Unlikely' category. The files in the middle," he said indicating a second, smaller set of files, "are those I think might hold some possibilities. And those on the right," he said indicating the single line of files occupying the right end of the table, "are what I consider to be the most likely candidates.

"You will, of course, be making the final decision as you know what you are looking for and I do not.

"So," the aging headmaster said lightly, "let us begin."

Half an hour later, while Harry was reading through the profiles of a husband and wife team of doctors a question appeared in his mind and he decided to act on it. "Albus?" he asked.

"Yes, Harry," Dumbledore asked without looking up from the chart he was examining.

"Why did you bring me here after the attack? wouldn't Saint Mungo's have been closer?"

Professor Dumbledore looked up from the chart and slowly laid it back down on the table. "Initially we did take you to Saint Mungo's, Harry. But old habits die hard; and old memories have a way of haunting even the most accomplished of wizards.

"If you will recall, I once told you that during Tom's last rise to power people were suspicious of one another. Even old and dear friends, like Sirius and Remus, did not know if they could trust one another. Those were dark times, Harry, and as soon as you were stable enough to travel we used a portkey to transfer you here and brought one of their top neurologists - someone we knew we could trust - to you."

"Oh," Harry said and returned to the stack of files in front of him.

Fifteen minutes later, however, another thought occurred to him and he decided to act upon it as well. "Albus?" he began again.

"Yes, Harry?"

"What exactly are our roles in the Order?"

"You mean yours, Ron's, Hermione's, Neville's, Luna's and Ginevra's?"

"Yes," Harry said, closing yet another file and setting it aside.

"Your role, Harry," Dumbledore said sagely, "as you are, indeed, the Heir of Gryffindor as well as the one whose coming was foretold in the prophecy, is to recruit as many members of the magical community to our side as you can and learn to harness the power of love so that you can finally and completely defeat Voldemort. I am happy to say, I might add, that you seem to have taken a major step in that direction with the development of that charm you used this summer.

"Ginevra's role is to help you in your recruiting efforts as well as helping you discover the true nature of love. You see, Harry, Ginevra possesses many of the same qualities you mother had while she was in this world and while some members of the magical community will respond to the more masculine energies you possess others, such as the unicorns, will only respond to the more sensitive, feminine energies Ginevra possesses. The two or you are a team and if you will let her she will teach you the meaning of love and help you harness its power. I must caution you, however, that she must be allowed to teach you in her own way and in her own time. Do not - and I repeat, do not - try to force anything. For her lessons to be effective they must come from the heart and be freely given. Under no circumstances should any of the lessons she has to offer be forced. You must let her teach you in her own way and in her own time."

The Headmaster paused and waited for several seconds to let this message sink in before continuing. "Ron and Hermione are a team as well. While Ron's specialty is the soft logic of behavior, tactics and strategy in an ever-changing world, Hermione's role is to keep him balanced and help him understand the hard logic of the muggle sciences and the finer points of their magical

counterparts so that, together, they can help us take full advantage of all of the resources available to us.

"Neville and Luna, are a team as well. With Severus' help and guidance Neville will be brewing the stockpiles of potions and draughts we will need in case of a major attack. I don't know if you knew this or not, Harry, but for centuries Hogwarts has been a major medical evacuation center. If Saint Mungo's should ever be stretched to its limits the overflow would come here. Luna is being trained as a healer. We could probably call upon Saint Mungo's in case of a local emergency but when time is of the essence it is best to have at least two healers on hand. And since Poppy is not as young as she once was Luna will be dispatched out into the field to help stabilize and heal any and/or all witches and wizards injured during battle so that they can be transported to either the castle or Saint Mungo's. We are, of course, looking for additional teams. But for right now they are our first - second if you count Poppy and Severus."

Harry sat silently and thought this over for a moment then looked over at Dumbledore with a thoughtful expression on his face. "You said Ginny and I are supposed to be recruiting people to our side; where do you think we should begin?"

Albus frowned and bowed his head briefly before looking up into Harry's eyes. "Alas, my friend, I cannot tell you where to begin because where I would begin may not be a wise choice at this time."

"Where would you begin?" Harry asked.

"I would begin with the centaurs as they are the guardians on the Forbidden Forest and gaining their support can provide both you and us with innumerable opportunities. But, alas, they are no longer as friendly as they once were. I am afraid the events of the past year has put a strain on our relationship."

"Yeah," Harry said flatly, "Firenze said I might have a little trouble with Bane."

"He did?" Dumbledore asked, somewhat surprised by this revelation.

"Yeah, he said I might have to go all out and exercise all of my authority as Godric's heir to get through to him."

Dumbledore rested his elbows on the table and, placing the tips his fingers together in his usual posture of contemplation, studied Harry for several seconds. "Do you feel up to it?" he finally asked.

"I don't know," Harry admitted, "but I've got to try and I won't know if I feel up to it unless I do."

"Well said, Harry," Dumbledore said. "Well said. Have you set a date yet?"

"I was thinking about trying it after breakfast tomorrow."

Albus sat back in his chair and studied Harry carefully for several more seconds. "My thoughts will be with you, Harry. But I am afraid I will not be able to accompany you. I have business at the Order's headquarters that needs attending to and . . ."

Harry waved him off. "I understand," he said. "I'll do my best and let you know how it goes when you get back."

"Thank you," Dumbledore said then smiled thoughtfully to himself. "I look forward to your report."

"Do you have any suggestions as to where we might go next?" Harry asked.

Almost an hour later, after pouring over at least fifty more files, Harry heard Professor Dumbledore cluck with interest followed by his characteristic, "Ah!"

Harry glanced up. "Do you think you have something?" he asked.

"Possibly, quite possibly," the former Transfiguration professor said, laying the folder open on the table in front of him. "Come over here and tell me what you think."

Harry stood up and, upon realizing how stiff he had become while hunched over the stack of files, stretched. After getting all of the kinks out he walked over and stood beside the Headmaster and leader of The Order of the Phoenix and, resting his hands on the table, began studying the file that lay open before him. 'Mother's Name:' he read, 'Amanda Babcock. Occupation: Astrophysicist, Specializing in the study of Energy Signatures and Gravitational Anomalies.' He read the rest of the mother's information then moved on to the father's information. 'Father's Name: Robert Babcock. Occupation: Theoretical Physicist, Specializing in Energy Transfer and Black Hole Research.' Harry smiled and looked up into Professor Dumbledore's expectant eyes. "I don't pretend to understand what all this means he said, smiling. "But it sounds promising."

Harry looked up and scanned the room for Hermione to ask her opinion and finally found her clinging to the uppermost rungs of a ladder, examining a book on the shelf in front of her. "Hey, Hermione," he called. "Could you come down here for a minute. I think we may have found something and I want your opinion."

Hermione glanced down then looked immediately back up. "Sure, Harry," she said, a slight edge of nervousness in her voice. "I'll be right down." Harry smirked. So the great Hermione Granger is afraid of heights. He guessed that was alright, though. She had more than proven herself in other areas. She had the right to be afraid of something. After all, wasn't Ron afraid of spiders?

When Hermione reached the bottom of the ladder she let out a sigh of relief and walked over to stand beside Harry. "What have you got?" she asked.

Harry pushed the file over to her and pointed to the columns of parental information. Hermione studied them for several minutes then looked up and smiled. "Yes," she said. "I think these are the people we are looking for." Then, turning to Albus, said, "How do we go about contacting them and convincing them to help?"

"You let me worry about that," The aging professor said. "In the mean time I think it would be a good idea if one or all six of you were to befriend their daughter."

"What's her name?" Hermione asked.

Albus flipped back to the first page of the chart and scanned it briefly. "Her name is Andromeda Babcock. She is a first-year Ravenclaw. I will point her out to you upon my return Sunday evening."

At that moment Ron let out a triumphant "Ha! Check mate!" as Alastor scowled in defeat. "That was a good game, though," Ron said encouragingly.

"Same time next week." Alastor growled threateningly.

"You're on," Ron said with a smile, wiping the beads of perspiration from his brow. "I'll give you this though, Alastor, you're good. You are very good."

Moody grumbled something about being out of practice as he set his pieces up for their rematch the following week. Ron, however, gathered his pieces up and put them in their carrying case.

At breakfast the next morning Ron and Neville glanced over at Harry as Hermione and Ginny joined them at the Gryffindor Table. "So when are you going to go talk to Bane?" Ron asked.

"After breakfast," Harry mumbled.

"What's after breakfast?" Hermione asked.

"Nothing," Harry said too quickly.

"Harry," Hermione scolded. "If it's anything dangerous we're not going to let you do it"

"At least not alone," Ginny added.

Harry scowled and looked at his plate, thinking about what he was going to be doing that morning. Hermione had almost blown it for them at the end of the previous year when she had led himself and Dolores Umbridge into the forest and expected the centaurs to 'take care' of Umbridge. He already knew that the centaurs were not happy with Hagrid for bringing Grawp into the forest and that they had ostracized Firenze for helping humans. He didn't know how Dumbledore had gotten Umbridge away from the centaurs but he was fairly certain that they were not too pleased about that either. As he looked up at Neville, Ron, Hermione and Ginny in turn, taking in the looks of concern in their eyes and recognizing their desire to help, he new that he could not refuse them. He could warn them and explain about the possible dangers but he could not refuse them.

"Alright," he said finally. "I'm going down into the Forbidden Forest to meet with Bane. It will be dangerous and possibly even deadly but it is something I have to do." After explaining what he was going to do and why and outlining his concerns and the other possible dangers he fell silent and waited for the information to sink in before asking the one question he least wanted to ask. "So," he said softly, "do you still want to go?"

"You're my friend, mate," Ron said seriously. "We've been through too much together for me to back out now. I'm with you."

"Me too," Hermione nodded.

Ginny squeezed his arm and he turned to look into her eyes. "I won't let you do this without me, Harry Potter. We're a team and I won't let anyone or anything tear us apart. I know the risks and I'm willing to face them no matter what so long as you are by my side."

Harry looked into her confident and reassuring eyes and smiled. "Thank you," he said and nodded his head, satisfied that he had chosen his friends well and that they would stand by him no matter what.

Neville cleared his throat and said, "I'm with you too, Harry. I've only been down there once in first

year with you and Ron and Malfoy and it seems you make a habit of going into the forest at least once a year. If I'm going to be your dueling partner then I guess I had better get used to the idea of facing more than just my fears so I'm in too."

"What's going on?" Luna asked, stepping up behind Harry and Ginny.

"We're all going down into the Forbidden Forest after breakfast," Ginny whispered urgently. "Harry is going to try to talk to the centaurs and we are going along because we aren't going to let him do it alone."

Luna was silent for a few seconds then asked, "Does Albus know?"

Harry nodded his head. "Yes, he knows. He's worried about how they might react but he knows and has given it his approval."

"Well then you can count me in as well," Luna said forcefully, which surprised everyone, "because the six of us are a team and I will not be left out just because I'm in Ravenclaw."

Harry turned around and looked up at Luna who was standing resolutely with her hands on her hips. "I wouldn't dream of leaving you out, Luna. Least of all because you are in Ravenclaw."

After breakfast they left the castle and, by agreement, headed towards Hagrid's cabin to say hello to their friend before venturing into the forest. The sky was clear and the sun provided them with some welcoming warmth as they crossed the lawns on their way to Hagrid's hut and in the distance Harry could see several people flying over the quidditch pitch. "I wonder who that could be," he mused out loud.

"What?" Ron asked.

"Huh?" Harry said, shaking his head. Then, realizing what he had said, said, "I was just wondering who was flying over the quidditch pitch."

Ron thought for a moment then said, "That would be Huffelpuff. All the tryouts are being held on one day this year due to the heightened security. Huffelpuff gets the early morning slot then comes Slytherin, Ravenclaw and Gryffindor."

"Why are we last?" Harry asked.

"I dunno. Luck of the draw I guess. Anyway, each team gets three hours."

"Luck of the draw," Harry groaned. "Oh, Filch will love that."

Ron snickered. "Yeah, he probably will at that. He won't be able to bust us, though, because we have permission to be out until the tryouts are over."

As they approached Hagrid's cabin Fang, Hagrid's giant boarhound, started barking and they looked up just in time to see the giant black dog bounding across the lawn towards them. Harry's eyes widened as he had less that a second to brace for impact before Fang jumped and hit him in the chest with the force of a small locomotive.

Harry fell back and instinctively rolled several times so that for a time it was hard to tell where dog

ended and boy began. When they finally stopped Harry was sitting with his legs splayed out in front of him and Fang was excitedly licking his face. "It’s good to see you too, Fang," Harry laughed as he struggled to push the enormous dog away.

At that moment Hagrid came running around the end of his cabin nearest his vegetable patch looking panicked and calling out for Fang. "Fang! Fang! Where are ye', Fang?"

Hermione and Ginny called Hagrid over, as Ron was too busy rolling on the ground, struggling for breath between gales of laughter at the sight of Harry being body tackled by a boarhound. Neville and Luna, who were still ignorant of the special bond between Harry and Fang, stood back and watched, confused as to what, if anything, they should be doing. "He’s over here, Hagrid," Ginny and Hermione called out between fits of laughter. "He’s just tackled Harry."

Hagrid trotted over and stopped beside to the two girls. When he saw Harry’s predicament he started laughing as well. "Well o' course he has," he laughed. "He’s been a migh' worried 'bout ye', Harry. Its no' ev’ry day a wizard goes up agains' twenty-three death eaters and lives to tell abou' it.

"Come 'ere, Fang," Hagrid said stepping forward and pulling his dog off of Harry so he could stand up.

"Thanks, Hagrid," Harry said, standing up and scratching behind the boarhound’s ears before straightening his robes.

"So how ye' feelin', Harry? I don' mind tellin' ye' tha' we were all kinda worried 'bout ye' fer a while there."

"I’m all right, I guess," Harry said, brushing the last of the grass off of his shoulders. "All I can really tell you about the attack, though, is that it wasn’t exactly a walk in the park."

"Yeah, tha’s wha' I been hearin'. I still don' know how ye' did it, though.

"So wha' brings ye' down here anyway? Professor Dumbledore 'splained why ye' aren' takin' Care o' Magical Creatures this year, so I un’erstan' tha' . . ."

"How’s Grawp?" Hermione asked suddenly.

The effect was immediate. Hagrid’s smile was wiped from his face and replaced by a frown and the sparkle in his eyes was replaced by an expression of sadness and loss that bordered on devastation. If Harry didn’t already know that magic would bounce off of him he would have sworn that Hagrid had been hit by a sadness curse. Hagrid looked down and studied his massive hands for a full minute before looking up and saying one word. "Dead."

"Dead? what do you mean dead?" Hermione gasped.

"The centaurs was kinda upse' when he broke loose las' year so they killed 'im," Hagrid said solemnly. "Murderin' scum," he growled. "An' now they won' even let me int' th' fores' t' see his body an give 'im a proper burial."

"Oh, I’m so sorry," Hermione said sympathetically. "Is there anything we can do to help?"

"No' unless ye' can bring 'im back t' life," Hagrid said gloomily. Then brightening he said, "But tha’s

enough o' that. What I'd like ter know is what yer doing down here. It ain' safe in the fores' any more so I hope yer not thinkin' o' goin' in there."

"That's exactly what we're doing," Harry said softly.

"Wha'?" Hagrid cried. "Have ye' los' yer min's? Its dangerous in there! I won' even go in there any more!"

Harry looked fiercely up at his first friend in the wizarding world and said, "I have to, Hagrid. I have to talk to Bane. These five don't have to go but they want to. I, however, have no choice."

Hagrid looked down at Harry and studied his face for several seconds then said, "Alrigh'. But if ye' ge' in trouble I wan' ye' t' send up some red sparks. If those centaurs hur' any o' ye' I'll teach 'em wha' fer."

Smiling grimly, Harry nodded his head. "Thanks, Hagrid," he said. "I don't think that will be necessary; but thank you anyway."

The trip into the Forbidden Forest started out innocently enough: The trees gradually blocked out all light which, even with their wands lit, left them stumbling through an oppressive gloom and the tree roots, brambles, briars and low lying bushes made walking difficult. But before long a more sinister feeling of being watched began to fill the air around them. At one point, almost fifteen minutes into their journey, Ron tripped over a tree root and fell. He had screamed and stumbled back against a tree sputtering nervously about spiders and Hermione had comforted him, taking his hand and gently reassuring him that she would take care of the spiders.

Ron breathed a labored sigh of relief and nodded his head resolutely. "I'm not forcing you to come you know," Harry said with just the right amount of concern in his voice to let Ron know that he was not mocking him. "You can go back if you want to."

"No," Ron said nervously. Then, setting his jaw, stated, "We're your friends, Harry. Where you lead we follow."

Several minutes later they entered a dimly lit clearing and Harry said, "This is it. Put your wands away."

"What?" Ron asked incredulously.

"I said wands away. We came here to talk not to fight and I don't want then feeling threatened in any way," Harry said as he made a show of tucking his wand away in an inner pocket of his robes.

When they reached the center of the clearing he stopped and took hold of Ginny's hand. "Alright," Harry said softly. "Stop. I want a defensive posture so backs together facing out." The others didn't need to be told twice and immediately formed a defensive circle. Harry then cleared his throat and called out, "Bane! I know you're there, Bane! We've put our wands away so there is no danger. All we want to do is talk."

At that moment an arrow flew through the air and stuck in the ground at Harry's feet. As it stood, quivering from the force of impact, a small army of centaurs emerged from the surrounding trees, bows drawn and arrows notched. Harry heard Hermione's gasp and Ron's gulp and felt Ginny shivering beside him. In the gloom Harry watched as the familiar figure of Bane stepped forward

and walked up to stand directly in front of him. "You are not welcome here, human!" the centaur said menacingly. "This is our forest and we did not invite you here. Leave now and you may live. Refuse and you will die."

With that Bane turned his back on Harry and started to walk away. "Don't turn your back on me, Bane," Harry threatened and the others could feel the waves of magical energy beginning pour off of Harry. "We came here to talk and I am not leaving until I have said my piece."

Bane stopped but did not turn around. "I told you to leave, human. If you wish to die that is your affair."

Bane was about to take another step away from Harry when a sudden bolt of lightning struck the ground a little more than a meter in front of him. As the crack of thunder died away Harry raised his voice and said, "I told you not to turn your back to me, Bane! I came here to talk. We can do it the easy way or, if you insist upon being as stubborn as your ancestors, we can do it the hard way. The choice is yours."

Bane spun around and glared at Harry. "LEAVE THIS FOREST NOW, HUMAN!" he bellowed.

The clearing and the surrounding area was suddenly filled with lightning strikes. The ground was upturned and several trees were reduced to kindling but amazingly no one was either hurt or injured. The violence and noise went on for almost a minute. Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Neville and Luna were covering their ears and screaming for it to stop and several of the centaurs were glancing nervously around at each other As if wondering what they should do. Harry and Bane, however, simply glared at each other. Finally, when it was evident that Harry was not going to stop until he gave in, Bane flinched and Harry relaxed. The thunder and lightning stopped and the two stood facing each other for several more tense seconds, hatred and loathing burning brightly in Bane's eyes. Then, as he motioned for his warriors to lower their weapons, Bane stepped tensely forward and said, "Say your piece, human. I can make no guarantees but we will listen.

Harry could hear the others let out audible sighs of relief. "Oh, you'll do more than that," Harry threatened, "or I swear I will destroy this forest."

Bane looked into Harry's eyes and seemed to study the look of grim determination that was etched on the young man's face then nodded. "We will listen," he said.

Harry relaxed a bit more and unclenched the fists he didn't know he had formed. "My guess is that you know that Voldemort has returned," Harry began.

Bane nodded.

"I am here to tell you, Bane, that we are going to fight him with everything we've got and do everything in our power to bring him down once and for all. I would like to be able to count you and the rest of the centaurs among our allies."

Bane thought for a moment then asked, "And why should we ally ourselves with you?"

Harry looked slightly stunned for a moment then quickly regained his composure. "Do you remember that Umbridge woman from last year?"

"Yes," Bane nodded, disdain and disgust dripping from the tone of his voice.

"Her attitude is very similar to that of Voldemort and his followers. They do not think that anyone who is not a full-blooded wizard should even have the right to exist. They want to destroy everyone and every thing they deem unworthy. This includes centaurs."

"I'm listening," Bane said, seeming to relax a bit.

Harry thought for a moment then decided to draw upon several of the experiences he had had during his Maturo Auctus. "Almost every civilization and society," he began, "has established a set of guidelines for what it considers to be acceptable behavior. Most people do not recognize them as such and many will go so far as to deny that they even exist. For those who are willing to acknowledge their existence, however, most will strive to justify them in some way so that they will not have to change their ways.

"For lack of a better term I call these unwritten rules 'formalities.' When some people are confronted by something that does not conform to their expectations of what is proper and right they will flee from it and try to get away. These people are usually harmless and wind up only hurting themselves by gradually closing themselves off from the greater possibilities the world has to offer. Others will lash out and try to destroy those things they deem as being either unacceptable or abominations. These people are the dangerous ones. Rather than trying to learn from that which they do not understand and gaining from their experiences they would rather destroy the things they view as unacceptable or abnormal and deny that they ever existed.

"Some of these people are fueled by the simple fear of the unknown while others are fueled by hatred, anger and rage. Indeed, some are even fueled by a mixture of motives. Now, I cannot guarantee that everyone on our side will accept you as you are and respect your rights as centaurs and members of the magical community but I think it is safe to say that many, if not most, of Voldemort's supporters would rather see you and your kind destroyed. I cannot offer you a peaceful resolution to all of your troubles but if you will fight with us - on our side - and if we win I can guarantee you a chance. Our two races may never peacefully coexist but with your help I would like to think that we have an opportunity to give peace a chance."

Bane looked Harry up and down, critically studying him for several seconds, as he thought about what Harry had said then nodded. "You speak well, human, and we accept. We will be your allies in this war. But tell me, by whose authority do you do these things and speak these words?"

Harry smiled and raised his hand into the air. "As the Heir of Gryffindor I do and say these things by the authority vested in me by my ancestors." A blinding sliver shaft of light suddenly appeared, extending up and out from his outstretched hand. When it disappeared Harry was holding the hilt of the Sword of Gryffindor. He turned it over and buried the tip of the sword in the ground between himself and Bane. "With your permission, sir," he said bowing slightly to Bane, "I ask that we might grasp the hilt of my sword as comrades in arms and future friends."

Bane looked at Harry who was watching him with a mixture of confidence and hopeful determination. Hesitantly at first he reached out and placed his hand on the hilt of Harry's sword. Harry then placed his other hand on top of Bane's and smiled up at the centaur. Bane slowly placed his other hand on top of Harry's and nodded. "How may we serve," he asked.

"As equals and, hopefully, as friends," Harry said confidently.

"Yes," Bane said as he looked into Harry's emerald green eyes, "as equals and as friends." Then, as

the two warriors removed their hands from the sword, Bane said, "You are a brave man, Harry Potter, and I am proud to call you friend. Is there anything we can do for you that will make your task easier?"

Harry thought for a moment then said, "My friends and I will need to get to know everything we can about both you and your abilities so that we can include you in our plans. Myself, and these five will need to meet with you on a regular basis so that we can get to know one another. I would like it if we could arrange regular meetings for this purpose."

Bane nodded thoughtfully. "It will be done. Is there anything else?"

Harry sighed. "I suppose you know Hagrid is heartbroken about his brother . . ."

Bane nodded.

"Is there any possibility you could let him in to bury his remains?"

Bane scowled darkly for a moment then said, "It will be done."

Harry and Bane then shook hands and as Harry pulled the tip of his sword out of the ground Bane walked back to the edge of the clearing and motioned for his warriors to follow.

Chapter 22. Lunch with Ginny, Mark Evans, Quidditch and The Prophecy

As they walked out of the forest, Harry with the Sword of Gryffindor resting on his shoulder and Ron, Hermione, Neville, Luna and Ginny with their wands out and lit, Ron said, "You were right, Harry. I didn't want to know what Firenze meant when he said you would have to exercise all of your authority as the Heir of Gryffindor to get Bane's attention. If I had known you were going to do that lightning thing I would have stayed home."

Harry mumbled something about not knowing what he would have to do until the last minute and continued walking, only glancing up every now and again to make sure they were on the right path. Hermione stayed close to Ron and Ginny stayed close to Harry while Neville and Luna brought up the rear, Neville with his wand drawn continually scanning for signs of trouble. Every so often Hermione and Ginny would exchange furtive glances of concern as they recognized the symptoms of Harry starting to shut down and withdraw into a self-imposed cocoon of isolation.

As they were nearing the edge of the forest and drew within sight of Hagrid's cabin Ginny extinguished her wand and took hold of Harry's free hand. "Are you alright?" she asked.

Harry looked into her eyes and nodded. "Yeah," he sighed. "I'm fine. I just need a little rest. I've got to get this sword back up into the library and then I'm going to go lay down and take a nap."

At the sound of Fang's excided barking Harry stopped and looked tiredly up at the rapidly approaching dog. Ron and Neville, realizing that their friend probably couldn't handle another body tackle from the boarhound just now, stepped in front of Harry and braced themselves for impact. When it came they wavered slightly but held their ground as Fang crumpled at their feet. Hagrid came running up a few seconds later with an expectant smile on his face but when he saw how tired Harry looked he looked from Ron and Neville to Hermione, Ginny and Luna searching for an explanation. "Tired," Ginny finally said, looking up into the friendly half-giant's face.

"Yeah," Ron added. "That lightning storm took a lot out of him."

Hagrid, who was now scratching Fang behind the ears, stopped and looked at Harry with an awed expression on his face. "Tha' was you?" he asked.

Harry looked up at his old friend and nodded. "Yeah," he whispered, "that was me. He wasn't listening so I had to let him know that I meant business."

Hagrid shook his head. "Bu' a lightning storm? On a day like this? You scared the studen's and mos' o' the teachers. They almos' canceled quidditch tryouts. I don' know wha' they woulda done if it had gone on much longer."

Harry lowered the sword, burying its point in the ground, and leaned on it for support. "Sorry about that," Harry shrugged. "I didn't mean to scare anyone but Bane . . . I guess it got a little out of hand."

"A little out of hand?" Ron laughed nervously. You should see what's left of that clearing!"

Hermione elbowed Ron in the ribs who looked at her in disbelief. "What?" he asked. "I'm going to

have to go change my robes before I go in for lunch."

Harry laughed softly at this. "Sorry about that, Ron." "That's okay, mate," Ron said as a blush rose into his cheeks, "You were successful and that's all that matters."

"You were successful then?" Hagrid asked.

"Yeah," Harry sighed again. "We were successful."

"And that's not all," Hermione said. "Harry got Bane to agree to let you go in and bury Grawp."

A tear came into Hagrid's eye. "Than' you," he said.

"Yeah," Harry said softly. "I wouldn't go running in there right away if I were you, though. They're still a little upset so I think you should wait until they come to you."

"I will," Hagrid said. Then, noticing the sword Harry was leaning on, asked, "Where'd ye' get th' sticker?"

"Dumbledore's office," Harry said simply.

"Bu' . . ." Hagrid was about to say that they hadn't had it with them earlier when he saw Ginny shaking her head and stopped. Then, looking up at the sky to check the position of the sun, said, "They should be goin' in ter eat in a bi'. If ye' wan' to ye' can wai' in m' cabin."

Harry thanked him and Ron stepped over and slipped his arm under Harry's free shoulder. Harry looked up into Ron's eyes and wordlessly thanked him with a small smile. Ginny took the sword from his other hand and carried it up to Hagrid's cabin where they stopped and waited, resting on the steps, until the other students had gone in for lunch.

Walking up to the castle several minutes later, once more in possession of his sword, Harry said, "You guys go on in. I'm just going to take this up to the library and then head back to the dorm."

"Oh no you don't," Ginny said pointedly. "I'm going with you and you are going to eat. Then I'll take you back to the dorm."

"Told you she was just like Mum," Ron snickered.

Ginny glared at her brother. "You be careful, buster, or I'll hex you into next week," she growled. Then turning to Hermione said, "Hermione, could you tell Dobby that Harry is very weak and tired and have him bring two orders of whatever Harry is having up to the Headmaster's Library?"

Hermione said she would in a tone that suggested she really didn't want to cross Mrs. Weasley's daughter. Harry just shook his head and, laughing softly to himself, started walking towards the main stairs. "What's so funny?" Ginny scolded when she caught up with Harry at the base of the marble steps.

Harry smiled and, shaking with a mountain of suppressed laughter born of fatigue, looked at her and said, "He's right, you know. You are a lot like your mum."

Ginny stopped and stared at him for several seconds. "Now you listen to me, Harry Potter, I'll have you know that the Weasley women may be strict from time to time but its only because we have the

best interests of our men at heart."

This was too much for Harry and he had to sit down to keep from falling over he was laughing so hard. Ginny stood in front of him with her hands on her hips glaring at him. Every time Harry looked up at her he burst out laughing again. Ginny finally relented and walked over to sit next to him. "I'm sorry, Gin," he gasped. "To hear it is one thing but to see it is almost too much." They sat on the stairs and laughed for several minutes, earning more than just a few curious glances from the students in the Great Hall, before picking themselves up and headed off to the Headmaster's Office.

They were still laughing when they reached the entrance to the headmaster's office where the gargoyle sprung aside to let them enter. At the top of the stairs they entered the outer office and then the private library.

Harry carefully replaced the sword and turned to look at Ginny who was standing on the far side of a small circular table that Dobby had apparently set up off to one side. The table was set for two with a single white candle set in a golden base burning brightly in the center. Ginny smirked. "It looks like Dobby is a romantic."

Harry stumbled away from the larger table and looked apprehensively at the arrangement, remembering his experience with Cho Chang in Hogsmead the previous year. "Er . . . yeah," he said at last, uncertain as to what he should say or do.

"Well," Ginny said, smiling sweetly. "Shall we?"

"Er . . . yeah. I guess," Harry said as he cautiously approached the smaller table.

"It's not going to bite you," Ginny laughed as she watched Harry's guarded approach.

"It's not the table I'm worried about," Harry said glancing up at Ginny.

"Oh. Well, I won't bite you either," Ginny said lightly, not realizing that that was exactly what Harry was afraid of.

After they had seated themselves and started eating Harry made several attempts at small talk but failed miserably. Finally, after exhausting all other possible topics of conversation that he felt comfortable with he said, "Ginny?"

"Mmm?"

"Erm . . . Albus and I were talking the other night and he seems to think you are going to be the one to teach me how to harness and use the power of love."

Startled, Ginny looked up and watched Harry as he made his confession.

For his part, Harry shifted uneasily in his chair and played with his food while he summoned up the courage to continue. "Er . . . um . . . What I mean to say is . . . um . . ." Looking across the table into her eyes he silently pleaded with her to understand what he was trying to say. "I mean, I already know how I feel about you and I have a feeling you feel the same way about me. I have been calling it love because it feels so right and I don't know what else to call it. The problem is that I really don't know if it is love or not; I mean, the Dursleys didn't exactly teach me anything about it

and . . ." he trailed off, looking nervously over at the beautiful girl sitting across from him.

Ginny smiled pleasantly and reached out, taking hold of his hands which were now fidgeting nervously with his napkin, much the same as his aunt Petunia had done earlier that summer and for a moment Harry could not help but wonder if he had inherited that from his mother as well as his eyes. "It is love, Harry," Ginny said softly. "I've felt it and I've known that feeling for years. What you are feeling is love at its most magical. What else did Albus tell you?"

Harry let out a sigh of relief then, gently taking hold of Ginny's hands and rubbing the backs of them with his thumbs, looked into her eyes and whispered, "I love you, Ginny Weasley," before dropping his eyes and continuing his confession.

"He told me not to force or rush into anything because he said that for it to work it would have to come naturally and be freely given. He told me that it had to come from the heart - your heart - or it wouldn't work." Harry stopped and looked up at Ginny who was still watching him then went back to playing with his food. "The thing is, is that I really don't know anything about love. I mean, like I said, the Dursley's didn't exactly teach me anything about it and I've never really had a girlfriend or anything so, um, if you want to go ahead with this thing then I'm going to have to ask you to please go easy on me.

"I know I've been pretty much of a prat over the past few years but - and I'm not trying to make excuses or anything - but it hasn't really been all that easy. I mean, I learned a lot about myself in my Maturo Auctus but I still have to learn how to love someone. I'm not good at it and to be quite honest with you it frightens me. I can take on basilisks, centaurs, dragons and Death Eaters without batting an eye but love . . ." Harry glanced up briefly. "It scares the heck out of me, Ginny. So if it's all the same to you I would like to take it slow and easy. Like I said, I want to get to know you for who you are on the inside; but I'm afraid . . ."

Ginny reached out and took hold Harry's hands again. Harry looked up, startled. "I understand, Harry," Ginny said softly. "I understand." And something in her eyes told him that she really did understand and that she would patiently guide him through what lay ahead.

For the next several hours they ate slowly, talked about their lives, joking about some of their misadventures, laughing at some of Fred and George's pranks and generally getting to know one another. They had lost all track of time when Dobby and Winky suddenly appeared beside their table. "Er, . . . Harry, Ginny," the faithful house elves squeaked.

Harry and Ginny both stopped laughing at the story Harry had been telling about one of the pranks the Marauders had pulled on a group of Slytherins and turned towards their friends, surprised at their presence but neither angry or upset in any way. "What can we do for you?" Ginny asked.

"Do for us?" Winky squeaked in surprise.

"Nothing, Ginny! Nothing," Dobby added. "Dobby and Winky is just here to tell you that it is nearly five o'clock and time for dinner."

"Would you like to eat here or will you be eating in the Great Hall?" Winky asked.

Harry and Ginny looked at each other for a moment then Ginny turned back to the two house elves. "Would it be too much trouble if we ate up here?" she asked.

"No, Ginny," Winky said confidently. "Winky and Dobby is glad Ginny and Harry is finally getting some time alone," Winky said boldly.

Harry was slightly taken aback by this revelation but quickly recovered. "Winky, Dobby?" he asked, "since we will be eating up here this evening could you please come and get us at about a quarter to six, and bring our brooms? We have quidditch try outs at six and we really don't want to miss them."

Winky and Dobby both nodded their heads vigorously and five minutes later, after taking their orders and returning to the kitchens to prepare their meals, the two house elves were back with two steaming plates of their master and mistress' specially prepared dinners. Even though neither of them would ever admit it to either Ron or Hermione, Harry and Ginny were both secretly glad that they could eat dinner in private and Harry decided that he might be taking advantage of the fact that he had a fully furnished Wizard's Kitchen in his trunk sometime in the not too distant future. A candlelit dinner at sunset with a view from the top of the Astronomy Tower sounded like just the thing to get their relationship off the ground and the privacy of his trunk would give them time to get to know one another and work their way through whatever issues might come up, away from the prying eyes of their friends and classmates.

At fifteen minutes to six, after another forty-five minutes of delightful and enlightening conversation, Dobby and Winky appeared with Harry and Ginny's brooms in hand. After thanking their friends for the wonderful dinner and for bringing their brooms Harry and Ginny left the library and then the Headmaster's Office. A dark haired student Harry didn't recognize at first - a first-year by the looks of him - was walking past as they exited the hidden stairs. Upon second glance, however, he thought he recognized the boy from, of all places, Little Whinging. "Mark?" he asked. "Mark Evans?"

The skinny boy turned quickly around and looked at Harry, his hazel eyes bulging slightly and his mouth falling open in surprised recognition. "Harry Potter?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah," Harry said brightly. "I don't need to ask why you are here but, what house are you in?"

"I'm in Gryffindor," Mark said proudly.

Harry glanced at Ginny, who looked mildly surprised that Harry and Mark seemed to know each other, for confirmation. Ginny nodded her head then asked, "Do you two know each other?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah. Unfortunately for Mark, he was one of Dudley's punching bags last year."

Ginny winced. "Oh, I'm sorry, Mark," she said.

Mark looked down at his shoes and shuffled his feet. "That's alright," he said. "I understand 'Big D' and his parents died in an accident on the road to London last month."

A suit of armor snapped to attention as they passed and Harry scowled at it briefly before responding to Mark's unasked question. "I don't think if was an accident, Mark," Harry said dismally. "I think it was murder."

"Murder?" Mark asked, astonished.

"Yeah," Harry said sollemly. "You see, there are some pretty bad wizards out there who have trying to kill me essentially since the day I was born. They'd already killed my parents, a friend and my Godfather trying to get to me and the only way they could get to me at the Dursleys' was to kill my aunt. The reason I think it was murder is because as soon as the protective wards came down twenty-tree Death Eaters attacked the house and I had to run for it."

They were now walking down a staircase that was notorious for sending people in the wrong direction but which was currently taking them on a direct route to the Entrance Hall. "Is that what that standing ovation was for at the Welcoming Feast?" Mark asked.

Harry grimaced but nodded. "Yeah. Some friends and I developed a rebounding charm over the summer that is effective against the killing and pain curses and, if our research is correct, every spell ever invented and I was the first to test it in an actual combat situation."

"Oh," Mark said softly. Then brightening, said, "Say, do you mind if I write a letter home and tell my parents that you don't go to Saint Bruno's?"

Harry laughed and said, "Sure. You can also tell them that my friends and I will be here for you if you should ever need any help."

"Hey, thanks!" Mark said excitedly. "For a while there I was afraid I wasn't going to make any friends."

"What about your dorm mates?" Ginny asked.

Marked shrugged his shoulders. "Yeah, there's them; but there are only three of them and they aren't very exciting."

Harry smirked at Ginny then looked back at Mark and said, "Mark, this if my girlfriend, Ginny Weasley. She has a pair of twin brothers I think you should meet."

Ginny almost choked as she started laughing at what she felt sure Harry had planned.

Mark looked up worriedly. "What?" he asked.

Harry smiled and said, "Fred and George are a couple of pranksters the likes of which Hogwarts hasn't seen since my father's day. I just think it might be a good idea if you met them and started building a reputation for yourself."

"Harry!" Ginny said in mock outrage. "What would Albus say if he knew you were contributing to the delinquency of a minor?"

Harry looked up innocently. "What?" he said. "All he said is that he drew the line at the destruction of school property. Besides, with everything Remus told Neville and me this summer, creative pranking is a sure way to catch your enemies off guard. And besides, it could easily lead to a career as a Spell Crafter."

Ginny was silent for several seconds then nodded her head. "Yes. I can see where that might be useful."

As they were walking across the Entrance Hall Harry asked, "So what are you up to today, Mark?"

"Oh, I was just out exploring, finding my way around really. Why?"

"Well I was just thinking that since Ginny and I have quidditch try outs in a few minutes you might want to come down and watch for a while."

Mark's face immediately brightened. "Can I? Is it allowed?" he asked excitedly.

Harry and Ginny both smiled and nodded then Harry added, "Since I'm one of the captains I think we can allow it."

"Brilliant!" Mark almost shouted. "I've never seen a quidditch game before. Is it fun?" Harry and Ginny both laughed. "It's the most excellent game in the world," Harry said enthusiastically.

As they were approaching the pitch Ginny took hold of one of Harry's hands. "Are you going to be alright," she asked. "I mean you were going to take a nap after all and I kept you up all afternoon."

Harry grinned. "I'll be fine," he said softly, try not to let Mark hear. "Most of it is the company I keep but the way Albus explained it, because of who I am I have a special kind of relationship with the castle and I am able to draw energy from its reserves."

"Cool," Ginny said.

"What's cool?" Hermione asked, coming up behind the three.

"Oh, nothing," Harry said with a sidelong glance at Mark. "I'll tell you later." Then turning to Mark he said, "Mark, I'd like you to meet Hermione Granger. She's the smartest witch in our class if not in the entire school, and she is one of the Gryffindor sixth-year prefects. Hermione, I'd like you to meet Mark Evans. Mark is from Little Whinging and, unfortunately for him, was one of Dudley's punching bags last year."

"Evans?" Hermione asked, shifting the book she was carrying to her other hand so that she could shake Mark's hand.

"Yes," Mark said, mildly surprised at Hermione's interest in his last name. "Why?"

"Do you think it's possible?" Hermione asked, looking between Harry and Mark. "I mean, I know it's a long shot but do you think you two could be related?"

Harry shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. I never thought about it before but I guess it's possible."

"Are you an Evans?" Mark asked, looking suspiciously up at Harry.

"My mum's maiden name was Evans so, yeah, I guess you could say I'm an Evans."

"Really? My dad's really into that genealogy stuff so I'll ask him. What was your mother's name?"

"Oi! Harry, Ginny!" Ron called from the center of the pitch. "Come on! We've got try outs!"

As Harry and Ginny mounted their brooms Harry turned to Mark and said, "All I know about my mother's side of the family is that my Mother's name was Lily and my aunt's name was Petunia. Sorry, Mark, but I gotta go."

As Harry and Ginny rose into the air and the wind began whipping through his hair Harry felt the familiar thrill of freedom and rush of adrenalin that had always accompanied him on his flights. He smiled over at Ginny, who smiled back, then, nodding in silent agreement, turned his attention to his Firebolt and shot up into the sky.

This was freedom! There was no other way to describe it. It was pure, unadulterated freedom. Harry shot high up into the air, pushing his broom to its limits, and then turned around and, performing a twisting, spiraling dive, drove his broom back down to the uppermost reaches of the playing field before dropping into a steep, vertical dive reminiscent of the Wronski Feint. With mere centimeters to spare he pulled out of the dive, the toes of his shoes gently brushing the grass as he skimmed the surface, then soared back up and did several loops around the pitch, spinning, swirling and twisting all the while. On his third pass he noticed a single, solitary figure, a familiar face really, sitting in the Ravenclaw section. He flew over and stopped, hovering a few meters in front of her. "Luna?" he asked.

Luna smiled. "Hi, Harry. You're really very good you know."

Harry blushed slightly. "Thanks, Luna." The smile on his face from flying was almost frozen on his face. "What are you doing here?"

"Watching."

"Neville?" Harry asked.

Luna nodded shyly as a smile and blush spread across her face.

"Alright then," Harry said brightly. "I'll see you around."

The tryouts went amazingly well considering they only had three hours to audition thirty people. Ron only let one goal through the entire time and that had been on one of Ginny's stalling approaches where she had flown in at an angle and stalled in front of the goal while Ron, trying to anticipate her move, had flown just enough out of her way to let her score. Ron had screamed in frustration and Ginny had laughed, teasing him by calling out that she knew him too well as she flew back out to join her teammates.

Harry scared almost everyone buy diving through the players at breakneck speeds to catch the muggle golf balls that were being thrown for the Seekers. He and Ginny had each caught every ball that had been thrown for them. The next closest Seeker was Dennis Creevey who had caught eighty percent of his.

Of those who were trying out for the Beater positions, however, Neville proved to be the most determined as well as the most lethally accurate. Neville unseated several players, who had been rescued by Madam Hooch and Professor McGonagall, and disrupted more Chaser formations than anyone else. He even helped his team's keeper a few times by knocking the Quaffel out of the hands of approaching chasers. Ron was secretly glad that Neville was on his team in the final game - they played three, short elimination games to give everyone a chance to play - because of the beatings the other Keepers had taken from Neville's Bludgers.

When it was all over Ron walked over to Neville, who was being congratulated by Harry and Ginny on his excellent showing, and said, "Fred and George would be proud, Neville. I don't know where

you got it from but I’m impressed."

"Thanks," Neville said, smiling. "I just needed a little motivation to bring out the Beater in me."

At that moment Hermione walked up and started talking to Ron as Luna ran over from the Ravenclaw stands and tapped Neville on the shoulder. "Hi, Neville," she said. "I was watching you from the stands and you were really good."

"Erm . . . Thanks," Neville said glancing uncertainly up at Harry as a blush started to fill his cheeks. Harry just smiled and nodded his encouragement.

"Can we talk?" Luna asked.

"Erm . . . Sure," Neville said bashfully.

"We’ll see you later," Harry said and motioned for Ron, Hermione and Ginny to follow him up to the castle so Neville and Luna could be alone. "Don’t be too long, though, or Filch will have a fit."

"Yeah, thanks," Neville said.

Half an hour later Harry glanced up from the game of chess Ron and Hermione were playing as Neville walked through the portrait hole. "I’ll be right back," he said, squeezing Ginny’s hand as he stood up. Walking over to Neville he smiled and said, "How’s it going, Neville?"

Neville, who looked to be on cloud nine, just smiled and said, "She likes me. She actually likes me."

"Er . . . good," Harry said. "I’m really happy for you, Neville, but we need to talk."

Snapping out of his reverie Neville looked at Harry and said, "Huh? What?"

"We need to talk," Harry said urgently and pulled Neville over to their table. Then, glancing around the common room and seeing how crowded it was said, "Maybe we had better go up to my trunk for this."

Looking curiously up at Harry Ron, Hermione and Ginny could see the tension on his face and seemed to sense Harry’s urgent need to talk to the four of them alone and in private. So, levitating the chessboard in front of them, Ron, Hermione, Neville and Ginny followed Harry up into the sixth-year boys' dormitory.

When Harry opened the seventh chamber of his trunk the other four looked down and their jaws dropped in amazement. "Wow," Ron said, as his eyes grew round. "Nice trunk, Harry."

Harry sniffed. "Yeah, right. It’s only nice if I use it."

Leading the way down into his private quarters Harry descended the ladder and levitated Ron and Hermione’s chess game down onto one of the nearby tables and waited as the others scrambled down the latter. As Neville was the las one down Harry called up to him and said, "Hey, Neville, could you close the lid, please. This is kind of important and I don’t want anyone knowing who doesn’t have to."

Neville nodded and pulled the lid closed as he descended the ladder. As soon as the lid was down a soft, warm glow filled the rooms and the light adjusted to a comfortable level for all. When they

were all safely down Ron looked around and said, "Whoa, Harry! Where'd you get all this stuff?"

Harry shrugged his shoulders. "Dobby says most of it is from the Potter Family Vault," he said noncommittally. "I didn't even know the Potters had a family vault so I really don't know."

Walking over to the chess table Ron looked at the pieces and gasped. "These are antiques, Harry!" Then, picking up one of the pawns and inspecting its base, said, "Not only that but they are Checkman originals. They must be at least five hundred years old!"

Harry sighed. "Yeah, fine, Ron. I didn't bring you down here to brag. I'll give you a tour later but right now we need to talk."

When they were all seated comfortably in one corner of the sitting room Harry cast an extra privacy charm on the trunk so that Neither Dean nor Seamus could hear them if they should enter the room while they were talking.

As he was about to begin speaking Dobby and Winky appeared out of nowhere and asked if they could get them anything to drink. After goblets of pumpkin juice and water were distributed Harry and Ginny shook their heads at their faithful companions and friends before turning their attention to the more serious matters at hand.

When Ron, Hermione, Ginny and Neville were all looking at him Harry inhaled deeply and said, "I had a little talk with Snape last week, Neville, and he asked me to explain something to you." Harry hesitated as he tried to gauge the reaction he would get from Neville upon hearing that Snape was a former Death Eater. When he realized that he didn't really know Neville well enough to know how he would react he decided to plunge ahead and hope for the best. "Neville, Professor Snape is a former Death Eater." Watching Neville's face for any signs of action or reaction Harry saw the first signs of anger boiling to the surface. Reaching across the table to stem the flow of anger Harry quickly added, "Before you get all excited, Neville, let me explain. Snape is spying for our side and Dumbledore trusts him. He is in a difficult situation and I honestly think he is beginning to regret some of the choices he's made. The reason he is so hard on us - you and me in particular - is because he cannot afford to blow his cover. I think he suspects some of the Slytherins may be spying on him and since our parents were, as he said, 'formidable forces in their day' he cannot afford to let anyone think he favors us in any way. In fact, I am almost certain he would be reported if he showed anything short of contempt for us. He doesn't really have anything against either of us personally but it's the position he's in that makes him have to treat us the way he does.

"He wanted me to explain that to you so that you will at least begin to understand where he is coming from."

Harry watched Neville's face and breathed an inner sigh of relief when he saw the anger begin to dissipate and drain away. "He's a good actor, then," Neville said quietly.

"Oh, it's not all an act," Harry reassured him. "A lot of it is genuine but that's just who he is."

"Is that all then?" Neville asked hottly, starting to stand up.

"No it's not," Harry said quickly. "There's more. There's a lot more."

Neville sat back down and looked around the table at the close-knit circle of friends. "Alright," he

said. "Go on."

Harry looked apprehensively around at his closest friends and then back at Neville. He hadn't told anyone the full prophecy yet and he didn't know how they would react. "Alright," he sighed. "I guess the best place to begin is with the prophecy."

"How much of it do you know?" Neville asked as Ron, Hermione and Ginny turned to look more intently at Harry. "I mean I dropped it in that room and it broke, didn't it?"

"The recording broke, yes," Harry nodded grimly, dreading what he would have to say next. "But that was only a recording. The original is upstairs, in Dumbledore's office. I listened to it after Dumbledore returned from the Department of Mysteries at the end of last term."

Ron, Ginny and Hermione were staring at him in shocked disbelief. "Why didn't you tell us?" Ron almost shouted and Harry was thankful for the privacy charm.

Harry bowed his head and studied his hands for several seconds then looked up at Neville who was watching him with an almost blank expression on his face. "I didn't tell you because it's not something I like to think about and because at the time the prophecy was recorded there were two possibilities as to who the second person in it could be." Harry looked tiredly across at Neville. "I was one and Neville was the other."

Hermione and Ginny gasped and Ron let his mouth fall open as he looked from Harry to Neville and back again searching for something, anything, that would explain what he had just heard. Neville's eyes grew wide as he sat disbelievingly back in his chair. "Me?" he squeaked.

Harry nodded. "Yes. You, Neville.

"The prophecy said that the one who had the power to vanquish the Dark Lord would be born at the end of July and that they would be the child of those who had defied the Dark Lord three times. At the time of the recording your parent's as well as my own had each had three run-ins with Voldemort and escaped. The prophecy also said that this child would be born at the end of July. You and I were both born at the end of July, Neville. The thing that put my name on that prophecy was when Voldemort marked me as his equal."

Neville looked at him curiously so Harry lifted his bangs so that they could see his lightning bolt scar.

"What else did the prophecy say?" Ron asked.

Harry took a deep breath and let it out in a heavy sigh. He then looked at Ron, across at Neville and over at Hermione. He then looked at Ginny who could see the worry and concern etched on his face. "It said that neither could live while the other survives. It said that, ultimately, I am either going to have to either kill him or die trying."

Hermione let out a little scream; Ron flung himself back in his chair muttering to himself; Neville's face drained of all color; and Ginny tensed up at his side as her breathing came in irregular gasps. "My job is to recruit members of the magical community to our side and take care of Voldemort. Ginny's job is to recruit and to help me learn to harness the power of love." Turning to look into his girlfriend's eyes he said, "I hate to say it like that, Gin, but . . ."

"That’s okay," she said. "I understand."

"Ron and 'Mione are our logistics and battle strategy team. Ron is in charger of what Albus calls the 'soft logic' of psychology and behavior while 'Mione is in charge of the hard logic of both the muggle and magical sciences. You two," he said looking at Ron and Hermione, "are a team and Albus is hoping that you can balance each other out."

Turning back to Neville he said, "A part of your job, as you probably already know, is to help Severus stockpile the potions we will need in case of an emergency. But there’s more to it than that. While my main task is to take out Voldemort we need someone in our generation, someone who has a real bone to pick with the Death Eaters, to lead the fight against them. And that, my friend, is you."

As an angry and determined look rose in his eyes Neville looked across at Harry, set his jaw and firmly nodded his head and at that moment Harry knew that they were now even more of a team than they had been that morning.

"What about Luna?" Hermione asked.

"Luna is being trained as a healer and a field medic," Harry said. "And we are all going to be trained to fight. Neville and I have a little bit of a head start on that front but I have a feeling you will all catch up fairly quickly. I mean, we all know what we are up against and we all know what the stakes are so I have no doubt that you three and Luna," Harry said glancing around at Ron, Hermione and Ginny, "will catch up fairly quickly. Besides, after next week we are going to start dueling in D.A.

"I hope you’ll be ready for a major demonstration next weekend, Neville. Remus, Tonks, Kingsley and Alastor told me that that next Saturday it is going to be you and me against the four of them in the quidditch pitch after lunch and after that it is going to be me against Albus. The same rules of engagement we used this summer are going to apply: As soon as you are disarmed you are out."

Neville shook his head and grinned. "They really are gluttons for punishment aren’t they."

Harry chuckled. "Yeah, they are. The one I’m worried about, though, is Albus. I’ve never dueled him before and if you’ve ever seen him in action … It’s amazing. I wonder what he’s playing at?"

Half an hour later, after giving his friends a tour of his trunk and assuring Hermione that she could use his library whenever she wanted, Harry lifted the privacy charm and started climbing the ladder. When he opened the lid to his trunk and stuck his head out Seamus and Dean jumped up from their beds in surprise, both of them half clothed, wands at the ready. Harry blushed slightly. "Sorry, guys," he said. "We were just having a little meeting. Er, you might want to cover up, though, because there are girls on the premises."

"Girls on the premises?" Seamus asked loudly. "Who?"

"Ginny and Hermione," Harry said as he climbed out of the trunk an reached town to help Ginny.

When Ginny was high enough to poke her head over the edge of the trunk she looked over and smiled mischievously at the two startled teenagers. "Hi, boys," she said seductively before smiling up at Harry and bursting out laughing as Seamus and Dean scrambled to cover themselves.

Chapter 23. Spying for the Order

Harry spent most of that Sunday in his trunk reading, studying, doing his homework, practicing occlumency, working on his ethereal magic and sifting through his memories with his pensieve. He was slowly sorting through his most troubling memories and setting them aside for future reference to dull their impact and, hopefully, get them out of his dreams. While he was in the process of removing one particularly disturbing memory - the memory of Cedric's death and Voldemort's return - it occurred to him that he finally understood how Albus was always able to appear so calm and relaxed: The old man simply refused to deal with many of his most painful memories until he had the benefit of time and experience on his side. At first it seemed as though the aged wizard had an unfair advantage but the more he thought about it the more he realized that Albus was doing the only really reasonable thing he could under the circumstances.

Ron, Hermione and Ginny came in around ten, Ron and Hermione to finish their chess game and Ginny to check up on Harry. They wound up staying for lunch and Hermione, although she was probably loath to admit it, learned a lot about house elves and realized her mistake in trying to free them because Harry and Ginny had insisted that Dobby and Winky join them at the table. At one point Ron asked Harry what he was going to do with the other five chambers of his trunk. Harry paused and looked thoughtfully around the kitchen for several seconds before voicing his opinions. "You know, Ron," he said thoughtfully. "I really don't know. I suppose I should be thinking about that, though, since I really don't have anywhere to go after Hogwarts and with the modifications Dobby and Winky have made to this place I could, quite literally, live out of my trunk." Then turning towards Dobby, said, "What do you think, Dobby? I don't want to make any extra work for you or anything but do you think you could do a little work on chambers three, four and five?"

Dobby looked at Harry, an eager smile on his face, and said, "Yes, Harry! Dobby is only too happy to help Harry!"

Harry thought about what kinds of rooms he would like in his home after Hogwarts for several more seconds then said, "The first thing we need to look at is a proper room for you. I mean, if you are going to be my house elf I want you to be comfortable. So I want you to turn the fifth chamber into a proper apartment for yourself." Then glancing at Winky and then over at Ginny, added, "I want you and Winky to work on it together because we have got to look to the future and, even though I am not going to say anything definite just yet, I have a feeling you two might be sharing that apartment in the not too distant future. I will make one stipulation, however. I want it to be large enough that any one of us, or all of us for that matter, can come in and have tea with you." Then, turning to Ginny, he asked, "Is that okay with you, Gin?"

Ginny smiled and nodded her head.

"The next thing we will need is an owlry. I don't want just any owlry, though, because they start to smell after a while. Is there any possibility you could transform one of the chambers onto an open-air field with lots of grass, a few trees, a bush or two and a pond or stream?"

Dobby and Winky looked at each other, holding a silent conversation for a few seconds, then turned back to Harry. "Yes, Harry," Dobby said. "Dobby and Winky can do it. It will take a little longer but Dobby and Winky is sure they can do it."

Harry hesitated before making his third request because he didn't even know if it was possible in a

trunk. He knew it was possible in the castle environment, but a trunk? He just didn't know. Then, deciding to go for it, asked, "Now, I don't even know if this is possible in a trunk but I've got to ask. Can you put a copy of the Room of Requirement in one of the chambers of this trunk?"

Ron, Hermione and Ginny all gasped and looked at Harry as though he had lost his mind. At this Harry smiled sheepishly and shrugged his shoulders. "I just thought I'd ask," he said innocently.

Several seconds later, after another silent conversation, Dobby turned to Harry and said, "Dobby and Winky is sure they can do it, Harry. But it will require study and house elves is not usually allowed to study."

Harry turned toward Ginny who, seemingly reading his mind, nodded her head, granting him permission to give Winky permission to study. Then, turning back to Dobby and Winky, Harry said, "Ginny and I give you permission to study anything you want. We do, however ask that you stay away from the Dark Arts unless it is for information purposes only."

Dobby and Winky jumped up onto the table and ran across the table, throwing themselves into Harry and Ginny's arms. Winky was crying tears of joy as she launched herself at Ginny. "Oh, thank you, Ginny!" the overjoyed house elf screamed. "Winky is always wanting to study but is not wanting to upset her master!"

Ginny hugged Winky and laughed. "That's all right, Winky," she said. "I want you to study. Remember when I told you that I wanted you to think of me as your equal? Well being able to think for yourself and study is a part of that equality."

Dobby just launched himself at Harry, too overjoyed for words, and clung to his neck, crying his eyes out. When the excitable house elf was finally calmed enough Harry set him back on the table and, noticing the scowl on Hermione's face, inwardly groaned but smiled at Dobby and said, "You're welcome."

After lunch Hermione and Ron left to go to the Hogwarts main Library to finish their homework and Ginny left to get the rest of her homework and returned a few minutes later with her books. She spread her stuff out on the large oak table in the room Harry had come to call The Conference Room even though the walls were lined with weapons and the far wall held a spectacular view of the Hogwarts grounds. For himself, after Ginny was settled, Harry set the book on Ethereal Magic Dumbledore had given him in the center of his desk and retired to his bedroom to work on expanding his awareness of the world around him.

Stretching out on his bed, Harry closed his eyes and entered into a deep meditative state. Setting his internal alarm for half an hour before dinner, so he would have time to take a shower and get cleaned up, Harry left his body and expanded his consciousness to include the whole of his trunk. He watched Ginny as she worked on her Potions essay for a few minutes and then turned his attention to the book on his desk.

As he approached the book and touched it with his consciousness he was surprised when he felt all of the information in the book, and all of the experiences behind this information, become a part of his awareness. He quickly sorted through this information and stored it in his own mind for future contemplation but then returned to the book and started reading. He felt Ginny look up as the cover of the heavy book thudded softly on the desk and chided himself for making so much noise because even though he had told Ginny what he was going to be doing he could not help but imagine that

seeing a book reading itself was a creepy sight.

At first, from Harry's point of view, the reading went slowly. But before long he was quite literally flying through the pages. When he was finished he softly closed the book and turned his attention back to Ginny. Looking over her shoulder he saw that she had only written about twenty centimeters and wondered if he had really read that entire book so quickly. Finding a small scrap of parchment Harry picked up one of Ginny's spare quills, dipped it in her ink well and wrote, "Sorry about the noise. I will leave you alone for a while. I am going to do a little exploring. H." The writing was messy but legible as he hadn't quite got the hang of writing with his mind yet.

Needless to say, Ginny was startled when one of her scraps of parchment began floating towards her. And she was almost unnerved when one of her quills rose up, dipped itself in her ink and began writing. But when she read the note she smiled and, nodding, said, "Alright then. I'll see you later."

After cleaning her quill Harry laid it down and began expanding his consciousness beyond his trunk. As he took in the sixth-year boys' dormitory he became aware of Dean who was sitting at his desk working on a transfiguration assignment, Seamus who was working on a charms essay and Neville who was reading one of his herbology texts. Slowly expanding his awareness even further he gradually became aware of the goings on in all of Gryffindor Tower and, eventually, the whole of Hogwarts. He briefly turned his attention towards the library where he found Ron and Hermione browsing through the books in the Restricted Section. He mentally chuckled at the changes that had come over Ron since the end of last term. He guessed that the combination the brain attack, the realization of Hermione's motivation and his new responsibilities in the Order were largely to blame but he knew that he couldn't discount love's role in his friend's transformation.

Next Harry expanded his consciousness to include Hogsmeade and the surrounding countryside. He was hesitant at first, as he began to explore the region, but gradually grew comfortable with the idea of being able to become aware of ever increasingly large regions of space and time. What surprised him most, however, was the fact that he could feel the complex swirls of thought and emotion that filled the world. He could tell what people were thinking and feeling and he could feel as to whether their intentions were honorable or not. He could also feel the general flow of individual thoughts and emotions so that he could know whether or not they merited further investigation.

On a whim Harry gradually increased his awareness to include the whole of Great Britain. It was more of an experiment to see how far he could extend himself than anything else and at first he was overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of all of the various thoughts and emotions of the millions of souls involved. But he gradually began to sift through the mundane and focus himself upon a few of the more interesting gatherings. Sifting through those as well he became aware of the Order's headquarters, and the debates going on there, and a particularly disturbing collection of thoughts in an old manor home on the outskirts of a small town in northern England.

Focusing himself upon this second collection of emotions he followed then to their source and found himself looking down upon a gathering of cloaked and hooded figures bowing down before a tall, central figure with a reptilian face, red eyes that seemed to glow with malevolence and thin, bony, white hands and fingers. This central figure was issuing commands to his 'faithful followers' and telling them of his plans to attack Hogsmeade. Harry listened in horror as Voldemort described the attack and, before he knew what was happening or could even stop himself, found that his

consciousness was split between Order Headquarters and Voldemort's meeting.

The members of the Order of the Phoenix were discussing the progress that was being made with the werewolf population and the renovations that were being made to one of Harry's castles in Wales and another in Ireland. Hestia Jones was taking notes when the quill suddenly flew out of her hand and a fresh piece of parchment laid itself out on the table. Most of the Order members either screamed or gasped when this happened but one - the leader of their group - sat calmly and watched as the quill took on a life of its own.

The first words to appear at the top of the parchment, in a still sloppy script, were "DEATH EATER MEETING IN PROGRESS." The quill then underlined these words and proceeded to record everything that was being said by Voldemort and his followers as they made plans to attack Hogsmeade. Fifteen minutes later, as the Death Eater Meeting came to an end Harry, whose writing was much neater at this point, made a notation at the bottom of the parchment which said, "(Sorry, no date set.) H."

As Hestia retrieved her quill and the various members of the Order looked on in amazement Albus simply nodded his head and smiled, his eyes twinkling merrily with the mischievous glint and said, "Ah. It would seem as though our second spy was successful."

At dinner in the Great Hall that night Harry approached the Head Table and briefly, out of the corner of his eye, caught a quick nod from Snape. Walking over to stand in front of the Headmaster he cast a quick privacy charm and said, "I was successful with Bane, sir. It wasn't easy but it did work."

Albus looked up and smiled. "So I hear, Harry. Tell me, did you study the elements during your Maturo Auctus?"

Harry nodded. "Yes, sir. I didn't think I would need it but Merlin insisted."

Albus chuckled slightly. "Ah, yes. Merlin. He is a bit of a task master isn't he."

Harry knew that it was meant as a joke but he was so tired that he couldn't bring himself to laugh. "Yes, sir," he said softly. "He is at that."

Sensing Harry's subdued demeanor Albus gazed over his half-moon glasses at Harry for several seconds before saying anything else. And when he did it was with a sense of compassion and understanding. "Tell me," he asked, "Did he teach you to brew the restorative draughts as well?"

Harry nodded. "I've got four of them going as we speak. They should be ready in a few hours."

"Very well. I want you to know that Severus has confirmed your transcript of the Death Eater Meeting. I don't know how you did it. Splitting your consciousness so clearly in two is very difficult, Harry. You must be careful. From now on I will suggest you attend to their meetings and then report your findings unless it is a matter utmost urgency. Hestia has been instructed to leave a fresh quill, a bottle of ink and a stack of parchment on a separate desk in her office at headquarters for your use."

Harry nodded again. "Where's this Andromeda Babcock girl we are supposed to be meeting?"

Albus looked over Harry's shoulder. He could tell the young man before him was fatigued but at the

same time he knew, even though it pained him greatly, that certain things could not be helped. Finding the little dark haired girl sitting next to Luna he said, "It would seem that Miss Lovegood has already found her."

Harry turned around after lifting the privacy charm and started back towards his seat when Remus stopped him. "You had better get a good night's sleep tonight, Harry. You and Neville are going to have an early start in the morning. I will be up there at four thirty to make sure you're up so we can start warming up for our run."

"Our run?" Harry asked, quirking an eyebrow at the werewolf.

"Twice around the castle grounds," Remus said, smiling sadistically. "We've got to get you back in shape for Saturday."

Harry groaned as he recalled the forgotten training schedule. "I'll be sure to warn Neville," he said. "But you had better be ready for a fight on Saturday because we aren't going to let you off so easy this time."

Remus chuckled but Harry was almost certain he could hear Tonks saying that she thought Harry meant it.

Chapter 24. The Charm

At breakfast on Tuesday Professor Dumbledore walked over to where Harry was sitting and, placed his hand on Harry's shoulder. Leaning over he said, "You might want to think about expanding your room tonight, Harry."

Harry looked up in surprise. "What do you mean, sir?" he asked.

"Well, it would seem," the Headmaster began softly, "that you are going to have quite an audience tonight. . ."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked nervously.

The Headmaster chuckled softly at Harry's sudden panic. "All of this evening's Defense Labs have been canceled so that the professors can attend this session so you will not only have the entire faculty but at least one fifth of the student body as well. In addition there will be a few Ministry representatives from around the world as well as a number of private citizens who are very interested in what you three were able to accomplish. I believe Madam Bones will be attending, as will Neville's grandmother and Luna's father. My guess is that you should expect an audience of around three hundred this evening."

Harry's jaw fell open. "But . . . but . . . but I've never taught more than thirty at a time, " he stammered.

"I realize this, Harry," the Headmaster said sympathetically. "But then I am afraid you may be going before crowds much larger than this in the very near future so I suggest you take this opportunity to get used to speaking to large crowds."

"Three hundred?" Harry whispered hoarsely, his eyes threatening to bulge from their sockets. "You're kidding, right?"

"No, my dear boy, I am not kidding. I cannot say for sure but that might be a conservative estimate so you might want to make it closer to five hundred."

"Five hundred?" Harry mouthed and watched as Professor Dumbledore returned to his seat at the Head Table.

"Five hundred?" he gasped at anyone who would listen. "How am I supposed to fit five hundred people in that room?"

"Well, it is the Room of Requirement after all," Hermione reminded him.

"I know," Harry said. "But five hundred people?"

Throughout the day Harry watched in dismay as witches and wizards began arriving at Hogwarts. Most were dressed in recognizable combinations of robes and balaclavas but a few were dressed in costumes that told Harry that they were definitely from different countries and different parts of the world. Those wearing kimonos were definitely from the orient and the cowboy hats had to be either from Australia or the United States. But some of the costumes were so outrageous that Harry had no idea where they had come from. He guessed that Mr. Weasley must have been right:

'Whenever a bunch of witches and wizards get together they can't help but show off.' But this was serious business and Harry didn't thing this was any time to be showing off.

After a quick dinner - Harry was still nervous and didn't know how he was going to fit that many people in the Room of Requirement - he ran up to the seventh floor and stood in front of the tapestry of the disgruntled trolls in tutus and tried to think of a way to fit five hundred people in a single room so that everyone could hear, see and practice what he was going to be teaching. Fortunately the students would not be practicing the charm until they were back in their own laboratory classes. But that still left at least three humdred people to teach. He was about to throw his hands up in frustration when he remembered Dean's posters of the football players from their first year. A football stadium! he thought. Of course, a football stadium would be perfect! But would the Room of Requirement be able to give him what he needed? It didn't have to be huge like some of the stadiums he had seen on muggle television but it did have to be large enough to accommodate at least five hundred people. All he could do was try so he began pacing and thinking about a football stadium large enough to accommodate five hundred witches and wizards.

When the door appeared on the third pass he walked over and opened it. At first all he could see was a dimly lit corridor. But as his eyes adjusted to the light he became aware of a set of stairs leading up at the far end of the short hallway. Hesitantly walking the length of the corridor and climbing the stairs Harry soon found himself standing in the middle of a stadium style set of bleachers surrounding a large, oval grass field. He walked down onto the field and out to stand in its central ring. "Lights," he said, his voice echoing off the walls. "I need lights." The air began to glow and gradually became brighter, illuminating the auditorium, until he told it to stop. As he walked around the field, familiarizing himself with his new teaching environment, people started arriving and taking their seats.

Among the first to arrive were Fred and George Weasley who softly whistled their amazement when they saw the stadium. "Whoa!" Fred said. "I like what you've done to the place."

"Hey, Harry," George called out. "Can we talk?"

"We've got some samples of that new candy Hermione owled us about," Fred said.

"We'd like you to test them and let us know what you think."

Harry walked towards them and invited them onto the field. "Let's see what you've got," he said when they met near center field.

Fred pulled a small bag out of his pocket and handed it to Harry. Inside the bag were what looked like four, cherry red licorice nibs. "We've only got four of the final product left," Fred said.

"We originally made six but as this is important we each tested one to make sure they're safe."

"Do you have a name for them yet," Harry asked, smiling up at his friends.

"Not yet."

"But we're working on it."

"How long will it be before you can mass produce these things?" Harry asked.

Fred and George looked at each other and shrugged their shoulders. "I don't know . . ."

"End of the week, maybe."

"Good enough," Harry said, immediately adjusting his prepared presentation to include the testing of these new candies. "We'll know tonight. If they work I want you guys to get them into production as soon as possible."

"How are you going to test them?" George asked.

"And how will we know if they work?"

Harry smiled knowingly at them and said, "This is the Room of Requirement, right?"

"Yeah," they both said together, wondering what he was getting at.

"And my bogart just so happens to be a dementor . . ."

"Oh," Fred breathed.

"You're going to willingly face a dementor to test these things?" George asked in awe.

"Yep," Harry nodded. "Now I suggest you go find some seats or you are going to miss the show."

As Fred and George hurried off the field to join the rest of the Weasleys in the rapidly filling auditorium Harry turned his attention to the room and mumbled, "I need a bogart."

Immediately a small wooden trunk appeared in the center of the field. As Harry approached it he could hear the bogart banging around inside. Still thinking about the room he said, "Thank you," in a muttered whisper that no one but himself could hear.

Several minutes later Harry saw Professor Dumbledore step out of the stairwell and up into the stands. He nodded at Harry to begin and took a seat near the opening. Harry pointed his wand at his throat and said, "Sonorus," while silently asking the room to dampen the echo.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen," he began nervously. "As most of you are probably aware, my name is Harry Potter." A hush fell over the arena. "You have come here to learn about the charm I used last summer. We'll get to that in a minute but first I would like to ask three members of my regular class to come down onto the field. We are going to be testing some sweets that have been developed by the owners of Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes to help us deal with the dementor problem until a more permanent solution can be found. Could Ronald Weasley, Ginevra Weasley and Neville Longbottom please come forward?"

Harry looked up expectantly and watched as Ron and Ginny stood up, leaving Hermione alone with the rest of the red-haired Weasley clan and began making their way down, and as Neville, who had been sitting with a stately looking matron wearing a broad brimmed hat with a stuffed vulture on top, a green dress and was clutching an enormous red purse, stood up and made his way down onto the field. "These candies have been . . . laced with a particularly powerful cheering charm that should make it easier for anyone who finds themselves in the presence of a dementor to summon a patronus. These three have yet to face a dementor; and I hope they never have to. But to be on the safe side we have been practicing the Patronus Charm in our laboratory class."

Ron, Ginny and Neville had reached the edge of the field, now, and were making their way out towards Harry. "Now, lest you think this be some form of blatant commercialization and that I am merely trying to take advantage of a bad situation, I am going to be talking to the owners of Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes after tonight's presentation to see if they might be willing to donate a portion of the proceeds from the sale of these sweets to a reconstruction fund for the rebuilding of the wizarding communities after we have won this war." Harry knew he sounded more confident than he was but his audience didn't need to know that. He was, after all, the one who had been sent to rid the world of Voldamort.

When Ron, Ginny and Neville reached the center of the field they glanced apprehensively at the wooden chest as Harry handed each of them one of the sweets and temporarily removed the voice amplification charm from his throat. "What's that?" Neville asked nervously.

"A bogart," Harry said darkly.

"But your bogart's . . ." Ron began.

"A dementor," Harry finished for him.

Ginny looked up at him, concern in her eyes. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," Harry said. "I'm sure. You guys are going to do the demonstration; I'm going to do the testing. Now when I tell you to I want you to put those things in your mouths, chew on them for a bit and cast your charms. I don't know how long they last so you might want to cast your charms as soon as they take affect."

Replacing the amplification charm Harry turned his attention back to his audience. "These three produced their first full-fledged patroni last week. Those of you who were there will remember what they looked like and will be able to judge how effective these sweets are." Turning to Ginny he said, "Ginny, ladies first."

Ginny smiled sweetly up at Harry and popped the cherry red licorice nib into her mouth and began chewing. Almost immediately a smile began to spread across her face. She raised her wand and forcefully cried, "EXPECTO PATRONUM!" The lion that leaped from her wand this time was much larger than it had been the week before and glowed so brightly that many were shielding their eyes against its radiance. The lion raced to one end of the field, silently roared at the audience then raced back. When it reached Ginny it sat back on its haunches, bowed its head to her, let her scratch behind its ears then dissipated into the ethos.

When the applause had died down Harry turned to Neville and said, "Neville, you're next."

Neville stepped nervously forward. As he was about to pop the treat onto his mouth Ginny touched his arm and said, "Don't worry, Neville. You'll do fine. Just pretend you are in a regular class."

Neville smiled nervously at Ginny then looked up at Harry. Harry smiled and nodded as if to say, "You'll do fine, Neville. I wouldn't have asked you to come down here if I didn't think you could do it."

With that thought in mind Neville popped the candy into his mouth. As the cheering charm began to take effect he raised his wand and yelled, "EXPECTO PATRONUM!" The bulldog that jumped from

his wand was at least twice the size of his first patronus and glowed at least as brightly as Ginny's had. It raced around the field for several seconds, viscously tearing at the air with its bared fangs, before trotting over to lie down at Neville's feet. Neville bent down and scratched his patronus' head and patted its back before it too evaporated.

As the applause from the general audience and cheers from their classmates died down Harry said, "Yes. those were very good and very well done. It would seem that these sweets are living up to their expectations. For this next demonstration I must ask you to please remember that it is only a patronus and, according to Ron, it only eats dementors." With that he stepped aside and let Ron take center stage.

Ron popped the little red sweet into his mouth and began to chew. He had to stop himself from laughing as he raised his wand and bellowed the incantation. The dragon that exploded from the tip of his wand glowed silver-white and swooped over the spectators belching flames of silver-gold as it went. Almost everyone was ducking and screaming but Harry could swear he heard Charlie cheering, "Yes! A dragon! I knew ya had it in ya, little bro'!"

When Ron's patronus had completed two circuits of the stadium and landed in front of Ron it bowed its head to him and disappeared in an explosive mist. Harry and Ron smiled at each other and Harry once more removed the amplification charm from his voice. "Good job, guys," he said. "I'm going to want all thee of you back down here for the demonstration of the defensive charm but right now I need to be alone with that bogart so if you could step over to the side . . ."

As they were leaving Harry called after them. "Ron, I will need you to open the chest."

Ron nodded, still smiling from his successful patronus.

Reactivating the amplification charm Harry waited for the commotion to die down before continuing. "So far so good," He said. "But we still have to test it against a dementor.

"This trunk," he said tapping the rattling chest with his wand, "contains a bogart. My bogart just so happens to be a dementor. So I am going to step back and on my signal Ron is going to open the chest. I must ask all of you to please remain seated and quiet. I want this to be as realistic a test as possible so I do not want it distracted from me in any way."

With that he stepped back from the trunk and, when he was several meters away, removed the amplification charm again and nodded towards Ron. Ron pointed his wand at the box and muttered something under his breath.

The box sprung open as Harry focused his attention on its occupant. As the dementor slowly rose from the box Harry could feel the familiar chill coming over him. What happened next chilled him to the bone. In his mind's eye he saw his godfather, Sirius, slowly falling through the veil and heard Bellatrix LeStrange's cackling laughter as she celebrated her victory. Then came the screams, the terrible screams of his parents' dying sacrifices. And finally came the scream of "Kill the spare" from the night of the third task. Harry felt his blood drain from his face as his hope began to fall away as a cold, gray mist began to cloud his vision. In a last desperate struggle he remembered the licorice nib in his hand and popped it into his mouth. Went he bit down on the sweet, cherry-flavored candy the cheering charm took affect. The mist suddenly lifted and the screams quickly receded into the background. He saw the dementor before him and immediately thought of the conversation he and Ginny had shared in Dumbledore's private library. It was the happiest he had

been in ages, just sharing a part of himself with the girl he loved. He raised his wand, pointed it at the dementor and shouted "EXPECT PATRONUM!"

The blindingly white stag that jumped from the end of his wand shone so brightly that there were screams and shouts of pain as the spectators shielded their eyes against its brilliance. The stag charged the dementor but before it had traveled more than a few meters the bogart became confused by the commotion in the stands and exploded. The stag stopped and looked around, confused by what had happened, turned around, looked at Harry, and walked gracefully back to stand before its master. Harry reached out and stroked its neck. His patronus stood still for several moments then, with an even more blinding flash, was gone.

Harry pointed his wand at his throat and said, "Sonorus," then cleared his throat and said, "It looks like they work." Then, shifting gears, he said, "I have been assured by Fred and George Weasley, of Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes, that these candies will be on their shelves, exclusively, by the end of the week. Their store can be found in Diagone Alley, London. For those of you who do not have easy access to Diagone Alley I am sure arrangements can be made to have cases sent to your offices or ministries as soon as they are ready. Fred and George will be happy to answer any questions after tonight's presentation. They will be stationed at either end of the field at the end of the program." He looked up at Fred and George who were eagerly nodding their agreement with this arrangement.

Turning his attention to the room again he asked it to get rid of the trunk the bogart had been in. It promptly vanished. "What I am going to be teaching you tonight," he began, slowly walking around the center of the stadium's field, "is a defensive charm that experience has shown can deflect and rebound back upon the caster at least two of the three unforgivable curses as well as a wide variety of other spells. It has not been fully tested against every spell yet; but if our research is correct it should be effective against all spells. I have been asked to teach you everything I can about this defensive charm so that you can begin using it if not today then in the very near future. In addition, I will be speaking to the owners of Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes in the near future about developing a line of sweets incorporating the effects of this charm so that you can use it while learning the charm and to protect your loved ones.

"I must warn you, however, that this charm is more about attitude than magic. It is a piece of wandless magic that comes from a combination of muggle spiritual philosophies and involves tapping unto the greatest source of magic imaginable - the Universal Magic of Creation - and using your body as a wand. Or perhaps a better way to explain it would be to say that when casting this wordless spell you are allowing the Magic of Creation to flow through your magical core - the magical core that exists within you body - to protect you in your times of need. The only major drawback to this charm is that, as I have said, it is a purely defensive maneuver. If you should try to cast an offensive spell while using the charm it will rebound back upon you.

"Over the course of this evening we will be accomplishing three things. First, we will be examining and reviewing the source and structure of this charm. There will then be a demonstration of this charm and its power. And finally, for those of you who have come here to learn the charm tonight, we will be practicing this charm in teams. I don't expect everyone to get it down tonight but you will be practicing it so that you can get a feel for what it is all about."

Harry stopped and, looking up, made eye contact with a young woman in the back row who looked to be in her early thirties. "As a part of this charm involves a re-examination of some of the more

classical theories of magic this is probably a good place to start.

"For years, indeed centuries, we have been taught that our magical abilities reside within our blood. This is only one part of the equation. For you see, our bodies are little more than machines. Apart from the biological components which are primarily found in our blood, the only thing that really sets us apart from the muggles is a certain . . . spiritual openness and willingness to believe that our muggle counterparts do not have. The thing that sets us apart from squibs is that we were able to connect with the magical cores that exist within our bodies, on a deeply spiritual level, at or before birth while they were not. Squibs are still open and willing to believe; they just weren't able to connect with their magical cores while their bodies were still in their mother's wombs. It is the combination of these three components that makes us . . . magical. Despite what some of you may believe, we are no better than anyone else. Witches, wizards, muggles and squibs are all equal in the eyes of Creation. The only real differences lie in the spiritual plains of belief and openness and the amount of bonding we did with our bodies while they were developing.

"We have also been taught, again for hundreds of years, that magic flows from within, that we are the source of this magic and that we need words and wands to make it work. This is not true. We are little more than conduits through which the magic of creation flows. What we choose to do with that magic defines, more than anything else, who and/or what we will ultimately become."

Harry paused and walked back to the center of the field and looked over at Ron and Ginny and Neville who were sitting on the sidelines. "Before we go any further I think I should stress that thought really is energy as are want, need and desire. How we choose to channel those thoughts is up to us. My hope is that you will choose to channel your thoughts towards the ideals of peace and harmony. The thoughts and energies you are about to experience have been designed to help you defend yourselves against unwanted attacks. I can only hope that you are able to learn how to use them and that you will use them well."

Glancing up slightly Harry saw Tonks leaning forward in her seat, a look of intense interest on her face. He also noticed that her hair was blond again and that she really did look rather beautiful. He smiled at her and continued. "As I said, this charm comes from a combination of muggle spiritual philosophies. Some of them are more than two thousand years old while others are relatively new. The combination of these philosophies and ideas is what makes this charm work and what, quite frankly, saved my life a little more than three weeks ago."

Raising his wand he drew an intricate diagram in the air and cast a quick spell. A spider web of light sprang from the tip of his wand and slowly rose into the air to hover several meters above the center of the field. As it rose, it formed a ball and grew in size so that everyone could easily see the diagrams that would be appearing within and around its three-dimensional surfaces.

"The charm begins," Harry began, "with the idea of doing unto others as you would have others do unto you. This is its core and the principle that gives it its power." As he said this a bead of light began circulating throughout the spherical spider web above his head. "The thing that gives it its force and the ability to rebound spells back upon their casters - including those employing its power - is another ancient principle which holds that those who live by the sword shall die by the sword." Another bead of light began circulating throughout the webbed ball.

"Since, while using this charm, you cannot be sure who will be casting which spells there is a built in safety mechanism that will protect you from all hexes, curses, charms and spells no matter their

power or origin. This is the true power of Creation and that which gives us free will. It is the idea that we should not pass judgment upon anyone or anything lest we be judged likewise. I know we are only human and that we cannot help but pass judgment upon the people, places and things around us but this is a very important part of the charm because as soon as you let your guard down to one kind of magic the spell will fall apart and you will be vulnerable to all kinds of magic." A third bead of light began circulating.

"The fourth, and perhaps the most important, aspect of this charm is humility. This is also the one aspect that will be the hardest for some of you to master because very few of us are truly humble. I say this because this spell - indeed no spell, in my opinion - should be used frivolously, as a means of drawing attention to yourselves. I have only used it a few times while learning it, once in an actual combat situation and once in a classroom demonstration. I can only recommend that you only use it while learning to use it, while practicing and as a teaching tool. The reason for this will become clear in a moment."

Harry glanced up at the ball above his head and then looked around at his audience. He noticed that Bill Weasley and the white-blond young woman sitting next to him - could it be Fleur - were taking copious notes. "The attitude part of this charm is a modernization of some spiritually philosophical ideals that have actually been around for thousands of years. I can't really say how long because the basic ideas were written down in some of the most ancient muggle texts and one can only assume that they existed long before they were ever written down. These four principles are: a) Life is my religion. This is so because it is only through our actual experiences in life that we are able to learn about hope, faith, patience, understanding, life and love. b) The Universe is my cathedral. This is so because we should not limit ourselves to the teachings of any one particular sect or set of experiences. We should be open to learning new things at all times and in all locations. I do not know where I will be five years from now and yet I know that wherever I am I must remain open to the possibility of learning something new. c) The underlying intelligence behind the miracle of creation is my spiritual guidance counselor. Some religions call this entity God while others call it Allah and still others give it other names. I, however, cannot give it a name because it just is and to give it a name would, in my mind anyway, limit it in some way when it is, in point of fact, an infinite form of power and intelligence.

"The fourth aspect of humility - and the one that serves to reinforce the third aspect of this charm, actually has two parts to it. The first holds that we should love our creator with all our hearts and all our minds. The second holds that we should never set ourselves above any aspect of creation in any way." Five more beads of light appeared and began circulating throughout the webbed ball.

"The fifth and final aspect of this charm is the understanding that your body is your wand and that you are little more than a conduit through which many aspects of creation are able to make themselves known. To use an old, occult muggle term, you are a channel through which the power of creation is able to manifest itself in our world. Through your choices, however, you are responsible for choosing how that power becomes manifest."

With the conclusion of his lecture the ball began to shrink. It shrank until it was no larger than a tennis ball then slowly lowered and entered the top of Harry's head.

There were several gasps as those present realized what Harry had actually done and then a thunderous round of applause as five hundred people rose to their feet to give him a standing ovation. When the applause had died down to a manageable level Harry raised his hands for

silence and cleared his throat. "Thank you," he said. "But before we get too carried away I think a little demonstration is in order. Could all of the members of last year's D.A. class as well as the entire Weasley family and professors Dumbledore, McGonagall, Lupin, Moody, Shacklebolt, Tonks and Snape please come down onto the field and surround me along the field's perimeter."

Harry waited while the additional thirty-six people made their way onto the field and surrounded him. While he waited he turned his attention to the room and asked it to provide a padded backdrop for them because he didn't want anyone getting hurt.

He made a point of nodding to and smiling at each person as they entered the field. Most of his students and former students smiled nervously and waved as they entered the field. Bill Weasley was whispering urgently to Charlie as they descended the stairs onto the field and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were casting anxious glances over their shoulders as they tried to listen to what Bill was saying. Percy lumbered sulkily onto the field and smiled anxiously at Harry when Harry caught his eye.

Professor Snape merely scowled and stalked to his chosen position. Most of the other professors were on their guard but smiled at Harry as they entered the and Professor Dumbledore , however, smiled brightly and nodded encouragingly towards Harry as they entered the field and turned to take their positions.

When everyone was in position and all was ready Harry cleared his throat again and said, "Ladies and gentlemen, None of these people knew that they were going to be called to participate in this demonstration and so I have no idea which spells they will be throwing at me. The only thing I am going to suggest to them is that they not cast anything that is either long lasting or does not have a counter charm because they will be struck by the full force and impact of the spells they cast. I will feel them, but only emotionally. They will be on the receiving end of their effects." Glancing around briefly he added, "I might also suggest that they step out away from the wall a bit because while the walls are padded they will need some distance to fall. I don't want any broken bones or internal injuries so, ladies and gentlemen, if you please."

When everyone had stepped several meters in towards the center of the field Harry said, "At your mark."

Harry felt rather than heard the first spell being cast and immediately felt the familiar calm that accompanied the charm wash over him.

Several seconds later, after Harry felt the thirty-ninth spell strike its caster he looked up and let the charm drop away. The audience was sitting in stunned silence but behind him Harry could hear someone laughing uproariously. He turned around and saw Professor Dumbledore leaning against the wall, squirming uncontrollably and laughing hysterically. Several people were watching the headmaster curiously and glancing at Harry for some kind of an explanation. Harry reviewed the spells he had felt being cast and shook his head. "Tickle Charm," he said and walked over to relieve the headmaster of his burden.

When Harry had either released everyone from the effects of their spells or helped them to their feet - except for Snape who scowled and waved him off - another round of applause filled the auditorium. As it died down Harry said, "Yes. Thank you for your assistance. Now, if those of you who have come here to learn this charm could come down onto the field and pair off into groups of three or four we can begin learning and practicing this charm. For those of you who for whom this

would be your regular laboratory period, you are excused."

For the next several hours Harry and Remus walked around the field helping those who needed it and congratulating those who did not. At one point, while visiting with Bill, Charlie and Percy, Bill took the opportunity to introduce Harry to his fiance. "Harry," he said, "I'd like you to meet my fiance. Harry Potter, meet Fleur DeLacoure, soon to be Fleur Weasley. Fleur, meet the one and only Harry Potter."

Harry blushed at the flourish with which Bill had said his name but smiled anyway and reached out to shake Fleur's hand. But Fleur had other ideas. She lunged at Harry and pulled him into a bone-crushing hug. "It has been so long, Harry Potter, has it not?" Fleur said after releasing him.

Harry noticed that her English was much better than it had been during the Tri-wizard Tournament. "Erm . . . yeah," he had stammered. "How's Gabrielle?"

"She is doing wonderful!" Fleur beamed. "She still cannot believe that you were the one to save her from the mermaids."

Harry blushed again, his face going even redder this time, and Bill and Charlie burst out laughing. "That's the sign of a true hero, Harry," Charlie laughed. "Modesty."

Harry smirked and started to turn away but Bill grabbed his arm. "Actually, Harry, Fleur and I were taking notes on this charm of yours during the presentation and we don't think your charm can be broken."

Harry smiled softly and said, "Thanks," then excused himself and moved on to the next group.

A few minutes later he glanced over and saw that Ron, Hermione and Ginny were talking to Percy. Percy looked understandably nervous, given Ron's temper, but things seemed to be going relatively smoothly so Harry silently thanked Snape once again for his unusual outburst the week before. He then wondered about Fred and George and looked around to see where they were and found them camped out at either end of the field under painted signs that read "Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes, Tonight's Special: Dementor Delights!" and each looked to be doing a good bit of business. Harry couldn't help himself but he had to shake his head and laugh.

Chapter 25. Tears

As things began to wind down Harry glanced at his watch and saw that it was almost midnight. Oh, great, he though, Filch is going to love this. At that moment Mr. and Mrs. Weasley walked over and Mrs. Weasley pulled him into a hug. "Harry dear" she said, "It's so good to see you."

Harry smiled and hesitantly patted her on the back. "It's good to see you too," he said. Then, stepping back and, motioning Mr. Weasley over, murmured, "I haven't told Ron and Ginny about our little arrangement yet. I figure Christmas will be soon enough so I hope you don't mind if I don't call you Mum and Dad just yet."

Mr. Weasley smiled. "We understand, Harry. It is, after all, on a need-to-know basis and after tonight's little demonstration we cannot help but trust your judgment on this."

"Erm . . . there's something else you should know that might complicate matters a bit," Harry said hesitantly.

"What's that, dear?" Mrs. Weasley asked.

"Well," Harry said, feeling an uncomfortable tightness around his collar, "you see, . . . er . . . Ginny and I . . . well . . . uh . . . we kind of fancy each other. It's nothing serious yet. We are just getting to know each other as people right now. But I thought you should know."

A broad smile spread across Mr. Weasley's face and he burst into laughter as he clapped a hand across Harry's shoulders. "But that's wonderful, Harry. However, I must warn you. There are some things about the Weasley women that can be quite intimidating."

Mrs. Weasley scowled at her husband but before she could say anything Harry let out a sigh of relief and laughed. "I know" he said. "Boy do I know. If looks could kill I would have died five times last week alone."

This seemed to do the trick as Mrs. Weasley smiled and began to laugh as well. Then, turning serious again, she said, "When did they learn to produce a patronus?"

"Last week," Harry confessed. "I know how important it is to you that they be able to defend themselves and I figured the best way to let you know that they could do it was to have them participate in the demonstration."

Mrs. Weasley hugged him again. "Thank you," she said, her eyes brimming with tears. "Thank you, thank you, thank you. I'm so glad you did."

Harry patted her on the back again and smiled. Looking over at Mr. Weasley he smirked and shrugged his shoulders. Tears of joy brimming from his eyes as well, Mr. Weasley stepped into the hug and said, "You have no idea, Harry. You have no idea."

Harry looked up and, seeing Charlie standing behind his parents, pulled a face and shrugged his shoulders. "Er, . . . Mum, Dad," Charlie began hesitantly, "do you mind letting him breathe so I can ask him a couple of questions?"

Mr. and Mrs. Weasley turned to look at their second oldest son and smiled through tear stained

faces. Charlie stepped quickly back, clearly shocked to see his parents in tears, but Mr. and Mrs. Weasley stepped aside and disappeared into the crowd. "What'd you do?" Charlie asked in awe. "I've never seen them like that before."

Harry shrugged modestly. "I just made sure they knew Ron and Ginny could defend themselves against a dementor."

"Oh," Charlie said, following his parents with his eyes. "Yeah, that dragon was something else. And Ginny's lion . . . well, let's just say I don't envy those dementors. If that lion has half the temper Ginny does they don't stand a chance."

Harry laughed nervously. "Yeah, I know."

Charlie laughed as well and then changed the subject. "Say, Harry, I was wondering if you could find some time to come to the dragon preserve to teach our people about your charm and how to do a decent patronus charm. It's not a very common talent you know and you seem to be one of the best teachers around."

Harry's face darkened. "I don't know," he said. "I'm more than willing to do it but it's the security thing that gets me. I mean, you know they're after me, Charlie. I'm safe here at Hogwarts but what am I going to do in Romania. I'm not defenseless by any means but I don't want to put you guys in any danger."

Charlie nodded. "I understand, Harry. Believe me I understand. But we need your help. If you're willing to do it I'll talk to Dumbledore and see if something can be arranged."

"Alright," Harry said. "You talk to Dumbledore and if something can be arranged I'll come."

"Good!" Charlie said and started to turn away.

"Hey, Charlie," Harry called after him, "I just though of something."

"What's that?" Charlie asked, turning back.

"How's Norbert?"

"Who?"

"Norbert, Hagrid's pet."

"Oh," Charlie said as understanding dawned, "The Norwegian Ridgeback."

"Yeah."

"Norbert's doing just fine. In fact, he's one of our best fliers."

Walking over to stand beside Charlie, Harry said, "I was wondering, how hard would it be to put together a photo album of Norbert for Hagrid for Christmas?"

"Not hard at all," Charlie said smiling. "We have tons of photos of him in our scrapbooks. All we'll have to do is pick out the best of the best and put them in an album."

"Thanks," Harry said. "It would mean a lot to me and I know it would mean a lot to Hagrid. However, I want you to let me pay you for it."

Charlie thought for a moment then said, "I'll tell you what, Harry. Being as it's a gift for Hagrid I have a feeling a lot of us are going to want to chip in. But if you want to buy the album that'll be fine."

The next people to approach Harry, after Charlie had left in search of Bill and Fleur, were Neville and his gran. Neville tapped him on the shoulder and said, "Hey, Harry."

Harry spun around to see who had said his name and when he saw that in was Neville he let out a quick, but audible sigh of relief. "Oh. Hi, Neville. Thanks for helping with the demostrations. How'd you do on the charm?"

"I got it right on the first try, thanks to you."

Harry blushed slightly at the credit he was being given for his friend's success. "Now, Neville," he began, "you know as well as I do that the ability comes from within. All I've done so far is help you begin to realize your potential."

Neville started to say something but was interrupted by his grandmother, who was standing behind and slightly to one side of her grandson, clearing her throat. Neville glanced up nervously. "Oh, yeah. Harry, I believe you know my Gran…"

"Er, . . . hello, Mrs. Longbottom," Harry said. "How are you?"

"I'm doing well, thank you, Harry," she said. I want to thank you again for everything you have done for Neville. You have no idea how much it means to me that Neville is able to produce a corporeal patronus, and at sixteen as well. It's simply amazing what you have been able to do."

Harry was about to object and explain that most of it was Neville's doing but he was saved the embarrassment of having to respond to such high praise from a woman who so obviously commanded a great deal of respect by Professor Dumbledore who chose that moment to approach with Luna Lovegood and a dark haired man with the same, slightly protruding silver-blue eyes. Harry guessed that he must be her father. "Ah, Amanda," Dumbledore said cheerfully. "I see you've met our youngest professor, Professor Potter."

Mrs. Longbottom's eyebrows shot up and she looked more closely at the young wizard in front of her. "Professor, did you say?"

"Yes," Dumbledore chuckled. "Harry is one of our defense Against the Dark Arts professors. He is not teaching any classes, yet, per se but he is teaching one of our labs. A lab to which your grandson and this lovely young woman belong I might add," he said, indicating Luna.

Mrs. Longbottom eyed Luna suspiciously for a moment then, returning her gaze to Harry, said, "Well, Albus, with people like Harry teaching your Defense classes I don't think I will have to worry about our children not being able to defend themselves after graduation."

Dumbledore chuckled softly. "Ah, Amanda, I fear that with people like Harry on hand they will be able to defend themselves long before graduation."

Harry blushed slightly as Mr. Lovegood stepped forward and shook Harry's hand. "Oddment Lovegood, Professor Potter. It's a pleasure to meet you at last . . ."

"Please," Harry interrupted him, "call me Harry. I've never liked titles and I'm just helping them learn."

"Be that as it may, Harry," Mr. Lovegood said, "Luna has told me so much about you and your classes; and that interview you gave last year was the only time in The Quibbler's history that we have had to run an article more than once. Add to that the fact that you are helping my little girl grow up in ways I never could and I will be forever in your debt."

Fatigue was catching up to him at this point and Harry could feel the long-suppressed emotions of anguish and grief rising up within his soul. As his eyes began to tear up he said, "I don't think you guys get it yet. I'm just trying to help. They do most of it themselves, I just . . ."

Then, quickly shifting gears to acknowledge the source of his grief, he said, "If you're talking about what happened back in June I think you should know that I've never done anything on my own. I've always had help. If you want to meet the true heroes talk to Luna, Neville, Ron, Ginny, Hermione and everyone else who has put up with me through the years and stood by my side when times got tough. They're the true heroes. I'm just a guy who is lucky enough to have such good friends."

By this time his voice was starting to crack and it was evident that he was about to do something he had never let himself do before. "In fact, Mister Lovegood," he choked out, "you are just as much a hero as I because you had the guts to print that story and both you and Mrs. Longbottom are heroes because you have raised two wonderfully talented, courageous and intelligent children who had the guts to follow me on an ill-fated mission that cost my godfather his life." Harry was gasping for breath by this time and his tears were falling unhindered. At that moment he felt someone take hold of his hand. Glancing down he saw that it was Ginny and that she was looking at him with concern written all over her face. "Now if you will excuse me . . ." With that he brushed past Neville and Mr. Lovegood and walked rapidly off the field, up into the stands, down the stairs and out of the Room of Requirement.

Ginny caught up with him as he collapsed against the wall just short of the portrait of the Fat Lady who was looking at them with concern. Harry was in tears by this time and was barely able to stand up, let alone walk. Ginny scowled at the Fat Lady and said, "Just open up already. He's hurting and I don't even want to think about your stupid password right now."

The Fat Lady harrumphed but acquiesced and swung open to let them pass.

Once in the common room Ginny guided Harry over to the couch in front of the extinguished fireplace and rocked Harry in her arms as he cried his heart out for the friends and family he had lost. Some time later, after Harry had cried himself to sleep with his head resting in Ginny's lap, Ron, Hermione and Neville came through the portrait hole and Ginny motioned for them to be quiet and pointed to Harry who was curled up on the sofa, his head resting comfortably in her lap. Ron and Neville went up to their room, Ron returning a few minutes later with a pillow, which he gave to Ginny, and a blanket, which he used to cover Harry. Before he left he leaned over and whispered, "You really are a lot like Mum, you know."

Ginny smiled up at her brother and whispered, "Thanks."

Before she went up to her room, Hermione started a fresh fire in the fireplace and brought two glasses and a pitcher of water down from the girl's washroom and wished Ginny a good night. Ginny thanked her and began humming lullabies as she gently ran her fingers through Harry's tangled hair.

Ron, Hermione and Neville came down early the next morning, after only a few brief hours of sleep, and found Harry and Ginny, sound asleep, comfortably sharing the couch, blanket and pillow in a chaste embrace that respected their dignity as human beings. As they descended the stairs from their respective dorms Remus stepped through the portrait hole and into the Gryffindor Common Room. When he saw Harry and Ginny asleep on the couch he walked over to Neville and said, "You know, I should probably give you guys the morning off because we were all up kind of late last night but we've only got three more days to get you two in shape for Saturday."

Harry groaned. "I heard that, Remus."

Remus chuckled. "Good," he said, walking over and pulling the blanket off of the pair on the sofa. "Then you won't mind if I don't give you a break."

Harry grumbled. "You're asking for it, Remus. I hope you guys are ready for the duel of a lifetime on Saturday."

Laughing out loud Remus said. "Bring it on, Harry. The only thing you can't use on Saturday is your elemental abilities."

"I won't need them," Harry said as he tried to figure out how to untangle himself from Ginny. After several seconds he decided that there was no other way out of his predicament so he murmured, "Erm, Ginny? Are you awake?"

Ginny giggled. "Mm Hmm."

"I'm sorry," Harry murmured, "but I've got to go train. You can probably get another three hours of sleep but my slave driver doesn't know the meaning of a good night's sleep."

Remus chuckled again. "Get up you lazy bum. Go get your sweats on and I want you back down here in three minutes."

Harry grumbled and, sitting up, once more apologized to Ginny before asking where his glasses were.

Ginny picked his glasses up off of the end table and handed them to him. "Here," she said putting his glasses in his hand.

After standing up Harry helped Ginny to her feet and, hugging her briefly, whispered a heartfelt thank you then turned towards Remus. "Alright, Wolfman. I'm up. You satisfied?"

Remus checked his watch and said, "two minutes and thirty seconds."

"ARGHH!" Harry cried out in exasperation as he ran up the stairs to the boys' dormitories to change.

Chapter 26. Impressions of Romania

When Harry entered the Headmaster's Office that Thursday evening for his Maturo Auctus Training Professor Snape was sitting rigidly in one of the chairs facing the Headmaster's Desk. Harry glanced over at his Potions Professor and fellow spy for the Order of the Phoenix and nodded. "Severus," he said in greeting.

Severus glanced up. "Harry," he said almost cordially.

When Harry had settled himself in into one of the other chairs and turned his attention to Albus the Headmaster sighed tiredly and Harry could sense the old man's fatigue. "We have a problem, Harry," Dumbledore said.

Harry looked up expectantly, hoping his mentor would elaborate. "Severus," Dumbledore said, turning the floor over to his Potions Master.

Snape shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "I fear my cover may have been blown. As a member of the Dark Lord's inner circle I should have known everything about the planned attack on you long before it happened. However, the only information that was revealed in my presence was that an attack was being planned. And even then I fear that the information may have been inadvertently divulged.

"You recorded Sunday's meeting accurately. However, as you noted, no date was revealed. I have no doubt the attack will take place; I just don't know when."

"But . . . how?" Harry asked.

"We do not know," Dumbledore said gravely. "Which is why we must ask you to dedicate a portion of each evening to surveillance. I do not want you to neglect your studies or wear yourself out, Harry, but we really do need your help in this matter. I hesitate bringing this up because it is usually viewed as an incredibly complex task and I do not wish for you to burn yourself out but one of the Ethereal Abilities I studied, but was never able to master, is the ability to store an Ethereal Memory in a crystal ball, much as we store a regular memory in a pensieve. The primary difference being that you do not necessarily have to 'experience' the memory to record it. According to the texts, all you need do is establish a connection between your conscious, ethereal self and the sphere and tell it when to begin and when to stop recording. All you have to do, then, is observe and the crystal will record the event for later viewing and study."

Harry nodded his head. "Yes," he said. "I read something about that towards the end of that book you gave me while I was reading it Sunday afternoon."

The Headmaster's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Tell me, Harry," he asked. "Have you finished it yet?"

Harry blushed slightly and looked down at his hands for several seconds, keenly aware of the two men who were watching him with renewed interest. "That's just it, sir. I read it while I was practicing my Ethereal Magic and as soon as I turned my attention towards the book all of the information in the book, as well as all of the experience behind that information made itself known to me. I still remember most of it because I didn't know what to think so I stored it in my brain

before going back and reading the book. It took me less than an hour to read the entire book from cover to cover and everything I read just reinforced my first impressions."

"Ah," Dumbledore said sitting back in his chair and gazing contentedly over his half-moon spectacles at Harry. "You have stumbled upon one of the wondrous advantages of Ethereal Magic. By merely touching a book you can become aware of all of the information it holds. And if the author has first-hand experience with the subject matter you will become aware of it was well."

"I guess I wouldn't get much out of Lockheart's books then would I," Harry mumbled.

Severus snorted at this and the Headmaster laughed out loud. "No, I'm afraid not, Harry. You would have gotten the information but I am afraid you would have gotten very little experience."

Several minutes later, after talking around the subject and discussing what should be recorded with both Severus and Harry, Albus turned to Harry and, with a serious expression on his face, asked, "So, are you willing to give it a go, Harry?"

Harry hesitated briefly then, after glancing at Snape, said, "I'll do my best. But what about Severus?"

Snape scowled. "I will still be attending the meetings, Po . . . Harry, because while you will be recording I will be interpreting your recordings for the Order."

Harry could tell that a part of Snape wanted to insult him for missing this detail but he let it slide. If they were going to work as a team then there was no need to aggravate his partner any more than absolutely necessary.

Standing up and walking over to a cupboard, Professor Dumbledore withdrew a small wooden box and handed it to Harry. "Here you go," he said. "This particular ball has been wiped clean in anticipation of you acceptance. You will have to program it to your particular frequency for recording purposes and restrict access to its contents to myself, Severus, Minerva, Alastor and, of course, you. We do not want too many people to know that we are able to spy on Tom in this way."

Opening the box Harry found a finely polished, clear crystal sphere, roughly five centimeters in diameter, nestled in a dark green velvet cradle. He could feel the raw energy radiating from deep within the heart of the crystalline structure and reached out with his mind to touch and examine its properties. What he found was the living, breathing consciousness of a stone. It was a very primitive and very subtle form of consciousness that he somehow knew would be easily frightened and intimidated if he did not take his time and gradually introduce himself to its presence.

Over the course of the next hour, totally oblivious to the goings on in Dumbledore's office, Harry introduced himself to the consciousness within the stone and began building a working relationship with its structures. When he was satisfied with the form their relationship had taken he bid it good rest and withdrew. Looking up into the expectant eyes of his mentor he sighed and said, "This presence will work just fine. We've met and introduced ourselves and I explained what we are trying to do. The stone has agreed to cooperate to the best of its abilities and will do as I ask."

Both professors looked curiously at Harry so he went on to explain how the spherical stone was alive and how its consciousness existed on a level that was so subtle that most humans - indeed, most sentient beings - could not sense it. He then described the nature of the stone's consciousness

and the working relationship he had built with it. Snape was skeptical at first and sniffed disdainfully at several of the points Harry was trying to make but gradually came to accept what Harry was telling them. When it was all over two hours had passed since his arrival in the Headmaster's Office and he was beginning to feel the strain of the day's activities as they took their toll upon his body.

After shaking his head briefly to try and stay awake, Harry looked back up and asked, "Is there any place in particular you would like me to observe as a test case?"

Recognizing Harry's level of fatigue and not wanting to push him any harder than absolutely necessary, but at the same time needing the kinds of information only this kind of remote viewing could provide, Albus said, "If you feel up to it, Harry, I would like to know the exact nature of the situation in Romania. I have spoken with Charley and, based upon his recommendation, am very tempted to send you over there to help them at the end of the month. But I need to know everything I can about the situation so that appropriate security measures can be taken."

Harry nodded. "Yes, sir," he said tiredly. "Is there anything else?"

Albus smiled softly. "Just one more thing, Harry. You might want to get a good night's sleep on Friday and review your notes on your Maturo Auctus."

Harry looked up curiously. "As you know," Albius continued, "everything you studied during your Maturo Auctus is in your mind waiting for you to either need it or be reminded of it. The first duel on Saturday between you and Neville and Remus, Nymphodora, Kingsley and Alastor is simply a demonstration to show the rest of the student body how to fight and defend themselves. The second duel, between the two of us, has been arranged so that I can essentially force your hand and help you bring some of those lessons to light. The only stipulation is that you will not be allowed to use any of your elemental abilities."

Harry ran his fingers through his hair and stood up, clutching the box with the crystal ball in it firmly. Yawning, he said, "Yes, sir." Then, as he turned to leave, said, "Could you tell Remus I am going to be spending the night on my trunk. I want to get to work on this thing as soon as possible and I don't want the guys asking too many questions."

Albus chuckled. "Ah, yes, your trunk. I have been meaning to ask you about that but another time, perhaps. Where will he be able to find you?"

Harry turned as he reached the door and looked back at the Headmaster. After thinking for a second or two he said, "Seventh chamber, down the ladder and straight across."

Albus nodded his head and turned his attention back to Severus as Harry opened the door and left his office.

Ron looked up as Harry opened the seventh chamber of his trunk and asked, "What's up, Harry?"

Turning around, Harry looked tiredly at his second friend in the wizarding world and said, "Homework. It looks like I'm going to be spending a lot of time in this trunk from now on so . . . I guess."

In his trunk, Harry walked into his bedroom and gently placed the box containing the crystal ball in

the center of the top of the small dresser at the head of the far side of his bed. He didn't really know why he did it except that Albus wanted it kept secret and even though only he, Ron, Hermione, Neville, Luna, Ginny, Dobby, Winky and Remus were currently allowed in his trunk he didn't want to take any chances of it being seen and asked about.

After opening the box and briefly reaching out to the crystal's consciousness he laid his wand on the dresser next to it and got ready for bed. As he pulled the covers over himself Harry fell into a deep meditative state. Even though he was physically, mentally and emotionally exhausted he found it easy to keep his mind alert while his body went to sleep. Focusing on the tasks outlined it a chapter on rejuvenating the physical body through ethereal magic while it slept, even if the soul was actively participating in another ethereal exercise, Harry reestablished his occlumency wards, set his internal alarm for 4:30 and initiated a sequence of ethereal events that would allow him to awaken refreshed and ready to face the day. To the outside observer, however, it would look as though Harry's body had begun to glow, surrounded by a soft, golden halo of light.

Harry reached out and contacted the stone's soul again and, after a brief dialogue, relaxed and began expanding his sphere of conscious awareness. In a few, short minutes he was aware of the whole of Great Britain. Expanding his awareness even further he soon became aware of France, Germany, Spain and the whole of Western Europe. Going still further he became aware of the Baltic States and the fringes of Eastern Europe. Focusing his mind on the spiritual signature of Charlie Weasley - The emotional impression he had received upon meeting the second oldest of Mr. and Mrs. Weasley's children - he found himself being drawn towards a series of high altitude valleys surrounded by snowcapped peaks.

The first things he became aware of, besides the setting, of course, were the dragons. There were literally hundreds, if not thousands, of them, filling the various valleys and nesting on the hillsides. It was well past sunset but because of the puffs of flame issuing from the mouths and nostrils of several of the older dragons an eerie red glow illuminated most of the battlefield, for it truly was a battlefield.

Several dragons were in the air with riders guiding them into combat against an onslaught of giants, dementors and Death Eaters. There were also several witches and wizards on brooms on both sides of the conflict as well as a number of ground troops. Hexes, curses, jinxes and charms were flying everywhere. There were casualties on both sides and the injured littered the ground between the sleeping dragons. He could see comrades in arms gathering the injured up into their arms and apparating away to field hospitals, for the less critically injured, or to the dragon preserve's main hospital complex, for the more serious injuries.

He watched as two giants tried to disrupt the sleep of a particularly large nesting female. She roused briefly and snapped at the giants who lumbered away but returned moments later to try again. As they approached a second time, bearing enormous spears to use against their prey, a dragon and rider swooped down from above. The dragon issued forth with a stream of fire that reduced the giant's spears to ashes. As the first dragon snatched up one of the giants in its claws and carried it away a second dragon swooped down and captured the other.

The riders of these two dragons directed their charges to carry their captives away from the battlefield and drop them in a ravine that was far enough away that these two giants would not be able to rejoin the battle any time soon. Harry sensed a desire to kill the giants but an unwillingness to do so, on the part of the dragon keepers, because the giants were, after all, an endangered species

and even though they were currently allied with the Death Eaters the dragon keepers did not want to make them go extinct.

The dementor problem was complicated by the fact that very few of the dragon keepers could produce a corporeal patronus and while they were fighting both dementors and Death Eaters they had to provide both cover and protection for those field medics who were trying to treat and rescue their injured comrades. At one point Harry watched in horror as a defender went down after being hit by a cutting curse and a dementor reached him before anyone could even get close enough to help. He heard the man's screams and felt the agony of his fear as well as its intensity as the dementor drew nearer. He finally had to turn away as the dementor bent down to kiss the man.

Harry forced himself to turn off his emotions as the battle raged. He spent the next several minutes visiting the different areas of the battlefield, memorizing the lay of the land and studying the tactics used by each side. If he was going to travel to Romania to teach his charm to the dragon keepers then he wanted to know what he was getting himself into.

After recording almost an hour of some of the most intense fighting he had ever seen he stopped the recording and severed the link with the crystal and returned his consciousness to his trunk.. He knew the images he had seen would haunt him until he deposited them in his pensieve but he had other things he wanted to do before returning to his body. He spent the next several hours doing his homework, reviewing his notes from his Maturo Auctus and reading books from his private library. He found that the more he read while using Ethereal Magic the easier it became and the more accurate his initial impressions became.

By the time his internal alarm went off and he was forced to return to his body he had completed most of the homework for the following week and read thirty books from the Defense section of his library. Some of the spells he had learned were fairly ancient and he doubted that several of them had been used in at least a hundred years.

After getting dressed, since he knew he had a few minutes before Remus' arrival, he entered his study and, pulling out his pensieve, deposited his memories of the battle in Romania. Remus descended the ladder into his trunk while he was in the process of removing the last of these memories and, as Harry finished the procedure and moved to return his pensieve to its cupboard, he noticed that his friend was watching at him with an expression of concern on his face. "What is it, Harry?" the werewolf asked.

Harry returned his pensieve to its cupboard and locked it then turned around to face his friend. "Romania," was his one word answer."

"That bad?"

Harry grimaced slightly then said, "Worse."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"Later. Let's go train."

Remus nodded his head and the two friends climbed the ladder to begin the day.

Chapter 27. Demonstration Duels

After stretching and warming up for twenty minutes Harry, Neville, Remus and Tonks ran twice around the perimeter of the castle grounds and then into the quidditch pitch where Alastor and Kingsley were waiting for them. After another half hour of gymnastics and tumbling it was six o'clock and they began their practice dueling. Remus, Tonks, Kingsley and Alastor retreated to one end of the pitch while Harry and Neville walked to the other. "Now remember," Moody said with the help of the Sonorus Charm, "disarm only and we only have an hour before you two have got to hit the showers and get ready for breakfast."

Harry grumbled and let Neville start the practice session with a stunner aimed at Kingsley which Harry quickly followed up with by casting three rapid-fire jinxes at Tonks and Remus. For the next thirty minutes Harry concentrated on Tonks and Remus while Neville focused his efforts on Kingsley and Alastor. They were so focused on both attacking and defending that they didn't even notice the small knot of professors that had gathered along the sidelines to watch.

The first break came when Harry took three really quick shots at Moody while Neville, on unspoken signal, disarmed Tonks with tickle and summoning charms. Even Moody was slightly flustered by this sudden change as he had been focusing on deflecting Neville's spells and didn't see Harry's coming until it was almost too late. He did, however, get his shields up in time.

What was disconcerting to the observers was that none of the combatants was saying anything loudly enough to be heard by anyone. They had to guess which spells were being cast by their energy signatures and effects.

As if by unspoken agreement the conjuring and transfiguration phases of the duel began at 6:35. By 6:40 the air was filled with flying objects and the ground was cluttered with a wide variety of objects that seemed to be moving of their own accord. The explosions of conjured and transfigured objects as they were hit by various spells were at times deafening, depending upon the size of the object being destroyed. It was, therefore, no wonder that several students saw Kingsley go down when a snowball suddenly appeared out of nowhere and hit him in the face with a resounding SPLAT! He was then quickly hit by a disarming spell and taken out of the competition. He was not angry about being disarmed. In fact, he was laughing as he picked himself up. "A snowball," he said while shaking his head. "This is a duel, not a snowball fight …"

Ten minutes later, as a small number of students began making their way down to the quidditch pitch, Alastor went down when a conjured raven flew in from behind and unexpectedly snatched his wand from his grasp as he began casting a shielding charm to protect himself from one of Neville's most powerful stunners. The combined effect was that Alastor Moody was thrown fifty meters back, out of the quidditch pitch, while the raven flew over to deposit the retired auror's wand at Harry's feet. Madam Pomfrey quickly ran over to help him up. When he was awake and back on his feet he shook his head and growled, "Those two are almost too good. I sure didn't see that one coming."

At seven o'clock Tonks sent a shower of red sparks into the air signaling the end of their training session. As the last spells died away the teachers and the few students who had made it down to the quidditch pitch began applauding. Harry, Neville and Remus looked up, realizing for the first time that they had an audience, and blushed a light shade of pink.

Harry and Neville knelt down to pick up their opponents' wands as Remus came over to congratulate them. "I can see we're going to have to be on our toes tomorrow," he said. "That tickle charm was a stroke of genius, Neville. After everything you two had been throwing at us I think the sudden switch with the addition of that tickle charm was the last thing anyone expected. I would like to know who threw that snowball, though."

Harry smirked and snickered as he bowed his head, his eyes dancing with mischievous glee. Remus threw his head back and laughed. "Harry," he said, "you are a true Marauder! No one, and I do mean no one, in their right mind would ever think of throwing a snowball in a wizarding duel unless they were born to be a Marauder! And that attack on Alastor was brilliant!"

"I only hope he's all right," Neville said. "That was a pretty strong stunner I hit him with."

"I'm all right, laddy," the retired auror growled as he limped across the field towards the three survivors. "I must admit, though, that that stunner of yours has quite a kick to it."

Neville laughed nervously as Harry returned Alastor's wand to him. "Yeah, well, I never really knew how powerful it was until today because you guys have always been able to block it."

"Well now you know," Tonks said as she and Kingsley joined the group in the middle of the pitch. "I'm just glad this is disarm only. I would hate to go up against you two in an actual fight."

"Who threw the snowball?" Kingsley asked in mock anger.

Harry looked up and sheepishly raised his hand. "It worked didn't it?" he asked innocently.

Kingsley burst into a booming laughter. "Yes, Harry," he laughed. "It did at that. A snowball was the last thing I would have expected in a wizarding duel. I can see that tomorrow is going to be an interesting demonstration."

As they made their way up to the castle, walking slightly slower than usual so that Moody could keep up, Albus came over and said, "That was quite an impressive display you put on this morning. How long did it last?"

"From start to finish was one hour," Tonks said cheerfully. "These two are real fighters."

"Yes. I can see that. How much time would you like to allocate for you demonstration tomorrow afternoon?"

The four main Defense Against the Dark Arts professors turned to look at Harry and Neville who looked back and shrugged their shoulders. "It's up to you guys," Harry said. "What do you think?"

"I think," Alastor began, "that since we now know to expected the unexpected from you two that we should give ourselves two hours at a minimum."

Harry and Neville's eyes widened slightly at this news but said nothing.

"Very well," Albus said. "In that case I will give you a thirty minute rest break between duels, Harry."

Harry's mouth fell open but Dumbledore only chuckled. "I want you rested but not too rested for

what we will be doing tomorrow afternoon."

Neville patted Harry on the shoulder and looked at him sympathetically. "I feel for you, Harry. I really do."

At breakfast Harry walked up to the Head Table and stopped in front of the Headmaster. When Albus looked up Harry handed him a small wooden box. "It's the crystal, sir," He said. "It has an hour's worth of last night's battle in it."

"Is it . . ." Albus started to ask but stopped when he saw the look in Harry's eyes.

When he returned to the Gryffindor Table and sat down between Neville and Ginny Ron looked up from across the table. "Is that what you guys do every morning?" he asked.

Harry and Neville looked up "Yeah, pretty much," they said in unison.

"It was a little louder this morning than usual but that's pretty much it," Neville added while Harry ordered his breakfast from Winky.

The talk around the castle that day was about the few minutes of mock duel a few of the students had seen that morning. It started out with a fairly accurate description of the last few minutes of the duel but by the end of the day it was blown so completely out of proportion that no one really knew what to believe. The six who actually knew what had happened as well as the rest of the professors remained silent, watching and listening as the story of a mock duel gradually transformed itself into an epic battle that had lasted for days on end and ended in a draw. It was quite humorous really and none of the six had the heart to set the record straight.

In their meeting that night the main topic of discussion was the situation in Romania and what, if anything should be done about it. According to Charlie's report, the attacks usually began shortly after sunset and ended shortly before sunrise each day. The dragon keepers and the aurors who had been sent in to help were holding their own but needed help if they were to get any rest. According to Charlie the attacks seemed to be aimed at disrupting the dragons' sleeping habits so that they would become uncontrollable.

It was finally decided, after a great deal of discussion and debate, that Harry, Ron, Hermione, Neville, Luna, Ginny, Remus and Tonks would travel to the dragon preserve, via Fawkes, on the evening of Friday, September 27th, to help in the fight and teach the dragon keepers and the aurors about what had unofficially come to be known as The Potter Charm, and return on the evening of the 29th. It was also decided that Ron, Hermione, Ginny and Luna would begin training with Tonks on Monday morning; and since four of them were on the quidditch team and were fairly decent flyers it was further decided That Harry and Ginny and Ron and Neville would train as airborne teams. They wanted to have one experienced dueler in each team in case of trouble and even though Ron initially wanted to pair with Harry he quickly backed down when Ginny began glaring at him.

The final topics of discussion were the mock duels that would be taking place the following afternoon. Even though they tried to discourage him, Severus insisted upon being included in the first duel. His logic being that Harry and Neville already knew how the four Defense professors fought and that to make it a realistic demonstration, even though he did admit to being impressed by what he had seen that morning, an unknown element should be included in the mix. Severus

won out in the end and it was agreed that Harry and Neville would face the five professors at 1:00 PM and that the duel would last for two hours unless one side was completely disarmed. The rules of engagement were reviewed to make sure everyone was on the same page and the meeting was adjourned.

Harry and Neville spent Saturday morning in the kitchen area of Harry's trunk discussing spells and strategy. They decided that since they had discussed Prank Warfare, but never used it, their upcoming duel with their professors would be an excellent opportunity to try their hand at it. They then discussed the various pranks they were going to use on which professors and when.

At 12:45 the seven combatants met in the center of the quidditch pitch and exchanged greetings, wishing each other a good duel. Harry noticed that Severus sneered menacingly at him as they parted and went to their respective ends but paid it no mind. That was how Severus was and they would just have to deal with him as well as their four regular opponents.

At five minutes to one the Headmaster stepped to the center of the pitch and addressed the assembled crowd. Casting the Sonorus Charm on himself he cleared his throat and the crowd fell silent. "Good afternoon," he began. "Even thought your attendance at this demonstration is mandatory I am pleased to see that you have all chosen to attend. In a few moments Professors Lupin, Moody, Shacklebolt, Snape and Tonks will be attempting to disarm Harry Potter and Neville Longbottom who have been training for the past few months due to their rather . . . unique predicaments. Many of you heard the explosions of yesterday morning's exercises and a few of you saw the last few minutes of what had been an hour-long duel. Today's first demonstration will last for two hours or until one team has been completely disarmed. I want you to pay close attention to what you will be seeing this afternoon because each and every one of you is going to be taught to defend yourselves. And while this particular situation - two against five - might seem a bit extreme, as much as it pains me to say this, you may find yourselves in similar situations in the not too distant future."

As he left the field he turned around and said, "At your leisure, gentlemen," before removing the charm from his voice.

The first spell that was cast was almost predictable. Snape cast a particularly powerful stunner at Harry who easily deflected it. From then on the air was alive with the exchange of magical forms of energy. Most of the curses, hexes, jinxes and charms were easily deflected by their intended recipients. But within the first five minutes Harry an Neville had slipped in enough, seemingly harmless, time released curses and charms to ensure their victory. While they were waiting for the spells to take effect, however, they put on a good show for their fellow students.

They ducked and weaved and spun and rolled, vaulting over each other to avoid being hit, all the wile sending a wide variety of spells at their opponents who were forced to use all of their physical abilities to avoid being hit as well. For not having trained as vigorously as the others Severus was actually doing pretty well. but both Harry and Neville could see that he was tiring quickly.

Twenty minutes into the duel Severus' robes seemingly transfigured themselves into Mrs. Longbottom's green dress. A large hat with a vulture perched on top appeared on his head and his wand was transfigured into a large, bright red purse. Then, before anyone realized what was happening, the Potions Master was surrounded by a think, almost impenetrable cloud of pink butterflies.

While Snape was swatting at the butterflies with his purse Harry let Neville do the honors of summoning his wand/purse since the transfigurations had been his idea. The transfigurations and butterflies only lasted a minute or two; but it was long enough to disarm their weakest opponent. Many of the students laughed at Snape's predicament, being reminded of the story of Neville's boggart experience in third year, but the remaining combatants didn't hear any of it. They were still focused on their duel and refused to let up. If anything, in fact, the dueling became more intense a few minutes later when the transfiguration phase of the demonstration began.

While Harry conjured a low hedge of roses as a momentary distraction Neville cast a charm and it began raining Rose pedals on their opponents. And while a flock of birds flew from Harry's wand, as a distraction, Neville conjured an oil slick around their opponents' feet. The whole process only took a few seconds but it was enough to cause Alastor to go down. As he fell back Harry summoned his wand and let it fall at his feet.

Half an hour later, after the appearance and subsequent disappearance of a variety of creatures and objects - including cats, dogs, horses, owls, hippogriffs, snakes, serpents, bludgers, snitches and pianos - Kingsley's robes suddenly turned a shocking shade of hot pink and began twisting quickly around his body, essentially imobilizing him. Moments later Harry hit him with a tickle charm and while he was struggling to regain his composure Neville did the honors of summoning his wand.

The battle raged for another forty-five minutes, with several near misses coming from both sides, before anything else happened. At one hour and fifty minutes Tonks suddenly found herself dressed in a pink tutu and wearing large wooden clogs while strutting around like a chicken. Remus looked mildly surprised at his partner's predicament but was too busy defending himself to do much about it. Once again, Neville did the honors of summoning their opponent's wand.

With five minutes to go Remus' robes were transfigured into a straight jacket. Harry summoned Remus' wand before it hit the ground and the stadium erupted into a collection of loud and boisterous cheers. Harry knelt down and picked up the two wands at his feet, while Neville collected the three at his, and walked over to stand in front of Remus who was struggling to free himself from the jacket. "Well, Professor," Harry asked as a mischievous smirk appeared on his face, "Did we pass the Prank Warfare Test?"

"Is that what you call this?" Remus almost screamed.

Harry smiled and nodded his head vigorously. "Mm Hmm. It was the only way we could think to insure our victory."

Remus growled. "Never prank a prankster, Harry. You will pay for this. Now get me out of this thing before I hex you!"

Harry looked at Remus' wand as he spun the werewolf's wand in his left hand. "I don't think so, Remus. Remember, I've got your wand."

Remus screamed. "ARGHH! Harry James Potter, you let me out of this jacket right now!"

Harry laughed but relented and undid the transfiguration.

"Just you wait, Harry," Remus growled. "I know where you live."

Chuckling, Harry said, "Ah, yes, Remus. But I have two house elves on my side and a record of all the pranks you pulled while you were at Hogwarts so I have a pretty good idea what to watch out for."

Remus snatched his wand from Harry's hand and stalked away grumbling, "Just you wait, Potter. Just you wait."

Half an hour later, after Moody had lectured the assembled students on some of the finer points of what they had just seen, Albus and Harry took the field and squared off at opposite ends of the field. They studied each other's eyes and faces for almost a full minute watching for some telltale sign that their opponent was about to act and make the first move. Harry could sense Dumbledore expanding his awareness to include the entire pitch so he did likewise. Then it happened. Albus' nose twitched ever so slightly and the fight was on.

As Albus cast the first spell, expecting Harry to roll to his wand side, Harry disappeared only to reappear directly behind the Headmaster. In response, Albus vanished and rematerialized at the opposite end of the pitch. The trading of places was so fast that those still in the stands, as the observation of this duel was purely optional, thought it was instantaneous.

As the curses and hexes began to fly and the two combatants moved around the field they were in as much danger of being hit by their own spells as they were their opponent's. The transfiguration phase of this duel began much sooner than it had in the previous demonstration and, again, the combatants had to be careful where they materialized.

When Albus conjured a dragon Harry countered with an enormous griffin. The two creatures fought it out above the ground, biting, slashing and clawing at each other, while the two most powerful wizards in the world battled it out on the ground. The carnage in the sky, however, was nothing compared to the mayhem on the ground.

Within the first hour the field was unrecognizable as anything other than the battlefield it had become. The bleachers were still standing but the ground was rent with trenches and craters where transfigured and conjured objects had been destroyed. After another half hour Harry could feel himself tiring but new he had to continue the battle until his mentor was satisfied with the progress he was making. So, drawing energy from the castle, he reenergized himself and continued to defend and attack as his latent abilities rose to the surface and became manifest in his destiny.

The two combatants were so intensely focused upon their battle that they didn't even notice when a cold wind started blowing out of the north and an icy rain began to fall. As the ground became an impossible quagmire of mud and muck the two wizards rose up and floated above the field, employing their Ethereal Abilities to suspend themselves and move around in the invisible ethosphere that surrounds every physical object and permeates the Universe while, at the same time, holding it together.

An hour later, after several Fire Whips had been exchanged and Harry's wandless abilities had been stretched to their current limits, Albus lowered his wand and called a stop to the proceedings. "Very well done, Harry," he said as Harry lowered his wand as well and the dragon and griffin disappeared. "You are progressing wonderfully. A few more duels and you will be ready."

Harry floated over to hover beside his mentor. "Yeah. That may be, Albus, but I had to draw energy from the castle just to keep going."

"Ah, yes, Harry. That is one of the things I was hoping you would do. I needed you to be tired so that you would be forced to draw energy from Hogwarts. I also wanted you to be relatively tired so that you would not try to reason through our duel. To use many of the powers and abilities you learned during your Maturo Auctus you have got to act on instinct alone. I wanted you to realize this while getting used to the idea that you are, indeed, a very powerful wizard."

Harry nodded then looked around at the damage they had done. No one was left in the stands and the pitch looked as though it had been used as a practice range for at least fifty muggle bombers. "Uh, sir . . ." Harry asked, indicating the pitch. "What are we going to do about the pitch?"

The Headmaster chuckled. "I believe this is where your Elemental Abilities will come in handy. We could fix it with regular magic but since you are, indeed, an Elemental of the highest order I suggest you use you abilities to repair the damage we have wrought." Harry looked at his friend and watched as he floated away and off the pitch. Rising up and gliding over to float directly over the center of the pitch Harry withdrew into a meditative state that was deeper than anything he had ever, consciously experienced before. Reaching out he began to feel and experience several of the most basic forces and energies of Creation. Turning his attention to the pitch he commanded a few of these forces and energies to repair the damaged turf and return it to pristine condition. The entire process may have taken fifteen minutes, all the while an icy cold rain was beating down on Hogwarts and the surrounding countryside. The two wizards who remained outside, however, did not feel any of it because, due to their mastery of Ethereal Magic, they were able to erect shields around themselves that protected them from the elements.

That did not, however, stop Madam Pomfrey from scolding them for staying out in the cold as soon as they entered the castle. "Honestly, Headmaster," she scolded. "I have never seen anyone who liked the cold as much as you. And now you've got Mister Potter enjoying it as well! What am I going to do with you two?"

Since dinner was already over Harry made his way up to the Gryffindor Common Room where he found Neville, Luna, Ron, Hermione and Ginny waiting for him near the fireplace. Ron looked up as he entered. "Hey, Harry," he began excitedly. "After the rain started we came up here and watched you from the dorms. That was really something! But what are we going to do about the pitch?"

Harry shrugged his shoulders and grinned slightly. "We fixed it," he said simply then added, "Now that you guys know what is expected of you I really do hope you are ready to train."

"I've been explaining what we went through over the holidays," Neville said. "They say they're ready but I don't know if they know what they've gotten themselves into."

Harry grinned. "Yeah, well, what say we go up to my trunk so I can get something to eat and then Neville and I can teach you some of the stretches and exercises you will need to learn to keep from getting hurt."

Chapter 28. Romania

The next two weeks passed quickly. Harry and Remus did several mock duels in Defense Against the Dark Arts and even though they were specifically warned to keep it under control Moony and Prongs Jr. took every opportunity to raise Prank Warfare to levels above and beyond anything anyone expected. It was not uncommon for Remus to be in the middle of teaching a class of first-years about shielding charms when he would suddenly scream, "Potter! I'm going to get you for this!" as his hair suddenly grew three feet in length and wrapped itself around his head.

Neither was in uncommon to hear Harry scream, "Moony! You're dead!" while either walking down the hall or sitting in a class when his robes transfigured into a frilly dress or his shoes suddenly became roller skates. The most entertaining pranks, however, took place in the Great Hall during meals.

During dinner, on the first Friday after the demonstrations, Harry and Remus were casting furtive glances at one another while almost everyone else was cautiously eating their dinners, awaiting the next volley in the now famous Potter-Lupin Prank War, when it happened: A large blob of mashed potatoes flew up and into Remus' face. This was quickly followed by a bowl of gravy emptying its contents on his head. Meanwhile, at the Gryffindor Table, Harry found himself being attacked by blobs of gelatin and preserves. Someone yelled "Food Fight!" and for the next hour it was the kind of free for all food fight that can only happen at a magical school. Roast chickens were marching along the tables challenging students to fights. Food was flying though the air and changing direction in flight only to be intercepted by a baked potato. Some of the explosions were really rather spectacular. And when it was over no one had been spared. Very little food had been eaten but everyone had had an enjoyable time. The only down side to the whole evening was that Harry and Remus, as the instigators, had to stand at the entrance to the Great Hall and clean everyone's robes as they left and then had to stay and clean the Great Hall itself.

At their meeting that night Albus chuckled merrily as the two Marauders entered his library and took their seats. "Ah, yes," he laughed. "Nothing like a bit of recreation to break the tension."

Harry and Remus, who had buried the hatched while cleaning the Great Hall snickered in response. "Ah, the good old days," Remus sighed nostalgically.

Severus scowled but Harry though he could sense a small smile creeping onto the stern Potions Master's face.

"I believe the art of Prank Warfare has only just begun to evolve," Kingsley chuckled. "Now if we can only get these two to stop fighting each other and turn their attention to our common foe I do believe that neither Voldemort nor his followers will know what hit them."

Everyone but Severus laughed at this; but even he smiled ruefully.

Ron, Hermione, Luna and Ginny were still complaining about the early morning wakeup calls and their aching muscles but they quickly quieted when Tonks threatened to put them through the same routine Harry and Neville had endured during the holidays, on the weekends. They had heard about the six-hour training sessions and were not in any hurry to experience them.

Towards the end of the meeting that night Albus went out into his office and returned moments

later with four new brooms. Handing them to the four fliers he said, "The Nimbus Broom Company has asked me to ask the four of you to test their new Electra 5000 while in Romania. These are the only four prototypes they have thus far produced. They say that they are even faster and more maneuverable than the Firebolt but they want your opinions and any recommendations on how they could be improved. So I suggest you spend as much time as you can - without neglecting your studies, of course - getting used to your new brooms. As these are prototypes, however, you will not be able to use them during your quidditch matches until they come into regular production."

At breakfast the following Thursday, the day before they were to leave for Romania, Hedwig, Henry and Pig all landed in front of their respective owners. Hedwig and Henry were both carrying large bundles from Weasley's Wizarding Weezes and Pig was carrying a letter from Fred and George. While Harry and Ginny relieved their owls of their burdens and presented their companions with pieces of toast Ron opened the letter and read it to his friends. "Dear, Ron, Hermione, Harry, Ginny, Neville and Luna," he began. "Sorry to commandeer all three owls for this delivery but we wanted to get these particular items to you before you left on vacation.

"Yeah, right," Ron grumbled. "This is not going to be any vacation."

"Henry's parcel contains several thousand Dementor Delights. We hope it is enough to get Charlie and his friends through at least the next few days. Hedwig's parcel contains several thousand Potter Charms. We've tested them on a few volunteers (mainly Ted Tonks) and you might want to know that they are powerful enough to protect muggles.

"Yes, Hermione, we have given your parents a supply, at no charge.

"Just so you know, Harry, our jokes and pranks are still doing quite well but, as our chief investor, you might want to know that Dementor Delights and Potter Charms are our best sellers by a wide margin. Our mail order business for those two items alone extends to every wizarding community on the planet. Thank you for trusting us with these projects! Even though we are currently donating seventy-five percent of our income from those two products to the reconstruction fund we are still guestimating that by the end of the year we should easily clear one million galleons in personal income, after taxes!"

Ron paused and looked up at Harry. "Whoa!" he said. "That is some serious money."

Looking back down at the letter Ron continued to read. "We have been working on improving our Portable Swamps as well as our Weasley Whiz-Bang Fireworks in accordance with your suggestions. The results look promising. They should be ready by November at the latest.

"Once again, thank you. Sincerely, Gred and Forge"

Ron looked up again. "What improvements? What did you ask them to do?"

Harry smirked then smiled. "I asked them to turn them into weapons with a few minor improvements."

Ginny looked at him and asked, "Prank warfare?"

Harry nodded. "Taken to the extreme."

When Friday evening arrived the six students and two professors entered the Headmaster's Office

with a weekend's worth of clothes stuffed into bags and shrunken down so that they could easily fit into their pockets. Each of them had a hip belt lined with pouches filled with Dementor Delights and Potter Charms. Remus, Tonks, Hermione and Luna, as the ground troops, also wore small backpacks that had been stuffed with small bags of the charmed sweets. As they made their final preparations for the trip to Romania Harry did a real quick check on the situation at the dragon preserve and, upon seeing that the battle was already in full swing, returned to his body, which was resting in one of the many chairs in the Headmaster's Office. Looking grimly up at his friends he said, "We go from here straight into battle. Our arrival point is being protected but as soon as we hit you had better be ready to fight."

His seven companions grimly nodded their heads and drew their wands. Harry, Ginny, Ron and Neville then mounted their brooms and everyone joined hands. As Fawkes flew over and landed on Harry's shoulder Albus said, "I cannot help but wish you well, my friends. Please try to stay with your partners; but if you do get separated please keep in contact with each other and stay safe so that you can be found in the morning." Then, turning to Harry, asked, "Do you have your potions?"

Harry checked his chest belt to make sure all of his potions were in their pockets and, when satisfied, nodded his head. "Yes, sir."

"Then I guess all that is left is for you to activate your charms and go," Albus said solemnly.

When they had all activated their defensive charms Harry nodded towards his mentor the turned to Fawkes. Grabbing hold of his tail feathers Harry looked up at the magnificent phoenix that was perched on his shoulder and said, "We're ready when you are, Fawkes."

With a blinding flash of light and a soft pop the eight, plus Fawkes, vanished from Dumbledore's office and almost immediately reappeared behind a large, house-sized boulder near the fringes of the dragon preserve. Curses were flying through the air and dragons could be heard roaring their disapproval. "Get down, Turk!" someone yelled from a nearby pile of boulders. Then they heard someone scream in agony as they were hit by a particularly painful curse.

"Get down!" Remus yelled."

"Communications charms!" Harry yelled as they huddled behind the boulder.

"I can't!" Hermione screamed. She was holding hands with Ron and Remus and couldn't turn loose of either of them.

"What do you mean you cant?" Harry yelled back.

"I mean I can't let go" she screamed. "It's like we're glued together!"

Harry looked back at Hermione with a questioning look on his face then turned his attention to his own predicament. He tried to turn loose of Ginny's hand and let go of Fawkes' tail feathers but found that he could not. What's going on, he thought. This shouldn't be happening. Then it hit him. "Drop your shields! They only get stronger as you share them!" The others looked at him like he was crazy. "I said drop your shields!" he shouted. "If we don't we're lost! Now, drop your shields!"

When they dropped their shields the connection was broken and they were able to move independently. As soon as Harry let go of Fawkes' tail feathers the phoenix vanished, returning to

the safety of Hogwarts and Albus' office.

"Shields up!" Harry yelled. "Communications charms!" With their communications charms in place the world around them became softly muted. They could still hear the world around them but the dominant sounds they heard were the voices of those included in their charmed circuit. "Alright," Harry said gently. "Is everybody here?" After they had all checked in a few seconds later he said, "Alright. On my signal adjust your frequencies to join the battle. Ready and . . . Mark!"

The sounds of the battle suddenly exploded in their ears. Men and women, witches and wizards could be heard screaming a variety curses, hexes, jinxes and charms while others could be heard screaming in agony. "Medic!" the voice they had heard earlier called. "I need a medic in alpha sector! Turk is hurt bad."

Luna glanced at Remus and he nodded. "We'll take care of Turk," Remus said as he and Luna ran over to the injured man, dodging a variety of hexes and curses as they went. "You just arrange for transport!"

Turks partner looked up in surprise then nodded his head. "They're here Charlie!" he said a little more calmly as he began to lay cover for Remus and Luna as they tended to Turk's injuries.

"Great!" Charlie Weasley said from somewhere on the battlefield. "Let their flyers know when the coast is clear and get them up in the air. We are going to need all hands tonight. Oh, and welcome to Romania, guys."

The eight new arrivals laughed nervously. "Thanks, Charlie," Tonks said as she and Hermione prepared to run to an injured witch who was dragging herself into a nearby trench. "I hate to tell you this but this is not my idea of a summer resort."

A few people laughed at Tonks' particular brand of humor but most were too busy fighting to notice.

Moments later, as Hermione gasped at the sight of the injure witch in front of her. Tonks said, "We are going to need an evacuation team in the trench fifty meters to the south of arrival point H."

Harry looked up at this and, glancing over at Neville and Ron to see if they were thinking the same thing he was, said, "Ron, Neville, you take that. Ginny and I will cover you. Fifteen minutes later, when Hermione gave the word that the witch was stable enough for transport, Ron and Neville shot out from behind the shelter of their boulder, flying low to the ground in a tight formation while Harry and Ginny shot up into the sky and began laying a fierce barrage of cover fire while Tonks and Hermione secured the injured witch to the stretcher Ron and Neville had conjured to float between their brooms. As soon as she was loaded Ron and Neville took off for the dragon camp's main hospital and Harry and Ginny joined the battle in earnest. Moments later they could hear Tonks asking, "Are you going to be all right, Hermione?" with obvious concern in her voice.

"Yeah," Hermione breathed. "I'll be fine. It's just that . . ."

"I understand," Tonks said. "Hospital, You've got a partial amputation coming in with multiple lacerations over her entire body and a mild concussion. She should be arriving momentarily."

"Thanks," came the response. "We'll be waiting for her."

Harry glanced down at Hermione and could see that she was not looking well. He wished that he could have prepared his friends with more than charts and maps and stories about what he had seen in his nightly visits but he didn't even know if he was fully prepared for what lay ahead. At that moment he realized that all he could do was give it his all and hope for the best.

After several hours of aerial combat in which Harry and Ginny and Ron and Neville had perfected their fighting strategies their adrenaline was still running high when Ginny yelled, "Watch it, Harry! You've got one on your tail!"

Harry quickly glanced over his shoulder and saw that he had indeed picked up a bogie. He tried several maneuvers to try to shake the Death Eater but none of them seemed to work. Apparently this guy was riding a Firebolt or one of the faster Nimbus brooms. As a last resort he dropped into a vertical dive and raced towards the ground, twisting and turning just enough to keep from being hit. With less than a meter to go he pulled out of the dive and accelerated into a climb. The Death Eater, startled by Harry's sudden disappearance, didn't have time to pull out of the dive and dove into the ground at full speed with a sickening crunch.

"A Wronskie Feint!" Charlie screamed joyfully. "Way to go, Harry!"

A few minutes later someone cheered, "A dragon patronus! I love it!"

This was quickly followed by, "Look at that bulldog go! I love you guys!"

As dawn approached Harry and Ginny touched down near an injured auror and ran to his side. The man looked as though he had gotten into a fistfight with a giant. "Medic!" Harry yelled. "We need a medic in beta sector five, near Hobson's Pond!" He then knelt down and started working on healing a few of his minor wounds while Ginny stood guard. He worked feverishly for fifteen minutes until a mediwitch arrived. She worked on the man for a few minutes then looked up at Harry and said, "I'm sorry. I know you tried and you really did do a good job but he's dead."

For a second or two he stood staring at the mediwitch in shock. Then something in his psyche snapped and waves of magical energy began pouring off of him. Ginny turned to look at him and, recognizing the signs of a major Elemental outburst from their encounter with Bane, whispered, "Oh no."

"What?" Ron asked.

"Elemental," Was all Ginny had to say.

"What?" Charlie asked.

"Harry is an elemental," Ron said urgently. "'Mione, Tonks, Remus, Luna, where are you?"

As the others checked in Ron said, "get everyone in who doesn't need to be out but leave enough to guard the dragons! This cannot be good!"

Ginny cautiously approached Harry and looked into his eyes. What she saw frightened her beyond belief. Harry's eyes were glowing a bright emerald green and the look of determination on his face told her that something major was about to happen. "Harry?" she asked.

Harry laid his wand on the ground and silently unbuckled his hip and chest belts, laying them on

the ground beside his wand. He then looked through Ginny, seeing her but not recognizing her presence. "This has got to stop," He growled as he mounted his broom. Before he kicked off he looked down from Ginny and glared at his wand and belts. "Take care of them. I will need them later."

As Harry rose into the sky, rocketing upwards as fast as his broom would carry him he blocked out most of the chatter in the communications link, only subconsciously listening to the progress that was being made as the battlefield was cleared, but listening for his friends to report in while he extended his conscious awareness to include the entire battlefield and beyond. As he searched for giants, Death Eaters and dementors the first report he was interested in came over the link. It was Ron's voice. "We're okay," Ron's voice said tiredly. "I got a little singed by an irate Chinese Fireball and Neville got winged by a Death Eater from behind but we're doing fine."

Hermione's voice suddenly cut in. "You get yourself to a healer right this minute, Ronald Weasley! Burns are a very serious matter and I don't want you taking any chances"

"Yes, Hermione," was Ron's only response.

Then Luna's obviously concerned voice cut it. "Are you all right, Neville?" she asked.

"Yeah," Neville said softly. "He got my wand arm but I'm fine. My elbow's a little stiff but I'll survive. How about you?"

Luna laughed. "I'm fine. A little worse for the wear but I'm fine. We've got quite a few walking wounded down here and Remus will need someone to take a look at his leg when we get back but . . ."

"Don't forget to have someone take a look at your shoulder, Luna," Remus cut in. "Tonks, Hermione, how about you two?"

"We got separated," Tonks said. "I've got three stretcher cases down here with the Ridgebacks but other than a few cuts and bruises . . ."

"I'll be right there," Ginny said. "I'm only about a hundred meters away. I hope you don't mind sharing a broom."

Tonks chuckled softly. "That's the least of my worries, Ginny. Keeping these three alive comes first."

"'Mione?" Ron asked, a note of panic rising in his voice. "Where are you and how are you doing?"

"I'm all right, I guess," Hermione said. "I'm a little dirty but I'll survive. As to where I am I really don't know. I've got an unconscious witch beside me, though, so I will need a stretcher as well."

"Shoot up some sparks, Hermione, and we'll find you," Charlie said.

Moments later a shower of red sparks could be seen near the eastern end of the preserve. "She's with the greens," a voice said.

"Oh, no," Charlie groaned.

"I'm closest," another voice said. "I'll get her."

"Thanks, Neil," Charlie said. "Hermione, listen to me. If those greens wake up and find you, you are toast so just stay calm and guide Neil in. He'll get you out."

"Er, . . . okay."

With all of his friends accounted for Harry turned his attention back to the tasks at hand. As the sun peaked over the horizon he became aware of two distinct groups of giants lumbering away from the battlefield with several stragglers heading off in various directions. He didn't want to kill them but he did want to get them out of harm's way. So, flying so high that he appeared to be little more than a tiny speck in the sky, he dropped into the same deep meditative state he had after his first duel with Dumbledore and began commanding the elements to do his bidding.

For the first hour, with a combination of lightning strikes and gale force winds, he drove the giants, dementors and Death Eaters away from the dragon preserve, destroying their camps and supplies in the process. After that he surveyed and mapped out the next phase of his plan. Over the next nine hours he re-sculpted the landscape around the preserve and formed a trench around its perimeter by compressing a full kilometer's worth of dirt, stone and bedrock into the roughly circular canyon's two walls. The result was a kilometer wide, kilometer deep canyon whose walls were nearly indestructible. Several streams and waterfalls cascaded down the cliffs, threatening to fill the moat. To solve this problem Harry created a deep ravine that would let most of the water drain out into the valleys below.

He was so exhausted by the time he was finished that he was just barely able to guide his broom in the general direction of the dragon camp's main compound. As he approached he could see and, to a certain extent, hear Remus and the others teaching a few hundred witches and wizards about the charm. They were in the practice phase of the program when Harry spoke into the charmed link. "Is anyone still on this thing?" he asked.

Ginny's voice immediately cut in. "I'm here, Harry," she said, her voice breathing a sigh of relief. "Are you all right?"

"I think so," Harry said tiredly. "Do you have my potions ready?"

"Yes. Where are you?"

"I . . . I don't know. You'll have to look up and guide me in because I'm just too tired."

Moments later Ginny's voice came back to him. "A little to you left, Harry. . . That's it. . . You've got a little rise coming up then you will be passing through the wards. . . That's it, Harry. You're almost here. . . Thirty more meters, Harry. . . Nose up or you're going to hit the wall. . . Alright . . . Let yourself down easy . . . And . . . Stop!"

As Harry's feet touched the ground he collapsed from utter and complete exhaustion. Ginny and Remus were the first to reach him. "Which potions will you need?" Ginny asked urgently.

Harry looked blearily up into Ginny's face. Even with his glasses she looked blurry. "All of them," he mumbled then closed his eyes and fell into a long, protracted deep and dreamless sleep. At first he was vaguely aware of the activity around him as someone conjured a stretcher and potions were poured down his throat. But after that he was too far gone to either feel or hear or even really care about anything.

When Harry opened his eyes next, Ginny was sitting next to him, her head resting on his blanket-covered chest. The blurry figures of Ron and Hermione were slumped together in a couch against the near wall; pale rays of sunlight were streaming through the narrow window across from his bed; and, turning his head, he saw two more blurry figures slumped together on the floor near what appeared to be a door.

A moment later the door creaked slowly open. The two figures on the floor stirred slightly as a blurry face appeared in the opening and looked at Harry. Seeing that he was awake the person carefully opened the door and quietly entered the room. "Good morning, Mister Potter," the woman whispered so as not to disturb his sleeping companions.

"Morning," Harry said softly. "And the name is Harry." Ginny stirred slightly but did not wake.

The healer smiled. "My name is Alice, Harry, and I am one of the resident healers."

Harry nodded his understanding and returned her smile.

"You came awfully close to total magical burnout yesterday; but for what you did we are eternally grateful. I have a restorative draught for you to take if you can untangle yourself from you overprotective young friend." Harry smiled at the though of anyone trying to get past Ginny when she was in one of her protective modes and was secretly glad that Ron and Charlie were here to deal with her rage and protect the others from her wrath. He didn't envy the dragon keepers but he pitied anyone who dared go against Ginny when she was in one of her moods.

After the healer had given him his glasses and left the room Harry carefully slid out from under the blankets and out of the bed, being more than careful not to wake Ginny - substituting the pillow for his chest as he went - and drank the potion before getting dressed and exiting the room. As he softly closed the door behind him Remus and Tonks pushed themselves up from their positions on the floor and ran over, hugging him as they might a long lost brother. "Thank God you're alright," Tonks whispered into his ear. "We were so worried."

Harry smiled shyly and shrugged his shoulders. "Sorry about that but it had to be done."

"I don't know what I'm going to do with you, Harry," Remus said sternly. "What would James and Lilly and . . . Sirius say if they knew I let you almost burn yourself out over a bunch of dragons?" Then, smiling and letting his false anger evaporate into nothingness, Remus hugged Harry tighter than the teenager had ever been hugged before. "Don't you ever do that to me again," Remus said laughing and crying at the same time. "You're the last of your line, Harry, and the son of one of the best friends a werewolf could ever hope to have."

Remus was about to say something else when they heard a high-pitched scream coming from inside the room. "I think Ginny's awake," Harry said hesitantly, turning around just in time to see the door swing violently open and get ripped from its hinges.

As Ginny stood in what remained of the doorway, breathing heavily and a dangerous look of determination on her face, Remus leaned in close to Harry's shoulder and muttered, "Mister Elemental meet Miss Hurricane."

Harry smiled at this and then turned his attention to Ginny. "Good morning, Ginny" he had time to say before Ginny launched herself at him and glued herself to his body.

"Don’t you ever do that to me again," she sobbed into his chest. "I’m never letting you out of my sight ever again."

Returning her hug Harry said, "That might be kind of hard to do. I really don’t thing you are allowed to spend the night in a boy’s dormitory."

Ginny just squeezed him tighter and refused to let go. Looking up from the embrace Harry saw Ron and Hermione standing in the doorway smiling and looking as though Christmas had come three months early. And behind them he saw Luna and Neville smiling at each other. "Morning," he mouthed.

Several minutes later, as they were sitting down to breakfast, Charlie and a dark haired man with sparking blue eyes walked into the dining area and sat down across from Harry. "Harry," Charlie began, "this is Neil McMillan. He’s my boss and he’d like a word or two with you."

Turning to the man sitting beside Charlie Harry noticed a slight resemblance to one of his classmates. "Any relation to Ernie?" he asked the man.

"Cousin," Neil said, nodding and smiling at the name recognition.

"Well, what can I do for you?" Harry asked.

"Do you have any idea what you did yesterday?"

"Er, . . . I dug a trench?" Harry asked hopefully.

Neil and Charlie burst out laughing. "Dug a trench, he says," Charlie laughed.

"Harry, you built us a castle!"

"And on top of that you dug us a moat that the dementors can’t cross and any giant would be crazy to even try!"

Harry smiled sheepishly. "I guess I’ll have to go out and survey the damage then," he said. "All I really remember about yesterday is that I was mad and I didn’t want anyone getting in my way."

"Well, if that’s what you do when you’re mad, Harry," Remus chuckled, "remind me never to get on your bad side."

Harry looked over at Ron for answers. "You’ll see, mate," Ron said. "It’s bloody brilliant, though, if you ask me."

Half an hour later Neil, Charlie, Harry, Ron, Neville and Ginny mounted their brooms and kicked off for a tour of 'Harry’s Trench'. Hermione and the others stayed behind on the excuse of wanting to get things set up for the afternoon’s training session.

As they crested the last rise on the northern edge of the enclave Harry’s mouth fell open and he slowly glided to a stop. "Holy . . . I did that?" he asked in disbelief.

"Yep," Ron, who had also stopped and was hovering beside him, said. "You’re good, mate."

"I know I’m impressed," Ginny said from his other side.

Harry gulped and looked over at Ginny. "Oops."

Stretching out into the distance before them lay a series of lush, green valleys and tree covered hills that blended perfectly into the surrounding terrain. A series of artesian wells percolated out of the ground on the near side, providing a natural irrigation system for the vegetation on the dragon camp side of the valley while snow pack and glacial melt provided water for the surrounding regions. As they slowly glided out over the newly created terrain Harry looked down and noticed several small herds of deer and other animals grazing in the pastures below. He breathed a sigh of relief, realizing that he hadn't killed any innocents in his drive to stop the attacks. He smiled to himself as several different bird species flitted about building nests and gathering food. At one point he even watched as a falcon dove out of the sky, snatching a rabbit in its talons as it skimmed over a grassy field, It saddened him to think that the rabbit's life had been cut short but at the same time he knew that it was a part of the natural order of things.

As they flew out over the newly created terrain Harry could not help but marvel at the wonder of it all. When they dropped down into the canyon the others began flying in a circulating formation around him, much as the members of the Order had on the night of his escape from Privet Drive the previous year. "I don't know what you did to those walls, Harry," Neil said as they rounded a bend near the upper end of the new canyon, "but they seem to be indestructible. Those Death Eaters threw curse after curse at them last night and they just bounced off. And the giants tried to climb up but they couldn't get a handhold anywhere. It's almost as if you put a permanent repelling charm on the entire length of the wall. I've never seen anything like it."

As they were approaching the dragon keeper's compound on their way back Harry noticed two tiny specks in the northwest sky. He watched them grow steadily larger as they landed and continued to watch as the others went in for lunch. Moments later he recognized Hedwig's and Henry's particular styles of flight and saw that Hedwig was carrying a parcel of some kind. He called out to them. "Hedwig, Henry? What are you doing here?"

Both owls landed on the ground in front of him a short time later, clearly exhausted from their long trip. The two owls had apparently taken turns carrying the package. When Harry gently lifted Hedwig up to his shoulder she perched unsteadily for a moment before leaning against the side of his head for support. After lifting Henry up to his other shoulder Harry picked up the parcel and began examining it on his way in for lunch. He found an envelope tucked securely beneath many of its binding strings. The letter was addressed to: Harry Potter, Keeper's Compound, Dragon Camp, Romania. In the 'from' section it said: Albus Dumbledore, Poppy Pomfrey, Rubeus Hagrid, Dobby and Winky, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Great Britain.

Upon entering the dining hall Harry heard Hermione gasp. "Hedwig!"

Less than a second later Ginny jumped up from her seat. "Henry?" she asked.

Henry hooted softly as she approached and hopped over to her shoulder when she was close enough for him to make the leap without falling to the floor.

"Those birds must really care about you," Neil said admiringly.

"Who's the package from?" Ron asked.

Taking a seat next to Ginny, Harry said, "It says its from Albus, Madam Pomfrey, Hagrid, Dobby and

Winky."

"Dobby and Winky?" Charlie asked. "Who are they?"

"A pair of house elves," Harry said absently. "Technically they are free but Dobby wants to serve me and Winky wants to serve Ginny so I guess you could say that they are our house elves."

Charlie chuckled. "You've got your own house elves, eh? Somehow I'm not surprised. So what do they want?"

"I don't know," Harry said, returning his attention to the envelope. "I guess I'll have to open it to find out."

"Here," Charlie said, sliding a knife down the length of the table to Harry, handle first.

"Thanks," Harry said, picking up the knife.

Breaking the seal on the envelope Harry opened it and slid the piece of parchment out. Opening it he read:

> Dear Harry,
>
> Mr. McMillan has informed me of your progress. I must say that I am surprised at the level of your abilities. But as I have said, you are an elemental of the highest order. It would seem that you are thwarting Tom's efforts at almost every turn.
>
> Be that as it may, however, you cannot keep exhausting your energy reserves like this if you expect to be able to fight Tom the next time the two of you meet. To help you recover more fully before your return to Hogwarts. Poppy has asked me to include refills of your regular potions as well as an additional restorative draught Dr. Stone prepared in case of emergency. I suggest you drink this potion immediately.
>
> Dobby and Winky, asked me to include a few bagels as well. These can be found in the container beneath the potions. You will have to use the Finite Incantatum Charm before eating them, however, as they are currently being protected by a number of charms to preserve their warmth and freshness.
>
> Hagrid has asked me to include restorative draughts for Hedwig and Henry to help them recover from their journey. These potions can be found in the smallest of the three packages.
>
> Fawkes will be arriving at sunset (Romanian time) to bring the ten of you back to Hogwarts. I look forward to your return and expect a full report from every member of your team at our next regular meeting.
>
> Sincerely,
>
> Albus Dumbledore,
> Headmaster,
> Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

"Well?" Ron asked as Harry laid the letter aside and started unwrapping the packages.

Harry absentmindedly pushed the letter in Ron's direction as he searched for Hedwig and Henry's potions. When he found them he summoned two shallow bowls from one of the nearby shelves and filled them with the draughts. Coaxing Hedwig and Henry off their shoulders, Harry and Ginny placed the bowls in front of their companions and encouraged them to drink their fill, which they did greedily. Breaking into the bagels Harry removed the charms from one and tore it in half, offering one half to Henry and the other to Hedwig.

After the two snowy owls were taken care of he opened the potions container and sorted through

the various bottles. He recognized most of them and knew that he would have to brew more of his personal potions when he got back so that Madam Pomfrey would have a supply on hand in case of emergency. The one bottle he didn't recognize was filled with a bright, aqua marine colored solution that seemed to radiate energy from within. Uncorking the bottled he looked around and offhandedly said, "Well, bottoms up. Here's to life," and drank the entire contents of the bottle in one gulp.

As the potion worked its way through his system he felt his skin begin to tingle as every nerve ending in his body fired. He was reminded of the Cruciatus Curse but this was different. Rather than hurting this felt warm and comforting. After almost a minute he looked around the table and saw that almost everyone was staring at him. "Cool!" Charlie said. "Do you glow like that all the time, Harry?"

Harry smirked. "Only when Ginny's around," he said.

Everyone laughed and a few minutes later they were eating and discussing the business of the day; that night's battle, which really hadn't amounted to much as the dementors seemed to have a height limit in their flight and the Death Eaters seemed hesitant to attack the dragons without the giants; and the charm. There were only about two hundred people left to teach since Remus and the others had spent most of Saturday teaching and it was decided that Harry would take this last class.

As the sun approached the western horizon the dragon keepers and aurors were, for the most part, going about their business more confidently than they had before. There were still a few who hadn't quite gotten the charm down but they were practicing every chance they got. Several satellite camps were being set up around the perimeter of the preserve, near the cliffs, to serve as a first line of defense and others were being set up at irregular intervals - in caves and wizarding tents - along the slopes leading up to the camp to serve as second, third and fourth lines of defense against any attacks. They didn't expect anything more than Death Eaters - at least not for the time being - as the giants and dementors had been effectively removed from the equation, but they still wanted to be prepared.

As the sun began to set Harry, Ginny, Ron, Hermione, Neville, Luna, Remus and Tonks were all standing in the middle of the dragon keeper's main compound saying their goodbyes and promising to keep in touch with the friends they had made. The remaining Dementor Delights and Potter Charms had been distributed among the aurors and two of the dragon keepers who were long overdue on taking their vacation time were going to be taking the empty packs back to Diagon Alley to be refilled by Fred and George.

The four fliers had their brooms strapped to their backs and Hedwig and Henry were perched on Harry and Ginny's shoulders, nervously awaiting Fawkes' arrival for the return trip to Hogwarts. Harry and Ginny knew that they would rather fly home under their own power but they had somehow convinced them to return with them via Fawkes.

Charlie put his arm around Harry's shoulders, being careful not to disturb Hedwig, and led him away from the others. "I want to thank you for coming, Harry. Charms aside, you guys have done more for the morale of this camp than you can imagine."

"I agree one hundred percent," Neil said catching up to them. "And I want you to know that you are welcome back any time. You've given us the kind of sanctuary we've always wanted and provided us with the means to defend it."

"Er . . ." Harry began but was interrupted by the soft popping sound that accompanied Fawkes' arrival. Harry shrugged. "You're welcome," he said then turned back to his friends. Something about Charlie's approach told him that there was something else Charlie had wanted to talk about and that it most likely had to do with his relationship with Ginny; but since Dumbledore was expecting them in his office any minute now the conversation would have to wait.

Harry walked back and took hold of Ginny's free hand, checked to see that Hedwig was all right and took hold of Fawkes' tail feathers. With a soft pop they we on their way, no longer standing in the dragon keeper's compound but being magically transported to the Headmaster's Office of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Almost instantaneously, with the same signature pop, the eleven travelers - four witches, four wizards, two snowy owls and one phoenix - appeared in Albus Dumbledore's office. "I trust all went well," the headmaster said.

Chapter 29. Consequences

At breakfast the next morning Luna joined the others at the Gryffindor House Table and when a fourth-year girl suggested she move back to the Ravenclaw Table Harry, Ron, Neville, Hermione and Ginny scowled at the girl, as all of their tempers were fairly short, and Neville growled, "Luna may have been sorted into Ravenclaw, Joyce, but she is more Gryffindor that you will ever be so she stays."

"And if you don't like it," Ginny added with a snarl, "then you can take it up with Professor Potter here."

A hushed silence fell over the Great Hall as almost everyone turned to stare at the six ill-tempered students who had not been seen since dinner on Friday. Harry turned to look at the fourth-year girl and, curtly nodding his head, dangerously said, "She stays."

Several of the students looked towards the Head Table, where many of the professors had witnessed the exchange, and towards Professor Dumbledore in particular for some sign but the Headmaster simply nodded his head and smiled. From that moment on Luna Lovegood became an honorary Gryffindor and anyone who complained about it was soundly rebuffed.

A few minutes later, as the morning post arrived, Hedwig and Henry flew in with the rest of the owls. But instead of bringing any mail simply landed and perched on Harry and Ginny's shoulders. "I think they are glad to be back," Ron commented as Pig landed on his head.

"And I think Pig is glad to see you made it back in one piece," Harry chuckled softly.

Ron scowled but didn't move to swat the tiny owl from its perch. A minute later, when the three owls made no sign of leaving Ginny took out her wand and tapped Harry's plate. Dobby's reflection appeared beneath Harry's unfinished breakfast. "Yes, Ginny?" Dobby's voice could be heard coming through the food.

Ginny looked mildly surprised that Dobby knew it was her who had called but made her request anyway. "Er, Dobby? We have three owls up here who don't seem to want to leave. Is there any possibility you could send up a small bowl of owl treats?"

Dobby smiled and nodded his head vigorously. "Yes, Ginny! They will be up in a moment." And true to his word a small bowl of owl treats appeared in the middle of the table between Harry and Ron moments later. The three owls hopped down onto the table and began eating. Henry and Hedwig glanced warningly at Pig every time the tiny owl got too close and occasionally hooted disdainfully at the mess he was making but otherwise seemed to accept him as an equal.

A few minutes later Mark Evans walked up behind Harry and tapped him on the shoulder. If it hadn't been for the fact that he was sitting between Ginny and Neville Harry would have spun out of his seat and hexed the little first-year Gryffindor without even thinking about it. As it was, however, he scared the young boy half to death and earned himself several glances from the Head Table. When he realized what he had done Harry blushed and slowly got up and turned around to apologize to the dark haired little boy who was standing between the Gryffindor and Ravenclaw tables, shaking like a leaf. "I'm sorry, Mark," he said after sitting down with his back to the table. "I'm just a little jumpy today."

"Th-that's okay," Mark stammered hesitantly. "I . . . I just wanted to let you know what my father found out," the little boy said, tentatively holding out a sheet of paper that was shaking violently.

The others had stopped eating and were taking an interest in the interaction that was taking place between their friend and the little first-year who might be one of his relatives. Harry, realizing that he had probably frightened the young boy out of his mind, smiled and stood up. Guiding Mark to sit in his seat, Harry accepted the sheet of paper and scanned it for a few moments before looking up at Mark and smiling, tears of happiness threatening to spill down his cheeks. "We're second cousins," he said happily. "And from the looks of it, you and your little sister and I are the last three in that particular branch of the family. And since I don't have any other blood relatives I guess you could say we are family."

Hermione gasped. "But that's wonderful, Harry!" she said.

Harry glanced up and saw the tears of joy in his friend's eyes. "I know," he said. Standing up he returned the computer printout to Mark and walked him back to his seat. As they were walking he turned to Mark and said, "All I've ever wanted was a real family."

"What about the Dursley's?" Mark asked.

Harry snorted. "They weren't much of a family, Mark. It was more like I was the slave and they were the masters. But that's over now. I know its not much but if you don't mind I would like to spend some time getting to know you."

"What would you like to know?" Mark asked as he sat down with his friends.

"Everything," Harry said. "But if your father knew my mother at all I would like to talk to him sometime to find out what she was like when she was younger."

"I'll ask him," Mark said tentatively, "but he doesn't talk about his cousins much. All he will ever really say about them is that one was nice and the other was mean. He says the nice one died on Halloween night in 1981 and that the mean one died last summer."

Harry looked at his shoes for a moment, struggling to control his emotions. When he felt composed enough to continue he said, "That would be my mum and aunt Petunia. My mum was murdered on Halloween night in 1981 and my aunt was murdered this past summer. And since Dudley was murdered as well I guess I'm all you're going to get where second cousins are concerned on your father's side of the family."

Mark looked up at Harry in horror. "You mean I was related to that big oaf?"

Harry grinned sadly. "Yep. I'm afraid so, Mark. I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad news but unfortunately we can't really pick our relatives."

After Defense Against the Dark Arts that morning Remus called Harry over. "You okay?" he asked. "I saw you jump when that Little Evans boy tapped you on the shoulder and I was just wondering . . ."

Harry nodded. "Yeah, I'll be fine. I had been watching the attacks every night for two weeks before we went so I could get a feel for what we were going into but seeing it and actually experiencing it are two different things."

"Aye. You've got that right, Harry," Alastor said, hobbling over. "From what these two have told me it sounds like you eight have seen some of the bloodiest fighting since the height of the war against Grindelwald."

Harry looked up into the retired auror's eyes, even though his magical eye was spinning crazily in its socket, and nodded. "I can imagine," he said sadly. "If the truth behind some of the stories Albus told me this summer is anything close to what happened this weekend then I can understand why he doesn't like to talk about it."

"Aye. And now you know why he cries sometimes when he does."

The other three Defense professors looked over at Moody in surprise but Harry just nodded his head. "Yeah. Now I know. But what are we going to do about the others? I mean, I've got a pensieve and I intend to use it tonight. But what about Ron, Hermione, Neville, Luna and Ginny?"

There was silence for several seconds, as no one knew what to say. Then Alastor said, "Albus has always been one for talking things through and I'll admit that it does have its merits but we can't force anyone to talk. What do the rest of you think?"

"I'll volunteer my trunk, if you think it will help," Harry said.

Remus nodded. "I think that might be a good idea, Harry. We will need someplace private to meet. Someplace where we can let our hair down and talk openly about our feelings."

Tonks nodded. "I'm with you. I'll talk to the girls and Ron tomorrow morning if you two will work on Neville. I know there are some things I want to talk about; but I don't want to talk to anyone who wasn't there."

"Me too," Remus admitted. "Its not that I don't trust you Kingsley, Alastor. Its just that . . ."

"I understand," Alastor said.

"That's one of the reasons Aurors work in teams," Kingsley said. "So we will have someone to talk to. That is also why it is so hard when your partner dies."

Tonks nodded her head. "I'll talk to Severus about brewing some calming draughts."

"And I'll talk to Dobby and Winky about dinners for eight, if that is alright with you guys."

"Sounds good to me." Remus said. "Tonks?"

"Sounds good to me too."

"Alright. It's settled then," Harry said. "The eight of us will start taking dinner in my trunk starting tomorrow night, if we can get the others to agree. Well, I had better get to Charms so I'll see you guys in the morning."

At 4:30 the next morning Remus walked into the Gryffindor, sixth-year boys' dormitory and approached Harry's bed. "I'm awake," Harry said softly. "Ron and Neville have been having nightmares. I wanted to give them some Dreamless Sleep Potion from my own stock but I don't want them to get too used to it."

Remus looked at him in surprise. "Do you use the stuff?"

"No," Harry shook his head. "I just keep a supply on hand in case of emergency."

"Brew it yourself?"

"Yeah."

Walking over to Ron's bed Remus pulled the curtains back. Ron was thrashing violently around, obviously screaming, reliving one of the most horrific moments from the battle the previous weekend. "Silencing Charms?" Remus asked.

"Had to," Harry said. "Otherwise none of us would have gotten any sleep last night."

Remus nodded. "Neville too?"

"Yeah."

Five minutes later, after waking both Ron and Neville up and removing the Silencing Charms the four wizards began stretching out and getting ready for their morning exercises. Fifteen minutes after that, after Ron, Neville and Harry had gotten dressed, they made their way down to the Gryffindor Common Room where Luna, Ginny, Hermione and Tonks were just finishing up with their stretches. Harry cast a questioning glance at Tonks who nodded her hear in response. All three girls were having nightmares about the battle as well.

After two laps around the perimeter of the castle grounds, three for Remus, Harry and Neville, They met up with Kingsley and Alastor in the quidditch pitch and started their ballet, tumbling and gymnastics drills. After an hour of that they broke into groups and while Ron, Hermione, Ginny and Luna learned about strategy in dueling from Kingsley and Alastor Harry and Neville went down to the other end of the pitch and dueled against Remus and Tonks. The only difference this time was that Remus was paired with Neville and Tonks was paired with Harry. The battle raged for half an hour, while the others watched with Alastor and Kingsley commenting about the different strategies being employed by the two teams, before Tonks was disarmed by a stray curse and Harry was left to duel his usual partner and one of his father's best friends. Fifteen minutes later Neville was disarmed with several spells that had been fired in rapid succession and then it was just Harry and Remus. At seven o'clock Kingsley shot a steam of sparks into the air and both Harry and Remus collapsed to the ground laughing. "You're good, Remus!" Harry laughed.

"You're not to shabby yourself, Harry!" Remus gasped out. "We're going to have to start you two on solos with multiple opponents sometime this week."

"Aye," Alastor growled. "You won't always have a partner and you will probably find yourselves outnumbered more often than not."

Harry and Neville nodded their acceptance of the next stage of their training but the other four just looked at each other with their mouths hanging slightly open. "No partner, multiples opponents?" Ron asked.

"Aye, lad," Moody growled. "As you learned this past weekend, they don't always play fair and they will do everything they can to separate a team."

Hermione suddenly paled and began to shake. Fortunately Tonks was looking at her at the time and ran over with a small bottle of potion. "Here!" she said urgently, shoving the bottle into Hermione's hand. "Drink this. It's a calming draught."

Hermione looked panicked but nodded her head and raised the bottle to her lips. Moments later, as the potion began to take effect, Hermione stopped shaking and her color returned. "Thanks," she said. "I don't know what happened . . ."

"That's alright," Tonks said, putting her arm around the younger woman's shoulders. "Its not uncommon after you first combat experience. That's why we are all going to start doing dinner in Harry's trunk tonight." The five who had not been a part of the discussion the previous morning all nodded their heads in acceptance of their fates. "And Severus has a supply of calming draughts in his office if you need any more."

Dinner that evening started out very quietly. The eight friends were sitting around the table in Harry's conference room just picking at their food. Even Ron, who normally had a voracious appetite, was doing little more than picking at his food. All heads were bowed in silence, as if in prayer, but the fact of the matter was that no one wanted to be the first to say anything. It was almost as if they feared that saying something would cause them to be magically transported back through space and time to the dragon preserve and the battle of the previous Friday night.

Dobby and Winky watched their friends with concern and did everything they could to lighten the mood but nothing worked. They gradually fell silent and just watched as the eight humans silently worked up the courage to face their fears and discuss what they had been through. Several times, people cleared their throats and glanced up as if preparing to break the silence only to drop their gazes back down to their plates and fall silent. Finally, after almost half an hour of a depressingly solemn silence, Remus cleared his throat and said, "We need to talk about this. If we don't it is going to destroy us."

The others looked up and murmured their agreement but no one really wanted to begin. Then, after several more minutes of silence, Hermione began talking about how she was feeling. "I . . . I . . . I never knew it could be so bloody. I mean, my parents are dentists and I am used to the sight of blood but I had never seen anything like that before. . ." As she continued to describe her feelings she began to shiver and then cry. Ron, after the initial shock of hearing his girlfriend confessing her feelings of fear and dread, moved his chair over to sit next to Hermione and put his arm around her shoulders. When she was finished she turned into Ron's shoulder and cried.

The others let her cry in silence for a few minutes before Tonks, who was sitting on Hermione's other side, spoke up and started talking about her feelings. And so it went slowly around the table with each person confessing their feelings and letting themselves experience the grief they felt. No one was immune to tears that evening.

After dinner the group moved to the sitting room. As Harry sat down next to Ginny on one of the couches he glanced at his watch and, seeing the time, asked Dobby and Winky to let the D.A. know that class was being canceled for the night. Remus and Tonks silently agreed that this evening was far too important to be put off so they asked the two house elves to cancel their classes as well.

They talked through the evening and far into the night, reliving the horrors of what they had seen and finding comfort in each other's company. It was a very painful experience, and emotionally trying on many levels, but they gradually began to come to terms with what they had experienced

and find a sense of peace that they could live with.

When Ginny drifted off to sleep at around 1:00 AM Harry carried her into the bedroom and laid her on the bed. Hermione soon followed and since it was so late Harry asked Winky and Dobby to conjure another queen size bed, for Tonks and Luna, in the bedroom and one for Remus in the library. Harry, Ron and Neville then climbed out of the trunk and went to bed. As they were getting ready for bed Harry looked over at his friends and asked, "Do you guys want silencing charms tonight?"

"Only if we need them," Ron said tiredly.

Neville nodded his agreement with Ron. "Yeah."

At seven o'clock that Friday evening, as the Hogwarts Branch of the Order of the Phoenix assembled in the Headmaster's Library, the eight were feeling much better about themselves and were getting back to their lives as students and teachers. There was still a long way to go but at least they had begun the process. Albus looked around at the group and sighed sadly then said, "I'm sorry. I had hoped to be able to spare most of you the horrors of war; but, sadly, our adversaries will not allow that to happen. I am, however, very proud of all of you. You are, indeed, a very strong, powerful and courageous fighting unit. My only hope is that others will be able to follow the examples you have set.

"But tell me, how are your meetings going?"

The eight looked around at each other for a few second then Tonks spoke up. "They are going well, Albus. We still have a long way to go but we are getting there."

Albus nodded his head. "Good. I have a request for the eight of you.

"The response to Harry's initial presentation was overwhelmingly positive. We have had numerous requests for additional training sessions. Since I have no wish to break up such an excellent team I was wondering if we could impose upon the eight of you to teach the Potter-Lupin-Granger-Padfoot Defensive Charm to approximately one thousand witches and wizards on the last Saturday of every month and approximately five hundred on the second Saturday of every month?"

After a brief discussion, during which it was agreed that Albus, Minerva, Alastor and Kingsley would help with the practice portion of the programs (Severus was excused as he would be attending Death Eater meetings on the weekends), it was agreed that they would teach these classes and that the two main lecturers would be Remus and Harry.

The next topic of discussion was the training of a select group of students, in addition to the six, in advanced dueling. It was decided that the training would be completely voluntary but that only certain students would be approached for membership in this elite group of fighters. It was also decided that the Room of Requirement would be used by Harry, Neville and Alastor's group while Tonks, Remus and Kingsley would be using the Hogwarts grounds and the quidditch pitch. The training of these additional fighters would not officially begin for another week but the selected students would be contacted that weekend.

Chapter 30. First Hogsmeade

The first Hogsmeade Weekend was announced for the last weekend in October. With the increased Death Eater and dementor activity more teachers were being sent to sheppard the students back to Hogwarts at the first sign of trouble. Fortunately it was also a teaching weekend for the eight, which meant that there were close to one thousand additional witches and wizards in town for that evening's training session.

The six were going into Hogsmeade together to meet with Andromeda Babcock's parents whom Albus had said would meet them at the Hog's Head at one o'clock to discuss the possibilities of mapping a dementor's energy signature and finding a solution to the problem. The Babcocks would be accompanied by two Unspeakables from the Department of Mysteries, two Ministry Aurors and Mr. Weasley and would be portkeying into Hogsmeade shortly before the meeting. After breakfast the six lined up as a group in the Entrance Hall to be checked out by Mr. Filch. Filch scowled at them as they approached but Harry could sense that there was nothing malevolent behind it. It was just a part of the caretaker's personality.

There was a toy store across the street from Honeydukes and as soon as Harry saw it he motioned for the others to follow him in. They looked at him curiously, as though wondering as to whether or not he had gone the way of Dumbledore, but agreed to go in and take a look around. The silver haired man at the counter looked up as they entered. "Ah, Mister Potter," the old wizard said. "The headmaster said I might be seeing you. What can I do for you and your friends today?"

Harry stopped abruptly and stumbled forward as Ron bumped into him. After catching himself and stepping cautiously up to the counter he hesitantly asked, "He . . . he did?"

"Yes," the old man said. "He told me that you were looking for a specific kind of toy, a toy that would challenge your abilities and force you to think about several things at once, to make all of the parts work as a whole while keeping each action separate and unique."

Harry nodded. "Yes, sir," he said. "That's what I'm looking for." The others looked at each other curiously then looked back at Harry as if he had lost his mind.

"The more complex the better, I take it?" the shopkeeper asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Then I think I may have what you are looking for," the old man said as he stepped out from behind the counter and walked down one of the aisles. "Follow me.

"We really don't get too many requests for these," the man said as he led them towards the back of the store. "Most wizards aren't up to the task. And even those who are aren't able to articulate more than a few functions at a time. However, since the odd witch or wizard does occasionally come along who is capable of such feats we do keep a few on hand . . ." The old shopkeeper continued to babble as he led them to the back of the store describing the mysterious toys he was leading them to. "We don't have many but we do have some of the most advanced appliances available."

The old man led them to a small collection of what looked like scale models of various magical creatures and left them to return to the front of the store. Hermione read the label on one and said,

"I've read about these!" Ron rolled his eyes. "They are the magical equivalent of muggle robots. They're much more sophisticated, of course, and they take an extraordinary amount skill to operate properly and . . ." she stopped and looked suspiciously over at Harry. "Harry," she scowled, "why didn't you tell us."

"I'm not supposed to tell anyone," Harry growled, "so, please, don't say anything. It's bad enough that you found out. We don't want it to become common knowledge." Ron, Ginny, Neville and Luna looked curiously between Harry and Hermione, hoping for an explanation, but with a nod of her head Hermione clammed up and Harry refused to elaborate further.

Fifteen minutes later, after carefully examining the few fully articulating toys in the man's shop Harry selected a half-meter long model of a Hungarian Horntail - the same dragon he had faced in the first task of the Tri-wizard Tournament in his fourth year - and carried it up to the front of the store. The old wizard looked up when he recognized Harry's selection. "Ah, a little sentimental value, Mister Potter?" he asked.

Harry blushed slightly and smiled sheepishly. "Yeah, you could say that," he said while paying for the dragon.

Their next two stops were Honeydukes where they stocked up on Chocolate Frogs, Cockroach Clusters and Bertie Botts Every Flavor Beans and the Three Broomstick where they met up with Kingsley, Remus and Tonks and relaxed until it was time to leave for the Hog's Head.

At twelve thirty they left the Tree Broomsticks, thanking Madam Rosemerta for her hospitality and reassuring her that they would return as soon as possible. Remus and Tonks turned and walked towards the train station while the others headed for the Hog's Head. When they arrived at the dingy little pub Kingsley walked over to the oddly familiar looking barkeep with the filthy rag and the two held a whispered conversation for several seconds. Meanwhile many of the pub's patrons were eyeing the six students suspiciously, which made Harry nervous for the girls' safety. He knew they could handle themselves, probably better than he, Ron or Neville could protect them; but some of the looks they were receiving still made him nervous. Moments later Kingsley stepped away from the bar and approached them. "This way," he murmured and led them around the bar, past the other patrons, through a shadowy doorway in the darkest corner of the pub, up two flights of stairs and into a room with a small conference table and several chairs scattered about. "You kids get set up," Kingsley said. "I'll be downstairs guarding the entrance." Harry nodded and Kingsley left, closing the door tightly behind him.

At five minutes to one Harry was pacing nervously across the floor, occasionally glancing out the dirty windows as if subconsciously expecting an attack at any moment. The table and chairs had been arranged into an acceptable configuration and everything else was going according to plan but still he felt nervous. He didn't know what it was and it was eating at him. The others were watching him nervously and he knew that they didn't know what, if anything, they should do to alleviate his feelings of nervousness. Finally, at two minutes to one Ginny grabbed his arm. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"I don't know," he said, returning to the realities of the moment. "I feel like I've missed something. I just can't figure out what it is."

"Well," Ron said. "If it will make you feel any better why don't you do a sweep of the area to see what's going on."

Harry nodded as he sank into a wooden chair next to the door. He immediately entered the ethos and began scanning the village of Hogsmeade and the surrounding area. He grew pale when he discovered the three battalions of Death Eaters hidden in the surrounding countryside and began to shiver when he discovered the dementors slowly gliding towards the village from the south. Snapping back into his body he opened his eyes and stood up. "Get ready to fight!" he commanded. "We might have thirty minutes but get ready to fight." The others looked up in astonishment then sprang to their feet and followed him as he raced out the door and down the steps.

Kingsley was already on his feet when they burst out of the doorway. "What's wrong?" he shouted as the six students raced through the pub.

Harry and the others skidded to a halt and waited for Kingsley to catch up to them, Taking several deep breathes to catch his breath and settle his nerves Harry turned to his fellow professor and said, "Death Eaters and dementors. We might have thirty minutes."

"Do you want to call off the meeting?"

"No. We need their help. This may be the best way to get their attention but we've got to protect them."

"Alright," Kingsley said grimly. "You six stay here. I'll alert the others." Turning to the barkeep he said, "Aberforth, alert all the other shops in town and have them get ready to evacuate everyone to the castle. If the locals want to stand and fight that's fine but we want all of the students except these six back on school grounds within half an hour."

At that moment seven people appeared in the street in front of the Hog's Head. Harry recognized Mr. Weasley and Mr. and Mrs. Babcock from their pictures and recognized the other four as Ministry of Magic officials by their robes. As Kingsley ran out the door Harry heard him call for Mr. Weasley to follow him and told the others to get inside.

Aberforth tossed his dirty rag on the counter and, pulling his wand out, sent a stream of red sparks shooting out the door and snaking through the streets as he alerted the people to the coming attack. As the Babcocks and their escorts entered the dingy pub he pushed them towards the six students and growled, "We're getting ready for an attack. I want you people safe so get upstairs and lock the door. We'll put impenetrable charms on the building but we want you out of sight until it's over." Then turning to Harry he said, "You got those charms, Potter?"

Harry checked to make sure he had his pouch with him and found it fastened around his waist. He nodded. "Yes."

"Good," the old man growled. "You others?" They nodded. "Good. You may need them. But right now get upstairs and conduct your business."

The Babcocks, the Unspeakables and the Ministry Aurors looked both startled and confused and didn't seem to know which way to turn until Hermione and Ginny walked over and explained the situation to them in whispered conversations. Hermione, being a muggle-born witch, took it upon herself to reassure Mr. and Mrs. Babcock that everything would be fine and Ginny, being her father's daughter, explained the situation to the Ministry officials. One of the few remaining patrons walked up behind Harry and growled, "You get yourself upstairs, Potter. I'll guard the stairs." The voice as well as the familiar scents of alcohol and tobacco smoke told Harry that this

man in the rough clothing was none other than Mundungus Fletcher.

"Thanks, Dung," he said then called for everyone to follow him back upstairs.

Once upstairs Ron closed the door and Ginny, Neville and Luna began sealing the room against attack and casting several layers of privacy charm while Harry and Hermione took seats on one side of the table and motioned for their visitors to take the seats opposite them. "Don't worry, Mr. and Mrs. Babcock," Hermione soothed. "Andromeda is perfectly safe at Hogwarts and you are perfectly safe so long as the wards that are now protecting this room remain in place. And we will do everything we can to see that you are returned home safely.

"How much have they told you about why you are here?"

Mr. Babcock looked around nervously and then said, "All we were told is that you are having a problem mapping the energy signature of some kind of creature that has to be destroyed if you are going to have a fighting chance at winning some kind of war that is going on in your world"

"Close enough," Harry said. For the next twenty minutes the six of them - Harry, Hermione, Mr. and Mrs. Babcock and the two Unspeakables - discussed the war that was currently raging in the wizarding world and what the two sides were fighting for. As the topic changed to dementors, energy fields and possible mapping procedures Ron, who was standing near one of the windows said, "They're here."

"Here too," Neville said from his window in the other side of the room,

Mrs. Babcock looked nervously around the room. "Are you sure we're safe?" she asked in an almost panic stricken voice.

"Quite safe," Harry said getting up and walking over to stand by Ginny near the third window that gave an obstructed view of the main road leading up to the castle. "How are the students doing?" he asked softly.

"I think most of the younger ones are back on castle grounds. A few of the older ones and most of the teachers are staying behind to help fight," Ginny said, a note of sadness in her voice.

Harry glanced around the room then looked at Hermione. "Do you think you can explain what we are trying to do, Hermione?"

"Yes," she nodded.

"Alright," he said as he looked out through Ginny's window and watched some of the street fighting that was going on down below. "Neville, you're with Ron. Ginny, you're with me. Luna, I want you to stay here and get ready to treat the wounded." Turning to the Aurors he said, "You two guard these people with your lives. If things start to go against us get them out." The Aurors nodded as they jumped to their feet and took up positions at the windows. As Harry and the others approached the door Harry smiled at Luna and said, "Miss Lovegood, could you please be so kind as to let us out of here so we can go lend a hand?"

Luna smirked then grimaced then reluctantly turned around to undo the spells she had cast on the door. "Alright," she said suspiciously, "But I don't want to hear about any heroics or you are all going to be grounded for a month."

Harry grumbled something about Luna being worse than his Aunt Petunia and started down the stairs with Neville, Ron and Ginny right behind him when he heard Hermione call after him, "No heroics, Harry!"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Harry grumbled as they descended the stairs.

"I think she knows you too well, Harry," Neville said as they reached the landing.

Glancing up at his friend before heading down the second flight of stairs Harry groaned, "Yeah, you're probably right."

When they reached the bottom of the stair Mundungus Fletcher stood up and looked at them curiously. "We're going to go help, Dung," Harry said. "I want you to stay here and guard the stairs until they come down." The lackadaisical thief sat back down and tilted his chair back against the wall as Harry turned to others and asked, "How are you doing on Dementor Delights?"

Neville checked his pouch. "I've still got a few," he said.

"I've probably got a dozen," Ron said.

"Mine's still full," Ginny said with slight smile. She didn't really need them but she carried a pouch full anyway.

Harry breathed a sigh of relief at Ginny's news. "Communications charms."

Moments later he heard Luna's voice in his ear. "I'll be monitoring you guys so please be careful."

"You too," Neville said. "Ron? You ready?"

Ron nodded grimly.

"Ginny?" Harry asked.

"Ready," Ginny said.

As they approached the door Harry glanced at Aberforth Dumbledore and said, "Good luck."

The barkeep nodded. "You too," he said. "Take care of yourselves or Albus will never forgive me."

As they left the Hog's Head Harry and Ginny went left while Neville and Ron turned right.

Harry and Ginny ran to the corner of the Hog's Head where Harry knew they would meet stiff resistance, as several Death Eaters were entering the village from that direction. Quickly glancing across the street he saw a wounded witch struggling to get out of the line of fire. "Luna," he said. "We may have your first patient for you."

"I'm ready," Luna said.

Turning to Ginny Harry said, "You're going to have to cover me Gin. The only way I am going to be able to get her is if I cover her with the charm."

Ginny nodded. "Be careful." Harry nodded and activated the charm on himself. Then, taking a

flying leap out into the intersection, tumbled and rolled to the witches side. Placing himself between the witch and the advancing Death Eaters he looked into her terrified face and said, "Just relax. I'm going to share my shield with you and get you to a medic."

As the woman nodded Ginny screamed, "Harry, look out!"

Harry spun around and saw a Death Eater running at him with a sword. Quickly dropping his shield Harry fired several curses at the Death Eater then turned back to the woman and, grabbing her hand, reactivated his shield. The Death Eater wavered for a moment then fell forward, burying the blade of his sword in his own stomach.

"Eew," Ginny winced.

Harry Picked the wounded witch up and ran back to the Hog's Head. Ginny covered their retreat. As soon as they were inside Aberforth cleared and lengthened a table near the back of the pub and, after deactivating the charm, Harry laid her on the table. "Thanks. I'll take it from here," Luna said as Harry turned back to the battle.

What Harry saw when he looked out the window horrified him at first and then he remembered what Moody had told them about not being afraid to hurt the enemy. "Neville?" he said.

"Yeah?"

"How's it going?"

"Not good. Ron and I are fine but we've got several wounded down here. Why?"

"We've got a small army of Death Eaters up here. I hate to say this, guys, but we are going to have to start hurting these people. Disarm them if you can but if you can't take them down. Don't kill them but take them down. Use those ancient curses we talked about."

"Will do," Neville said, determination evident in his tone.

Ginny turned to look at Harry. His jaw was set and the determined look in his eyes frightened her. Harry glanced over at her and smiled grimly. "Gin," he said, "you've got to know that I will be fine but I've got to go out there and fight. I want you and Aberforth to protect the Hog's Head. We will send the wounded your way."

Ginny nodded.

"We've got the same thing going down at the Three Broomsticks," Neville said. "You okay with guarding it, Ron?"

"Yeah."

"Neville, I'll meet you at the toy store," Harry said.

"Right."

Harry and Neville met up at the toy store fifteen minutes later. Shortly thereafter Tonks and Remus entered the charmed communications link to take stock of the situation with their students and relay news of the fight that was going on at the train station. Half an hour after that Hermione

entered the link and started helping Luna care for the wounded.

The battle raged for hours. Of all the witches and wizards fighting to defend Hogsmeade that day there were only seven, excluding Ron, Hermione, Luna and Ginny who could produce a corporeal patronus and they were in high demand. At one point Harry summoned Ginny's pouch and distributed the Dementor Delights to the other five.

When it was over the casualties were in the hundreds but fortunately the fatalities were few. Unfortunately, however, Mister Weasley was among the injured. As Harry and Neville were on their way back to the Hog's Head they met Arthur who was leaning unsteadily against the wall of one of the clothing stores. He was bleeding from his wand arm and his robes were in tatters. As soon as Harry saw him he turned to Neville and said, "Get Luna!"

"What." Luna asked.

"Nothing!" Harry said sternly. "Just drop everything and get down here."

As Neville ran up the street towards the dingy pub Harry cut himself out of the communications link, ran over to Mr. Weasley and helped him to the ground. Tearing a strip of cloth from Mr. Weasley's already tattered robes Harry wrapped it around Mr. Weasley's upper arm, tightening it to help stem the flow of blood and silently thanking Dumbledore for their lessons in basic first aide.

By the time Luna arrived, followed shortly by Ron, Ginny, Hermione and the others Harry had stopped the bleeding from most of Mr. Weasley's wounds and conjured a stretcher for the trip up to the castle. Mr. Weasley's face was white from loss of blood and he was sweating profusely from the effects of the curses that had hit him. Luna pushed Harry aside and knelt down beside Mr. Weasley. "Move!" she commanded angrily. Harry stood up and backed away without any hesitation.

Luna drew her wand and began to carefully unwrap Mr. Weasley's wounds. The one on his arm was worse than it had originally looked and Ginny and Hermione both turned in to hug Ron whose face had suddenly gone white. Mr. and Mrs. Babcock and the Unspeakables and the two Ministry Aurors cringed and turned away as well. Harry and Neville just looked at each other and swallowed as their faces began to pale. Luna, however, focused all of her attention on the wounds and carefully healed each of them to the best of her ability. When she was finished she reached into her pouch and pulled out a blood restoration draught and poured it down Mr. Weasley's throat. She then conjured a pillow and some blankets and made Mr. Weasley as comfortable as she could for the trip up to the castle.

When she was finished Luna looked up at Harry and Neville and said, "I've done all I can. He should be fine but I want to get him up to Madam Pomfrey as soon as possible."

They nodded and Neville joined Luna as she led Mr. Weasley's stretcher up to the castle and Harry turned back to his friends. "He'll be fine," he said. "Luna's a powerful witch and a gifted healer."

Ron looked at Harry for a moment, his face still pale, then nodded for him to take Ginny.

Harry put his arms around Ginny and she clung to him, crying into his chest. One of the Ministry Aurors handed Harry his dragon and said, "We 'd best be going."

Harry nodded but turned to Mr. and Mrs. Babcock and said, "Now do you see why we need your

help?"

They both mutely nodded.

The trip back up to the castle was slow and painful. Ginny was crying most of the way and Harry could tell that Ron was trying to be strong for his sister's sake but every once in a while his voice would crack and Harry could hear the fear and uncertainty his friend was feeling. When they reached the gates Remus, Tonks, Kingsley and Alastor were waiting for them. They walked in silence most of the way, each lost in their own thoughts, until Harry broke the silence. "How many casualties?" he asked"

"Too many," Remus said. "More than three hundred. Arthur was by far the worst. I'm just glad Luna was there."

"Me too," Harry said softly.

Remus almost laughed. "Luna's a strong girl, Harry. She's growing up fast. I honestly don't think her father will recognize her at the end of the year."

"Yeah, but is that a good thing?" Harry asked.

"I don't know, Harry," Remus said, shaking his head sadly. "I really don't know."

As they entered the castle, stretchers were lining the halls and several people wearing St. Mungo's uniforms were tending to the injured. Harry guessed that they had flooed in as soon as news of the attack on Hogsmeade reached London. He also suspected that Albus and Poppy had given them a list of the healers they wanted.

Several people looked up as they passed, on their way to the Hospital Wing, and more than just a few turned away when they saw Arthur Weasley's injuries. When they entered the Hospital Wing Madam Pomfrey took one look at Mr. Weasley and shooed everyone out of their way as she directed Luna to take him to the private room just outside of her office. When they reached the door she opened it and motioned for Luna to take Mr. Weasley inside but held her hands up when Ron, Hermione, Ginny and Harry tried to enter. "I'm sorry," she said. "I know he's your father but no visitors until he is stable." Glancing at Harry's torn jumper and spotting a small bloodstain she added, "You might want to get that shoulder looked at Mister Potter. I would do it myself but as you can see we are rather busy at the moment."

Harry looked at her curiously, not registering the fact that he might be hurt for several seconds, then gradually became aware of a dull, throbbing pain in his right shoulder. Turning his head he saw the tear and the bloodstain and turned back and nodded his head. "You just take care of Mister Weasley. Spare no expense. I'll pay for it."

Madam Pomfrey nodded and closed the door behind her, shutting herself, Luna and Mr. Weasley in the private room.

As the seven turned to leave Ginny looked at Harry's shoulder. "You had better get that looked at straight away, Harry. It doesn't look good and we've got a class to teach in a few hours."

Harry looked over at Remus. "How are you doing, Remus?" he asked. "Any injuries?"

Remus checked himself over. "Nope. I got away free this time."

"Good. Then you take the lecture tonight and I'll do the one tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?"

"Yeah. Some of these people aren't going to feel like attending tonight and since they came all this way to learn about the charm I want to make sure they get their money's worth.

The six other members of the teaching team who were present nodded their agreement. "Let's get your shoulder taken care of first," Tonks said. "Then we can worry about who's going to be teaching what."

A few minutes later, as the rest of the students were nervously heading into the Great Hall for dinner, Harry was sitting on a stretcher on the opposite side of the Entrance Hall with his shirt off while Dr. Stone was healing a rather nasty cut on his shoulder. "It's lucky for you my first job at Saint Mungo's was as a General Healer, Harry," Dr. Stone was saying. "Otherwise I don't know what I'd do. Do you go looking for trouble or is it natural?"

Harry laughed despite the pain and winced as it flared up. "It's natural. Trouble just seems to find me."

Dr. Stone shook his head. "I should have known," he said sadly. "Poppy told me about a few of your exploits when I was here this summer. And when I first met you, you had just been attacked by twenty-three Death Eaters. Then last month you go off and fight in a dragon preserve in Romania and almost burn yourself out. And today you insist upon fighting an army of Death Eaters in Hogsmeade . . . Tell me, Harry, what is the flavor next month?"

Harry snickered, still wincing slightly. "Quidditch. Gryffindor versus Slytherin in two weeks."

"Oh, no," Dr. Stone groaned. "And they wonder why healers have grey hair." Then, changing the subject, he asked, "Tell me, Harry, how are you doing in Potions?"

"Alright, I guess. Why?"

"I've got a fresh bottle of that restorative draught you drank in Romania I'm going to give you but it is only good for two months and it takes a week to brew. If I were to give you the recipe do you think you could brew it?"

Harry shrugged his shoulders and once again winced with a resurgence of pain. "I don't know. I could try. I already brew all of my own elemental draughts . . ."

Dr. Stone threw his hand up in the air. "The kid's an Elemental too!" he exclaimed in exasperation. "What's next? Are you going to tell me that you're an Ethereal as well?"

"Er . . . Yeah."

Dr. Stone's mouth fell open. "You're kidding, right"

"No," Harry said softly, shaking his head slightly.

A few seconds later, after Dr. Stone had recovered from this latest shock, he looked Harry in the eye

and said, "Harry, please tell me you're kidding. Ethereals and Elementals are extremely rare by themselves. I don't think there has ever been anyone who has been both. If you are indeed both then there is only so much I can do for you if you should get yourself in any real trouble. Magical Burnout is one of the things I can deal with; but there are other, more complicated, problems that could arise that I have no way of knowing how to treat."

Harry shook his head again. "I'm sorry, sir, but I am both as well as a few other things I haven't even tried yet."

Dr. Stone handed Harry his jumper and sat down beside him with a heavy sigh. "What am I going to do with you, Harry?" He mumbled half to himself.

Harry looked at the healer, confused by his concern, and said, "Well, if it's all the same to you I would appreciate it if you would be my friend first and my doctor second."

The healer remained silent for several seconds, slumped over ,staring down at his shoes. Then, looking over at the young man sitting next to him, smiled slightly. "Alright, Harry," he said sullenly. "I'll be your friend. But right now I've got other patients to attend to so you go get something to eat. If I'm still here when you are finished with your presentation I'll stop in to see how you are doing. In the meantime, however," he said handing Harry a bottle of the glowing, aquamarine potion and a piece of parchment, "take these and keep them in a safe place."

Harry accepted the restorative draught and recipe and tucked them in one of his pockets. After thanking the healer he turned and walked across the Entrance Hall. When he didn't see any sign of Ron, Hermione, Neville or Ginny in the Great Hall he remembered that they were going to be eating in his trunk again tonight before heading to the Room of Requirement and turned around and ran up to Gryffindor Tower.

Over dinner it was agreed that Ron and Ginny would not take part in either of the presentations that weekend so they could stay close to their father and visit with the members of their family who were expected to arrive later that evening. Luna was also excused as Madam Pomfrey had decided that since she had already done most of the work on Mr. Weasley she should be the one to finish it. Her reason being that in cases of severe trauma it was usually best for one healer to do all of the work due to the risk of a second healer's magic undoing the first healer's work.

Madam Pomfrey looked up as Harry, Hermione and Neville entered her domain after the second presentation and said something to Luna who looked up and smiled. When she finished what she was doing she walked over. Harry noticed that her stride was more confident and determined than it had been and was both pleased and concerned at the changes that were taking place in his friends. Taking Neville's hand, Luna said, "This way. Follow me."

The three - Neville didn't really have much choice in the matter - followed Luna through the infirmary to the room they had taken Mr. Weasley into the previous afternoon. When she opened the door there was a general rustling of robes as Ron, Bill, Fred, George, Percy, Ginny and Mrs. Weasley all stood up. "Harry dear," Mrs. Weasley gasped and pulled him into a bone-crushing hug.

"Afternoon, mate," Ron said from the far side of the bed. "How'd it go?"

Harry smiled nervously. "Er . . . Well, let's just say that the attack on Hogsmeade got their attention," he said, not wanting to think about anything but Mr. Weasley's condition at the moment. "How's

your dad?"

"I'm doing fine, thank you, Harry," Mr. Weasley said pushing himself up in bed. "That's twice I owe you my life, Harry."

"You don't owe me anything," Harry said. "But while I'm here, do you mind if I ask why you didn't use the charm?"

"You know what it was like out there, Harry," Mr. Weasley said. "It was just too fast. Everything was happening so fast that we barely had time to think."

"Yeah, I know," Harry said glumly. "Did you even have a Potter Charm on you?"

"No," Mr. Weasley mumbled, cringing at his wife's reproachful glare, "I didn't. We weren't expecting any trouble and when it came I confess that I was unprepared. I understand I owe Luna a debt of gratitude as well," he said, smiling weakly over at the young healer who was standing next to Neville. Poppy tells me that if she hadn't healed my wounds as quickly as she did there is a very good chance I would have died."

Ginny, Hermione and Mrs. Weasley all gasped while the color quickly drained from Ron, Fred, George, Percy and Bill's faces. Luna smiled shyly and took a step back, as if trying to use Neville as a shield to protect herself from all of the attention she was now receiving.

Mrs. Weasley caught Luna's arm, however and pulled her into one of her famous hugs. When she let go of her Mrs. Weasley held he at arm's length and looked at her through tear filled eyes. "Thank you," she whispered.

Harry walked over to stand next to Fred and George. "Guys, I have a favor to ask of you." Fred and George turned towards Harry but didn't say anything. "Is there any way you can individually wrap some of those Potter Charms so that everyone can have one on their person. They will have to be in an easy-to-open container that will protect the charms and keep them from breaking until they are needed."

"Sure!" George said.

"It shouldn't be to difficult," Fred added.

"I don't know why we didn't think of it sooner."

"Good," Harry said. "I'll pay for the advertising but I want you to place full page ads in The Daily Prophet, Witch Weekly, the Quibbler and any other publications you can think of to get the word out about them so that if worse comes to worse the people will be safe against magical attack until help arrives."

"Can we use Charlie as a reference?" one of them asked.

"Huh?"

"Charlie hasn't stopped talking about that time you guys were in Romania last month. He says that if it hadn't been for you guys and those charms there would have been a lot more casualties."

Harry looked nervously over at Mrs. Weasley. He didn't know how much she knew about their trip to Romania and he didn't want her to find out about it through a newspaper clipping. "Er, How much does your mum know about that?"

"She almost had a litter of kittens when she found out about it . . ."

"And she wanted to skin Dumbledore alive . . ."

"But she's alright with it now . . ."

"We think."

Harry glanced over at Mr. Weasley and saw that Luna was in the process of casting a number of diagnostic and healing charms. "Madam Pomfrey said I should be the one to complete your healing, Mister Weasley," she said after casting the last charm, "She says that since I started it your wounds would probably respond best to my magical aura." Mr. Weasley nodded. "I can't find anything else wrong with you so we'll just give those spells a few minutes to wear off and then I'll have her come in and check you over. But I don't see why you shouldn't be able to go home this afternoon."

Ginny rushed over and hugged Luna. "Thank you, Luna," she said in a hoarse whisper. "I don't know how we will ever be able to thank you enough!"

At first Luna looked shocked, as if not knowing how to react to the praise she was receiving for the small miracles she had performed and looked nervously around at the room full of Weasleys. Then, as she slowly realized that she was actually being congratulated and complimented for being herself, she returned the hug and said, "That's okay, Ginny. You're dad will be fine and this is what I was trained for. I'm just glad I was able to help."

Harry turned back to the twins and, smiling, said, "Anyway, do what you can."

Fred said, "Will do, Harry."

"But keep your money."

"Yeah, we'll pay for the advertising."

Harry glanced up at them curiously.

"Yeah," George agreed. "As of last week one hundred percent of the profits from the Dementor Delights and Potter Charms are being dedicated to the war effort."

"And the goblins are starting to complain because our first war chest vault is almost full."

"So we're going to have to open another one next week."

"Alright then," Harry said then asked, "Have the goblins chosen a side yet?"

"Bill and Fleur and I," Percy said, joining the conversation, "have been working with them over the past few months, trying to secure their rights through Ministry channels. We're pretty sure most of the Gringotts goblins are on our side. After your little demonstration in Romania most of the others, as well as most of the dwarves, joined our side as well. There are, however, a few small pockets of resistance. I think they are waiting to see what happens with the dementors."

Harry nodded. "So are the ghosts and ghouls," he said sadly. "I just hope we can solve that problem." The other three nodded their agreement. "I want to take as many of his weapons away from him as possible so that in the final battle it's just him and me. I don't know how I'm going to beat him yet but I am going to beat him."

"Couldn't you just strike him down with a bolt of lightning?" Ron asked, stating the obvious.

Harry's eyes and voice grew cold. "No," he said, sending a shiver down the spines of those who heard him. "Death is too good for him. He's caused too much pain and suffering. I want him to suffer!"

Harry's face darkened as he stalked over to the door, determined to find some way to make Voldemort pay for all of the damage he had caused. Ginny turned to follow him but Ron grabbed her arm and shook his head. As he opened the door to leave Harry growled, "I'm going to the library."

Harry spent the rest of that Sunday in the Headmaster's Library absorbing every book in the school and every magical and muggle library within a three hundred kilometer radius of the school, searching for some way to make Voldemort pay for all of the pain, suffering and anguish he had caused. Dobby brought him his dinner and an occasional snack and Professor Dumbledore checked in on him occasionally but otherwise left him to his own devices. It was not until late in the evening, after the Weasley's had left and most of the students and teachers had gone to bed that Albus interrupted Harry's train of thought, insisting that he go to bed. "Harry," Albus said gently. "It's late. I think you should be going off to bed."

"I know it's late, sir. But I've got to find some way to make Tom pay for everything he has done."

"Yes, yes. I agree," the aging Headmaster said. "All in good time. But you have classes tomorrow and you need your rest."

Harry stifled a yawn. "I know, sir. But there's something else that's bugging me."

"And what might that be?" Albus asked, conjuring a chair and sitting down to speak privately with the young man before him.

Harry turned to look into the aging professor's eyes. "I just don't understand it," he confessed. "What's he playing at?"

"What do you mean?"

"I've been monitoring his progress for over a month. I know how large his forces are. What I don't get is why he attacked Hogsmeade with such a relatively small force and why, since he probably knew that I would be there, he didn't come himself."

Albus leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers thoughtfully for several minutes, obviously deep in thought. "I don't know," the Headmaster finally said. "Since this was his first major offensive since the attacks in Romania perhaps he is simply wishing to let us know that he is still there. He might also be biding his time until he is able to determine just how powerful you have become,"

Chapter 31. It Begins

Harry found out why there had only been tree battalions of Death Eaters in Hogsmeade that night. He had only missed a few Death Eater meetings due to his need for a peaceful night's sleep upon occasion and apparently Severus had missed them as well. When he entered the ethereal that night and went to check up on Tom he found out that there had been attacks in Newcastle, Northern Ireland; Loughrae, Ireland; Portree, Scotland; St. Just, England; and on the Isle of White that weekend as well and that they had all taken place at the same time so that the Aurors would not know where to turn first. The only community that had been able to repel the attack had been Hogsmeade and that had primarily been due to the presence of so many additional Aurors.

After the meeting Harry expanded his awareness to the whole of Great Britain and then focused his attention on each of the sites in turn. What he discovered made his heart clench in pain. In some of the towns entire neighborhoods had been destroyed. In the coastal communities the docks and piers had been demolished. And in all of the towns and villages they were still counting the dead and wounded.

When his internal alarm went off at 4:15 Harry got up, dressed himself and proceeded to wake the others. Fifteen minutes later, as he followed his friends into the Room of Requirement, which had been turned into an Olympic-sized track and field complex for their morning exercises, Alastor came over and asked, "What's wrong, laddy? You look like hell."

Harry looked up at his fellow professor, trainer and friend and shook his head. "I'll tell you later."

After their warm up, run and exercises Harry directed everyone in their group, of which there were sixty, to sit down in a circle around him. When he had everyone's attention he looked into their eyes and said, "For those of you who stayed and fought in Hogsmeade on Saturday let me say that we are all eternally grateful. The odds were against us but we won that particular fight. Now you know what we're up against and why you are being trained to fight." Swallowing hard, he glanced over at Moody and then, with a heavy heart, sighed and went on. "But we were lucky. Don't ask me to tell you how I know because I really can't explain it; but Hogsmeade was only one of six communities that were attacked on Saturday. Towns and villages were attacked all over Great Britain that day. I don't have any casualty counts. Neither do I have a list of the dead. But I . . ." he hesitated, "I think it is safe to assume that at least a few of our fellow students, if not a few of us, will be receiving notices over the next few days as the dead and missing are accounted for." His voice cracked. With a heavy sigh he looked back up into the eyes of his fellow students. "I don't know why the Daily Prophet didn't carry any news about the other attacks in Sunday's paper. All I know . . . is that we . . . we were the only group that was able to repel the onslaught.

"For those of you who fought, counseling sessions will be arranged to help you deal with what you have experienced. Please do not think you are too strong to need to talk about it. Many of you saw what it was like for Ron, Hermione, Neville, Luna, Ginny and myself at the end of last month, after we returned from Romania. It helps to talk about it. Seek out your friends and your fellow fighters. Speaking from experience I think I can safely say that it won't be easy; but it will help. I am going to suggest that you find a partner, someone you feel comfortable talking to, and work through this together because I don't know how long this war is going to last. All I know for sure is that it is going to get worse before it gets better and we are going to have to lean on each other for support.

"I have just one final note before we start dueling. We are going to have to work with each other across house boundaries so please do not be afraid to reach out and help someone in need, even if they are your worst enemy. You never know but that your worst enemy today might turn out to be your best friend tomorrow."

There were a few murmurs as Harry stepped back and Alastor looked at him with what Harry and the others had come to recognize as an expression of concern on his scared face. They then broke up into their groups and began practicing. The more advanced students - mainly Harry, Ginny, Neville, Ron, Hermione, Luna and a few others - moved down to one end of the field and, after half an hour of singles dueling, broke it up so that Harry was facing five opponents and Neville was facing three, while Alastor hobbled around correcting spells and commenting on moves and techniques. Harry was hard pressed when defending himself against Ron, Ginny, Lavender, Padma and Cho but he did eventually disarm Lavender, Padma and Cho. Neville was getting better but only lasted about fifteen minutes against Hermione, Luna and Colin.

When the owls arrived with the morning post, Hermione was in the process of paying for her copy of the Daily Profit when the first scream went up at the Huffelpuff Table. Moments later screams went up at the Ravenclaw and Slytherin Tables as well. When Seamus opened a letter he had received from his father he paled as he read the note. Looking across at Harry he gulped, "Me cousin . . . She was just a wee lass. And me mam is in hospital."

Harry bowed his and sighed as he closed his eyes. He felt Ginny's hand slide into his own and squeeze but he didn't have the energy to squeeze back.

The next two weeks were filled with attacks. Not only were Tom's forces striking throughout Great Britain and portions of Western Europe but other despots and dark lords were uniting behind his banner and carrying out attacks in Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa and the Americas. There really wasn't anywhere on the planet that could be called safe and more often than not Hogwarts was being used as an Emergency Medical Evacuation Center. The Hospital Wing was always full and healers, potions masters and other specialists were constantly flooing in from all over the country. It was, for lack of any more articulate description, a madhouse.

Classes went on as scheduled but silencing charms were used on all of the rooms to block out the screams and groans of patients' whose cots and stretchers lined the halls. The house elves were kept busy not only preparing food for the faculty, staff, students, patients and medical personnel, but helping Filch clean the bloodstains off of the floors and walls. All students were encouraged to go directly to their classes and not to dawdle any more than was absolutely necessary. For those upperclassmen that had free periods they were encouraged to help the healers, house elves or potions masters.

The only exceptions to this rule were Harry, Ron, Hermione and Neville who were spending most of their out-of-class time working on the war effort. Since he could do it, Harry magically expanded the hospital wing to twice its normal size and added several treatment rooms. He also set the suits of armor to patrol the castle grounds to make more room for the wounded. Ron, Hermione and Neville were given access to Harry's crystal ball so that they could study and learn the tactics used by the various groups of Death Eaters. When Ron got his first look into Harry's ball he gulped and looked over at Harry. "No wonder you spend so much time with your pensieve."

Harry looked over at his friend and nodded. "You're just seeing a recording. I've removed the

emotional content because that's just too much for anyone to be able to handle without a pensieve."

The upshot of all of this activity, even though it was very trying on everyone concerned, is that even though the house rivalries remained intact the houses were gradually uniting behind a common cause. It wasn't pretty and it most definitely wasn't easy but they were gradually becoming a cohesive, working unit.

During Harry's regular Thursday evening training sessions it took a lot of effort for him to focus upon the tasks at hand but he knew that since he was supposedly the only one who could defeat Voldemort he needed to train. So, after several minutes of debriefing, he would drop into a deep meditative state and focus his wandless magical abilities on the dragon he had purchased in Hogsmeade.

His first task was to make it open its eyes and mouth. This was easier said than done, however, because he had to isolate and move specific artificial muscle groups while paying attention to how they affected the whole. He quickly learned that no action, no matter how seemingly insignificant, takes place in isolation.

When he had mastered the eye and mouth movements he moved on to the head and neck. Again, this was easier said than done because with head and neck movements most of the rest of the dragon's body became involved and it fell over several times before he learned that in order for the model to remain upright the head and neck movements would have to be accompanied by a variety torso, wing, tail, leg and foot movements. Needless to say, he was worn out by the end of his first session with the dragon and he hadn't even gotten to walking yet, let alone flying.

The goal of these exercises was to train his mind to be consciously aware of several things at once and to at least subconsciously understand how they functioned as a system. So far as to how this applied to his training to face Tom went, Albus explained that it would help him focus on his objective while remaining constantly aware of everything that was going on around him. Albus encouraged him to apply these principles to his nightly journeys as well as his dueling practices so that, when the time came and he found himself in the midst of a battle, he could face multiple opponents at once and still distinguish friend from foe.

At their first regular Order meeting after the attack on Hogsmeade it was decided that the Gryffindor-Slytherin Quidditch match would go on as scheduled because everyone was in need of a distraction, no matter how brief, from the war. It was also decided that since Harry and Ginny had been negotiating with the Wood Elves that the eight - plus Albus, Alastor and Kingsley - would go into the heart of the Forbidden Forest on the third Saturday of November to meet with their counterparts and seal the deal.

The other main topic of discussion, aside from the war, was the Christmas Holiday and how they were going to insure the safety of the students. It was decided that while the Hogwarts Express would indeed run, for those who wished to return home for the holidays, all of the students would be encouraged to stay. They would also be encouraged to invite their families to stay in specially designed Wizarding Tents either in Hogsmeade or on the castle grounds. Ron was placed in charge of security for the event; Hermione and Ginny were placed in charge of accommodations, Hermione for the muggles and Ginny for the wizarding families; Neville and Luna were placed in charge of the apparation and portkey points that that would be set up in and around Hogsmeade; and Harry was placed in charge of the temporary modifications that would have to be made to the

castle itself.

It was decided that, for this event, the castle would be made visible to the muggles. They would not be able to take any pictures of it but they would be able to see it. It was also decided that there would be a Yule Ball on Christmas Eve and a New Years Ball on New Years Eve as well as, if they got enough snow, a number of sleigh rides, snowball fights and other wintertime activities. They weren't sure about ice-skating because of the giant squid but there was always a possibility.

In the hour before dawn on the second Saturday in November - the day of the Gryffindor-Slytherin Quidditch match - Harry was anxiously pacing the floor of the sixth-year Gryffindor boy's dormitory. The attack that night had been particularly gruesome and even after spending most of an hour siphoning his memories of the events off into his pensieve he still had a hard time forgetting what he had seen. Throwing his bed curtains open he lay down and dropped into Occlumency mode. Clearing his mind he sorted through his memories and pushed the latest into the furthest recesses of his mind. Then, after a brief respite from all thought, began to focus his mind upon what lay ahead.

As his thoughts turned to quidditch he remembered that he and Ron had worked out several new plays and formations had drilled the team on them to flawless execution. The chasers were working as a seamless unit, rivaling the levels of cooperation shown by Katie, Alicia and Angelina. Their beaters were a murderous pair of team players and knew their positions well. And Neville was so accurate with his bludgers that he could actually knock the quaffel out of a chaser's hands without the chaser even knowing about it until it was too late. It didn't happen often but when it did it wad a sight to behold. But then again there was still that element of surprise, of the unknown. They had practiced and drilled and practiced some more but they didn't know what they were up against since Slytherin had had to replace their seeker, both beaters as well as one of their chasers.

"Oi, Harry," Ron said, sounding slightly surprised that Harry was actually laying in his dormitory bed and not sleeping in his trunk, and yanked Harry out of his meditative thoughts. "What's up?"

Harry glanced over at his friend who was sitting on the edge of his bed facing him. "Quidditch."

"I know that," Ron said, stating the obvious. "But why aren't you in your trunk?"

Harry laughed. "Ron," he said, sitting up and shaking his head. "You don't know how funny that sounds coming from you. If it weren't for the fact that I know that you know how nice it is in there I would almost be willing to say that you are starting to sound an awful lot like Dudley did when we were little."

Ron blushed. "Oh, sorry," he said and looked up apologetically.

"No, that's all right, Ron. You had no way of knowing. And besides, I've put that behind me. I actually don't mind spending time in my trunk. I only wish my cupboard had been even one tenth as nice."

Ron grinned the chuckled. "Yeah, I can imagine. So what are you doing up here anyway?"

Harry sighed and looked over at his friend. "Taking a break. Last night was not good. We may get a few casualties out of it but most of them were so mangled that there really isn't much left."

"What's it look like?" Neville asked, coming over to stand between the feet of their beds.

Harry glanced up then shook his head. "You'll see."

"Can you at least give us some idea what we will be looking at?"

Harry glanced back over at Ron then looked down at his hands. "I'd really rather not but since you are going to have to study it anyway I guess I had better warn you. It is some of the most gruesome fighting I have ever seen. It makes Romania look like a Sunday picnic. You are going to see traumatic amputations and decapitations, with blood spurting all over the place, as well as partially clothed bodies sliced to ribbons and the flesh torn away from their bones." Harry shivered slightly then, with a shake, looked back up at his friends. "Just be glad you get the edited version. I've already spent an hour with my pensieve this morning and I have a feeling I am going to have to spend another hour with it after the training session tonight."

Then, smiling weakly, Harry changed the subject. "I'll tell you what. You guys give me until you are ready to go down to breakfast to practice my Occlumency and I promise that I will be ready for Slytherin."

As Harry laid back on his bed Ron and Neville headed off for the showers. Fortunately neither Dean nor Seamus had been awake to hear Harry's brief description of the attacks because Harry knew that each of them had lost at least one loved one that night and he didn't want them to hear what had happened. It was bad enough that he knew. He was just glad that there was no way the Daily Prophet could come anywhere close to communicating the horrors of what he had seen that night.

As they approached the Quidditch Pitch that morning Harry noticed that the stands had been magically enlarged overnight to accommodate the people who would be attending the seminar that evening as well as as many of the injured as wanted to attend. It wasn't as big as the stadium at the Quidditch World Cup but it was large, at least by Hogwarts standards.

Harry and Ron had agreed to alternate on the pre-game speeches because while Ron considered Harry to be the better speaker Harry considered Ron to be the more enthusiastic quidditch devotee. Today it was Harry's turn to deliver the pep talk. When everyone was ready and settled he cleared his throat and said, "I know we've all been under a lot of pressure lately. I also know that some of you might be feeling rather hopeless given the events of the past couple of weeks. I know it's frustrating for some of you because you want to be out there fighting. But I can tell you this much. You don't want to be out there until you are ready.

"Quidditch is a sport. It's a game. Ron and I have taught you everything we can and we feel that you are ready. We feel that you are ready to go out there and teach those Slytherins a lesson in humility. But like I said, this is just a game. I want you to fight to win but I don't want you to fight dirty." Harry paused as an evil smirk spread across his face and a glint of fiery determination came into his eyes. Smiling at his teammates and winking at Ginny he started the last sentence of his speech with a growl then let it explode to fill the locker room and echo off of its walls. "Now, let's go out there and teach those snakes a lesson!"

As one the Gryffindor Quidditch Team rose to their feet and cheered. On their way to the doors, however, Ginny stepped over and looked up into his eyes. She could tell that he had seen something and that it had affected him deeply. "What is it?" she asked.

Harry looked into her concerned face and sighed. "I can't hide anything from you, can I?"

Ginny shook her head. "No, you can't. Now what is it?"

Harry looked at her and frowned slightly. "Can I tell you about it later? I don't mean to put you off, Gin, but I'm afraid that if I even let myself start to think about it I might not be able to focus on the game."

Ron and Neville came over and when Harry saw them looked at Ron with pleading eyes, silently asking him to explain to Ginny that he really didn't want to talk about what he had seen that night. Ron led Ginny a few steps away and began explaining Harry's secret spying missions to her in whispered tones and Neville looked into his friend's eyes with an expression of genuine concern. "Are you going to be all right, Harry? I mean, it's not too late to call in one of the reserve chasers if you would rather not."

Harry shook his head and smiled. "No, but thanks. I'll be fine. I need to do this to help me get my mind off of it."

Neville nodded. "Okay."

A few minutes later, just before the teams were going to be introduced, Ginny came over and took hold of his hand. "I'll always be here for you, you know."

Harry smiled at her and squeezed her hand. "Thanks," he said. "Maybe tomorrow we can do a private dinner in my trunk so we can talk about it."

Ginny smiled and leaned up, kissing him on the cheek. "I'd like that," she whispered into his ear as the doors flew open and the announcer screamed, "AND HERE COMES GRYFFINDOR!"

The announcer's voice was strangely familiar but Harry couldn't quite place it until Professor McGonogal made her first warning. "Back after a year long absence, thanks to an ungrateful old bitty who . . ."

"Wood!" Professor McGonagall warned.

Harry smiled and almost laughed out loud. Oliver Wood was back.

"Erm . . . yes professor. Anyway, back as Seeker, after a year long absence, is none other than Harry Potter!" The roar in the stands was earsplitting not only because of the cheering that effectively drowned out any noise from the Slytherin section but because someone conjured a giant lion's head that let out a deafening roar. "Er, yeah," Oliver said, nervously glancing over his shoulder at the apparition. "Potter is one of the Gryffindor Team Captains this year and I know for a fact that he has only failed to catch the snitch once in all the matches he has played.

"Returning as Keeper this year, after a very successful debut last year is Ron Weasley, the other Gryffindor Team Captain and youngest brother of the infamous Weasley twins who were forced to retire last year . . ."

"Wood, I'm warning you," McGonagall growled.

"Er . . ." The rest of his apology was drowned out by a mixture of laughter at his predicament,

cheers from the crowd and the reappearance of the roaring lion's head.

As the introductions continued the lion's head made five more appearances, effectively quashing any comments from the intimidated Slytherins. When Madam Hooch called the captains together she made her usual speech about wanting a "good, clean game" then had them shake hands. Orville Burns, one of the Slytherin Captains stepped forward and, attempting to crush Harry's hand, sneered, "Say your prayers, Potter. You're going down this time.

Harry maintained his grip and reflected most of the pressure Burns was exerting back at him. Innocently smiling at his adversary Harry said, "I have no problem with that so long as it's a fair fight. But then again, if it's a fair fight I don't think you stand much of a chance."

Burns growled but didn't say anything.

When everyone was in the air Madam Hooch released the bludgers and snitch. She threw the quaffel up into the air and blew her whistle. The lion roared again and the game was on.

It was a hectic, fast-paced match that would have done the Irish and Bulgarian national teams proud if everyone had been flying Firebolts. But then again, Oliver was having a hard enough time keeping up with the action. The Gryffindor Team, aside from Harry, may not have had the fastest brooms in the world but they were easily out flying the Slytherins. And by the number of lion's roars coming from the stands Harry could only guess that the Gryffindor Chasers were enjoying a successful run. He, however, had tuned out most of the commentary and was focusing on finding the snitch.

At one point, to shake the Slytherin Seeker off his tail, as he had been marking Harry most of the game, Harry dropped into a steep, vertical dive straight through a Gryffindor formation. In his mind he knew it was a Wronski Feint but the Slytherin Seeker didn't know that Harry hadn't seen the snitch and followed Harry into the dive. Harry accelerated into the dive until, with mere centimeters to spare, he pulled out of the dive and started climbing back up into the match. Moments later he cringed as the Slytherin Seeker plowed into the ground with a sickening crunch.

He wasn't surprised when Madam Hooch blew her whistle for time and Madam Pomfrey ran out onto the field to attend to the injured player. Harry swung around and hovered over the injured Slytherine and looked down with heart felt concern. He hadn't meant for his opponent to get hurt; all he had wanted to do was scare him a little so he would stop marking him. He slowly dropped down to hover beside the injured player as Madam Pomfery conjured a stretcher and levitated the boy onto it. "Is he going to be alright?" he asked softly.

Madam Pomfery looked up and nodded. "He'll be fine. I don't know where you learned that move, Mister Potter, but I don't think you are going to have any more trouble with seekers marking you after this."

Harry looked at her curiously for several seconds until she walked away, leading the stretcher and its occupant off the field and up to the castle.

"It was his own fault, you know," Ginny said as she glided in to hover beside him. "Ever since you started playing the other seekers have been marking you. They have got to learn to play their own games."

Harry looked over at her and smiled weakly. "Yeah, I know. That doesn't make it any easier, though."

"I know," she said gently, "but you can't let others' weaknesses stand in the way of your strengths."

Harry smiled, a little more confidently this time, and said, "Yeah, you're right. What's the score anyway?"

Ginny looked at him and laughed. "You really are in your own little world up there aren't you?" Harry blushed. "Don't worry!" she laughed again. "I was up there last year, remember? I know what it's like. The score is 130 - 10 in our favor."

Harry smiled hesitantly and was about to say something when Madam Hooch appeared in front of them. "Get up there!" she barked.

Harry and Ginny looked at Madam Hooch then quickly glanced at each other and took off, rising to their normal playing positions. Five minutes later, when the score was 160 - 10 in favor of Gryffindor, Harry saw the snitch. The only real problem was that it was hovering right behind Ron.

Harry began his run from above the Slytherin goals and barreled down the pitch, racing past chasers, beaters and bludgers, flying straight towards Ron at top speed. He could see the panic in Ron's eyes as his best friend realized he was on a collision course. With less than five seconds to impact Harry screamed, "ROLL!" At the last possible moment Ron rolled to his left and hung upside down as Harry rocketed through the goal and grabbed the snitch. As his fingers closed around the golden walnut sized ball he pulled up on his broom and made a gracefully sweeping arc up and over the pitch.

"THAT WAS FANTASTIC!" Oliver screamed. "I'VE NEVER SEEN ANYTHING LIKE IT! POTTER IS BACK AND WITH A VENGENCE!"

Harry flew back to the goal posts and smiled sheepishly at Ron. "Sorry about that, mate," he said. "I didn't mean to scare you but 310 - 10 is good enough to prove the point."

Ron looked pale. His eyes were wide and sweat was streaming down his face. "Uh . . . yeah. D-d-do you m-m-mind if I g-g-g-go ch-ch-ch-change now?"

Harry studied Ron curiously for a few second until realized what his friend was talking about then burst out laughing. "You can go change any time you want, Ron!"

The crowd was going wild as Ron flew off to the locker rooms and the lion was making repeated appearances every few seconds, causing the quidditch pitch to echo with its roars and startling several flocks of birds in the Forbidden Forest. As Harry, snitch in hand, floated down to the ground Ginny wrapped her arms around him and pulled him into a tight, celebratory hug. When she finally released him she looked up, laughing, and said, "Where's Ron?"

Harry leaned down and whispered in her ear, "Don't tell anyone but I think he wet himself."

Ginny looked up at Harry and her eyes grew wide as her mouth fell open in shock. Moments later, however, she was doubled over in laughter. At that moment someone wrapped their arm around his shoulders and screamed, "When I told you to die for the snitch, Harry, I didn't mean for you to take everyone else with you! That was some fantastic flying!"

Harry turned to look at the man beside. "What are you doing here, Oliver?" he asked.

"We had a bye this week so we came in to learn about your charm and I asked McGonagall if I could announce the game."

No sooner had Oliver shouted his reply than Harry felt himself being pulled into an overpowering hug. "WE WON! WE WON! WE WON!" Hermione screamed jumping up and down while hugging Harry, her face a picture of ecstasy and joy. Then, looking around, she asked, "Where's Ron?"

Ginny, who was still laughing at Harry's earlier comment, looked up briefly and then burst out laughing again. Hermione looked at Ginny then back at Harry. "Ron's in the changing room," Harry said. "He's had a pretty rough day."

"I'll say," Oliver said. "He had twelve saves. There are going to be a lot of teams looking at him next year."

Hermione looked at Oliver and even though she seemed to recognize his face she didn't say anything. "Hermione, you remember Oliver Wood," Harry said by way of introduction.

Hermione got that far away, glazed look on her face that let everyone know she was thinking then suddenly smiled. "Oh, yes. I remember you. Oliver Wood, the terror of the seven G's weren't you?"

Harry cringed at Hermione's use of the nickname the quidditch team had given their former captain. Oliver shook his head and smiled. "Not any more," he laughed. "Now I'm on the receiving end of some of the hell I put that team through."

"Where'd that lion come from, Hermione?" Harry asked.

"Did you like it?"

"Of course I did. It was a little unnerving at first but it was a nice effect. Who conjured it?"

Hermione smiled and began to laugh again. "Luna and I go together and expanded her hat idea from last year."

Harry just shook his head and laughed. "You two. I'm glad Ginny's on the team . . ."

Hermione blushed and Harry put his arm around her shoulders. "That's alright, Hermione," he said. "It's kind of amazing, really. A few years ago you couldn't care less about the game and here you and Luna are coming up with one of the best cheer's I've ever seen."

Hermione blushed again.

When they reached the entrance to the changing room Harry, Ginny, Neville and the rest of the team as well as Oliver and a few of his teammates went inside while Hermione and Luna moved to the changing rooms' main entrance to await their return.

After his shower Harry was getting dressed and only half listening to the conversations going on around him when he heard Oliver and one of the Puddlemere United Beaters talking about the new Electra 5000 series of brooms that was expected to be out the following year. "Yeah, the reviews sound really great," the beater was saying, "but it doesn't sound like they have been tested on a

quidditch pith yet."

"I know what you mean," Oliver agreed. "It sounds like the initial tests were pretty extreme but I would still like to know how they handle under normal circumstances."

As he finished tying his trainers Harry stood up and, while walking over to Oliver's group, winked at Ron, Neville and Ginny who joined him. "Actually, they haven't been tested on a quidditch pitch yet," he said.

Oliver turned around. "What do you mean? How do you know?"

Ron smirked. "We flew the prototypes into battle in Romania at the end of September. That's how we know."

"And we haven't been practicing with them because they aren't allowed on the pitch yet," Neville added.

The entire Puddlemere team turned to stare at the four students. "You mean you were the testers?" one of the chasers asked.

Harry smiled sheepishly. "Yeah. The four of us tested them in combat."

"That's where we got some of our new plays and formations," Ron said.

A sandy haired man who looked to be in his late 20's or early 30's stepped forward and reached out to shake Harry's hand. "I'd like to talk to you about some of those plays. They were absolutely amazing. The name's Stephen Douglas. I'm the Puddlemere United Captain."

Harry took his hand and shook it. "Harry Potter. But the one you want to talk to is Ron. I just sit up there and watch them unfold and look for the snitch. He's the real mastermind behind the plays."

As they left the locker room they were joined by Hermione and Luna. The entire Gryffindor team was engaged in a lively conversation about quidditch tactics and strategies with their Puddlemere United counterparts as they made their way up to the castle but Ron, Ginny and Neville were getting most of the attention. When they were about half way to the castle a slightly build young woman with short blond hair and hazel eyes stepped over and started walking beside Harry. "Alison Nolan," she said. "I'm Puddlmere's Seeker."

"Nice to meet you," Harry said. "I'm Harry Potter."

"In know," she blushed. "Harry, I must tell you that that is the first successful Wronski Feint I've seen since Krum did it in the World Cup two years ago."

Harry cringed at the memory of the sound of the Slytherin Seeker plowing into the ground and the aftermath. "I didn't mean for him to get hurt," he mumbled. "I just wanted to scare him a bit so he would stop marking me."

"I understand," she said. "He's an inexperienced flyer. But where did you learn to do it so well?"

"Romania," Harry said simply. "Sometimes the only way to get a Death Eater off your tail is to out fly them. Ginny and I can both do them and Ron and Neville have a pincer move that is flat deadly if

you aren’t expecting it."

She stopped. "You weren’t kidding? You really did test the prototypes in Romania?"

Harry looked at her, his eyes starting to glaze over with the haunting memories of that terrible night. "Yes," he said. "We really did test them in a combat situation. Now if you’ll excuse me I’m going to go up to the Hospital Wing and check on their seeker."

"Sure thing," she said,

Harry caught up with Ginny and told her that he would catch up with them in the Great Hall because he wanted to go check on the Slytherin Seeker. Ron over heard their conversation and said, "I don’t see why, Harry. I mean he is a Slytherin after all."

Harry turned and glared at Ron for a moment. "This isn’t Romania, Ron!" he snapped, "Its just a game."

Ron blushed and dropped his eyes to the floor. "Yeah," he said. "You’re right. Do you want any company?"

"No," Harry said. "I’ll be fine. You guy’s go on ahead. I’ll meet you at lunch."

When Harry entered the hospital wing fifteen minutes later Madam Pomfrey met him at the door. "What can I do for you, Mister Potter?" she asked.

"I just came to check on Brian Daniels," Harry said. "I didn’t mean for him to get hurt. I just wanted to scare him a little."

"I understand," Madam Pomfrey said. "That’s one of the things I’ve never liked about that sport. The weaker players try to copy the better ones and usually wind up getting hurt. I’ve notified all of the house teams that under no circumstances are any of their seekers to mark you during a match."

"What are you doing here, Potter?" Orville Burns spat as Harry and Madam Pomfrey approached the injured seeker’s bed.

"This is a game, Burns!" Harry growled, his anger level rising to dangerous heights. "It isn’t war. I don’t know if you have ever fought in an actual war or not but I have." Harry’s voice was dangerously dark now and he was struggling to control his temper. "Quidditch is not a matter of life and death. I happen to care about people. If you want to be pig headed about it and not care that’s your problem; but I am not going to let you stop me from caring about an innocent victim of an accident that never should have happened. I didn’t ask him to follow me into that dive. He did it of his own accord and now he’s paying the price. All I want to know is if he is going to be alright."

Burns and the rest of the Slytherin Quidditch team blanched at the near outburst and took a step back from Harry. "He’ll be fine," Madam Pomfrey said, breaking the tense silence that followed. "Would you like me to let you know when he wakes up?"

Harry broke eye contact with Orville and shook himself out of his darkening mood. Looking quickly at Madam Pomfrey he said, "Yes," turned around and almost, but not quite, literally stormed out of the Hospital Wing.

By the time Harry reached the Great Hall a few minutes later he had calmed himself down for the most part and decided to let Burns and the other Slytherins deal with it on their own. He honestly didn't think they knew what war was all about and he knew that no amount of talking could convince them that quidditch was just a game. They would have to experience the terrors of war first hand before they realized how trivial these house rivalries were. Part of him wanted them to have had these experiences yesterday while another part of him wanted them to never have to go through it.

When he joined Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Neville, Luna, the rest of the Gryffindor quidditch team, and the Puddlemere United Reserve Team, in the Great Hall Ron and Oliver were talking about the latest developments on the international quidditch scene. "Yeah," Oliver was saying, "I guess ol' Krum must be thinking about retiring."

"What do you mean?" Ron asked, glancing at Hermione for some sign. Hermione, however, looked as shocked as Ron and shrugged her shoulders to indicate that she hadn't heard anything either.

"Well, it seems Bulgaria is looking for a new Seeker and they want them there by the end of the year," Oliver said. "I mean they already have a reserve and a second alternate. But the scuttlebutt is that Krum is taking an extended leave starting in January and they want to fill the third position before he leaves."

"I wonder what that's all about," Ron thought out loud.

"I don't know," Oliver said. "But it will be interesting to find out. I mean he's only twenty. He's at his prime. He's still got a lot of good years ahead of him."

"Maybe he's found something a little more important than quidditch," Harry said.

Oliver looked up suddenly and stared at Harry in disbelief. Then, after a moment's hesitation his expression softened and he said, "You know, Harry, if these guys hadn't filled me in on your experiences in Romania and Hogsmeade this year I would call you a traitor. But you're right. Maybe he has found something worth fighting for."

The rest of that afternoon was spent visiting with Oliver and his teammates. Ron met with their team captain and, with minimal input from Harry, described several of the team's new formations and Neville and Ginny and the rest of the Gryffindor team discussed tactics with their Puddlemere United counterparts. After a while Harry Ron, Ginny and Neville retrieved their Electra 5000 prototypes from Dumbledore's office and gave demonstrations of some of the moves they had used in Romania. Ron and Neville even demonstrated their pincer move in which they flew straight at each other at top speed only veering off at the last possible moment. If anyone had been following them they, the trackers, would have collided in mid air and been finished. Each of the Puddlemere flyers then took a turn on one of the prototype brooms and was suitably impressed by the handling and performance.

Chapter 32. Overcoming Imperio

Harry and Ginny shared a quiet dinner in his trunk that Sunday evening at a small table Dobby and Winky had set up for them next to the window in the conference room. As they talked Harry explained what he was doing with Remote Viewing and Ethereal Magic and, at her insistence, hesitantly described some of the carnage he had seen. He purposely didn't tell here about the some of the more gruesome attacks but he did hint at the fact that many of the Death Eaters were becoming increasingly more sadistic.

As the sun began to set Ginny glanced out the Wizard's Window and gasped in surprise when, in the distance, she saw a number of black, winged horses rise up out of the Forbidden Forest. "What are those?" she asked.

Harry looked out the window. "You mean those black, flying horse things?"

"Mm hmm."

"Those are Thestrals."

"They're beautiful," she whispered.

Harry bowed his head and closed his eyes. "Yeah. They are. But I had hoped you wouldn't be able to see them."

"Why not?"

"Because it means that you have seen someone die and grieved for them."

"Oh," Ginny said. "I guess a lot of people are going to be able to see them in a few years."

Harry stared down at his plate and sighed. "Yeah," he said. "I hope it doesn't take a few years but you are probably right: A lot of people a going to be able to see them."

They spent a lot of time talking that night. They talked about classes, the Order, dueling and the prophecy. Harry was hesitant to talk about the prophecy but Ginny was very supportive and for some reason Harry felt comfortable talking to her about it and he knew that he could trust her with his innermost feelings. They were just getting started on their discussion of the plans that were being made for the upcoming holidays when Winky appeared beside them. "Excuse me, Harry, Ginny," she squeaked, "but you is having company."

Harry looked in towards the sitting room and saw Remus coming down the ladder. Looking back at Ginny he reached out and squeezed her hand. "Don't get up," he murmured. "I'll be right back."

Standing up and walking around the conference table he met Remus at the suits of armor and smiled. "What's up, Remus?" he asked.

Remus glanced over Harry's shoulder and, seeing Ginny, waved. "Hi, Ginny," he said then turned back to Harry. "This won't take long, Harry, but we need your help. We are going to start teaching everyone from third year up about the Unforgivables starting Monday."

Harry was about to argue that their charm could defeat the Unforgivables when Remus held his

hands up and shook his head. Then, putting his arm around Harry's shoulders, led him away from the conference room and into the study. "Harry," he said, "you know as well as I do that there isn't always time to even think about the charm, let alone activate it, in the heat of battle. I mean, look at what happened to Arthur Weasley. That is a perfect example of why there have been so many casualties. True, Arthur didn't have one on him but . . . um . . . I don't know if anyone's told you this or not but most of the casualties we are seeing are people whom have either been trained by us or have had the charms in their pockets. They have been fighting to save their property while ignoring the risks to their lives." Harry started to say something but Remus cut him off. "It's a hard lesson to learn, Harry, and some people never learn it. We can't force them to learn that life is more important than possessions but we can prepare them for what they might be faced with if this war drags on much longer."

Harry sat down at his desk and motioned for Remus to sit in one of the chairs opposite him. "So why do you need me to help you teach about the Unforgivables?"

Remus sat down in one of the comfortable chairs and leaned back. After studying Harry for a few moments he said, "Because you and Alastor are the only two of the five of us who have successfully thrown off the Imperious Curse when cast by someone of Tom's caliber and because you are still young. I almost hate to say this but the students respect you almost as much as they respect Albus which is a lot more than they respect any of the other teachers, except maybe Minerva, and they will listen to you more than they will listen to us."

Harry snorted at this but acquiest. "Alright," he said. "What do you want me to do?"

Remus grinned. "Who ever is teaching that day - we are going to be doing this over the next two weeks - will give the main lecture and then turn it over to you to describe the Imperious Curse in greater detail. Then they will cast the curse on you so that the students can watch you and observe. And since you are a very powerful wizard in your own right you will be helping us cast the spell on the students so that they can get a greater understanding of what it feels like."

Harry ran his fingers through his hair and hung his head. "Alright," he said with an air of resignation. "Who's first?"

"Monday is fifth-year Gryffindor and Ravenclaw with Alastor followed by fifth-year Slytherin and Huffelpuff."

Harry looked up. "After lunch, right?"

Remus nodded. "Yeah. Don't worry, Minerva will give you your homework assignments at dinner. That's why we are spreading it out over a two week period, so you don't fall behind in any of your studies."

"Gee, thanks," Harry said sarcasticly then stood up. "Alright. Tell Alastor I'll be there."

Remus stood up and pulled Harry into a brotherly hug. "You're doing fine, Harry," he reassured his young friend. "I know James and Lily and Sirius would be proud."

Harry smiled weakly at one of his parents' and godfather's best friends the followed Remus back out into the sitting room. Before Remus mounted the ladder he glanced over at Ginny, who was sitting patiently over by the window watching the candle flicker as she gently blew into its flame,

and said "You might want to think about walking Ginny down to the common room because it's getting late and most of your roommates are already in bed."

Harry glanced over at Ginny and nodded. "Yeah. I suppose."

Remus chuckled as he started to climb the ladder. "Oh, and don't worry, Harry. I'll be sure to spread plenty of rumors about what you two are doing in your trunk."

Harry snatched a pillow up from the nearest couch and threw it at the retreating werewolf's back. "Don't you dare!" he threatened. "Or the next prank war will make the last one look like child's play."

Remus just laughed as he crawled out of the trunk. When he was out he turned around and smiled down at Harry with a mischievous glint in his eye. "See ya."

The notices went up the next morning.

> ATTENTION ALL STUDENTS:
>
> The war that is currently raging beyond the boundaries of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is of great concern to all. As you know, every effort is being made on your behalf to guarantee your safety while you are here and to provide you with as normal a learning environment as possible while school is in session. Under the circumstances it has been decided that Hogwarts will remain open over the upcoming holiday season. Arrangements have been, and are being, made for both Hogwarts and Hogsmeade to play host to any and/or all students and their families who wish to spend the Christmas Holidays with us. The Hogwarts Express will make its regularly scheduled run to Platform 9¾ on Saturday, December 21st and will return to Hogsmeade on Wednesday, January 1st for those who wish to return home for the holidays. We do, however, encourage all students and their families to take advantage of this opportunity, as we cannot guarantee your safety once you leave the area. Please register with your head of house if you plan on remaining with us over the holidays.
>
> Weather permitting, activities will include inter-house snowball fights (no magic allowed), snow sculpturing, sleigh rides and ice-skating as well as Yule and New Years Balls and a number of concerts.
>
> Sincerely,
> Albus Dumbledore
> Headmaster,
> Hogwarts School if Witchcraft and Wizardry

Harry arrived late for lunch that day As Alastor had asked to speak with him after Charms so that they could go over what they were going to be doing that afternoon. Luna was the first to look up as Harry approached their traditional place at the Gryffindor Table. She was laughing at a joke Neville had been telling when she saw Harry and called out to him. "Hey, Harry!"

The others looked up, smiled and scooted over to make room for their friend. Placing his hands on their shoulders Harry stepped over the bench and sat down between Neville and Ginny. Tapping the center of his plate with his wand he asked Dobby for a bowl of soup with an extra helping of restorative draught and two bagels. Then, as Ginny slid her hand into his own, turned to look into his girlfriend's eyes. "Hi," he said softly.

Ginny looked into his tired eyes and seemed to feel the deep, underlying, emotional fatigue that was eating at his soul. "Are you alright?" she asked.

Harry smiled weakly. "Yeah, I'll be alright. I'm just getting a little tired of the war is all."

The others nodded, all but Luna understanding that Harry had a front row seat to some of the most horrific fighting that had been seen since the days of Gridelwald. "Why don't you take a few nights off?" Ron asked softly, the concern evident in his voice.

Harry looked up suddenly, fire flashing from his eyes. Hermione, sensing an explosion, raised her wand and cast a quick privacy charm. "I can't!" Harry snapped. "You remember what happened the last time I took a night off? We missed the plans for the attacks on the other villages."

"But, Harry," Hermione soothed, "look at what it's doing to you. True, you are sleeping and getting physically rested but emotionally it is tearing you apart."

There was silence while Harry thought this over. When his lunch appeared he looked up at the others and nodded. "Yeah, I'm sorry" he said. "You're right. I've got to stop trying to play hero. I'll talk to Albus and see what he says." Then turning to Ginny he said, "But I want to thank you for last night, Gin."

Ron looked up, his face suddenly red with rage. "Look!" he said, "I don't mind you going out with my little sister. I won't even mind if you get married; but you had better not be shagging her or I will be the first to hex you as soon as you have taken care of Tom!"

Harry shook his head and chuckled. "No, Ron. It's nothing like that. We just had dinner and talked."

"Then what's this about thanking her for last night?"

Dipping one of the bagels into his soup Harry said, "The way it was explained to me, when I was studying Spiritual Magic, is that there are basically three kinds of people in the world. There are people like Tom who are energy takers. They tend to drain the emotional energy from their surroundings. There are people like Albus who are energy givers. They tend to radiate energy and freely give of themselves when others are in need. And then there are energy sharers. These people share their emotional energy with others and grow stronger because of it. We are all actually energy sharers to a certain extent but some seem more inclined to draw energy from others and act as energy sinks while others tend to be more open and giving, more willing to share their energy with others. Ginny and I are energy sharers. We grow stronger just by being in each other's presence. Don't ask me to explain all of the technicalities of it because it would take too long and

I’m not sure I understand it all that well. But suffice it to say that all Ginny and I have to do is talk to benefit from this exchange."

Ron blushed. "Oh, okay."

Hermione, who was seated across from Ginny, had been observing this exchange while carefully listening to Harry’s words. "Harry," she asked carefully. "What all do you know about this exchange of energies?"

Harry glanced across at Hermione. "Not much, really. I know that the energy is the energy of life and that it gives us happiness and the willingness and desire to carry on. I know that it takes many forms and that the exchange takes place on a deeply spiritual level. Other than that I don’t know all that much. Why?"

The look of intense concentration that had been masking Hermione’s features lifted as a light of understanding came into here eyes. "From what you’ve described, it sounds like dementors are energy sinks. They may be a bit more complicated than that but the basic idea is there."

Harry thought about this for a minute then, sitting up and tiredly running his fingers through his hair, said, "Yeah, so."

Hermione scowled. "Don’t you see?" she hissed. "This may be the key to defeating the dementors. If they are energy sinks then at least we have a starting point. I’m not saying that this will change anything because they may have already found a solution but then again maybe they haven’t and this may be the piece of the puzzle they are looking for." Reaching for her bag she rummaged around for a bit and pulled out a piece of parchment, a quill and a half full bottle of ink. She wrote furiously for several minutes then, after examining her work, looked across at Ginny. "Could I borrow Henry?" she asked. "I want to send this off to the Babcocks as soon as possible."

The urgency in her voice, in concert with the fact that she was already getting to her feet, left little room for negotiation so Ginny took the easy way out. "Er, . . . yeah. Sure. I guess so."

Smiling merrily, as she always did when convinced that she was on to something, Hermione shouldered her bag and, parchment in hand, walked quickly out of the Great Hall headed for the owlry.

After reinforcing Hernione’s privacy charm, to make sure no one could hear their conversation, Harry turned to Ron and asked, "So, do you think the security measures will be enough?"

"I don’t know," Ron said, shaking his head. "I hope so, though. We’ve got a ten kilometer perimeter set up around both places and we are going to have air born patrols going on around the clock starting the second week of December. I just hope its enough."

"It will be," Ginny said reassuringly.

Harry glanced over at Ginny. "Yeah," he sighed. "But while they’re here who’s going to be guarding the other hot spots and who’s going to be on call for random attacks?"

"Alastor and I have been working with Madam Bones on that for the past couple of weeks," Ron said in an attempt to reassure his friend that all bases were being covered. "In addition to the aurors and hit wizards we have several of our own agents stationed in and around all of the most obvious

targets. There are no fewer than ten in any given location. Half of them are at there permanent stations while the other half are free to float, to go to wherever they are needed. I think we pretty much have all of the bases covered."

"What about the regular employees?" Harry asked.

"After the events of this past June," Ron continued, "all Ministry employees have been questioned extensively under Veritaserum. Several were even arrested. The same goes for Saint Mungo's. We're doing the best we can, Harry, and that's all anyone has a right to expect."

Harry was silent for several seconds. "Yeah, I guess." Then turning to Ginny he asked, "How is your work going with the pixies and fairies?"

"Some of the pixies are definitely on our side and will be helping with the patrols," Ginny said. "The Cornish Blues, however are causing some problems. I've met with the Fairy Queen several times and she assures me that they are on our side. She says I have a lot of your mother's qualities and that she believes in our cause. She says that they will never turn to the dark side. When I met with her yesterday she said that since the last pact they made was with your mother she would like to meet with you to reestablish that bond. Until then all they can to is serve as sentries and look outs. They will also be helping with patrols."

"What about the leprechauns?"

"They are currently remaining neutral. However, I do get the feeling that once the fairies come on board they will join our side as well."

"Who else?" Harry asked while rubbing his temples. "Who haven't we contacted yet?"

"We haven't talked to the High Elves yet," Ginny suggested. "I don't know what we can do about the house elves because they are so scattered but we can always try."

Turning to Neville Harry said, "How's it going on your front, Neville?"

Neville squirmed slightly before squaring his shoulders and delivering his impromptu report. "Luna and I have been working with the Department of Magical Transportation and we have established twelve secure apparation points in and around Hogsmeade and the portkeys are being arranged for the muggles." Turning to Ron he said, "And you might want to know that Percy can be very helpful when he wants to be."

Harry smiled. "Good. How about you, Luna? Anything else to add?"

Luna nodded. "Most of the Floo Network is down but we have been able to rebuild small portions of it. So far we have access to Saint Mungo's as well as a few of the other major Wizarding Hospitals and government facilities in Scotland, Ireland, France and Spain. We are still working on Germany, Sweden and Portugal but we hope to have those up and running by the end of the month."

Harry nodded. "Good. I hope we won't need them but something tells me that we will before this is over. Is there anything else before I lift this charm?"

When no one said anything Harry flicked his wand and the Great Hall sprang to life around them as conversations and laughter filled the air and their fellow students discussed classes relationships

and holiday plans, blissfully unaware of the roles six of their fellows were playing in their futures. "So what's up for you next, Harry?" Ron asked, acting as though their private conversation had never taken place.

Harry smiled grimly. "Moody and I are teaching the fifth years about the Unforgivables this afternoon," Harry said glumly.

"Oh, good!" Ginny smiled as she linked arms with Harry and leaned into his shoulder. "That means I get you next."

Harry smirked. "Yeah. You get the infamous Professor Potter for Defense Against the Dark Arts this afternoon."

Glancing at her watch Ginny said, "Well in that case, Professor Potter, I suggest we get moving. We only have about fifteen minutes before class starts."

Harry groaned and looked over at Ron. "What did I ever do to deserve this?"

Ron laughed. "I think it's called love, Harry. And so far as I can tell there is no escaping it."

"You're probably right," Harry smirked.

"You had better believe he's right," Ginny smiled as she stood up and retrieved her book bag from beneath the bench and waited for Harry to thank Dobby for his meal. When they were walking across the Entrance Hall she turned to him and asked, "So what is this class going to be like?"

"Oh not much, really," Harry said offhandedly as Luna caught up with them. "Alastor is going to talk about the Unforgivables for a bit; then I am going to discuss the theory behind overcoming the Imperious Curse; then we will do a little demonstration; and finally we will be putting each of you under the curse so that you will know what it feels like. Hopefully at least a few of you will be able to fight it."

"Isn't that the curse the fake Moody taught you to overcome in your fourth year?"

"Yes," Harry said hesitantly. "And even though he was a fraud I do owe him a debt of gratitude. If it hadn't been for him I never would have been able to throw it off when Tom tried to control me in the graveyard that night."

Ginny looked over at him with concern as they approached the Defense classroom. "I'm sorry, Harry," she said. "I didn't mean to bring back any of those memories. It just slipped out."

"That's okay," Harry said smiling. "I've pretty much dealt with those memories. It's amazing what you can do when you are dead and can see things for what they really are. I'm not saying I'm perfect or anything but at least I can look at things from a broader perspective now. And a using a pensieve never hurts."

As they entered the Defense room Harry asked Ginny to meet him after class and turned towards Alastor who was standing in front of the teacher's desk while Ginny walked over and took her seat in the front row. "You ready for this, Harry?" Alastor growled when Harry joined him at the desk.

"As ready as I'll ever be," Harry said, resigning himself to being voluntarily put under the Imperious

Curse.

"Good. I'll warm them up for you then."

Harry nodded and walked over to stand in the shadows while Alastor delivered his lecture on the three unforgivable curses. He didn't demonstrate them as his abductor had in Harry's fourth year but he did give them very accurate description of what the Cruciatus and Imperious Curses felt like.

Fifteen minutes later Harry found himself standing up in front of the class clearing his throat, preparing to deliver his portion of the lesson. Sitting back on the front edge of the teacher's desk he bowed his head and stared at a point on the floor roughly a meter in front of him. After several seconds of silence he looked up and locked eyes with Ginny who was sitting directly in front of him. She smiled warmly, giving him the strength he needed to go on. And with a sigh Harry pushed himself away from the desk and began describing how to overcome the Imperious Curse. "The first thing you need to know," he began, "is that the Imperious Curse is the magical equivalent of peer pressure. I'm sure you all know what it feels like to do something you normally wouldn't just to fit in and be a part of the crowd, a part of your chosen peer group. That's kind of what the imperious curse is like except that it is much more powerful and it will take every bit of resolve you have to be yourself, and act according to your own wishes, to throw it off. The more powerful the wizard casting the spell the more difficult will be your task.

"When the curse first hits you, you will experience a feeling of euphoria. All of your aches and pains and cares and concerns will seem to drift away and you will be very tempted to not only listen to but to obey the voices in your head because it is such a comfortable feeling and you will not want to fight. But you must fight because if you don't you may wind up killing not only the people you love but destroying everything you cherish and value and then, when the curse is lifted, you will have nothing but the memory of what you have done.

"The first voice you hear while under the Imperious Curse will be the voice of the person casting the spell and it will be either asking or telling you to do something. These requests or commands may seem harmless enough in the beginning but you must resist all - and I do mean all - of these whisperings because once you open up to this voice and give in, this person's power and control over you will only grow stronger.

"The second voice you will hear will be your own personal voice of reason. It will begin by asking the simple question as to why you should obey these commands. This is the voice you should listen to because it is trying to help you fight and resist the curse. But it cannot do it alone. You must listen to this second voice and ignore the other. It will require a determined effort to be yourself and to rid yourself of the effects not only of the Imperious Curse but of the lesser curse of peer pressure as well. And since most of us already know how difficult it is to overcome the subtleties of peer pressure, especially when we are still young and fairly impressionable, most of you already have an idea as to what kind of battle you will be facing when you are placed under the Imperious Curse. Whatever you do, don't give in. Fight for all you're worth because the Imperious Curse is a lot more direct and a lot more powerful than the subtleties of peer pressure but if you truly wish to rule your own lives then I can promise you that the battle will be worth it."

As Harry finished his portion of the lecture a blond haired Ravenclaw boy sitting behind Ginny raised his hand. "Yes?" Harry asked point to him.

"Uh, Professor Potter?" A few of the Gryffindors snickered and the boy blushed bright red.

"That's Okay," Harry reassured him. "My name is Harry but Professor Potter will do."

"Er, Okay," the boy blushed. "Who's the most powerful wizard to cast the Imperious Curse on you and were you able to throw it off?"

The room fell silent and all eyes turned expectantly towards Harry. Harry swallowed hard and turned towards Alastor for some sign as to what he should tell them. Moody nodded his head and sensing Harry's apprehension, softly said, "Go on, Harry, tell them the truth."

Harry turned back to the students and, taking a deep breathe said, "In answer to the first part of your question, the most powerful wizard who has ever cast the Imperious Curse on me likes to go by the name of Voldemort." As expected, almost everyone gasped and a few screamed. Only Ginny and Luna remained stubbornly silent. Once everything had settled down Harry answered the rest of his question. "To answer the second part of your question, yes. I did throw it off."

"Now," Moody said, stepping up to stand beside Harry, "I want you to gather round so that you can watch Professor Potter's eyes. That is where you will see the struggle. Harry is strong and can throw my curse off without much effort but he still has to throw it off. Watch his eyes and you will get some idea as to what you will be up against when we cast the spell on you." Ginny and Luna and their classmates came forward and gathered around Moody, positioning themselves so they could both see and watch Harry's eyes. When everyone was settled he asked Harry if he was ready. When Harry nodded his head Moody raised his wand, pointing it directly at Harry's head, and yelled, "IMPERIO!"

A sudden sense of euphoria filled Harry's being as all of his cares and concerns dropped away. Nothing mattered as he felt his mind fill with the fluffy, sweetness of cotton candy. It was hard to form a coherent thought in that world that would allow him to resist the curse as Moody's disembodied voice told him to start doing jumping jacks; and yet he resisted because he knew that these were not his thoughts.

Out of sheer force of habit he quickly dropped into a deep, meditative state, blocked Moody's voice out of his mind and threw the effects of the curse aside. As he did so, however, both Alastor and the students could see the look of fierce determination in his eyes and feel the waves of raw, magical energy radiating from his being. When he was free of the curse he shook his head and smirked at Alastor with an evilly defiant twinkle in his eye. "No thank you," he said with a wry smile. "I did enough of those this morning."

Several of the students watching him had moved back and Alastor had dropped his wand as if it were a hot iron. Moody's normal eye grew wide with shock and disbelief. His mouth fell open as his magical eye darted between his dropped wand and Harry. "Are you alright, Potter?" he asked nervously.

Harry took a deep breath and let the built up tension and magical energy fall away and shook his head to clear away the fuzzy feelings that still lingered in his mind. "Yeah, I'm fine. What happened?"

Moody looked at him curiously. "I'm not sure," he said nervously. "I've never seen such a rapid build up of magical energy. I had to drop my wand before it exploded. Has this ever happened before?"

Harry sighed heavily. "Yes. It's happened a couple of times in my Thursday night classes, when we

were talking to Bane and while we were over in Romania. I'm getting better at controlling it but sometimes it just gets away from me."

"The ring?"

Harry nodded. "Yes, that's part of it."

Moody nodded his understanding then turned back to the class. "Well now, were you watching his eyes?" Most of the students nodded mutely afraid to take their eyes off of Harry and only hesitantly glancing at Alastor. "Good," the battle scarred ex-auror growled. "Then I suggest we get on with the rest of the lesson."

For the rest of the period Harry and Alastor put the students under the Imperious Curse. For most of the time the room was filled with students hopping around like rabbits or grousing around like gorillas. A few were spared the humiliation of acting like animals but wound up either dancing around the room or doing calisthenics. Luna had fought it off when Alastor cast it on her but didn't want to go up against Harry. Then there was one person left to be tested.

As Ginny stepped forward to stand before Harry, Alastor asked him if he would rather he, Moody, test her. Harry looked at Ginny. "What do you think, Gin?" Harry asked. "You have to be tested but I don't want you to get hurt. If I throw everything I've got into this curse . . ."

"Do it," she said, cutting him off. "You are a very powerful wizard, Harry. If you could throw Tom's curse off before the ring I hate to think what you could do now. But I was already controlled by him once and I want to be able to throw it off if it ever comes to it."

Moody looked at Harry and, shrugging his shoulders, hobbled back to stand beside the door. The other students all took their seats, some still suffering from the after effects of the curse, while Harry and Ginny took center stage. Harry reluctantly raised his wand and pointed it at Ginny's eyes. Ginny quickly nodded and set her jaw. Harry sighed then, taking a deep breath, bellowed, "IMPERIO!"

As the glowing stream of energy struck Ginny in the face her body relaxed and all tension seemed to melt away. But then she started to fight the curse and the tension returned. Her normally soft, chocolate brown eyes took on a steely glare of grim determination and beads of perspiration began to appear on her forehead. Her hands balled into fists and her body began to shake with suppressed rage.

Some of her classmates were beginning to mutter at the duration of her test, wondering how long she could hold out, when Ginny shocked everyone but Harry and Alastor by letting out a bloodcurdling scream followed by a resounding "NO!"

Harry quickly lowered his wand as soon as she threw the curse off and ran to her, catching her before she fell to the hard stone floor. "Are you alright?" He asked as the bell rang.

Ginny, breathing shakily into his chest, her entire body shaking from the strain of throwing off the powerful curse, nodded her head. "Yes," she breathed. "I'll be alright. That was a powerful curse, Harry. I don't know if I could have taken much more of it."

Harry hugged her to his chest and ran his free hand through her hair, brushing it away from her

face. "You did good, Gin. It took me four times to cast it off completely and that was with a wimp like Crouch Junior casting the spell. I was pouring everything I had into that spell and you still threw it off on the first try."

Ginny smiled up at him. "Thanks," she said. "Now what did you want to talk about?"

"Huh?" Harry asked in confusion.

"You asked me to see you after class. What did you want?"

"Oh," Harry said, remembering their earlier conversation. "I . . . er . . . I was . . . Well, I was wondering if you would go to the dances with me over the Christmas Holiday. I'll understand if you don't want to but just in case you do I thought you might want to know that I'll need dance lessons." It had taken him a moment to get started but then it poured out in a rush.

When he finished Ginny was giggling softly. "Of course I will go with you, Harry," she said. "And don't worry about dance lessons. I'll teach you what I can but you couldn't be any worse than Neville. My feet still hurt whenever I think about the last Yule Ball."

Harry smiled at the memory of Neville stepping on Ginny's toes at the Yule Ball in his fourth year. After walking with her over to her desk where he helped her collect her books he escorted her to the door of the classroom. As they exited Alastor shoved a small blue bottle with a dark liquid sloshing around inside into her hand. "Here," he said gruffly. Ginny and Harry both looked at the ex-auror curiously. "It's a restorative draught," Moody said. "After that little demonstration you are going to need it to get through the rest of the day."

Ginny took the bottle, looked at it curiously then smiled. "Thank you," she said then turned and smiled at Harry. "I'll see you at dinner."

Moody stumped back into the classroom and sat down behind the teacher's desk. When Harry walked back in and sat on the edge of the desk, to await the Slytherin and Huffelpuff fifth year students, Moody growled, "You should be proud of her, Harry."

Smiling to himself Harry crossed his arms and leaned back slightly. "Oh, I am, Alastor, I'm very proud of her. She is going to be alright no matter what happens to me."

Chapter 33. Blood Brothers

Suspiciously, over the next few days, the Death Eater attacks decreased dramatically so that by Thursday evening all of the war casualties had been transferred to either St. Mungo's or one of the other, smaller hospitals and Harry was able to recall the suits of armor from their patrols. Most of the students were slightly unnerved when, during dinner Thursday evening, the castle's front door's swung open and several empty suits of armor marched across the Entrance Hall, fanning out in different directions, to return to their posts. Albus glanced up at the unusual amount of noise and smiled, nodding his understanding of what was happening and Harry kept his head down and tried to keep from laughing at the expressions on some of the student's faces.

When Harry entered the Headmaster's Office after dinner that evening Albus looked up from his paperwork with a slightly worried expression on his face. "Harry," he said, "your friends tell me that you are pushing yourself too hard. They say that while you may be physically resting you are not letting yourself relax spiritually. Is this true?"

Harry approached the headmaster's desk and seated himself in one of the more comfortable chairs in the room. After leaning forward, resting his elbows on his knees for support and studying the patterns on the rug beneath his feet for several seconds he sighed and looked up into his mentor's eyes. "I don't know what else to do, Albus," he said honestly. "I don't want to miss anything like we did last month. I just don't know what else to do. . ."

Albus nodded his head in understanding. "Yes, Harry. I understand. You feel as though the weight of the world is on your shoulders and that so long as you are able you must give your all to fight the forces of evil."

Harry studied his hands for several seconds then, without raising his head, nodded.

"Tell me, Harry, does your scar still bother you at all?"

Harry sat back in the chair and looked curiously over at the man across from him. "It tingles almost all the time," he said. "It's nothing major. It's more of a nuisance than anything but, yes, I suppose it does. Why?"

"I think," Albus said as he leaned forward, resting his elbows on his desk and steepling his fingers, "the time has come for us to begin exploring the possibilities of using your link with Tom to our advantage." Harry looked up curiously. "I think it is time we began analyzing the quality of the signals you are receiving so that you can use them as an alarm of sorts to let you know when Tom is planning something. That way, if we are successful, you will be able to get some much needed rest and relaxation."

For the next two hours they worked on helping Harry become more sensitive to the quality of the signals being sent by his scar so that he would know when Voldemort was up to something and, in a more surrealistic sense, what he was thinking. It was an interesting experiment, combining various facets of several different kinds of magic and the difficulties and dangers of losing his identity to the process were thoroughly explored. But they both decided that the risks, so long as they were aware of them, were worth it. The initial results were promising so it was agreed that Harry would continue this research on his own and submit a magically enhanced, written report on his findings every week until he had mapped all of the various signals he was receiving from his scar. In this

way it was hoped that they could compile an accurate record of most, if not all, of Tom's thoughts and activities.

Harry's work with the dragon was postponed until the following week. He had gotten most of the basic movements down and was able to make them look fairly natural but the dragon still staggered drunkenly when he tried to make it walk. At the rate he was progressing, however, Albus was hoping that Harry would have the model flying by Christmas. It was also decided that Harry's Animagus and Metamorphmagus training would begin either over the Christmas Holidays or at the start of the next term. As always, these lessons were to be kept strictly confidential and on a need-to-know basis at all times, or at least until Tom was defeated.

Friday morning dawned clear and bright. But as the day wore on a cold front moved in over the region accompanied by a thick layer of clouds. By the end of classes that day it was starting snow lightly, with big, soft, fluffy, white flakes floating gently from the sky. The first hints of a major storm did not begin to appear until half way through dinner that evening when a gentle breeze rapidly accelerated into a howling, gale-force wind.

The main topic of discussion at their weekly meeting that night was as to whether or not to go through with the meeting with the wood elves. Many were concerned that the blizzard would be too much; but Albus assured them that the wood elves were already in the forest and that to back out of the meeting now, no matter the reason, would be perceived as a sign of weakness and that, if they backed out, they might never be able to gain the wood elves' respect. And so it was decided that, before breakfast the next morning, Harry, Albus, Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Neville, Luna, Kingsley, Remus, Tonks and Alastor would go into the forest to meet with the wood elves' delegation.

The wind howled through most of the night, only letting up slightly an hour or two after midnight. None of the students slept well that night. Harry, Ron and Neville were up at the crack of dawn and got dressed. A few minutes later there was a knock at the door. Seamus and Dean stirred briefly but rolled over and went back to sleep almost immediately. When Ron opened the door Hermione, Ginny and Luna - Luna had spent that night in the Gryffindor fifth-year girl's dormitory so they could all be together - crept in.

After a light breakfast in Harry's trunk, compliments of Dobby and Winky, they donned their hats, gloves (mittens in Luna's case), boots and Winter Cloaks and left to meet the others in the Entrance Hall.

Moody was grousing about his stump hurting because of the change in weather from earlier in the week as the students descended the Main Stair but didn't complain too much because he knew how important this meeting was and wouldn't miss it for the world, even if Kingsley and Remus had to carry him through the forest for him to make it. When they were ready, Albus looked at the doors and said, "I think the time has come for us to depart." With that he raised his wand and cast a spell at the front doors, which swung open just enough to let them pass. But what met their eyes was a two meter high wall of snow topped with a swirling blizzard. "Hmm," The aging headmaster said. "It would seem we are well on our way to having enough snow for our holiday activities." Then, with a flourish, said, "Wands out."

For the next several minutes the eleven witches and wizards blasted their way through the snow on their way to the Forbidden Forest. Harry and Albus were in the lead followed by Ron, Hermione,

Neville, Luna, Ginny and Tonks. Remus, Kingsley and Alastor brought up the rear because, as much as Alastor despised accepting help from anyone, Kingsley and Remus were given the responsibility of helping him over and through some of the obstacles that lay ahead.

As they approached the Forbidden Forest, as it was still almost an hour before breakfast, they detoured over to Hagrid's cabin and cleared the snow away from the door and off the roof so he would be able to get out when he wanted and could start a fire in his fireplace without worrying about the smoke backing up into his cabin. A few minutes later, as they entered the forest, Harry wondered how the centaurs, thestrals, unicorns, acromantulas and other creatures of the forest were doing. The snow was not as deep once inside the forest and the wind and weather were not as violent as it had been on their journey from the castle but it was still far from ideal.

As the snow depths tapered off to little more than a skift Harry began to get the uncomfortable feeling that they were being watched. In the murky shadows up ahead he thought he saw a pair of thestrals eating a small animal of some sort. He and Albus stopped at the same time, the others bumping into them, and raised their wands. Lighting their wands with the Luminos Charm they waited for their eyes to adjust before venturing any further into the forest. While they were waiting Harry quickly reached out with Ethereal Consciousness and found the wood elves in a particularly well sheltered glen near the center of the forest. He also made note of the elven sentries that had been posted around the glen to serve as guards for this meeting. Between themselves and the elves, however, were a whole host of dangerous and magical creatures they would have to avoid in order to reach their final destination. Closest at hand, though, were the centaurs who were watching them with detached interest. Casting a quick Sonorous Charm on himself Harry called out, "Bane, Ronan. We must pass through your forest on our way to a meeting with the wood elves. We request your forgiveness for this trespass and ask that you might provide us with safe passage both to and from this meeting."

The others, with the exception of Albus, glanced nervously around as they suddenly found themselves surrounded by a rather large herd of centaurs. Bane and Ronan stepped out of the murky shadows and approached Harry and Albus. "Albus Dumbledore," Bane said in formal greeting. "You have chosen well." Then turning to Harry, he said, "Harry Potter, I greet you once again. We are aware of this meeting and we will provide you safe passage. Do not abuse this privilege, however. I see you have brought the werewolf, Lupin, with you. Is he a part of your honor guard?"

Harry glanced back at Remus and smiled. "Yes. Remus Lupin is a part of my honor guard and a good friend as well."

"Very well," Bane said.

Harry cleared his throat. "And I would be honored if you and Ronan, as the two most senior members of your tribe, would stand beside Albus Dumbledore and myself as honorary members of my guard."

Albus smiled down at Harry and a few of the others gasped at the audacity of this request but Bane fell silent, as though thinking it over. Finally, after several seconds of seemingly intense contemplation, Bane looked back at Albus and said, "You have chosen very well, Albus Dumbledore." Then turning to Harry he said, "We accept, Harry Potter; and we will escort you to this meeting."

Almost an hour later, after crossing several small streams, walking through some of the darkest parts of the forest and crossing a few small clearings, Harry's quidditch reflexes took over as he reach out and caught an arrow in mid flight, before it could strike the ground at his feet. Astonished, everyone stopped and began nervously looking around for the hidden archer. Several of the centaurs began to draw their weapons and murmurs of suspicion and outrage began to fill their ranks. "No!" Harry said sharply, his voice echoing through the forest. "We did not come here to fight. We came for a meeting. This is just their way of letting us know that we are approaching the meeting place. From here on we will be escorted by members of the elven guard. Put your weapons away or they will take it as a sign of hostility and none of us will live to see the sun rise tomorrow morning."

Several of the centaurs expressed their desire to fight but Bane and Ronan turned on their fellow tribesmen and ordered them to stand down. They did so grudgingly.

When the last of the centaurs had effectively disarmed themselves Harry looked up at Albus who grimly smiled and nodded his head. Harry knelt down and lay the arrow on the ground, carefully positioning it in the traditional elfish sign of peace. The shaft lay perpendicular to their path so that if they wished to continue they would have to step over the arrow. When he stood up again he looked up into the forest canopy, watched and waited.

Several minutes passed in marked silence. Humans and centaurs alike were starting to grumble at the fact that they were being kept waiting. After a time only Harry and Albus were still waiting patiently. Then it happened: Several wood elves, some male and some female, appeared around the periphery of the herd of centaurs, bows drawn, arrows notched and swords and darers unsheathed. A tall elfish warrior with a long mane of dark brown hair, piercing blue eyes and a deeply tanned complexion stepped out of the shadows and, approaching Harry, knelt down and picked up the arrow. "You would have made a goof elf, Harry Potter," he said. "Most humans do not have such reflexes."

Harry smiled briefly. "Emric?" he asked.

"Yes," the elf nodded. "I am Prince Emric. We will escort you and your honor guard into the glen where you will meet with my father. The others, I am afraid, will have to wait here for your return."

After sorting themselves out the eleven humans and two centaurs, accompanied by twenty elfish warriors, made their way even deeper into the forest. Fifteen minutes later they entered a small glen that was so heavily guarded that Harry doubted an unescorted ant could enter without risking serious bodily injury. Sitting on a large log near the center of the glen was an ancient, silver haired elf wrapped in a heavy fur cloak. He was staring intently into the small campfire before him, seemingly mesmerized by its dancing flames. When they approached, however, the ancient elf looked up, threw his cloak off and, jumping over the fire, ran over to Albus and embraced him warmly. "Albus!" he cried happily. "How are you my brother?"

The Headmaster returned the warm embrace. "I am well, Wulfric," Albus chuckled. "It has been a long time, my brother. I wish this reunion could have taken place in more peaceful times but alas it seems to be our fate that we meet only in times of darkness." Harry and everyone else looked curiously at Dumbledore.

Noticing their curious expressions the aged elf laughed merrily. "Albus, I think introductions are in order."

The Headmaster turned around. "My friends," he said smiling and his eyes twinkling merrily, "I would like you to meet my good friend and blood brother, Lord Wulfric Albus, High Lord of the Wood Elves. We became brothers in blood and purpose many years ago and I dare say that without his help we would not have been victorious in the war against Grindelwald."

The elf lord smiled. "Yes, Albus," he said, "Those were dark days. But thanks to you we have all had many years of relative peace." Then his expression changed. "Sadly, however," he sighed, "you are right, my friend. That was our war and the world is now faced with a new enemy. The time has come for us to pass the mantle of brotherhood on to the next generation. This is their war and we must offer them every advantage we can."

Albus smiled. "You are, of course, correct, my friend, which is why I encouraged Harry to contact you and your people."

A few more pleasantries were exchanged and then they got down to business. Harry introduced the members of his honor guard, beginning with Bane and Ronan, and described their roles in the coming war. Emric then introduced his closest lieutenants and explained their roles. Then, for the next two hours the humans, elves and centaurs described what they knew of the situation. It turned out that the wood elves knew a great deal and were more than willing to help defeat the dark legions because they knew that the future of their world hung in the balance as well. As these talks were winding down Ron’s stomach growled loudly enough for everyone to hear. Everyone but Ron, who was too busy blushing and being embarrassed, laughed. After the laughter had died down Wulfric called for the feast to be served.

After a sumptuous meal composed of a wide variety of basted meats, boiled and steamed vegetables, mushrooms, a variety of breads, kabobs and soups, of which Harry politely ate his fill while Ron thoroughly enjoyed himself, the rituals and ceremonies began. After the opening ceremony Harry and Emric approached the small alter that had been erected off to one side and picked up two of the ceremonial daggers it held. As they gazed intently into each other’s eyes they lay the blades across the palms of their right hands. Moments later, as the energy between them built to an acceptable level, they quickly nodded to each other and, drawing the blades across their hands, sliced the palms of their right hands open, causing them to bleed freely. They both winced at the pain but, with the determination of duty, reached out and firmly clasped the other’s hand. Hermione and Ginny both gasped when Harry sliced his hand open but watched in amazement as, while Harry and Prince Emric became blood brothers, the air around the two young men began to shimmer an glow.

A pale blue aura surrounded Harry and Emric as wizard and elf blood mingled and the air immediately surrounding their clasped hands began to glow brightly. When the intensity of the light was such that it filled the glen and several of the spectators were shielding their eyes against the soft yet blinding light Harry broke the silence that accompanied this ritual. "I, Harry James Potter, share my life and my blood with you, Prince Emric, prince of the wood elves, in this time of need so that we may draw from each other’s strengths and fight the common foe. I offer you my friendship, brotherhood and allegiance in all that is to come."

Emric answered in a firm, steady voice. "And I, Prince Emric, prince of the wood elves, share my life

and my blood with you, Harry James Potter, in this time of need so that we may draw from each other's strengths and fight the common foe. I accept your offer of friendship, brotherhood and allegiance in all that is to come and forever more."

Harry and Emric looked at each other across their clasped hands, which had stopped bleeding, and smiled. "It is done," they said as one and with the finality of a last reassuring grip, released their symbolic embrace.

The ancient ritual was repeated twice more, once for Ron and Emric's first lieutenant and once for Neville and Emric's second lieutenant. After this a second, lighter meal was served and friendships were sealed. As they made their way back to the castle Luna was uncharacteristically chatting excitedly about the healing techniques she had been discussing with one of Wulfric's healers and Ginny and Hermione were talking just as excitedly about the things they had learned. As they bid farewell to Bane, Ronan and the rest of the centaurs near the edge of the forest Harry turned to Albus and said, "Is that why you have so many names, Albus?"

Albus looked at him and smiled. "Yes, Harry. That is why I have so many names. Albus and Percival are my birth names but Wulfric and Brian are the names of my blood brothers. You now have the right to add Prince Emric's name to your own just as Ron and Neville have the right to add Woodring's and Onric's names to theirs."

Chapter 34. Warning Signs

As the Christmas Holidays approached Hogsmeade's two main inns filled to capacity and the valley and surrounding countryside began to fill with winterized Wizarding Tents which slowly took the shape of a small city. It seemed that most of the students and their families had chosen to take the Headmaster up on his offer and, due to the unusually heavy snows of late November and early December, many of the students were able to practice their charms while preparing the various campgrounds and keeping the walkways clear. Dean Thomas and a few of the more artistically inclined students used their abilities to create many beautifully decorative ice sculptures commemorating the event.

Each family who did not have a room or suite of rooms at one of the inns had their own tent. Each of these structures was fully equipped with bedrooms, bathrooms, living rooms, kitchens and studies. And, as with the tents at the Quidditch World Cup, the interiors were much more spacious on the inside than their external structures would lead one to believe. Indeed, some of the smaller tents, tents that from the outside looked no larger than a one or two man tent, were so roomy that they actually had three bedrooms with separate baths, overly large living rooms, formal dining rooms, large kitchens and expansive servants' quarters.

By the first day of holiday the apparition and portkey points that had been set up in and around Hogsmeade were extremely bust as witches and wizards either disapparated to or apparated from work or other errands or muggles were escorted to and from their destinations by teams of security wizards. A few of the more open-minded muggles - those who had married into the wizarding world - took portkeys and their magical surroundings in stride but most needed help adjusting to their surroundings. To help alleviate this strain Hermione and Professor McGonagall organized orientation meetings and a buddy system, which paired wizarding families with muggle families. All in all it was a very productive and festive gathering that did more to foster muggle - wizard relations than anything the Ministry (at least the Ministry under Cornelius Fudge) could have devised. Madam Bones, who was still serving in her capacity of Interim Minister while a new Minister of Magic was selected, attended many of the orientations and assured everyone that they were safe and that the Ministry was doing everything in its power to protect them and prepare for the coming war. Harry, however, stayed out of the limelight as much as possible. He knew what he had to do and he actually preferred working behind the scenes, preparing for the confrontation he knew was coming.

The Weasleys - Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, Fred, George, Percy, Bill and his fiance Fleur - arrived the next day and were given a spacious five-bedroom tent in a small out-of-the-way compound near the castle's main entrance which consisted of the Weasleys, the Grangers, Mrs. Longbottom, Mr. Lovegood the Babcocks and the Evanses. The Babcocks and Evanses were, understandably, nervous at first but were quickly put at ease by Mrs. Weasley's openness and hospitality. Even Mrs. Longbottom, who was an intimidating presence in the wizarding world, let alone the muggle world, warmed to the occasion and hosted a dinner party for those in their compound. And Mr. Lovegood spent many hours interviewing Albus, Alastor, Kingsley and the many security wizards, hit-wizards and aurors stationed in and around Hogwarts and Hogsmeade for the next issue of The Quibbler. He had also received special permission from the Headmaster to bring in a number of reporters to cover the events. Albus had agreed on the condition they all be screened and checked for any ties to dark witches or wizards.

Harry was just sitting down to breakfast on the morning of the 21st when two men in Ministry uniforms approached and sat down across from him. Harry glanced up and recognized them as the two untouchables from the Department of Mysteries who were working with the Babcocks on a solution to the dementor problem. "Mister Potter?" One of them asked.

"Yes?" Harry said as a short stack of Dobby's blueberry pancakes appeared on his plate.

"We believe we may have found the answer to your question," the one on the left said.

"It is a variation on the Patronus Charm with a complex emotional signature that is not going to be able to be conjured without help. The incantation and wand actions are the same but the underlying emotions are different," the other added.

Ron was just entering the Great Hall with Fred and George, who were giving him a hard time, at his sides. "Hey, Harry!" George called out.

"We thought we would join you for breakfast . . ."

"And give our little brother . . ."

"The benefit of our experience."

Ron groaned and glared bleary-eyed daggers at his brothers. Harry waved them over. "Fred, George," he said, "I would like you to meet Michael Johanson and David Jorgenson. They work as Unspeakables in the Department of Mysteries. They have been working on a solution to the dementor problem and seem to think that they may have found an answer."

Turning back to the two men sitting across from him Harry said, "Gentlemen, I would like you to meet my friends and business partners Fred and George Weasley. They are the makers of Dementor Delights and Potter Charms. If what you are saying is correct then these two fine, upstanding gentlemen," he said with a wink to Fred and George, "might just be the people we need to make it work. What have you come up with?"

Michael, the one on the left, said, "What we've come up with is a complex emotional structure which, when magnified by the magical forces of the Patronus Charm, should destroy a dementor and release all souls and memories contained therein. It is a combination of happiness, a desire to free any and/or all trapped souls and a sort of grim determination to destroy the dementors as well as an extraordinary amount of love."

For the next fifteen minutes Harry watched and listened as Fred, George, Michael and David discussed the charm's requirements, its component parts and activation. It startled him to see how intently Fred and George were listening and the seriousness of their expressions. He wondered if they were going to come out of this war with their smiles in tact. When they were finished Fred and George excused themselves, saying that they needed to get to work, and left, almost running out of the room.

Hermione, who had joined the group a few minutes earlier, lay her fork down and looked intently over at the two Unspeakables. "How does it work?" she asked. "I mean, how does it destroy the dementor?"

The one on the right, David, said, "Well, actually, Miss Granger, your last letter gave us the final

piece to the puzzle. We didn't know how it was going to work until we read your note about the subtle science of Energy Transfer. When we read that, however, we knew the answer.

"The way the charm works is that the patronus disrupts the dementor's energy field just enough to let the other elements into its system. Once these elements enter the system there is no stopping them and the dementor essentially explodes from within, releasing all forms of spiritual energy they have consumed. If our calculations and models are correct then this modified Patronus Charm should spell the end of the dementors."

Several hours later one of the twins returned with a small bag full of amber licorice nibs. Harry was walking through the Entrance Hall when George raced through the main doors, almost bowling over a young, first-year Huffelpuff boy as he described the castle's magical doors to his younger sister. Harry looked up at the sound of the George's voice and changed direction, leaving Ron, Ginny, Neville, Luna and Hermione to go in to lunch without him. "What have you got?" Harry asked as the George stumbled over.

"We don't know why we felt it was so urgent," the young wizard said in a rushed whisper, "but Fred and I have been working on this all morning while Lee manned the store. Here. These are the first samples."

Harry nodded his understanding of the twin's sense of urgency. He had felt it too. "Thanks, George," he said, accepting the proffered bag. I'll go up and test them. You get something to eat and I'll be right back."

George nodded and entered the Great Hall. Harry, however, turned on his heel and ran back up the main stair, through the maze of hallways, corridors and stairways to the Room of Requirement. As he paced back and forth in front of the entry all he was thinking about was that he needed someplace to test a modified Dementor Delight. When, on the third pass, the door appeared he popped one of the sweets into his mouth, drew his wand and opened the door. As he stepped inside and closed the door he felt an odd mixture of emotions coursing through his system. The room was long and narrow, extending for a distance to his left and for a greater distance to his right. It was dimly lit with a number of torches placed at intervals along the walls. Turning to his left he didn't see anything but the cold, stone surfaces of walls, ceiling and floor with a few torches lighting the way. Turning to his right, however, he saw it and felt the sudden, bone-chilling cold of a dementor's approach. Raising his wand and pointing it at what would have been the dementor's chest he yelled, "EXPECTO PATRONUM!" This time, instead of a silvery white stage erupting from his wand, a brightly glowing golden stag exploded from the tip of his wand and immediately attacked the dementor. As its horns made contact the unnatural abomination exploded, releasing several vaguely transparent wisps of spiritual energy into the air. As these ethereal beings rose into the air Harry was overwhelmed by a sense of gratitude at being released from a tortuous prison composed of nothing but darkness and despair.

Staggering slightly with the realization that he had just faced a real dementor and not a boggart or anything more benign he opened the door and stumbled back out into the corridor. As soon as he regained his bearings he tucked his wand back into his pocket and raced down to the Great Hall.

Several people looked up as he ran into the dining room but he paid no attention to their curious glances. Spotting George, sitting with Ron and the others, he ran up to the red haired master of mayhem and leaned heavily on the table between George and Ginny. Everyone looked up at him in

surprise but his attention was focused on George. "They work," he said, gasping for breath. "How soon can you put them into full production?"

George looked up, dropped his fork and stood up. "Consider it done," he said stepping over the bench.

"Make it a top priority," Harry said as George turned to leave.

"Will do," George said forcefully before racing out of the hall.

"What was that all about?" Neville asked as Harry slumped down onto George's vacated seat.

Harry looked across the table at Neville with a weary look in his eyes. "I just destroyed a dementor."

Hermione gasped. "But . . ."

Harry raised his hand to silence her protests. "When the Room of Requirement was built it was charmed not create any dark creatures, excluding boggarts, unless the school was under threat of attack. It was a security measure the founders felt was necessary given the volatility of their age. I was just up there testing one of the new Dementor Delights and I destroyed a dementor."

The others' faces visibly paled. "You should tell Albus," Hermione insisted. "I will," Harry said as he stood up and started quickly walking towards the Head Table. When he reached it he walked over to stand in front of the headmaster and, using a little wandless and wordless magic, cast a privacy charm around them. The headmaster glanced around as the room grew suddenly silent around him. Apparently noticing that everything but the lack of sound was as it should be he looked at Harry and said, "Could I help you, Harry?"

"The school is under threat, sir. I don't think Tom even knows what he is going to do yet but the school is most definitely under threat of attack."

"And how do you know this?" Dumbledore asked, his eyes glinting with the battle hardened gleam of a man who has already seen more death and destruction than most but who is not so old as to fear a confrontation with any foe. Harry explained about the security measures that had been built into the Room of Requirement and then told him about going up there to test one of Fred and George's new Dementor Delights and about facing and destroying a real dementor. Dumbledore steepeled his fingers and gazed thoughtfully over Harry's shoulder towards the back of the room. "And you have no idea as to either when this threat is coming or from which direction?"

"No, sir," Harry said shaking his head. "All I know is that, according to what I've learned about the Room of Requirement, the attack should be taking place sometime within the next seven days."

Dumbledore studied Harry's face for several seconds before saying anything. "What do you suggest?" he asked.

Harry thought for a moment before turning around to look at all of the people happily enjoying the Christmas Holiday. Then, turning back, he said, "The one thing we don't want to do is cause a panic." Albus nodded his agreement. "I do, however, think that we should prepare for war." Again Albus nodded in agreement. "I think we should, at least temporarily, move Fred and George's lab into the castle since they are in charge of the Dementor Delights and Potter Charms. We should get as many flyers as we can and pair them up, where necessary, with those proficient in the Patronus

Charm. I also think we should reinforce our border watches and get ready to initiate a widespread communications charm."

Albus looked at Harry and nodded once again. "All wise decisions, Harry. But aren't you forgetting something?" Harry looked up curiously. "The wood elves," Albus said. This is what the pact was made for."

Harry's mouth fell slightly open. "I forgot about them," he mumbled, chastising himself for his oversight.

"And the centaurs," Albus added. "This war is still young and they are a proud people. You cannot ask them to do much; but they will defend the forest." Harry nodded.

"Now I suggest you contact the Weasley twins - you can use my fireplace for that - and then go into the forest to explain the situation to Bane, Ronan and Emric." Standing up from his half eaten lunch the headmaster stepped away from the table. "You will need to take Ron and Neville with you into the forest but leave the others here. I will take care of the rest."

Harry nodded and turned to leave. "Oh, and, Harry," Dumbledore called after him. Harry turned back. "The charm."

Harry smirked and with a flip of the little finger on his right hand lifted the Privacy Charm. Albus smiled as the Great Hall came to life around them and his blue eyes twinkled merrily over his half-moon spectacles.

Harry walked quickly back to his friends who were watching his approach. When he reached them he quickly cast another privacy charm and leaned into them. "The first thing," he said, "is not to panic. We don't need a riot on our hands. Ron, Neville, you are with me. Ginny, Hermione, Luna, stay here. Albus will need you to help organizing the defenses. Standing up he lifted the privacy charm and quickly strode from the hall.

At the base of the Main Stair Harry broke into a run again and darted up the stairs and through the corridors to the headmasters office. The gargoyle was already opening as he raced towards it, subconsciously hearing Ron's and Neville's foot falls as they ran to catch up. Sprinting up the spiraling stair Harry burst into Albus' office and ran over to the fireplace. Grabbing a handful of floo powder from the jar on the mantel he knelt down in front of the grate, threw the powder in and called, "Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes," as he stuck his head into the green flames. The familiar twisting dizziness that accompanied this kind of communication swept through his head and he was secretly glad he hadn't eaten any lunch that day.

When the spinning stopped he shook his head to clear his mind and opened his eyes. Looking out through the fireplace in the back of Fred and George's shop Harry saw Fred's back as he bent over his cauldron. "Fred?" he called softly.

After stirring his cauldron counterclockwise three more times and removing the bronze rod Fred turned around,. "Hey, Harry. What can I do for you; and do they work?" Harry looked up at his business partner. "Can Lee run the shop for a few days?" he asked.

"Sure. Why?"

Harry explained about the security measures that had been charmed into the Room of Requirement and about his encounter with the dementor. "So in other words," he concluded, "the castle is under threat of attack. We don't how long we have but we do know that it is probably less than a week. Since you two are the makers of both Dementor Delights and Potter Charms we would like you to set up a lab here so that we can go into mass production no later than tomorrow."

"Anything else?" Fred asked.

Harry thought for a moment. "Yeah. Bring along a few cases of your modified fireworks and portable swamps. We might need those as well."

"We'll be there in a couple of hours."

Harry nodded. "Good. Tell Dumbledore what you need when you get here and he will get you set up."

Pulling his head out of the fireplace Harry fell back into the Headmaster's Office and rolled away from the hearth, narrowly missing a small table loaded with trinkets he could have sworn he had destroyed the morning after the ministry battle at the end of his fifth year. Ron and Neville, who had been standing on either side of the arched entry into the main office, stepped over and helped Harry to his feet. "I hate that," Harry mumbled, referring to the floo network and talking through fireplaces.

"I hear you, mate," Ron said. "Sometimes it's the fastest way to go, though."

Fawkes suddenly trilled gently from his perch then, rising up, glided across the room and gently landed on Harry's shoulder. "Lo, Fawkes," Harry said as he reached up to caress the magnificent bird's plumage.

"So where to now?" Neville asked with a steely resolve that had not been there before.

Harry and Ron both looked at Neville who grinned sheepishly back. "Our next stop is the forest," Harry said as Fawkes glided back to his perch. "We have got to talk to the centaurs and call the wood elves."

Several people glanced at them as they made their way down the marble steps, members of every house giving them a thumbs-up sign to signify that they knew at least a part of the plan and would be participating in the coming battle. The three returned a few of these silent greetings but walked quickly and resolutely through the Entrance Hall and out the Main Doors. The power and energy radiating from the three determined young men caused many heads to turn as they passed but no one stopped them to ask what they were doing or where they were going as they crossed the castle grounds.

They entered the Forbidden Forest and walked for several minutes until they came to a small clearing where they stopped and waited. A few minutes later Bane stepped into the clearing and approached the trio. "Why have you come into our forest, Harry Potter?" he asked.

Harry turned towards the battle-hardened centaur and looked him square in the eye. "I have come to warn you, Bane, and to ask your assistance. We do not yet know what form the attack will take but we do know that an attack on the castle is coming sometime within the next seven days. I

cannot ask you to fight on our side but I will ask you to defend your forest and not harm any innocents who may wander in during the battle.

Ronan entered the clearing and stepped up to Bane. They conferred in a whispered conversation for several minutes while Harry, Ron and Neville awaited their response. Finally, after several more centaurs had filtered into the clearing, Bane looked up. "We will do as you request, Harry Potter. How will we know when the attack has begun?"

Harry glanced at both Ron and Neville to see if they had any ideas but upon seeing the blank expressions on their faces decided to go with what he knew, recalling the streams of sparks that had signaled the all clear on the night of his escape from Privet Drive at the beginning of his fifth year. "We will send up a shower of sparks from the top of the Astronomy Tower. Green will be the signal to get ready and red will be used to let you know that the attack has begun."

Bane nodded. "Very good, Harry Potter. We will be awaiting your signals. Is there any other reason you have entered our forest today?"

"Yes," Harry said bluntly. "We have come to summon the wood elves. My hope is that they will help us by fighting by our sides."

Bane nodded and signaled for his people to leave the three young wizards alone in the clearing. "Good luck, Harry Potter."

Once the clearing was empty, save the three wizards, they stood back to back to back and mentally called out to their elfish counterparts. Moments later Emric, Woodring and Onric appeared before them. Woodring was holding a chicken leg in one hand. "You guys have no sense of timing, do you?" he grumbled.

Ron, Neville, Onric and Emric all laughed. "Sorry," Harry smirked, "but this is kind of important."

Harry explained the situation to the elves and, with Ron and Neville's help, described their planned defense of Hogwarts and Hogsmeade. They drew maps in the snow with their wands and revised their plans to include the wood elves whenever and wherever possible. "Since you know your strengths far better than we ever will," Ron said at one point, "it is probably best that we draw up a combined plan so that we don't get in each others' way."

They spent the next few hours working and reworking their plans, knowing that they did not know what they were going to be up against. They concluded their talks with an agreed upon plan as the sun reached the horizon and darkness began to fall. With wands lit Harry, Ron and Neville made their way out of the forest shortly after full sunset and walked tiredly back up to the castle.

"Where have you been?" Mrs. Weasley scolded as they entered the Great Hall. "I've been worried sick about you."

"Sorry, Mum," Ron said halfheartedly. "We've been talking to the centaurs and wood elves."

Fred and George looked up in shock and Mrs. Weasley's mouth fell open. "Centaurs and wood elves?" she whispered sternly. "You could have been killed. Those are dangerous creatures."

After collapsing on the bench next to Hermione Ron looked up at his mother and sighed. "Not really, Mum. They are just like us. The only real difference lies in the fact that their bodies look different."

Fred and George sat down on either side of Harry, squeezing Ginny to one side, and, in hushed whispers, said, "We're all set up in the dungeons."

"Snape has given us full run of the potions classroom . . ."

"And Flitwick is helping us with the charms."

Harry smirked tiredly. "Good." Then, rubbing tired eyes, stared at the empty plate in front of him. "How many teams do you have working for you?"

"Twenty," George said proudly. "They are working in shifts so that by tomorrow we should have enough to last a few days."

"Both charms?" Harry asked tiredly.

Fred and George looked at each other, clearly concerned for their friend's well being. "Er, . . . yeah," George said. "Why do you ask?"

Feeling Ginny's hands on his shoulders Harry leaned back and let her hug him from behind. Relaxing into her embrace he sighed and said, "I don't know. I just have a feeling we are going to need every advantage we can get. Now if you don't mind," he said letting his head fall forward again, "I think my girlfriend would like to sit down and eat some dinner.

Fred and George both looked up and saw their little sister - the only woman they feared more than their mother - standing silently behind Harry giving him a massage and smiling sweetly at her older siblings but with a warning look in her eyes that they both recognized as a threat to get out of her way. They both scrambled to their feet and offered her their seats. She graciously took the seat to Harry's right and leaned into him saying, "Time to wake up, sleepy head."

Harry smiled weakly at her. "Yeah, I know."

After ordering a full three-course dinner from Winky with extra restorative draught Harry settled into the flow of the conversations going on around him and slowly worked his way though his meal. He noticed that Mrs. Weasley was somewhat confused by Fred and George's sudden reappearance that afternoon and was at a total loss when it came to some of the comments that slipped out about 'defenses' and 'preparations.' He suspected that she was starting to put two and two together but hoped she would not raise the alarm.

Chapter 35. First Hogwarts, Second Hogsmeade

Somehow word of the impending attack filtered down through the ranks of aurors, hit-wizards, security-wizards, members of the Order of the Phoenix, members of the faculty and staff and the student body without causing a panic and without too many rumors being spread about the size and composition of the forces that would be arrayed against them. Harry suspected that this might have something to do with the fact that Tom hadn't shown the true size of his forces yet; but whatever the reason he was happy for it. He spent most of his time leading up to the Yule Ball physically in the Headmaster's Library but mentally extending himself into the ethos, making sure he had a firm grasp on his understanding of what they would be up against. He kept most of what he learned to himself but told Ron, Neville, Albus and Emric about his findings so they could adjust the battle plans accordingly.

When Harry walked into the Gryffindor Common Room at 4:00 PM on Christmas Eve Ron looked up from the game of wizards chess he was playing against Neville, who was actually very good and had come close to winning on several occasions, and motioned him over. "So what do we know?" he asked when Harry joined then and a privacy charm had been cast.

"We know what and how many," Harry sighed, slumping down into an overstuffed chair so he could watch the conclusion of the game. "But we still don't know when or from which directions."

Neville looked up from the board after putting Ron's king in check. "You look beat, Harry," he said. "You really should try and get some rest before the ball or you won't last the night."

Tearing his eyes away from the board Harry looked tiredly up at his friend and smiled. "Yeah, I think I will." After lifting the privacy charm he stood up and with one last glance at the board before heading up to their room said, "Nice move, Neville." Neville smiled at the compliment but Ron scowled at his competition.

Two hours later Harry was awakened by Seamus and Dean's voices as they congratulated Neville on a job well done. Putting his glasses back on he rolled out of bed and sat up yawning, looking curiously over at his roommates through sleep filled eyes. "What happened?" he asked.

"Neville finally beat Ron!" Seamus said happily. Harry looked over at Ron who was sitting dejectedly on the edge of his bed. "It wouldn't have been so bad," he grumbled, "if half the house hadn't been watching."

"Oh, cheer up, Ron," Harry said. "How many games have you lost this year?"

Ron glanced up. "One," he said.

"And how close was it?"

"It was almost too close to call. But he had a one move advantage on me and I couldn't stop him."

"Well," Harry said as he stood up and headed for the bathroom, "it sounds to me like you taught him well."

"Yeah," Ron groaned. "Too well."

Harry laughed at his friend's discomfiture and walked into the bathroom, closing the door behind him as he went.

By 6:45, as the dinner portion of the ball began at 7:00, Harry and Ron were waiting in the common room for Ginny and Hermione. Most of the others had already gone down and Neville had left to meet Luna outside the Ravenclaw common room. Harry was watching Ron who was nervously fidgeting and playing with the corsage he had conjured for his girlfriend. "What's wrong?" Harry asked.

"I don't know," Ron said, nervously glancing up the girl's stair. "It's kind of strange, that's all."

"What is?"

"Well," Ron said, glancing over at his friend, "When Hermione and I stopped fighting last year we found out that we really do like each other. It didn't come all at once but the more we talked and got to know each other the more we learned to care about each other. I'm not saying we don't still like to argue once in a while but at least now our arguments are about things that actually mean something."

"Yeah, I've noticed that."

"And then last summer, when you were attacked and fighting for your life, we realized how much we really do mean to each other." Ron's eyes were starting to brim with unshed tears as he turned to face his friend. "And that was when the whole family realized how much you mean to Ginny. She was devastated and wouldn't come out of her room. She cried more than I thought possible and she wouldn't talk to anyone but Mum, Hermione, Winky and Dobby. She loves you, Harry, and to be honest with you I couldn't be happier for her."

Harry smiled warmly up at his much taller friend and put his hand on Ron's shoulder. "Thanks, Ron," he said softly. "I'm sorry I put you guys through that but in a way I'm glad it happened."

Ron looked into Harry's eyes and, with a watery smile, said, "Thanks, mate," and, with a sniff, wiped his tears away.

Hermione and Ginny, who had snuck down the stairs during Ron's confession, stepped in to form a small, human box. "He's right, you know," Hermione said softly. "If it hadn't been for you we never would have stopped fighting and we probably never would have realized how much we really do love each other."

"And if it hadn't been for the attack I never would have realized how much I really do love you, Harry," Ginny said, squeezing his arm.

Harry looked down at the radiant red haired angel standing next to him and smiled. "I'm glad something good came of it." Then, stepping back to get a better look at his date, he was astonished at how beautiful she really was. She was wearing a white, loose-fitting satin dress that seemed to hang teasingly from her shoulders. The neckline was modestly cut but not so much so that he had to struggle to use his imagination. Its sleeves gracefully sheltered her arms, ending with a flare just above her wrists. Her hair cascaded gracefully down her back with a few errant strands curling

lovingly around her neck. She needed no makeup but the little she did use highlighted her face perfectly. And her eyes - those deep, dark, deliciously chocolate colored eyes - seemed to invite him to fall even more deeply in love than he already was.

The sound of Ron clearing his throat brought him out of his trance and he blushed furiously when he realized that he had been unabashedly staring at Ginny. "What say we get going?" Ron said.

"Oh . . . uh . . . yeah," Harry stammered, tearing his eyes away from Ginny's smiling face and offering her his arm.

Ron, Hermione and Ginny all laughed at Harry's embarrassment as they left the common room and headed for the Great Hall. "Turnabout's fare play, mate," Ron chuckled as the portrait of the Fat Lady swung close behind them.

The Christmas decorations in the Great Hall were spectacular to say the least. A large, towering Christmas tree stood in each corner with an even more magnificent one standing in the center of the room. Each of the trees were tastefully laden with decorations and wonderfully strewn with live fairy lights. Each of the large, circular tables had seating for six couples and was tastefully decorated with ice sculptures created by the first and second year Charms students. As Harry and Ginny were shown to their table Harry looked around at his handiwork and realized that the Great Hall was now large enough to hold the thousands of people who would be attending the ball and still leave plenty of room for dancing. He had been so busy that he had almost forgotten that he had enlarged it shortly after breakfast that morning. When they reached their table Neville and Luna were already there as were Bill and Fleur and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. And, even though they were not officially a couple by any means, Mr. Lovegood and Mrs. Longbottom were seated at their table. Ron held Hermione's chair for her as Harry did for Ginny.

"Oh!" Mrs. Weasley gasped when she saw Ginny approaching their table. "Ginny, you are so beautiful!"

Ginny bowed her head demurely and blushed a light shade of pink. "Thank you, Mum," she mumbled.

At the stroke of seven Professor Dumbledore stepped up onto a slightly raised platform at the head of the Great Hall and addressed his audience. "Ladies and gentlemen, students and honored guests," he began. "I am both honored and deeply humbled that you have chosen to attend this year's Yule Ball. While the circumstances behind the organization of this event are less than ideal my hope is that you will all have an enjoyable evening." With that he bowed humbly to the diners and left the stage.

After a sumptuous dinner of hams, yams, geese and pudding the band - a full wizarding orchestra with a wide range of musical accomplishments - started playing and Harry and Ginny stepped out onto the dance floor. As the evening wore on many people complimented them on how well they danced and how nicely they seemed to fit together. At ten minutes to midnight, however, in the midst of a slow, romantic dance, Harry stopped and scowled, "That . . ." he started, with a mixture of anger and disgust, then stopped himself before he could utter a particularly descriptive curse.

Ginny looked up at him, worry in her eyes, and said, "What's wrong, Harry?"

Harry looked into her eyes before grabbing her hand and leading her quickly off the dance floor.

Ginny stumbled the first few steps but quickly regained her footing as they walked briskly through the startled couples many of whom turned and curiously watched as the golden couple passed by. Harry didn't stop, however, until they were standing in front of Professor Dumbledore who was visiting with a young muggle-born boy's parents near one of the enormous Christmas trees. At a natural pause in the conversation Dumbledore turned towards Harry and smiled. But upon seeing the look of grim determination on the young man's face grew suddenly serious and cast a privacy charm that included himself, Harry and Ginny. "What is it, Harry?" he asked, some of the twinkle suddenly disappearing from his eyes.

"Dementors, trolls, banshees and Death Eaters at dawn. He is going to try and close us in."

Ginny's knees buckled as she started to faint. Harry caught her in his arms and helped her to a chair. "Will you be alright?" he asked, kneeling down in front of her.

Ginny smiled weakly and nodded but all of the color had drained from her face and her eyes were wide with fear. "How do we fight banshees?"

Harry smiled reassuringly up at her and squeezed her hands. "Silencing charms," he said. "Then I don't know. I'm hoping this modified Patronus Charm will do the trick. Are you sure you're going to be alright?"

Ginny nodded. "Yes," she said weakly. "You go tell the others."

Harry raised her hands to his lips and kisses the backs of both of them. Then smiling confidently up at her he whispered, "I love you," before standing up and walking back out onto the dance floor, discretely drawing his wand.

The first people he sought out were Ron and Hermione who were dancing comfortably together near the center of the auditorium. Walking quickly over to them he tapped Ron on the shoulder who looked up and was about to let Harry cut in when he recognized the sudden twist of a wrist, signifying the activation of a privacy charm, and stepped back to look at his friend, an expression of concern rapidly replacing the look of contentment he had been wearing moments earlier. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"Tom is sending the dementors, trolls and banshees as well as a sizable contingent of Death Eaters our way at dawn. We have less than six hours but I want to be in the air in five. Spread the word but do it quietly"

Hermione squeaked. "Banshees?" she asked.

Harry nodded then answered the unspoken question. "Silencing charms," lifted the charm and went in search of Neville and Luna.

After telling Neville and Luna, Remus, Tonks, Kingsley, Alastor, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, Bill, Fleur and a few others Harry headed over to the refreshment tables where Fred and George were busily adding something to the punch. Shaking his head he snuck up behind them and gruffly said, "I hope you boys aren't planning on spiking the punch," in an almost perfect imitation of Moody.

The twins both jumped, dropping the bottle of fire whiskey they had been adding to the mix into the bowl. When they spun around the expressions of fear on their faces were so priceless that

Harry could not help but laugh. "Who, us?" they asked innocently.

"Yes you," Harry said, smiling at the twin's feigned innocence. "We need everyone sober tonight," he said seriously.

George pulled out his wand and vanished the contents of the punch bowl as Fred, also recognizing the seriousness of the situation, asked, "Why, Harry? What's up?"

Harry looked around and motioned several members of the Slytherin quidditch team who had volunteered as flyers and a few others who had volunteered in other capacities over so that he could talk to all of them together. As he was about to cast the privacy charm Ginny walked up behind him and touched his hand. Raising her wand she cast the spell and, taking his hand, smiled up at him. Harry smiled down at her and squeezed her hand. "Voldemort is going to be sending the dementors, trolls and banshees, as well as a large contingent of Death Eaters, against us at dawn." Several members of this small audience either gasped or shuddered at Harry's casual use of Tom's invented name and most glanced nervously around with the mention of banshees. "Now before you ask," he added, "our first line of defense against the banshees is the silencing charm. After that I have no idea how we are going to beat them. I'm hoping the modified Patronus Charm will work against them as well but the first task, where they are concerned, is the widespread use of silencing charms. So unless you flyers have a wing man you know you can trust I am going to have to ask you to carry a passenger to help you with the charms." Looking directly at Orville Burns he said, "I know some of you seem to think that witches have no place on a broom. But this is no time to play politics. We need the best spell casters we can get teamed with our best flyers."

Pansy Parkinson stepped forward with a sandy haired young man Harry recognized as Blaise Zabini and said, "We're in crowd control, Harry. What do you want us to do?" Harry looked at Blaise. "You're a musician aren't you?"

Blaise nodded.

"Then go get your guitar and help the teachers take care the younger students." Turning to Pansy he said, "Pansy, uh, you could probably help Blaise but I want you to float. For right now I want you to help Mrs. Weasley with the muggles. When you have finished there I want you to report to Madam Pomfrey.

Pansy nodded. "How much time do we have?"

"Voldemort has scheduled his attack for dawn but I want to be in the air by five o'clock. I want all flyers to meet back here at four thirty so we can team up and get our assignments." Turning back to the twins he said, "Are the charms ready?" They nodded. "Alright. Professors McGonagall and Flitwick have been busy conjuring hip and chest belts. Are the fireworks ready?" Again they nodded. "Alright then. I suggest you get your teams together and start loading them. If you feel up to it I am going to want you two in the air."

Twin grins appeared on their faces. "Yes!" they hissed happily.

After Ginny lifted the privacy charm the group broke up and went their separate ways to get ready for what lay ahead. "Where's Charlie?" Harry asked.

Ginny stepped in front of him and took hold of his other hand so that both of his were in hers.

"Harry," she said almost shyly.

"Yes?" Harry asked looking down at her angelic face.

Pushing down on his hands and rising up onto her toes she quickly but gently kissed him on the lips. "I love you," she said then lowered herself back down to the floor.

At first Harry was stunned. It wasn't so much the kiss - although that had certainly been enough - as it was the verbal declaration of her love for him. He stood there for several seconds in stunned silence then looked into her eyes and realized that his mother had been right about his soulmate. Wrapping his arms around her waist and pulling her into his first self-initiated hug. "I love you too, Ginny," he whispered into here ear. "I love you too."

At 4:30 Christmas morning 500 teams of flyers were assembled in the Great Hall. A few had wingmen but most had copilots. All of the school's quidditch teams were fully represented and some of the nation's top flyers were in attendance as well. Professor Dumbledore was standing on a raised platform at the front of the room with Harry, Fred and George sitting behind him. As soon as everyone had settled down Albus cast a Sonorous Charm on himself and cleared his throat. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said quieting the crowd, "I thank you all for coming. As you know our spies have informed us that we are under an imminent threat of attack. We cannot reveal our sources but let me assure you that they are accurate.

"We know that we will be facing at least dementors, trolls, banshees and Death Eaters. Fred and George Weasley, in cooperation with two muggle scientists and two Unspeakables from the Department of Mysteries, have developed an enhanced Dementor Delight to assist you in casting a Patronus Charm capable of destroying the dementors." A murmur of surprise and appreciation rippled through the auditorium. "I have been told that the chief difference you will notice upon casting this charm will be the color of your patronus. Rather than being silver it will be gold. Your first line of defense against the banshees will be a silencing charm. After that we are not sure. Since they are related to the dementors, however, we suspect that the modified Patronus Charm might work on them as well. Unfortunately, trolls are immune to most forms of magic so you will have to resort to physical violence where they are concerned. I don't know what to tell you about the Death Eaters. All I ask is that unless you are specifically licensed to do so, avoid casting any of the Unforgivales. Stun and bind and let the authorities deal with the captives afterwards.

"Each of your chest belts has been outfitted with a portkey. If you should become injured simply tap the Hogwarts crest twice in rapid succession and you will be brought back here. And now, if I am not mistaken, Harry Potter would like to say a few words."

Albus stepped back and Harry stood up and stepped forward. "First off," Harry said, nodding in acknowledgement of the smattering of applause that accompanied his introduction, "let me thank you all for coming. As you know, this is an all-volunteer mission and I cannot tell you how much it means to me that you are all here. I should tell you that we are not alone. The wood elves are our allies and will be patrolling the forests; and their leader has assured me that if we can take care of the dementors and banshees they will take care of the trolls and help us with the Death Eaters. And I must ask that if you come upon any goblins please refrain from harming them if at all possible. I have been assured that the vast majority of their nation has chosen to remain neutral until they see what we are able to do with the dementors and we don't need anything jeopardizing their possible cooperation. Stun and bind and we'll sort it out afterwards.

"With that I am going to turn you over to Fred and George Weasley who would like to say a few words about those egg shaped devices hanging from your chest belts."

Harry stepped back and the twins stepped forward. "The egg shaped devices, as Harry calls them," Fred began, "are, in reality, our latest line of fireworks. For those of you who were here last year, you know how effective they can be when trying to create a diversion. Their operation is similar to that of a muggle hand grenade. Simply pull the pin and throw. They have a five second delay charmed into them so you will have time to get out of the way before they go off. We recommend using them on the trolls and Death Eaters. The green ones are for diversion only. The red ones, however, are for attack and have been charmed for use against trolls and giants."

As Fred finished his little speech George stepped up. "As soon as we are able, Fred and I will be laying a line of portable swamps to slow their advance. We do not suggest getting trapped in one of these inventions because you will not be able to get out unless or until they are deactivated. We have added a special bog feature to this line of swamps that will suck you in and hold you in place until you are rescued."

Ten minutes later, after Dumbledore cast a communications charm over all of the flyers as well as a few monitors who would be remaining at Hogwarts during the battle, everyone was airborne and Professor McGonagall was shooting off warming sparks from the top of the Astronomy tower. Twenty minutes after that Harry's group, which consisted of himself, Ginny, Ron and Neville, crested the rise just beyond the auror's perimeter. It was still quite dark but in the distance they could just barely begin to make out the ranks of dementors that stretched to the horizons. "Bloody hell," Ron gasped. "There must be thousands of them." Harry scanned the scene before him and looked over at Ginny, smiling grimly. "Are we all seeing the same thing?" he asked through the communications charm.

"Dementors and banshees?" Seamus asked.

"As far as the eye can see," Charlie almost whispered in awe.

"Yeah," Orville Burns said. "We're all seeing the same thing, Harry."

"You doing okay, Hermione?" Ron asked.

"She's doing fine," Bill said.

"She's something of a white knuckled flyer," Charlie added, "but I won't let her fall."

"Take care of that broom, Fleur," Harry said. "It's kind of special if you know what I mean."

"Is this the one you used to get the egg?" Fleur asked.

"Yeah," Harry whispered as memories of his godfather threatened to derail his resolve.

"I will take care of it for you," Fleur said in a tone that let Harry know that she understood its significance.

Ginny glided over to Harry and reached out, resting her free hand on one of Harry's legs. Harry looked over at her and smiled and mouthed a heartfelt 'thank you' before sitting back on his broom and unzipping one of the pouches on his hip belt. Popping one of the new Dementor Delights into

his mouth and closing the pouch he said, "Ladies and gentlemen, let's go hunting."

The next comment he, as well as everyone else involved in the communications charm, heard was a whispered, "Remember Cedric."

"Yes," Harry and Fleur said in unison, "remember Cedric."

"Thank you, Cho," Harry said softly. Then added, "Everyone, this battle is being dedicated to Cedric Diggory." War hoops and battle cries were heard from every group as the flyers bit into their Dementor Delights and bent over their brooms as the counter offensive was launched.

Several hours later most of the dementors and banshees had been destroyed and those that had escaped the initial onslaught were in the process of being hunted down. The modified patroni had no trouble destroying the legions of dementors that had been set against them and the banshees had fallen just as easily. The wood elves were dealing a major blow to the trolls and while the air filled with a particularly lethal blend of fireworks Fred, George, Bill, Charlie and Hermione were laying a wide swathe of portable swamps wherever the Death Eaters threatened. There had been several casualties on both sides and more fatalities than Harry even wanted to think about. True, most of them had been on Tom's side but Harry couldn't help but wonder what those lost lives would have been like without Slytherin's heir.

After the first few hours of non-stop flying and fighting the Hogwarts Defenders, as they had begun calling themselves, had started taking fifteen-minute breaks in their flight teams. Now it was their turn. Harry, Ron, Neville and Ginny were hovering high above the battlefield, so high up that they were little more than insignificant specks in the shy and far enough away from the action that most spells would run out of energy before reaching their position. Ginny Ron and Neville were chatting lightheartedly and laughing about the looks on the faces of some of the trolls when one of Fred and George's spinning galaxy clusters had exploded less than a meter in front of its face effectively blinding and disarming it, giving the wood elves time to fill its thick hide with poisoned darts. Harry was only half listening to the conversation while idly watching the progress of the battle.

Out of the corner of his eye he caught a glimpse of a bolt of energy heading their way but didn't think much would come of it as it would probably die out before it reached them anyway. He looked out over the battlefield for a few seconds, scanning the horizon to see if he could see what lay ahead then surreptitiously glanced back to where that bolt of energy had come from. What he saw horrified him. The bolt that was still coming at them at top speed was the emerald green of the killing curse and it was headed straight for Ginny. "Ginny, look out!" he yelled.

A split second later the curse hit the handle of Ginny's broom. The Electra 5000 exploded, throwing Ginny up and away from her boyfriend, friend and brother. The three boys were stunned. They sat numbly watching as Ginny sailed through the air and began to fall. It barely registered that she was screaming because they initially thought the curse had hit her as well. When her screams broke through to Harry's consciousness, however, he put his broom into a steep dive and flew like he had never flown before.

The air was whipping his robes and he could hear the seams tearing as his robes became more tattered and torn that anything Remus had ever worn. His glasses were being pressed into his face so hard that they cut into the bridge of his nose and he had to blink droplets of blood away so that he could see where he was going. With fifteen meters to spare he caught up with her, scooped her onto his broom and began to pull out of the dive. The additional weight, however, was too much

and the broom was nose heavy. He was able to pull most of the way out of the dive but the tip of the handle caught on a small boulder. The broom snapped and they both went spinning and tumbling over the course terrain.

When they finally stopped rolling, some 50 meters from the point of impact, Ginny lay unconscious at the base of a grassy knoll and Harry lay, severely injured, a few meters away. He had no idea where his glasses were - they had come off during their tumble - and so his entire world was a blur. Sensing rather than seeing his beloved angel Harry ignored his own considerable injuries and crawled to her side. Leaning over her limp body he felt for a pulse and found one then listened for her breath and found that she was still breathing as well. At least she's alive he thought.

Looking up he thought he saw a blurry white something kneeling over them. Then he heard his mother's gentle voice saying, "You must bond with her, Harry. Share all of your energy with her. It is the only way." Harry blinked, trying to focus on the image but it was gone.

Looking down again he scooped Ginny into his arms and began to cry. At that moment Ron and Neville landed on either side of him. "Is she . . ." Ron asked, worried more for his sister's life than his friend's obvious injuries.

Harry shook his head. "She's alive," he said.

"THEN GET HER OUT OF HERE!" Ron screamed.

Harry looked up into his friend's eyes and briefly noticed a faint white halo beginning to glow around Ginny and himself before passing out. The next sounds he heard were Mrs. Weasley's screams of horror in the Entrance Hall. "Where'd they come from?" she screamed. "Look at them! They're hurt! What's wrong with them? They're glowing!"

The next voice he heard was the gently reassuring voice of Albus Dumbledore. This time, however, it held a commanding sense of urgency. "Do not touch them!" he ordered. "We will take them to the hospital wing but they must remain together and we must not touch them until the process is complete."

Chapter 36. Soul Mates

When Harry opened his eyes he was on a grassy knoll looking up into a deep blue sky heavy with humidity. The air was warm and a gentle breeze whispered through the nearby trees. Sitting up he saw that the grass was green, the trees were filled with leaves and several birds were flitting through the air. The small lake in front of him looked very familiar. Looking down the hill to his left he saw the Weasley's ramshackle home and realized that he was now at the Burrow. Turning to his right he saw Ginny sitting on the bank at the upper end of the lake absentmindedly tossing pebbles into the water. Standing up he quietly walked around the lake until he was standing a few meters behind and to the left of the beautiful redhead. "Ginny?" he asked softly.

Ginny turned her head and looked up at him. There was a somber expression on her face and she looked as if she was about to cry. "Are we dead?" she asked without bothering to acknowledge his greeting.

Walking over and sitting down beside her Harry looked into here eyes and said, "With God as my witness, Ginny, we are not dead. We are, however, in the one place in this world where you feel safest."

"What happened?"

"What do you mean?" Harry asked. Ginny looked at him like he was crazy for a moment so he defended himself the only way he could. "I have to know what part of that question you are asking before I can answer it."

The expression on Ginny's face softened and she smiled briefly as she nodded her head in understanding. "How did we get here?"

Harry picked up a broken twig and examined it for several seconds. "What's the last thing you remember?" he asked.

Ginny thought for a moment then said, "The last thing I remember is my broom exploding and falling through the air. Then I woke up here."

Harry grimaced slightly then tossed the twig into the lake where it bobbed once or twice and then started gradually floating back towards the shore. Sighing heavily he studied his hands for several seconds then looked out across the lake. "To make a long story short, sometime during your fall your mind retreated to the one place where you feel safest, the Burrow. I caught you before you hit the ground but my broom was nose heavy and before I could pull all of the way out of the dive we crashed. Our bodies are pretty badly damaged but they are in the hospital wing back at Hogwarts."

"But how did you get here?"

Harry looked at her, trying to think how he was going to explain it to her. Then, deciding the direct approach was probably best, said, "before I passed out the first time my mother came to me and said that the only way I am going to be able to save your life and bring you back is by bonding with you, by sharing all of my energy with you and essentially merging our souls so that they will become one. Our bodies are too badly damaged for anything else to work."

Ginny rolled over onto her knees and turned to him, gently reached out she turned his face towards

her own. You really do love me don't you?"

Harry smiled and nodded. "Yes, I do," he said softly then looked into her soft, chocolate brown eyes. Taking hold of her hands he said, "I don't want to lose you, Ginny. I've already lost my parents and my godfather. I don't know if I could live with myself if I lost you."

A single tear escaped his swollen eyes and Ginny reached up and brushed it away with a gentle caress. "I don't want to lose you either, Harry. But can't we just stay here. I mean, we are safe after all."

Harry smirked and shook his head. "No," he said softly, "we can't. I almost wish we could but if we stay here we will be condemning ourselves to a perpetual existence in a state of limbo. We can stay here for a while but I have to go back because sooner or later I have to face Voldemort and I would like you to come back with me. It's entirely up to you. That choice is yours but I have to go back."

Ginny frowned slightly. "I'll go back with you, Harry." Then looking at him curiously she asked, "How do you know all this?"

Smirking, Harry smiled and chuckled lightly. "You learn a lot about the real facts of life when you die. I learned a lot back in August and it's helped me quite a bit."

Ginny laughed merrily and threw her arms around his neck causing him to fall back into the grass. She lay on top of him and kissed him gently but forcefully enough to let him know that he meant the world to her. After almost half an hour of continual snogging she sat up and, straddling his abdomen, sat resolutely on his stomach smiling down at him with a playfully suggestive look in her eyes. "Wow," she said.

Harry nodded his head as a wide grin spread across his face. "Yeah."

Ginny playfully slapped his shoulder. "So how do we go about merging our souls?"

Harry vigorously shook his head and smiled up at her. "You expect me to be able to think after that?"

Ginny laughed and stood up and offered Harry a hand up. "Of course, silly. You can't stay here and I go where you go. So if you have to go back and fight Tom I'm going with you."

With Ginny's help Harry pulled himself to his feet and brushed some of the dirt from his robes. As they began to walk hand-in-hand around the lake and down towards the Burrow Harry bent down, picked a wild lily and laced it into Ginny's hair. "Well, to begin with, it is essentially a marriage ceremony that takes place on the spiritual level. It will bind us together as soul mates for all eternity. I'm not saying that we will always have to be together or anything but no matter what happens to either of us we will always know that there will always be someone in this world who loves us unconditionally just as we are."

"Does everyone have a soul mate?"

"No," Harry said shaking his head sadly. "Everyone has the potential but not everyone has found their one true mate. It takes time and a certain spiritual maturity to be ready to find one's soul mate. That's why most younger souls - and I'm not talking about the physical age of the person but rather the experiential age of the soul - don't have them yet. They are just too rebellious to handle

the responsibilities of this kind of relationship."

For the next several hours Harry and Ginny walked around the Burrow discussing the particulars of the soul mate relationship and getting to know each other more intimately and more personally than most ordinary couples could achieve in a hundred lifetimes together. As the sun was beginning to set and the sky in Ginny's place of safety was beginning to burn with various shades of red, orange, yellow, purple and pink Ginny turned to Harry and asked, "Now that I understand it, how do we do it?"

Turning to face her Harry took both of her hands in his own. "It's not really all that complicated but it does have to be done from our spiritual centers and it has to be done willingly, honestly and with all of out love in attendance."

Ginny smiled and said, "Then let's do it."

"Are you sure?"

Ginny nodded, her warm smile lighting up her face more effectively than a noontime sun. "Yes," she said.

"Then let's get down on our knees," Harry said as he lowered himself to the ground still holding onto her hands. When they were seated comfortably, hand-in-hand, knee-to-knee, Harry said, "I'll start it. All you have to do is follow your heart and repeat its instruction."

Closing his eyes and bowing his head slightly Harry whispered a short incantation then said, "In the name of all that is holy and with all of Creation as my witness I pledge all of my love to you, Ginevra Weasley, and pray that you will accept me as your soul mate."

Following Harry's lead Ginny closed her eyes and bowed her head. After whispering her half of the incantation she said, "In the name of all that is holy and with all of Creation as my witness I pledge all of my love to you, Harry Potter. I accept you as my soul mate and pray that you will accept me as yours as well."

They both opened their eyes and slowly raised their heads. When their eyes met Harry smiled and said, "I do."

With the pronouncement of those two simple words the air around them began to shimmer and glow brightly white. They stood up and wrapped their arms around each other in a warm and loving embrace. Their combined aura began to glow even more brightly as Ginny's place of safety faded.

Chapter 37. Happy Christmas

The air was warm but still and somewhat stale and the smell of various potions told him that he was in the hospital wing. The heavy, regular breathing near at hand told him that at least two people were nearby. The muffled volume of other noises told him that he must be in the private room next to Madam Pomfrey's office. Then a weight shifted on his chest and he heard a muffled moan as Ginny tried to make herself more comfortable. With the sudden realization that he was sharing a hospital bed with Ginny Harry's eyes flew open. What the heck was going on? "Er, . . . Ginny?" he whispered.

"Mm hmm," she moaned dreamily.

"Um, . . . we're back. The charm was successful. We made it."

Ginny rose up and looked down into his face. He supposed she was smiling and that her hair was falling loosely down around her face in a tangled mess but all he could see was a blur of facial features and red hair. "Thank you," she murmured then whispered, "I love you, Harry."

Harry felt around with his free arm and was relieved to find that they were both clothed in flannel pyjamas. Sliding his arm around her waist he closed his eyes and nuzzled her neck. "I love you too, Ginny, but I think we should get up."

Ginny protested this sentiment by snuggling more deeply into the covers, pressing herself even more closely into Harry's chest. "But I don't want to," she said, pulling the blankets in from the sides of the bed.

"Well good morning," a voice said and Ginny jumped up to a sitting position on the edge of the bed, clutching the blankets to her chest.

"Told ya," Harry chuckled which earned him a stern look from his soul mate.

"Don't worry about it, Ginny," Remus chuckled, from somewhere near the door. "Albus forbade anyone from even touching you until you stopped glowing and even then he insisted you be kept together at least until you woke up."

Harry pushed himself up in the bed and looked around his fuzzy environment. "How long have we been out?" he asked

"Three days," Ron said tiredly from the other side of the bed.

"How'd it go?"

Someone chuckled from somewhere near the foot of the bed. "If there is one thing those Death Eaters have got to learn it is to never tempt the hand of fate by pissing off a Weasley."

"Bill?" Harry asked.

"Yeah, that would be me," the young curse breaker said as he stood up and stretched.

"What happened?"

This time Remus chuckled. "When the word went out that you and Ginny went down . . . well, let's just say I would hate to be in your shoes if you should ever hurt their little sister. They didn't just use those Weasley Whiz Bangs as diversionary devices they started using them as legitimate weapons of war. And some of the curses they threw . . ." Remus laughed nervously. "Well, let's just say that I'm glad I'm on their side."

"That bad, eh?"

"Worse," Ron said. "When the Weasley brothers unite you just don't want to get in our way. I was even surprised at the power of some of those curses."

Remus chuckled again. "They're still trying to figure out who some of those Death Eaters are. They're still alive but wow."

This time Ginny giggled. "Let that be a lesson to you, Harry. Never piss me off."

Harry held his hands up defensively and smiled. "I don't think you have to worry about that. We're in this for the long haul, now, and I value my life too much to even think about trying to get you mad."

With a satisfied nod Ginny said, "Good."

Everyone in the room laughed at this. The door flew open moments later to reveal the blurred figure of a very over worked matron. "Good," she breathed. "You're awake." Bustling over to their bed Madam Pomfrey raised her wand and cast a diagnostic spell first over Ginny and Then over Harry. After pronouncing them fit she told Harry to open his eyes and look straight ahead. "This won't hurt a bit," she said. "I just have to get the right prescription for your new glasses." Harry did as he was told and waited as she first cast an ophthalmologic spell on his eyes and then cast a prescription spell on what looked like a new pair of glasses, very similar to his old pair, which she then handed to him. She then cast an optometry spell on the glasses so that they would adjust themselves to his face.

As Harry's world came into focus he looked around the small room and noticed that Ron's right arm was cradled in a sling. "What happened to you?" he asked.

"Sprained my wrist . . ." he said.

"And broke his arm," Remus added.

"You're next, Mister Weasley," Madam Pomfrey said.

Ron stood up and grimaced at Harry who smiled sympathetically as his friend followed the matron out of the room.

"I'll go get you guys some decent clothes," Remus said as he too stood up. "And Albus will want to talk to the two of you after you've had something to eat." After Remus had left the room Harry pulled his legs up and sat on the edge of the bed next to Ginny. Reaching out for her hand he intertwined his fingers with her own then, after exchanging a brief smile with her, turned to Bill. "Bill, I want you to be honest with me. How bad is it?"

Bill looked up and smiled. Standing up and walking over to stand in front of Harry and Ginny he

pulled Remus' chair away from the wall and sat down. "Actually, Harry," he began softly, "it went better than anyone could have expected. Oh, sure, we had close to three hundred casualties and fifty deaths but that's nothing compared to what we did to them. They no longer have the dementors or banshees and most of the trolls were wiped out. Most of the Death Eaters seemed to be junior partners because they were easily captured; and the hit-wizards took care of most of their more advanced members. I think they lost close to five hundred."

"Hermione?" Harry asked nervously.

Bill chuckled softly then smiled. "She's fine. She's spending some time with her parents down in the compound right now but she's fine. I'll tell you what, though. That girl is one heck of a witch. When she heard that you had gone down she went into a spitting fit. She almost put the six of us to shame. I don't know where she found some of those hexes but she can sure wield a wand."

"How about the others?"

"We all pulled through just fine. In fact, aside from you two, I think Ron got the worst of it."

Harry smiled and bowed his head. "Thanks. Were any students killed?"

Bill chewed on his lower lip for a moment as if uncertain as to how he should answer that question. Then, apparently making up his mind, leaned forward resting his elbows on his knees and gazed down at the floor in front of him. "Five of our fatalities were students. One was the Huffelpuff Seeker, two were Slytherins, one was a Ravenclaw Chaser and one was a Gryffindor Reserve Beater. All of the houses lost someone so the whole castle is in mourning right now."

"How about the elves?"

"Neville says they lost about twenty-five with eighty-three injuries. And before you ask, Emric is fine. He's worried about you but he's fine. The last I checked he was in the Great Hall where his injured warriors are being treated."

At that moment the door opened again and Ron walked in, his arm free of the sling, carrying two potions bottles. "Doctor Stone said for you to drink these and to get out of here as soon as you are dressed and feel up to it. The hospital wing is kind of crowded right now and even with the additional healers they are pretty rushed. Fortunately Neville and Severus were able to stockpile enough potions to get us through this thing."

Harry and Ginny accepted the bottles and, after a brief grimacing glance at the contents, tilted them back and drank their foul tasting draughts. After a brief coughing spurt Ginny said, "What about the goblins? Were any of them fighting for Voldemort?"

Bill nodded. "Yes. There were about five hundred of them. We captured most of them and they are being held in a detention center near Surrey. They're tough little buggers but we didn't kill any of them because, as you said, we're going to need them on our side in the end."

"Was there any sign of Tom?" Harry asked, looking up from the floor and voicing the question that had been eating away at his mind for the past several minutes.

"No," Ron said. "He wasn't there. This was a pretty major battle but for some reason he didn't show."

"I wonder what he's planning?" Harry though out loud. "He's up to something, I just wish I knew what it was."

Ginny rubbed the back of Harry's hand and looked up into his eyes as he turned his head towards her. "We'll figure it out," she said. "And when we do we will prepare and be ready for his next attack."

Harry smiled and nodded his head. "Yes we will; and we'll do it together."

For the next several minutes the four - Harry, Ginny, Ron and Bill - talked about the battle, Harry and Ginny asking multiple questions and Ron and Bill answering as best they could, when the door opened and Remus walked in carrying two sets of robes. "I was able to get a set of your robes, Harry, but Minerva had to get Ginny's. The charm on the girls' stair wouldn't let me pass twenty years ago and I doubt it has changed even though I am a professor."

Harry glanced over at Ron, remembering the time the steps had turned into a slide when he had reached the sixth step, and chuckled, "No, Remus, it hasn't changed as Ron found out last year." Ron glanced up and glared at Harry but blushed scarlet anyway.

Bill, Remus and Ginny burst out laughing. "Ron," Ginny scolded through fits of laughter. "What would Mum think if she found out." Ron visibly paled. "Oh, don't worry," Ginny giggled. "We won't tell her."

"Besides," Bill added, "I think the only Weasley boy who hasn't tried getting up into the girls' dorms is Percy."

Ron, looking relieved at Bill's reassurance, smirked and the smiled sheepishly.

Five minutes later, as Harry, Ginny, Ron, Bill and Remus were walking through the hospital wing (Harry and Ginny still in their pyjamas but dressed in robes), Harry saw that, once again, all of the beds were full. He briefly waved at Luna when she glanced up from the witch she was healing. Luna smiled at them and nodded her greeting before returning to the healing spell she was casting on the woman's arm. Out in the hallway they saw that the corridor was lined with beds and several students and healers were busy helping the injured. They had reached a stair leading down towards the Great Hall and were about to descend when Pansy Parkinson, carrying a stack of freshly cleaned bedpans, entered the short stair from below on her way up. "Hello, Pansy," Harry said, not sure how Pansy felt about being on bedpan duty.

Pansy looked up and smiled. "Hi, Harry, Ginny," she said cheerfully. "You're up. You had us all worried there for a bit." Then, shifting her gaze to Ron, she said, "Hi, Ron. How's your arm?"

Ron stretched his arm out in demonstration. Good as new. Thanks, Pansy." Harry and Ginny glanced curiously over at Ron and then back at Pansy. "Er . . ." Harry began but Pansy, sensing his confusion, cut him off.

"Houses don't matter any more, Harry. When it comes to war we all do what we can to help."

Harry watched in stunned silence as Pansy climbed the steps and turned to watch as she disappeared around the corner. "Oh," he said then turned towards Ginny who was still holding his hand. Gently squeezing her hand they smiled at each other and descended the stair.

When they entered the Great Hall several minutes later Harry saw that all of the tables and chairs, except for a very small few, had been moved to the sides and stacked one on top of the other to make as much room for the wounded wood elves as possible. All of the decorations had been taken down and several of the house elves were helping the wood elf healers tend to their wounded cousins. The Head Table had been pushed back from the edge of its dais and a second line of chairs had been set up so that a few could eat at any given time.

They hadn't taken more than a few steps into the Great Hall when Harry and Ginny both staggered back from the impact of two very excited house elves who flung themselves at their knees. "Harry! Ginny!" Dobby and Winky squeaked excitedly as they looked up at their master and mistress. "You is alive!"

Harry and Ginny knelt down and hugged their little friends. "Yes, we're alive," Harry chuckled.

"It will take more than a little flying accident to get rid of us," Ginny said reassuringly as Winky's eyes began to fill with tears. "Don't worry, Winky," she said soothingly. "We won't leave you."

"Thank you, Ginny," Winky said as she furiously brushed her tears away.

"We will get your meals," Dobby squeaked."

Harry smiled and said, "Okay. But I want you to go back to helping the wood elves as soon as you can."

Dobby and Winky both nodded and with a pair of muted cracks were gone.

Nine people, Five humans and four elves, stood up and walked around the ends of the head table as the small group made their way into the Great Hall. Harry looked at each of the injured elves as they slowly walked towards the head table. Some of their injuries looked to be so severe that he didn't know how they had survived. He was silently cursing Voldemort in his mind when he felt a hand on the leading edge of his shoulder. Stopping and looking up he saw Emric's battle weary face gently smiling at him. "Fear not, my brother," Emric said. "They knew the risks when they volunteered; and with any luck all will survive and live to lead happy and productive lives."

Tears in his eyes, Harry nodded and pulled his blood brother into a brotherly hug born of grief and a need for reassurance. "I hope so, my brother. But I fear that this is not the final battle."

"No," Emric said softly. "This was not the final battle but we will fight side by side until this war is won."

Stepping back as tears began to cloud his vision Harry smiled and hoarsely whispered, "Thank you."

As the new group of fourteen made their way to the head table Neville dropped back to walk beside Harry. The moans and groans of the injured echoed through the Great Hall but Neville's presence had a certain calming effect upon Harry's soul. The fact that the sixth member of their group was alive and well gave him the added confidence he needed to go on. "There's no sign of either Lestrange or Pettigrew," Neville said. "We don't know what's going on but for some reason he's holding those two back."

Harry gazed thoughtfully down at a wounded archer for several seconds before responding. "I

know. I think he was hoping for victory this time but at the same time I think he now realizes that it is not going to come as easily as he had hoped, if at all. I think we've proven ourselves against him enough times to plant the seeds of doubt in his mind."

The fourteen made their way up onto the dais and sat, seven to a side, along one end of the table. Almost as soon as they were seated the plates before them filled with food and Harry heard someone cast a privacy charm so that they could speak openly without fear of being interrupted or overheard. Emric, Harry, Ginny, Ron, Neville and Emric's two top generals sat along one side of the table while Wulfric, Albus, Madam Bones, Bill, Fleur, Charlie and a familiar looking, dark-featured man who slouched when he walked sat opposite them. "I believe an introduction is in order," Albus said indicating the familiar looking man. "I know you already know him, Harry, but so much has happened over the course of the past eighteen months that you may not remember. Victor Krum has kindly agreed to assist us in our efforts by working with you, Ron and Neville in helping you understand the dark arts. He will be working with the three of you in your divination class with Firenze to help you come to a more complete understanding of what we are up against in terms of the magical content. He will also be working with Severus and Neville to restock our potions supplies."

Harry's mouth fell slightly open before he caught himself and closed it with a snap. He then turned to Victor and smiled. "Welcome back, Victor," he said glancing quickly at Ron to gage his reaction to the Bulgarian Seeker's presence. Surprisingly there was none.

"I vas not supposed to arrive until the first off Januvery but ven I heard off the attack I came as soon as I could. I have only been here for two days and already I feel at home. You should be proud off vot you have accomplished, Harry. Many vizards in my country have gone over to the dark side and vot you and your people have done has given them reason to reconsider," Victor said with a smirkingly twisted smile.

Harry smiled. These words - coming as they did from Victor Krum, the internationally famous Bulgarian Quidditch Player and Seeker - meant more to him than he ever thought they could because Victor was a team player and realized that it was going to take a team effort to defeat Voldemort. "Thank you," he said.

"We were just discussing what should be done to memorialize those who have fallen in the struggle against … Voldemort," Madam Bones said, hesitating slightly before saying Tom's assumed name.

Harry tensed up slightly at the idea that anyone could even think about building a memorial before the final battle had been fought but then felt Ginny's hand gently rubbing his thigh and he relaxed. "I think it's a bit early to start planning any memorials because the war isn't over yet. But if I could make one request it would be that Bertha Jorkins, Frank Bryce, Cedric Diggory and Sirius Black be listed as the first fatalities of the second war."

Fleur and Victor were the first but everyone agreed that Cedric should be listed in a place of honor, describing the circumstances of his death. The rest of the meal was spent discussing the establishment of a graveyard on the castle grounds for those who had fallen and would fall and whose families wished them to be interred in a place of honor and about the awards and commendations that would be handed out in a few weeks time, after the dust had settled and everything had been sorted out. The idea of awarding anyone for killing or harming anyone or anything sounded slightly off to Harry but he kept these thoughts to himself as he recognized the

fact that they promoted unity and morale among the ranks. It seemed that almost everyone who participated in this battle in any way would be receiving an award; but the two he was most impressed with were the nominations Fred and George were receiving for their work in developing Dementor Delights, Potter Charms, the full line of Weasley Whiz Bang fireworks and their Portable Swamps. They were both being nominated for Orders of Merlin, First Class.

After a rather large breakfast Dumbledore looked meaningfully at Harry and Ginny and said, "Could I impose upon the two of you to meet me in my office in one hour's time?" Harry and Ginny looked at each other and then looked back at the headmaster and nodded. "What about, Albus?" Ginny asked.

Albus sighed and then smiled, an unmatched twinkle in his dancing blue eyes. "Ah, yes," he said lightly with a hint of mystery in his voice. "It is a very private conversation about what has just happened in your lives." The two teens looked at each other again, eyes rife with confusion. "Until then, however, I suggest you return to your rooms and get cleaned up." Albus gently smiled at them and nodded his head briefly. "Off you go then."

Sensing that they had been dismissed, Harry and Ginny looked at each other, stood up and, turning around, made their way out of the makeshift elfish hospital and up to the Gryffindor Common Room where they parted company, going to their respective dormitories to shower, change clothes and freshen up.

An hour later they were standing in front of the headmaster's office door. Harry was about to knock when they heard Albus' voice call out to them, "Come in!" Harry and Ginny looked at each other and grinned. Albus never ceased to amaze them. He always seemed to know when someone was about to knock on his door. Opening the door they walked through the familiar surroundings of the antechamber and into the office proper. "Please, have a seat," Albus said, motioning towards two chairs in front of his desk.

Harry and Ginny stepped forward, each taking a seat in one of the chairs and rather conspicuously, although subconsciously, reaching out to hold hands. Albus saw this gesture and chuckled softly to himself as Fawkes flew over and perched himself on Harry's knee. "Lo, Fawkes," Harry said as he reached up and began to absently pet the majestic phoenix.

"What is this about, Albus?" Ginny asked, breaking the calming silence that hung in the air.

Steepeling his fingers and studying the two souls seated before him Albus' eyes twinkled and the light within seemed to dance merrily about. "Ah," he sighed. "The wonders of love." Then, as if snapping out of a self-induced hypnotic trance, blinked and looked directly into Harry's eyes. Harry could feel him striving to enter his mind but held him off, not out of any malicious intent but as a matter of course not to let down any of his guards, thereby giving Tom an opportunity to reestablish contact. Albus nodded. "Very good, Harry."

Carefully lowering his hands he shifted his gaze and looked at the two of them. "Do you remember when I told you that there are some things that I have locked away in my mind and refuse to think about, Harry?"

"Yes," Harry nodded.

"One of those things is the bonding process and ceremony the two of you have just shared."

"You have a soul mate," Ginny asked gently.

Albus smiled. "Yes, I do." His expression changed ever so slightly and the twinkle faltered briefly. "Sadly she is no longer in this world. She left shortly after the war against Grindelwald and I have remained single and alone ever since. Oh, I have many friends and acquaintances but there will never be another Elizabeth. And so I must wait until my time in this world is at an end so that I can join with her in Heaven.

"You and I are a lot alike, Harry. We have both done things that others thought impossible; we have both survived extremely close encounters with death; and we have both bound our souls to extremely beautiful, talented and wonderful young women." Ginny blushed openly pink but Harry bowed his head and smiled to himself as he blushed and recalled the many confidences Dumbledore had shared with him over the previous summer. "But this is not my main reason for asking you here."

Harry looked up, "Sir?"

Albus chuckled. "So formal." Steepeling his fingers he once again studied the two teenagers before him. After almost a minute he asked, "Have you told Ginevra about the prophecy?"

Harry nodded. "Yes."

"Very well then. Do you remember the line which says that you possess a power Tom knows nothing about?"

Harry thought back to the time when he and Albus were watching Professor Trelawney revolving around the surface of the headmaster's pensive for a moment then again nodded his head. "Yes."

Albus smiled. "Now please try to understand that this is only a theory because we will not have all of the information we will need to know for sure until certain events have been fulfilled." Harry nodded and leaned slightly forward in his seat. "It is my belief that somewhere between your Maturo Auctus and your bonding ceremony you found the answer to this part of the riddle. I honestly do not know what it is called but I do know it when I see it.

"What did you see?" Ginny asked.

Albus' eyes twinkled as he briefly glanced over at Ginny then looked back at Harry. "Your portkeys were charmed to bring you back to Hogwarts, more specifically to the Great Hall. However, when you arrived you appeared in the center of the Entrance Hall."

Harry started to open his mouth to protest that someone could have simply made a mistake when charming those two particular portkeys but Albus held his hand up to silence the protest before it began. "Please, Harry, let me finish.

"Due to the requirements of the bonding process we could not physically touch either of you for two days, until you stopped glowing. When we removed your clothing and checked the portkeys we found that they had not yet been activated."

Harry and Ginny's mouths both fell open as they looked at each other in shock. As one they turned back to look at the headmaster. "How is that possible?" they asked in unison.

Albus' eyes twinkled with excitement as he said, "I do not know. The wards around Hogwarts were designed to make it impossible for any witch or wizard to either apparate onto or disapparate away from anywhere on the grounds. After we discovered that your portkeys had not been used I checked the wards and they are still in place and as strong as ever. So the only explanation I can find is that somehow, in your moment of crisis, you found a way around them. It is, therefore, my conclusion," he said, his eyes sparkling merrily, "that you have found the basic building blocks for the development of the kind of power you will need to defeat Voldemort."

Harry sat in stunned silence for several seconds, not hearing, not seeing, not even feeling his surroundings. Slowly, however, Fawkes' gentle trilling worked its way into his consciousness and he awoke with a start. "Do you mean to tell me that something I did will make it possible for me to defeat Voldemort?"

Albus gently smiled and studied Harry and Ginny over the tops of his half-moon glasses for several seconds before responding. "I think it would be more accurate to say that it is something the two of you did. You see, Tom has never known love and has, therefore, never known grief. And since he has never known either of these things he has never had any reason to seek out someone to share them with. The two of you share something very special that Voldamort will never be able to destroy."

"I will explain the bonding process to Molly and Arthur if you like; but for right now I think you should go down to the Weasley compound to celebrate a belated Christmas."

Fawkes flew back to his perch and Harry and Ginny stood up. "Yes, sir," Harry said. "I would appreciate it if you could explain it to them. It’s still rather new to me and I’m not sure but I think Ginny is still getting used to the idea." Ginny nodded her head. Standing up as well, Albus smiled and nodded his head as he reached out to shake Harry’s hand. Taking his hand and briefly yet confidently shaking it Harry looked into the old man’s eyes and said, "Happy Christmas."

"Happy Christmas, Harry, Ginevra," Dumbledore said then stepped around his desk. As he escorted Harry and Ginny to the door he was softly humming a Christmas carol under his breath. When they reached the door he opened it for them and said, "Please tell Molly and Arthur to expect a visit from me tomorrow morning."

As they were stepping through the door Ginny quickly turned around and hugged the Headmaster. "Happy Christmas, sir," she said then turned and ran down the stairs. Harry and Albus stared after her in stunned silence for a second or two and then burst out laughing. Harry then turned and ran down the stairs after Ginny as Albus closed the door to his office and returned to his desk.

At the bottom of the stair, as the gargoyle closed behind them, Harry pulled Ginny into a warm embrace. "You’re amazing," he said. "You are absolutely amazing." Ginny laughed and hugged Harry tightly for several seconds, pressing her ear to his chest, before stepping back and, reaching for his hand, led him down the corridor towards the Entrance Hall.

When they walked into the Weasley’s reinforced tent twenty minutes later Ron, Hermione, Mr. and Mrs. Granger and Molly and Arthur Weasley were sitting around the large kitchen table drinking tea. As soon as the door closed, however, Harry found himself staggering back into the wall as Hermione flung herself at him from half way across the room and pulled him into a bone-crushing hug. "Harry!" she screamed. "You’re alive!"

Harry coughed a couple of timed as he struggled to catch his breath. "Last I checked," He choked out. "Could I have some air please?"

Hermione let herself down and stepped back. "Sorry," she blushed. "Its just that you have this nasty habit of scaring us half to death by almost dieing."

"I'm sorry, 'Mione. I'll try not to do it again."

"You had better not!" Hermione scolded then, without warning, pulled him into another bone-crushing hug.

"Air. 'Mione, air, air," Harry gasped.

When Hermione finally released him he looked over at Ginny and mouthed a barely audible, "Whew!"

"Better you than me," Ginny giggled.

Mrs. Weasley was next in line. This time, however, her eyes were brimming with unshed tears as she wrapped her arms around him and enveloped him in a warm, motherly hug. Her lower lip was quivering as she clung to him and whispered, "Thank God you're alive, Harry." Reaching out and pulling Ginny into her embrace she softly cried, "Thank God you are both alive."

Harry and Ginny looked at each other then looked over at Ron and Mr. Weasley. Mr. Weasley was smiling and nodding his head but Ron just smirked and shrugged his shoulders. Harry reached around and rubbed Mrs. Weasley's back as he tried to soothe her muffled sobs. "It's alright, Mum. I made a promise when Ginny and I first got together that I would never let anyone or anything hurt her without doing everything in my power to prevent it."

Ron, Ginny and Hermione looked at Harry in surprise as Mr. Weasley walked over and helped his wife back to the table. "What did you just say?" Ron asked. "Did you just call our mum, Mum?"

Harry looked into his friend's eyes, a broad grim slowly spreading his face. "They adopted me," he said simply. "Since I no longer have any relatives and since . . ." he hesitated, "Sirius is dead I no longer have a guardian … We signed the paperwork on the first night back but I asked everyone involved to keep it quiet, on a need-to-know basis, because I don't want to give Tom any tools to use against me. You guys are the family I never had. This just makes it official." Turning to Hermione he said, "And you've always been the sister I've always wanted but never had. While Ginny is officially my sister now she is really much more than that."

Silence hung in the air for several seconds as Harry's message sunk in. Then pandemonium reigned supreme as Ron and Hermione raced forward shouting and screaming their delight and Ginny shrieked while pulling him into one of the warmest hugs he had ever experienced.

When everything settled down and they were all sitting around the kitchen table Mr. Granger said, "Excuse me, Harry, but who is Tom? I though you were fighting some dark wizard named Voldemort."

"Voldemort is a fictitious name," Harry said, sensing Ginny tensing up slightly beside him. "It is a name he made up so that others would fear him." Slipping his hand into one of Ginny's to let her know that he would always be there fore her he continued, "His real name is Tom Marvolo Riddle."

Harry took his wand out and wrote Tom’s name out in flaming letters in the air above the table. Then with an extra flick of his wand the letters rearranged themselves so that the spelled out, 'I AM LORD VOLDEMORT.'

Mr. and Mrs. Granger nodded their understanding then Mrs. Granger asked, "But why should he want to use your family against you?"

Ginny, Ron and Hermione looked at Harry uncertainly and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley and Mr. and Mrs. Granger looked at him questioningly. With a sigh of resignation Harry bowed his head and said. "It would seem that there is a prophecy about Tom and me. Not many people know what it says but I have seen it. Since your children are my best friends and since I want you to know how much their love and support means to me I suppose you have a right to know. According to this prophecy, I am the only one who has the power to, as the prophecy says, 'vanquish the dark lord.'" Mrs. Granger and Mrs. Weasley both gasped and Mr. Weasley and Mr. Granger’s mouths fell open as their eyes slightly bulged but Harry continued. "He doesn’t like that and so he has been trying to kill me essentially since the day I was born. I got this scar on my forehead when I was a year old when he killed my parents and marked me as his equal. Since then I have faced him four more times and, with Ron’s, Hermione’s Ginny’s Neville’s and Luna’s help, escaped each of those encounters. After the battle in the Department of Mysteries last June . . . and the death of my godfather I got tired of running and decided to fight. And I will be honest with you Mister and Mrs. Granger, I couldn’t have done it without Hermione and I can only hope and pray that you will never pull Hermione out of school. We need her more than you will ever know and I give you my word that we will do everything we can to prevent any harm from coming to her."

Hermione looked across the table at Harry as tears began to well up in her eyes and, smiling, mouthed, 'Thank you.'

Mr. and Mrs. Granger looked at each other for several seconds then looked at their daughter’s hopeful face. "Then it’s settled," Mr. Granger said. "You can stay and complete your education at Hogwarts."

"If your friends love you and need you that much," Mrs. Granger added, "we are not going to stand in the way of your happiness."

Harry and Ginny looked at each other with confused expressions on their faces as Ron and Hermione viciously hugged one another. "Perhaps we should explain," Mr. Granger said, "When we heard about what happened last June we wanted to pull Hermione our of school for her own safety. But as you know she can be a very persuasive young lady." Hermione smiled weakly at Harry. "We let her come back this year because she was so insistent that this is her world and is the only place she will ever be happy. When we started hearing reports of unexplained deaths and green skulls appearing above the victim’s houses we, of course, became worried. We were all set to pull here out of school at the end of term this year but from what you and the Weasleys have told us she is probably safer here than anywhere. And the fact that we know that she is both happy and loved means more to us than all the gold on Earth."

That evening, after Bill, Fred, George, Percy and Charlie returned from their days in Diagon Alley, Harry, Ron, Ginny, Hermione, Neville, Luna, Andromeda Babcock and Mark Evans walked down to the compound and into the Weasley’s spacious tent. Just off the kitchen was a large dining room. Beyond that there was an enormous living room with two doors, leading to bedrooms with en suit

baths, on each side. There were three large couches - one between each set of doors and one near the near end. A small card table was set up in one corner covered with the pieces of a half finished jigsaw puzzle Mrs. Weasley had been working to calm her nerves and several comfortably upholstered chairs stood at odd angles around the room. Against the far wall, however, was an enormous, beautifully decorated Christmas tree and the floor around it was piled high with innumerable gifts of various shapes and sizes.

When they entered the kitchen Harry glanced over and saw Remus nursing a steaming mug of what looked like hot chocolate at the far end of the table. Harry motioned for the others to go on into the living room where they could hear Fred and George playing a game of exploding snap. They nodded their understanding and left him alone with his father's friend. Walking over to the table he sat down across from Remus. "It's your first Christmas without him, isn't it," Harry said.

Remus looked up and nodded his head. "I didn't think it would be this hard really. I mean, even while he was in Azkaban I at least knew he was alive. But now I don't even have that." Remus slammed his fist down on the table, causing his mug to jump and sloshing a little of its contents out onto the table. "Damn it, Sirius!" he screamed through gritted teeth. "Why did you have to die?"

Harry looked up briefly as Tonks slid a mug of hot chocolate in front of him and mouthed a thank you. "You never really believed he did it did you, betrayed my parents I mean."

Remus looked up into Harry's eyes and Harry could feel all of the pain and suffering the last true Marauder was experiencing at that moment. He held Remus' gaze for several seconds, trying to tell him that he was not alone and that just as he, Remus, had been there for him over the summer holidays he, Harry, would be there for him whenever he needed to talk. Then Remus looked back down at the table and sighed. "You know, Harry, I don't think I ever really did. We had been through so much together as kids and I just couldn't believe it. I mean, they were the best of friends. They did everything together. I couldn't believe Sirius would betray James. I should have known Peter had something to do with it and I should have done something about it." Remus raised his fist again and slammed it back down on the table before Harry could catch it. "Damn it," he scowled at himself. "Why didn't I think?"

Harry reached across the table and placed a hand on top of Remus' quivering fist. "It was a different and difficult time," he said softly. "If everything I've heard is true then you didn't know who you could trust."

Remus looked up again, tears streaming down his cheeks, "Yes, Harry, I know. But it still hurts."

Harry and Remus spent the next half hour sitting at the kitchen table, drinking hot chocolate and talking through Remus' feelings of loss while the other guests arrived. When Tonks stuck her head in and told them that everyone had arrived Remus looked across at Harry and smiled. "Thanks," he said.

"Any time, Remus," Harry said standing up and placing their empty mugs in the sink. "You know I'll always be here for you."

"Like I was there for you last summer?"

"Yeah."

"Thanks."

The rest of the evening passed quickly. They spent the next two hours exchanging gifts and then sat down to an enormous Christmas dinner especially prepared by Dobby and Winky and a few of their friends. There were several highlights that evening but perhaps the most memorable moment took place when Harry, Ron and Neville presented Ginny, Hermione and Luna with Promissory Rings. The three girl's gasped when they opened the dual ring jewelry boxes and everyone fell silent while Neville explained that they were magically paired rings, made of the finest elfish gold available, and that they would shrink or expand to fit the wearers. Fred and George started whistling and making catcalls when the couples embraced but were quickly silenced by Mrs. Weasley when she threw a pair of sofa pillows at them.

Another highlight came when Fleur and Bill returned Harry's Firebolt to him freshly cleaned and in mint condition with several additional safety and indestructibility charms built in. Harry was busy inspecting his broom when Albus was let in carrying four Electra 5000 Battle Series brooms. The broom company had taken their recommendations from their experiences in Romania and built a broom specifically designed for flying into battle. The new features that most impressed Harry were the enhanced indestructibility charms and the Permanent Center of Gravity Charm that would keep the broom's center of gravity where the owner set it no matter how unevenly the weight was distributed. It was no substitute for lousy flying but at least he knew that if he ever had to make another diving catch like the one on Christmas Day he would be able to pull out of it.

The third highlight of the evening came when Madam Bones, the Acting Minister of Magic, presented Mr. and Mrs. Babcock with Certificates of Outstanding Scientific Service to the Magical Community for their work in mapping the energy signatures of the dementors, which led to the development of the Enhanced Patronus Charm. They were, of course, startled but graciously accepted the awards and told Madam Bones that if the Ministry of Magic should ever need their services again they should not hesitate to call.

The most touching events of the evening were when Charlie presented Harry, Ginny, Ron, Hermione, Neville, Luna, Remus, Tonks, Dobby and Winky with specially designed dragon hide battle robes with the Dragon Camp's logo, a fire breathing dragon in in a twisted posture of flight, on the cape and the Order of the Phoenix logo, a phoenix in flight, on the inside left breast and when Harry and Ginny presented Dobby and Winky with dress robes. Dobby was, of course, ecstatic. Winky, however, was horrified and wondered what she had done to displease Ginny. "Is Ginny mad at Winky?" she sobbed almost uncontrollably. "What has Winky done to upset you, Ginny? Winky promises never to do it again if you will just tell Winky what she has done to upset you!"

If took the combined efforts of Harry, Ginny, Hermione and Dobby five full minutes to calm her down and explain to her that they were not setting her free if she did not want to be free but that they wanted them to be happy and to have a change of clothes so that they could blend in a little more easily in a wider variety of settings. Almost as soon as Winky accepted this explanation she began apologizing profusely and making an even bigger spectacle of herself. After a few minutes of this Harry chuckled and, leaning over, whispered into Ginny's ear, "Better you than me."

Ginny giggled then rolled her eyes. "You be careful, buster. I have a new bat bogey hex I'm itching to try."

After dinner, during which Harry and Ginny visited with Mr. Evans about his mother's childhood, Harry, Ginny, Bill, Fleur, Remus, Tonks and Charlie retreated to the kitchen while Ron and Neville settled down in the living room for a rematch with Fred, George, Hermione, Luna, Andromeda Babcock, Mark Evans and Susan Bones as spectators and the older adults and Percy broke into conversational groups. "Say, uh, Bill," Harry asked. "You're a curse breaker, right?"

"Yes," Bill said suspiciously. "Why do you ask?"

Harry played with his fingers for a bit then looked down the table at Remus and then at Ginny who was sitting next to him. "I need a curse that will make Voldemort pay for all of the pain and suffering he has caused."

The room fell suddenly silent as all eyes turned towards Harry and for several seconds the only sound that could be heard coming from the room was the ticking of the clock mounted on the wall. "What do you mean?" Bill asked.

Harry's voice became strained as his hands balled into fists and his body began to shake with rage. "I want him to pay. He has ruined far too many lives for him to get away with anything so peaceful as death. Death is too good for him. I want him to suffer!" he growled.

By this time Harry was shaking so violently that the table was shaking and the others could both see and feel the waves of energy radiating away from his body. Ginny knew, from their first encounter with Bane back in September, that if they didn't do something soon the entire compound would explode so she reached out and gently place her hands on his trembling fists. Sensing her calming presence Harry looked down at her hands and slowly let his eyes travel up her arms until he was looking into her eyes. "It's alright," she whispered. "Everything is going to be alright."

Harry stopped shaking and let the built up energy drain away. "Thank you," he said. The others at the table were shocked and stared at Harry for several seconds until Charlie nervously laughed, "Well at least you've got your priorities straight. I haven't seen that kind of power since you were in Romania."

Harry sheepishly smiled at Charlie who was sitting next to Remus at the far end of the table. "Sorry," he said. "I almost lost it."

"Well, thank God for Ginny," Bill said nervously, still somewhat shaken by what he had just experienced.

Putting his arm around her waist and pulling her into a sideways hug Harry looked into Ginny's eyes and smiled. "I do, Bill. Believe me, I do."

Tonks started laughing, nervously at first but as the others joined in and Harry's near outburst was forgotten it became a heartfelt laughter that echoed through the camp. A minute or two after the laughter had stopped and everyone had caught their breath, Bill looked across the table at Harry and said, "You're asking for a pretty powerful piece of magic if you expect him to suffer. From everything we've been able to gather about him, he doesn't care about anyone but himself and causing pain and suffering in others is his favorite pastime. We honestly don't know if he has the ability to suffer."

"Oh, he has the ability alright," Harry said softly. "After all, it was my blood that was used to bring

him back to life and, as Albus said at the end of last year, a part of what makes me human and that part which is going to make it possible for me to defeat Voldemort, is my ability to feel emotional pain and suffer; after all, our blood is where a lot of our magical abilities come from. They don't all come from blood but that is one of their most basic components. What we need to do is find a way to take advantage of that weakness and turn it to our advantage."

For the next several hours the seven members of the Order of the Phoenix discussed a variety of possibilities. Harry and Remus summarized the research they had done over the summer and the development of the Potter-Lupin-Granger-Padfoot Defensive Charm; Fleur reviewed her extensive background in charms work; and Bill went over the requirements for unbreakable charms and curses. They didn't solve any problems or develop any new curses that night but they did come to a few understandings and agreed to keep working on it. When their little meeting finally broke up it was three o'clock in the morning and Ginny and Tonks were struggling to stay awake. After agreeing to meet Charlie later on that afternoon to take Hagrid's Christmas present down to him Harry and Remus walked Ginny and Tonks back up to the castle. They parted company in the Entrance Hall and Remus and Tonks headed off towards the Faculty Quarters while Harry and Ginny made their way up to Gryffindor Tower.

The Fat Lady was asleep and snoring softly when they reached the entrance. Harry cleared his throat several times trying to get her attention. Finally, after almost a minute he broke down and said, "Excuse me, ma'am, but we would like to go to bed if you don't mind." The Fat Lady stirred and blearily opened one eye. "Password," she said.

"Fairy lights," Harry said and the portrait swung slowly open revealing the entrance to the Gryffindor Common Room.

At the base of the stairs leading to the girls' dormitory Harry wrapped his hands around Ginny's waist as she wrapped her arms around his neck. After sharing a long, deep and passionate kiss they pulled apart. "Good night, princess," Harry said.

Ginny smiled up at him. "Happy Christmas, my prince."

Chapter 38. Hagrid’s Christmas

When Harry awoke the next morning it was already fairly light out. Even though he couldn’t see very well without his glasses he could tell, from the view from the Wizarding Window in his bedroom, that the sky seemed to be overcast and, if he wasn’t mistaken, it was snowing lightly. "Well good morning, sleepy head," Ginny said from the entrance to his bedroom.

Harry scrambled and grabbed his glasses off the dresser next to his bed and quickly put them on. As his world came into focus he looked over at Ginny who was laughing at his antics. "How’d you get in here?" he asked sternly.

Ginny laughed and shook her head as she walked over and sat on the bed next to him. "Ron let me in. I gave Dobby and Winky the morning off so I could fix your breakfast and we could talk."

"About what?"

"About us."

"Us?" Harry asked apprehensively.

"Yes, silly," Ginny said, smiling. "We are, after all, soul mates. And if Albus thinks that we have somehow combined forces to create something Tom can never destroy then I think we at least owe it to ourselves to explore a few of the possibilities."

Harry swallowed hard and began to blush profusely as his eyes grew wide. Hoping she wasn’t suggesting what he thought she was suggesting he said, "Er . . . uh . . . um, okay. But can I take a shower and get dressed first?"

Ginny laughed as she stood up. "Of course you can, silly." Then bending down she kissed him on the cheek and whispered, "Don’t worry, Harry. I wasn’t thinking about exploring those possibilities. Although I must admit that if things keep going the way they are I might be open to exploring a few of those possibilities after I graduate."

Harry let out a sigh of relief and collapsed back into his bed.

Ginny laughed again as she stood up. "Twenty minutes, Harry. Breakfast will be ready in twenty minutes so I suggest you get a move on."

Harry groaned but as soon as Ginny had left the room he got up and stumbled to the bathroom.

Fifteen minutes later Harry walked into the kitchen area of his trunk and sniffed the air. "Smells great," he said. "What’s for breakfast?"

Ginny jumped slightly then turned to face her boyfriend. "Eggs Benedict. Winky made the sauce but left the rest to me."

Harry walked over to stand beside her and looked down at the eggs as they reached the point of perfection. "Ah, yes." He sighed deeply. "Much as I despised doing it, this was the Dursley’s Sunday morning ritual and one of the few meals I enjoyed preparing."

"I didn’t know you could cook," Ginny said, turning to look at Harry with newfound interest.

Harry chuckled. "Oh yeah. I can cook. In fact, if nothing else, once I graduate I could always become a chef."

"You think you're that good, eh?"

Harry laughed and shook his head. "No, I'm nowhere near as good as your mum but I can cook well enough.

"Then dinner is on you," Ginny said with a mischievous smile. I'll give Dobby and Winky the rest of the day off and you can fix dinner."

Harry backed away from the counter with a horrified look on his face. "What? You've got to be kidding! Me? Cook dinner? Oh no. Not on your life."

Ginny flashed her puppy-dog eyes at Harry and stuck her lower lip out in a pout. "Its only once a week, Harry. I'll take Saturdays and you can take Sundays. We'll let Dobby and Winky have the weekends off and we can use those days to improve our cooking and baking skills."

"But . . . but . . . Oh, alright. But you had better watch the eggs because I think they are about done."

Ginny jumped and turned back to the Wizarding Range. When the eggs were finished she placed them on the plates, poured the steaming sauce over them and carried them to the table while Harry poured the juice.

"You know," Ginny said as she seated herself at the small kitchen table, "she's your mum too."

Harry looked up in surprise. "Huh?"

"Well," Ginny said as if stating the obvious, "since they did adopt you, you are now a part of the family so you can call her 'Mum' now too."

Harry though about this for a moment then said. "Yeah, I suppose you're right. But only at family gatherings and only around those who need to know, at least until Tom is defeated."

Ginny smiled to herself then nodded. "Alright then. But when its just you and me she is definitely 'Mum.' I want you to get used to saying it because now that we are soul mates I have a feeling you are going to be saying it for a very long time. And you are most definitely going to be taking cooking lessons from her next summer."

"Hey!" Harry said, taking mock offense. "I'm not that bad! And besides, you haven't even tasted any of my cooking yet."

Ginny giggled. "No, I haven't. But it would be a great bonding experience for the two of you. And you could help dad with all of his muggle contraptions."

"You have this all planned out don't you?" Harry asked with a smirk.

"Mm hmm." Ginny nodded. "You're a part of the family, now, Harry, so you had better get used to it."

Harry groaned. "Oh no, what have I gotten myself into."

Ginny laughed. "Love, my dear Mister Potter. Love."

For the next two hours Harry and Ginny discussed their relationship and where they saw it going. It was agreed that, since they wanted to spend as much time as possible together, Ginny would move some of her clothes - mainly her dress and battle robes - into one of the closets in the bedroom and that one of the dressers would become hers as well. She would still sleep and bathe in the fifth-year girls' dormitory but she would spend most of her time, outside of class, in Harry's trunk. Harry was a little hesitant at first because he wanted her to have other friends but eventually gave in.

At around 1:30 in the afternoon they heard someone knock on the lid of the trunk and then heard Ron's voice calling out, "Oi, Harry! You in there?"

Harry stepped out into the sitting room and yelled up at the ceiling. "Yeah, Ron. We're here. Come on down."

When Ron opened the lid he looked around curiously. "Whose we?"

"Me, brother dear," came Ginny's voice from the kitchen area. "We gave Dobby and Winky the day off so I fixed Harry breakfast and he is preparing my dinner."

Ron shook his head and chuckled. "You had better watch it, Harry. Before long she will have you tied to the stove."

Harry glanced over at Ginny then looked back up at Ron. "Only on the weekends, Ron." Ron looked at him quizzically. "Dobby and Winky get the weekends off," he explained. "Ginny is going to do the cooking on Saturdays and I and going to do it on Sundays."

With a look of utter confusion on his face he turned around and climbed down the ladder. When he was safely down Harry led him into the kitchen. "So what's up?" Harry asked.

Sitting down with his back to the window Ron looked at his best friend and little sister and shook his head. "Soul mates," he said with amazement. "Albus explained it to the rest of the family this morning. You two really must love each other to use that kind of magic."

"We do," Harry and Ginny said in unison.

"Mum said it was the only way I could save her and it is a commitment I will never regret."

"You saw your mum?" Ron asked.

Harry nodded his head. "She appeared to me just before you and Neville landed and told me that it was the only way."

Ron laughed nervously. "Don't get me wrong, Harry. Its just that I've never had an experience like that."

Harry stood up and went to the refrigerator for a butterbeer for his best friend. "Don't worry, Ron," he said turning around after closing the door. "I understand."

Accepting the bottle Ron popped the top and took a drink then said, "Thank you. Oh, and that reminds me, I want to thank you for what you said to 'Mione's parents yesterday. Your timing could not have been more perfect."

"Were they really thinking about pulling her out of school?" Ginny asked.

Ron nodded. "Yeah," he said sadly. "I can't say as I really blame them because they really do love her but this is the safest place for her right now. I think Albus is talking to them about going into hiding until the war is over."

Harry chewed on his lower lip for a few seconds as he considered this news then decided to change the subject. "So who won the rematch last night?" he asked.

Ron smiled. "I did," he said, puffing out his chest. "It was close but I beat him."

Harry and Ginny both laughed.

"That brings up something else I wanted to ask," Ron said. "What time did you guys finally get in last night?"

"Sometime after three, I think. Why?"

"Just curious. Since you guys are soul mates I really can't say anything but I am kind of curious about what you were doing all night."

Harry chuckled and shook his head. "Nothing, Ron. We didn't do anything. We just sat around the kitchen table with Bill, Charlie, Fleur, Remus and Tonks and talked."

"What'd you talk about?"

"Oh," Harry said with a slight yawn. "We're trying to find a curse that will make Tom pay for all of the pain and suffering he has caused."

Ron was taken slightly aback by this revelation and sat back in the chair. "Do you think it's possible?"

Harry nodded. "He's got my blood coursing through his veins so he is subject to the same laws I am. All we have to do now is figure out some way of using it against him."

"Have you come to any conclusions yet?"

"All we know for sure is that it is going to have to be a very powerful and very ancient piece of magic, possibly along the same lines as the charm Remus, 'Mione and I developed last summer. We also know that it is going to have to be unbreakable because I don't want him to ever be able to escape from it.

"Bill and Fleur are going to work on it in London and consulting with some of their friends while we work on it from this end. I know you and 'Mione already have your hands full but I'd sure appreciate it if you could spare a few minutes every once in a while."

Smiling, Ron stood up and pushed the chair back under the table. "Sure thing, Harry. Say, have you got your homework done yet?"

Harry grinned and Ginny shook her head. "Yes, Ron," Harry said knowingly. "I did it on the first two days of holiday. Why? Haven't you finished yours yet?"

"Oh, yeah," Ron said quickly. "Well, almost. I've still got a little work to do on my Charms essay but it shouldn't be too hard."

"Maybe you should go talk to Fleur," Harry said. "She probably knows more about charms than anyone here, except for Flitwick of course."

"Do you think she would be willing to help?"

Harry shrugged his shoulders. "It never hurts to ask."

Twenty minutes later they met up with Hermione, Neville, Luna, Remus, Tonks and Charlie in the Weasley compound and began making their way down to Hagrid's Cabin with a large, leather-bound photo album with a picture of Norbert belching flames while in flight over the dragon camp framed on the front cover. Worked into the leather above the picture was "Hagrid's" and below the picture was "Norbert." Ginny sighed happily when she saw it and exclaimed, "Oh, Charlie, it's beautiful! Hagrid will love it!"

Charlie smiled and glanced over at Harry who was smiling as well. "That's the idea, Gin. Hagrid doesn't really have any family outside of Hogwarts and it's always nice to know that you are appreciated."

Five minutes later the nine were standing in front of Hagrid's cabin, Charlie hiding the photo album beneath his cloak while Ginny, Ron, Hermione, Neville, Luna and Tonks struggled to keep straight faces. Remus was standing quietly in the background while Harry knocked on the door. They waited and listened as Fang jumped up and start barking as he skittered across the floor and Hagrid scraped his chair back and lumbered across his one room mansion while telling Fang to be quiet. "Ge' down, Fang! Back, back! Wha' ye mean barkin' at any one wha' comes by fer a visit? Down I tell ye! Ge' down!"

When Hagrid opened the door Hermione was the first. "Happy Christmas!" she chirped.

Hagrid's face broke into a full, open-faced smile, his black eyes sparkling and his cheeks swelling with pride. "Well, 'appy Christmas to you too!" he laughed. "Come in! Come in!"

Holding Fang back with one hand and opening the door with the other the large half-giant ushered the nine visitors into his humble abode. Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Neville and Luna sat on the edge of Hagrid's long bed while Harry and Charlie took the two vacant chairs and Remus and Tonks stood in the corner by the fireplace. As soon as he closed the door Hagrid turned loose of his large, black boarhound who immediately walked over and started sniffing Harry's chest and slobbering on his robes. "I'll never un'erstan' it," Hagrid said jovially. "Yer th' on'y one 'e does tha' to, 'arry. D' ye thin' me'be 'e likes ye?"

Looking down at Fang who was trying to lick his face Harry tried to back away but only succeeded in tilting precariously back on the chair's back legs. He would have fallen back if Charlie hadn't jumped up and caught the back of his chair. In the process, however, Hagrid's Christmas present slipped out from under his cloak and fell to the floor. "'ere, Fang," Hagrid scolded. "Go lay down." As the large boarhound plodded over to his basket in the corner by the door Hagrid noticed the photo album. "'Ere now, wha's tha'?"

"This," Charlie said as he knelt down to pick up the album, which had mercifully landed face down,

"is your Christmas present. It’s from all of us but it was actually Harry’s idea."

Hagrid looked over at Harry and smiled. Then, looking back at Charlie and over at the others, smiled even more broadly. "'Ere now, ye shouldn' o' done tha'."

"But we wanted to," Hermione said happily.

"And you haven’t even seen what it is yet," Ron added.

Hagrid looked around at all of the smiling faces then looked back at Charlie who was holding the book to his chest. "Well then, le’s see wha' ye go' there, Charlie."

Charlie laid the leather bound volume on the table, turned it around and slid it across to Hagrid. Hagrid’s eyes flew open when he saw the cover and his dark, bushy eyebrows almost disappeared into his hair. "Norbert!" he cried. "I ne’er though' I’d see 'im again! Than' ye, than' ye, than' ye!"

Harry smiled so broadly at Hagrid’s reaction to seeing the photo album that his cheeks actually hurt. And the approving nods from his friend let him know that they thought he had made the right decision as well.

The next several hours were spent going through the photo album and listening to Charlie tell stories about Norbert’s life on the preserve and how he had grown to be one of the camp’s best flyers. Hagrid was as proud as any father could be and his eyes brimmed with tears of happiness and joy several times that afternoon. And when they turned to the last picture in the album Hagrid laughed out loud and pulled Harry, Ron and Hermione into one of his infamous bone crushing hugs that made Mrs. Weasley’s hugs feel like a light pat on the back. The picture had been taken in the afternoon of their second day in Romania and showed Harry, Hermione and Ron standing in front of Norbert who had lowered his head to hover just above and behind the trio. Harry was standing casually on one end, calmly waiving with one hand while firmly holding Hermione in place with the other; Hermione was in the middle smiling pleasantly but occasionally glancing nervously over her shoulder at Norbert; and Ron was standing on Hermione’s other side, one arm securely linked with Hermione’s to prevent her escape. In the picture Ron was laughing, smiling and waiving as if posing for a picture while standing in front of a fully-grown, fire breathing Norwegian Ridgeback was a daily event.

That night Harry prepared a sumptuous dinner with a small loaf of freshly baked whole wheat bread, two steaming bowls of homemade vegetable soup and an expertly filleted Red Salmon. Ginny watched in amazement as Harry prepared the meal without using any magic and complimented him on his expertise. When she asked him why he wasn’t using any magic he just shrugged his shoulders and said, "I learned to cook the muggle way and, as Albus once said, old habits die hard."

Chapter 39. Coping and Classes

The New Year's Eve Ball went as well as could be expected. It wasn't as well attended as the Yule Ball had been but no one complained and Harry was glad that every effort was being made to remember those who had fallen in the battle. The service, that had taken place before dinner that evening, was not only well done but reminded everyone that it was going to take a team effort to defeat Voldemort and that everyone's efforts, no matter their history or background, would be needed and greatly appreciated.

At midnight on New Years Eve Harry and Ginny were standing at the top of the Astronomy Tower looking down on the makeshift village on the castle grounds. The air was cool but not cold and a gentle breeze rustled their cloaks and robes just enough to let them know that it was there. The sky above was clear and the galaxy was laid out before them. After watching the activity on the castle grounds for a while Harry turned around and started searching the heavens for the Dog Star. When he found it he stopped and let his eyes fill with tears. Ginny, sensing his pain and seeing where he was looking, took hold of one of his hands and held it gently in both of her own. "You miss him, don't you," she said, stating his heart's desire to speak with his godfather again.

Not really trusting his voice Harry nodded his head slightly and said, "Mm hmm."

Stepping around to stand in front of him Ginny reached up and brushed away a few of the tears that were beginning to spill down his cheeks. Harry looked down and smiled at her. After wiping the rest of the tears from his eyes he looked down into her eyes and whispered, "Thank you."

Ginny slid her arms around his neck and pulled him into a gentle hug. "He's never really all that far away, you know," she said softly. "All you have to do is think about him and remember the good times. That's the way he would have wanted it."

"I know," Harry whispered then wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her into a gently tender yet passionately warm New Years kiss.

Fifteen minutes later they left the Astronomy Tower and made their way back to the Gryffindor Common Room where they said good night and went to their rooms.

The few students who had gone home for the holidays returned the next evening and were stunned at what they saw. Several of the students were still sporting bandages and slings and a few - like Orville Burns - we still using a crutch or crutches to get around. The Quibbler had run a special war issue the day after the battle - based upon interviews from flyers, volunteer fighters, residents of Hogsmeade, aurors, hit-wizards, security wizards - which had been approved of by Percy after he made sure that all of the details were correct and accurate but the returning students wanted to hear all about it from those who had actually lived it. Not surprisingly, though, no one wanted to talk about it. Even Colin Creevey, who had take many of the pictures used in the issue, was surprisingly quiet and refused to talk about it. A few of the more brazen returning students mocked those with injuries, suggesting that they were just trying to get attention or gain sympathy, but they were quickly silenced by those who had stayed.

On the Saturday after the students' return Harry, Ginny, Ron, Hermione, Neville, Luna, Blaise, Pansy, Orville and several of the others who had taken part in the defense of Hogwarts in various capacities were sitting in the Defense classroom, with Kingsley as moderator and a wizarding

psychologist in attendance, talking about their experiences trying to work through some of the problems they were having with flashbacks, nightmares and people asking questions they did not want to answer. For Harry and his group this was nothing new but for those for whom this had been their first battle it was a nightmare and Harry honestly felt sorry for them. At one point Orville Burns stood up and almost shouted, "Why can't they understand that we don't want to talk about it?"

"With anyone who wasn't there," Pansy added.

"Are you referring to the returning students?" Mr. Hawkhorn, a soft-spoken, balding man with a silver fringe, sparkling blue eyes and sky blue robes, asked.

"Yes!" Orville growled.

Kingsley stood up and walked over to stand in front of the teacher's desk, which had been shoved back against the wall to help create a more open and friendly environment. After folding his arms across his chest and bowing his head in thought for several seconds he let out a deep, audible sigh. "That, Mister Burns," he said gently, "is why we are here. You see, until recently most of you in this room have led very sheltered lives. You have not had to deal with the pain and agony of war or having seen your friends or family die. But now you have. You have experienced a few of the unspeakable atrocities of war. You have seen and felt things you most likely never knew existed, hate beyond hate, fear beyond fear and pain beyond pain and you have survived. We, the faculty, staff, your fellow students and people like Mister Hawkhorn here are here to help you. Many of us have dealt with these kinds of experiences before and I can tell you from personal experience that talking about it is never easy. It might seem far easier to withdraw into your own little worlds and build walls around yourselves, locking even your closest friends out because you fear that they will not understand. But that is neither the safest nor the sanest alternative.

"You need to let people in. It may not be easy and it may feel like some are trying to pry into your private lives but that's what these support groups are all about. We are here to help you adjust to life after, hopefully, some of the most horrific experiences you will ever have. All we can do is ask that you please try to be patient with those who were not there and do not understand what you have been through. If they wish to understand . . . if they truly wish to understand what you have been through then they will be just as patient with you."

When Albus stood up to make his announcements at the Start of Term banquet the next night Harry noticed that while his eyes still were still sparkling with life there was a certain haunted look to them, almost as though he were remembering the events of the last war against Voldemort as well as the events of the war against Grindelwald. His heart went out to the old man then because he knew what Albus had been through.

As the old man rose to his feet the Great Hall fell silent. "Although many of you did not go home for the holidays, for which I am eternally grateful, many of you are returning from what we can only hope was a restful and enjoyable holiday season. As you know, we have had an eventful past few weeks and many things have changed. In the past I have delivered this speech with respect to Harry Potter and asked you not to bother him with questions about the recent events in his life. Now many of you know why. Some memories are just too painful to relive for the sake of simple conversation.

"For those of you who returned home for the holidays as well as those of you who did not actively

participate in the defense of the Hogwarts and Hogsmeade I must ask you to please respect the rights and privacy of those who did and not ask them any questions they might find hard to answer. We lost several fine witches and wizards in that battle as well as a few promising students who gave their lives for what they believed in and I ask that you honor their memory by remembering what they died for and keeping their memories alive in your hearts.

"We are going to strive for normalcy as soon as possible. However, since many of you are still dealing with the pains of war, counseling sessions and support groups will be held every Sunday evening until such time as they are no longer needed. The faculty and staff as well as several representatives from Saint Mungo's will be on hand to help you deal with any issues you might have. I encourage you all to attend. If you were not here or did not actively participate in our defense and would like to attend one or more of these sessions then I must ask that you get permission from the participants before attending.

"On a lighter note, there will be an awards ceremony next Saturday, starting at 1:00 PM, to honor and recognized those who fought and those who died. That is all. Now please, tuck in."

The silence that lingered in the hall after the headmaster's speech was almost deafening. No one had ever heard him sound so grave. But gradually the conversations picked up and, after a while, small bits of laughter began to fill the air.

In Defense Against the Dark Arts the next morning Remus, Kingsley and Alastor were all looking a bit grim and Tonks was looking nothing short of shell-shocked. "Well that was interesting," Kingsley said. "And I must commend all of you on a job well done."

Moody growled his affirmation then added, "Aye. We couldna done it without ye."

Tonks nodded her head as tears began to well up in her eyes. "I'll be honest with you guys. I've only been an auror for a few years and that was only my third encounter with all out war; and I'm proud of you. I don't think I could have asked for any better mates than you students and the others who fought on our side. I thank you."

Remus looked up from where he was sitting on a stool in a shadowy corner - he was still recovering from the effects of the last full moon - and sighed. Standing up and walking over to stand beside Tonks he said, "Now you know why what we have been trying to teach you is so important."

A girl in the back row raised her hand. Pointing to her Remus said, "Yes?"

"Excuse me, Professor Lupin, but I went home for the holidays and wasn't here for the battle. I understand why its hard for most people to talk about it because there are things my grandfather still won't talk about when we ask him about the war against Grindelwald and I hope the rest of you don't mind but I think it would be very instructive if we could talk about the spells that were used and how and why they were used."

Several of the students shuffled uncomfortably in their seats and a few even grumbled about her just wanting to hear their stories but the more Harry thought about it the better he liked the idea. Remus seemed to think about the girl's suggestion for several seconds then said, "You may be right. After all, if what I've heard is true then that is precisely how Harry's study group was started last year."

The girl smiled at the acceptance of her suggestion and the rest of the class was spent discussing the many curses, hexes and charms used in their defense of the school and how and why they were used. The discussion turned out to be so successful that it set the pattern for the rest of that week's classes.

In Charms Professor Flitwick openly discussed the battle and praised the twins for their line of fireworks and portable swamps. He complimented them on their creativity and ingenuity and told everyone that they would go far in the wizarding world. Towards the end of class he said, "Now I don't want you to get the wrong idea but sometimes the greatest minds are those that cause the most trouble while in school. The Weasley twins were, and still are, great pranksters and I wouldn't be disappointed if some of you were to follow in their footsteps."

Hermione's jaw just about hit the floor when she heard this but she quickly recovered when she apparently realized that the diminutive professor was encouraging them to be creative while developing their personal charms and to not necessarily play by the rules. He was not encouraging them to hurt anyone out of spite but he was encouraging them to find creative applications for seemingly innocent charms. Their assignment for that week was three rolls of parchment on the use of charms in battlefield operations. They were to use both historical references as well as, for those who had participated in the battle, personal experience. They were to also begin developing at least three charms for either offensive or defensive maneuvers or a combination of the two.

Professor McGonagall was slowly pacing back and forth across the front of the Transfiguration classroom when they entered, apparently deep in thought. She glanced up occasionally as the students entered but didn't say anything. When everyone was settled and the bell sounded, signaling the start of class, she walked over to her desk, picked up a handful of small stones and, without warning, tossed them out over the students' heads. The reflexes of some were slower than others but before any of the stones could either strike any of the students or hit the desks or floor they were all transfigured onto a variety of butterflies, birds, flowers or leaves. "Very good," she said after the cries of spells being cast had died away, a faint smile appearing on her normally stern face. "You have learned your lessons well. And from the reports we have received you all did an excellent job of defending yourselves against the rather crude weapons of the trolls and goblins. I must say that I am proud of all of you. Today, however, we are going to begin the study of human transfiguration.

"These transfigurations are very complicated and can easily go awry if you are not careful. As those of you who were in Advanced Potions last term learned, the Polyjuice Potion is used to temporarily transform one person into the likeness of another. The transfigurations you will learn in here are not as dramatic as the effects of this potion but they can be used to effectively alter your appearance so that you will be unrecognizable to anyone who does not know that the transfigurations are in place.

"In addition, this term we will be learning about the animagus transformation. As I stated at the beginning of the year this transformation requires a highly advanced potion to initiate the process as well as an ability to do a small amount of wandless magic. It is unlikely many of you will be able to perform this spell. However, since all of you must be given the opportunity to at least try I thought we would spend today casting a spell that will reveal what your animagus forms might be. When I call your name please bring your wand and step to the front of the room."

Several minutes later she called Hermione who excitedly stood up and, taking her wand, walked to

the front of the room to stand in front of the teacher's desk facing Professor McGonagall. Thus far they had seen a bat, a badger, a wolverine and a skunk come shooting out of their classmates' wands. Harry couldn't help but wonder what Hermione's animigus form would be. "Very well, Miss Granger," Professor McGonagall said. "You know the wand movement and the incantation please proceed."

Hermione raised her wand, performed the complicated wand movement, tracing an intricate pattern in the air, and said, "Acclaro Animans!" Almost immediately a murky mist sprang from her wand, which quickly took the shape of a brown otter. The otter flipped and flopped and performed several animated antics before dissipating into nothingness. Professor McGonagall's face softened briefly as she smiled at Hermione. "Well done," she said then called the next person forward.

When Neville was called he glanced briefly over at Harry for support then turned to look at their Transfiguration Professor. After a moment's hesitation he raised his wand, made the movements and cast the spell. The murky mist that sprang from his wand slowly grew and expanded until it took the shape of a large bull of an American breed of cattle with long, sharp, intimidating horns. Everyone gasped at this display and Professor McGonagall even stepped back in surprise. "Where did that come from?" she exclaimed. Neville shrugged his shoulders and grinned sheepishly as the magical energy dissipated into the air.

When Harry stepped to the front of the class several minutes later he could sense that all eyes were on him and it made him very uncomfortable. But then all eyes had been on everyone else too so he had nothing to complain about. "All right, Mister Potter," Professor McGonagall said. "Let's see what your animagus form will be."

Harry looked into her eyes for a bit then raised his wand and began tracing the pattern in the air. As he traced the last imaginary line he said, "Acclaro Animans!" and the now familiar murky mist sprang from the tip of his wand. Unlike the others, however, his mist shot out and divided into two separate creatures. The first to appear was an enormous lion that was at least as large as the professor's desk. Shortly thereafter a second, smaller animal appeared. This one was a large, black, panther. Both animals had green eyes but the lion had a dark lightening bolt shaped growth of hair on its right shoulder. The panther, however, other than its startlingly green eyes, had no distinguishing characteristics.

The rest of the students gasped and Professor McGonagall took a startled step back from Harry and studied him for several seconds, the thin line of her lips pressed together in an expression of intense scrutiny. "It would seem that you have two possible animagus forms, Mister Potter," she said, breaking the silence that had fallen over the room. "We will have to see what, if anything, comes of this."

When Ron was called forward, towards the end of class, he cast the revealing charm and a reddish mist shot forth from his wand. As it began to take form most of the students were terrified at what they saw. The mist grew and expanded until a large, ginger-haired wolf was standing on the floor in front of Professor McGonagall's desk. The wolf was at least as large as the largest werewolf. It had Ron's blue eyes and a viscous snarl on its lips.

As soon as it was completely formed it walked around Professor McGonagall, eyeing her hungrily, then walked over and sat in front of Ron. It looked at him for a moment then raised its head and let out a long, silent howl which (if the apparition had been capable of making a sound) would have

rattled the windows and frightened more than just a few students. Ron looked nervously over at the professor, beads of perspiration beginning to appear on his forehead and brow, and swallowed hard. "Well, Mister Weasley," Minerva said, "it would seem that you patronus as well as your potential animagus form are truly intimidating creatures."

Severus was most definitely not himself in Potions that afternoon. He tried to hide it but Harry could tell that he was both worried and shocky. His face was slightly paler than usual; his eyes held a frightened, almost haunted, look; and the small beads of perspiration that continually appeared on his forehead caused him to continually mop at his brow with a slightly soiled white handkerchief. He took attendance and lectured extensively about the Wolfsbane Potion. He was so preoccupied that he actually forgot to give either Harry or Neville a hard time or to deduct points from any of the houses.

After Class, as Harry, Ron, Hermione and Neville made their way towards the Gryffindor Tower and their common room, they walked along in silence for several minutes until they were alone. "What do you think is wrong with Severus?" Ron asked.

Harry stopped and looked vacantly ahead for several seconds. "He had a rough night last night," he said solemnly. Then, leaning with his back against a nearby wall, set his book bag down and slid down the wall until he was squatting on his haunches. "Tom doesn’t like to lose and when he loses he takes it out on his Death Eaters. Severus had the Cruciatus Curse held on him for several minutes last night."

Looking up at his friends who were now gathered around him Harry said, "But that’s not what bothers me."

Ron and Neville joined Harry on the floor. "What do you mean?" Neville asked.

"I mean," Harry said with an air of exhaustion that one would normally expect from a much older man, "that Tom has abandoned his policy of organized attacks and has declaired open season on muggles, muggle-borns and half-bloods. He has given his Death Eaters a list of targets and told them to strike at will."

Hermione gasped and Ron looked up at her with a worried expression on his face as Neville dropped his gaze to study the floor in front of him. "There isn’t really anything we can do to stop him," Harry said dejectedly, his eyes still on the floor. "I gave a copy of the list to Albus this morning but there are just too many names to guard them all; I think the Ministry and the Order are going to prioritize and coordinate their guarding activities but it isn’t going to be easy."

Squatting down across from Harry, Hermione said, "So what can we do?"

Harry looked up at her. "We can prepare ourselves for the loss of life. I’ll do what I can to warn as many people as I can but I’m only one person and there’s only so much I can do."

After several more seconds of silence Ron and then Neville and Hermione stood back up. Harry stayed staring glumly at the floor for several more seconds until Ron and Neville tapped him on the shoulders offering him their hands and pulled him to his feet. The four Gryffindors then made their way to their common room for a break before heading down to dinner.

Chapter 40. Hope, Faith and Determination

When the post arrived at breakfast the next morning Hedwig, Henry and Pig entered with the other owls. They weren't carrying anything but, as had become her habit, they flew in and landed on their companion's shoulders simply to spend time with them. After the third day Harry had started requesting a small bowl of owl treats with his breakfasts so the owls would always have something to eat that was more in keeping with their regular diets. Harry was stroking Hedwigs feathers with one hand, after feeding her several owl treats, and Hermione was in the process of paying a tawny owl for her copy of the Daily Prophet when someone screamed. Everyone suddenly stopped, looked up and watched in stunned silence as a young girl from the Huffelpuff Table jumped up and ran out of the Great Hall crying.

No one moved as the girl sped from the room, too stunned to know what to say or do or think. Then, as the girl brushed past a few late arrivals and ran out into the Entrance Hall, Professor Sprout quickly got up from the Head Table and rushed over to where the girl had been sitting. Picking up the piece of parchment the girl had let fall to the floor she read it and looked worriedly up at Professor Dumbledore before turning and following the girl out of the hall at a fast walk. Dumbledore looked down the table and nodded to Madam Pomfrey, who quickly stood up and left the Great Hall, before turning to speak briefly with Professor McGonagall and getting up to leave himself.

Professor McGonagall waited until all of the owls had left then stood up. Tapping lightly on the edge of a crystal goblet with her knife she called for silence then said, her voice echoing in the stillness of the room, "Miss Larson has suffered a terrible loss. True, it is not the first of this war and I fear that it will not be the last but please respect Miss Larson's privacy and give her the time she needs to grieve. She will not be attending classes for the remainder of this week and will need your help in more ways than one. She will not be leaving because she no longer has a home to go to and those of you who are her friends will be excused from your classes on a rotating basis so that you may keep her company. We are all the family she has now and we must show our support."

As Professor McGonagall sat back down many of the teachers and several students visibly paled and an even more profound silence fell over the Great Hall as history began to repeat itself. Gradually, however, people began to return to their meals. With five minutes to spare Harry, Ginny, Ron, Hermione, Neville and Luna were the last to leave and head off towards their respective classes. Remus, who had been watching Harry ever since the announcement, caught up with Harry, Ron and Neville outside of Firenze's classroom and tapped him on the shoulder. "Harry," he said softly, "I want you to know that. . ."

Harry turned around and looked at his friend. "I know what you are going to say, Remus," he said tiredly. "There was nothing I could do about it and I already know that."

Remus nodded. "That, and that this is what it was like when I was in school. There were, on average, two to three notices per week and sometimes there were even three or four a day. For right now we've got the upper hand because we have got you six as well as the rest of the order and we are better trained than his new recruits. We also have the charm, which will hopefully cut down on the number of casualties and give the ordinary witch or wizard a fighting chance. I know you take this personally and I really can't blame you because he has, after all, been out to get you since before you were born. We may lose some real property and we may lose a few lives but at least now

we have a fighting chance. Last time we really didn't have much other than hope, faith and determination. Please don't give up on hope, Harry, because sometimes that's all we've got, hope, faith and determination."

Harry looked into Remus' eyes and saw that the werewolf was being completely honest with him and that behind the honesty there was a the kind of hope, faith and determination that had seen him through his years as a werewolf as well as many years of war and the loss of the only true friends he had ever really had. Leaning heavily against the wall Harry watched as a small, hopeful smile appeared on Remus' face. "Thanks, Remus," he said. "I'll remember that."

Remus smiled. "You're a powerful wizard, Harry. Not only that, you're emotionally strong. You've seen and experienced more than most wizards or witches twice your age and I have faith in you."

Harry blushed slightly and, bowing his head, smirked at the thought of anyone placing their faith in him. "Yeah, right. Just don't place all your faith in me because I'm going to need all the help I can get."

Remus laughed and clapped Harry on the shoulder. "Oh, don't worry about that, Harry. We don't expect you to do all of the fighting. We'll be standing right beside you when the time comes. Now get to class."

When Harry entered Firenze's classroom Harry was surprised to see that Ron was actually talking to and visiting with Victor Krum. At the moment he and Ron and Neville were laughing about a joke or story someone had told while Firenze watched and patiently listened in the background. When he saw Harry, however, the centaur stepped around the three humans and approached Harry. "Good morning, Harry Potter," he said. "I understand you took my advice and did not ask my people to do anything more than protect their own forest. That was a wise move, Harry Potter. They are a proud people and would not take kindly to being asked to do anything more. At least not yet."

Harry shook Firenze's hand. "Yes. And I thank you for your advice, Firenze. I will not ask them to do anything more than they would do under normal circumstances. After all, they don't particularly like humans. All I am ever going to ask of them is a degree of cooperation in defending the forest."

"Very wise, indeed, Harry Potter," Firenze said. "But come, let us join the others and begin today's lesson."

After class, as the three were walking towards the Great Hall for lunch, Harry said, "Oi, Ron. What is it with you and Krum? I thought you hated him?"

Ron blushed slightly as he looked down at his feet. "Hate is a little strong. I will admit that I was jealous and didn't trust him but . . ."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Okay. So what gives?"

Ron shuffled his feet a little while studying the floor then said, "Do you remember what I told you about me, Hermione and Ginny before the Yule Ball?"

Harry thought for a moment as he recalled the conversation they had had in the common room while waiting for the girls. "Yes," he said.

"Well, it's like this: When your best friend's life hangs in the balance a lot of the stuff you thought

was important doesn't seem all that important anymore. "We talked about a lot of things during those two weeks and one of them was Victor."

"Oh," Harry said softly. "So you get along now?"

"Yeah. He's really not all that bad once you get to know him."

Harry laughed. "I could have told you that two years ago!"

"Yeah," Ron laughed nervously. "But two years ago I wouldn't have listened."

In D.A. that night Harry looked around the room and tried to smile. "I know this morning didn't start out all that great but I want you to know that I am very proud of all of you.

"I talked with the other Defense Professors this afternoon and the Headmaster has given the go ahead for a kind of school-wide dueling competition that will take place at the end of the year. Professors Lupin, Moody, Shacklebolt, Tonks and I will be pitting our best fighters against each other in a five-way battle on the castle grounds. It will be a no-holds-barred competition where the last team with any members standing wins. The only rules are that no unforgivable curses may be cast and it is a disarm only competition. Other than that anything goes. So you are going to have to learn everything from charms, hexes and curses to transfiguration and blocking. You aren't going to know what is going to be thrown at you either in here or during the contest so you are going to have to learn everything. Are there any questions?"

Colin raised his hand. "Yes, Colin?" Harry asked.

Colin's face was grim and his eyes held a haunted look that broke Harry's heart because he knew what Colin had seen and that it had robbed the excitable young Gryffindor of his innocence. "Um," Colin began uncertainly. "How many fighters will be allowed on each team?"

"Ten," Harry said, stating the number agreed upon in their meeting the previous afternoon. "There will be a total of fifty fighters. The rest of the school will be watching from the battlements."

On their way back to the common room after class that night a mischievous grin started to play across Harry's face. Ginny noticed and stopped him several meters short of the portrait of the Fat Lady. When they were alone she said, "Alright, Harry. What are you thinking?"

Harry looked at her, an innocent expression on his face, and said, "Oh, nothing really. It's just that we have a leg up on all of the other classes because our practice room is the Room of Requirement and we can create any environment we want."

As his grin grew into a full-blown smile Ginny burst out laughing. "Oh, Harry," she laughed, "You are too much!"

When the time came for their first official Order meeting of the new term Harry, Ginny, Ron, Hermione and Neville met Luna at the entrance to the Headmaster's Office. As they approached the gargoyle swung aside. When they reached the door Harry was about to knock when Bill Weasley pulled it open. "Right on time," he said, smiling at the surprised faces of the six students standing before him.

"What are you doing here?" Ron asked. "Is everyone all right? No one's been hurt have they?" The

panic was evident in his voice and Harry could feel Ginny's muscles tighten as she squeezed his hand and tensed every muscle in her body, bracing herself for the news she feared most.

Bill's smile faltered slightly but was quickly replaced. "No," he said. "Everyone's fine. Mum and Dad and Fleur are at headquarters; Percy and George are at the Burrow; and Fred is at the shop in Diagon Alley, which is where I will be later on tonight." Ginny visibly relaxed and loosened her grip on Harry's hand. "I came here to talk to Harry, Remus, Hermione and Minerva. And if they agree with what Fleur and I have come up with we will get to work on it in as soon as possible."

Stepping back into the antechamber Bill let the students in and followed them into the library. Remus, Kingsley, Minerva, Alastor and Tonks were already seated around the table discussing various topics of interest and Harry could see Severus and Albus leaning forward in the two wing-backed chairs in front of the fireplace speaking quietly in the background. When they had all entered the library the section of shelves slid back into place and the torches began to burn slightly brighter to give them more light. Albus and Severus stopped talking and stood up, walking around the wing-backed chairs to take their seats at the table. When everyone was seated Albus looked around the table at the other members of their little group, his eyes finally coming to rest on Harry. "It would seem that our precautions were well within the confines of reasonable expectation," he said. "We have dealt him a serious blow. However, due to our successes the war has moved into another phase. Rather than striving for frontal attacks and battlefield victories Tom has chosen to resort to the terrorist techniques he employed in the closing years of the last war. He may still have a few major battles planned but for now at least he is resorting to assassinations and targeted attacks.

"I am afraid your parents have gone into hiding, Hermione, as has your father, Luna, and your grandmother, Neville. Although I must say, your grandmother was much harder to convince than Luna's father.

"Will we be able to visit them?" Hermione asked.

Dumbledore paused and considered this question carefully before answering. "Yes," he said gravely. "I suppose that can be arranged. However, I must warn you that any visits will be difficult to arrange as we do not wish to risk any of your lives unnecessarily."

Hermione was silent for a moment then nodded her acceptance of the situation. "I understand, Albus. Will we be able to contact them in any way?"

Albus smiled but his eyes held a certain hesitancy that told Harry that making contact with anyone on the outside was not going to be as easy as it had been. "Yes, you will be able to contact your parents. However, any correspondence will have to go through channels and will have to be approved to avoid disclosing anything of strategic importance."

Harry watched as Hermione hung her in defeat then remembered the mirror he had discovered at the end of his fifth year, after it was already too late. "Er, Albus, what about two-way mirrors?"

Everyone looked curiously over at Harry. "What do you mean?" Albus asked.

Harry took a deep breath to settle his nerves then said, "I didn't discover it until after it was already too late but Sirius gave me a two-way mirror just before we got on the Knight Bus last year. He said that he and my father used them while they were in detention to plan their pranks and such. I was

just wondering if something like thiat could be arranged so Hermione and her parents could at least see and talk to each other."

Albus' eyebrows shot up and his eyes sparkled with the joy of discovery. "Ah, yes. I should have known those two would come up with something like that." Turning to Remus he said, "Remus, you were their cohort in many of their schemes. Is this possible?"

Remus blushed slightly. "It's a complicated charm but yes it can be done."

"Can it be keyed to only work for certain people?" Moody asked. "We don't want them falling into the wrong hands and being used against us."

Remus thought for a moment. "Yes, I suppose that could be done. It should be relatively easy to key one to work for a certain witch or wizard but keying one to work for a specific muggle might prove difficult. I will give it my best though."

"Why did my father have to go into hiding" Luna asked.

"Your father," Kingsley said, his deep voice rumbling around the room, "is a known supporter of the light side and is the editor of the Quibbler. It is important that we keep that line of communication open so that the wizarding world can have a more complete picture of what is going on in the war. The Daily Prophet is good at reporting casualties and fatalities but that is only one small part of the total picture. Your father's paper reports as much of the full story as it can without revealing any secrets. Your father has gone into hiding along with many of his top reporters to keep them both safe and alive. The Quibbler's main offices are still open; however an alternate printing facility has been set up just in case the main facility is either attacked or destroyed."

Luna closed her eyes and bowed her head. "Okay," she said softly.

"We know this isn't going to be easy for any of you," Minerva said, "but we hope you will understand that it is a necessary evil."

"What about my gran?" Neville asked.

"Ah, yes," Dumbledore chuckled. "It took quite a bit of convincing to get her to go into hiding. She wants to exact her revenge upon Ms. Lestrange at least as much as you do, Neville. And she most definitely does not want to lose you. However, she has accepted that she can be of greater service to us by translating and documenting your family's private library of spells in an undisclosed location than by remaining an open target for Voldemort and his followers."

Neville let out a long, low whistle. "Wow," he said. "Is she really going to do that?"

"Oh, yes," Albus said merrily. "She is more than willing to part with at least a few of your family's secrets if it will help bring an end to Voldemort's reign of terror."

Ron looked at Neville curiously. "Some of those spells have been in the family for centuries," Neville explained. "There are curses, hexes and charms in some of those books that haven't been used for at least a hundred years."

Ron's eyebrows shot up but Ginny cut him off before he could say anything. "What about our parents?" she asked.

"Molly and Arthur have chosen to accept their fate whatever it may be. They know the risks and the dangers, perhaps better than most," Albus said sadly. "They were, after all, members of the original order. Except for your father's work at the Ministry - which, I might add, has increased substantially over the past few months - they are more or less permanently stationed at headquarters, which, as you know, is unplotable.

"Now, if there are no further questions I think we should hear from William on the security measures that have been taken since our last meeting."

Bill cleared his throat and glanced down at the sheet of parchment that lay on the table in front of him. "In light of recent events," he began, "people have begun to recognize the necessity of tolerating a few inconveniences. We are in the process of setting up Anti-apparation wards around potentially targeted homes. We are setting them up with a fifty-meter buffer zone so that whoever is on the inside will either have a fighting chance or a chance to escape. We have set up Anti-apparation wards around most of Diagon Alley with a few select points set aside for arrivals and departures and these points are being constantly monitored.

"We have also been working on rebuilding and tightening up the Floo Network. A few public fireplaces have access to large portions of the network and they are being monitored as well. But many people are asking to be either removed from the network altogether or are forming their own, smaller networks consisting of those they feel they can trust, with limited access to the main body. Fire talking is still available throughout most of the network; however, some people are asking to be removed from that service as well.

"It is an inconvenience but the people understand that some sacrifices have got to be made to ensure their safety. They don't like in and I don't blame them but at least they understand. I'm not saying there aren't a few holdouts because there are. I only hope we can convince them before it is too late.

"What about Knockturn Alley?" Harry asked, remembering his brief adventure there in the summer before his second year.

Bill's face darkened slightly. "That's one of the sticking points," he said. "They don't like it. They refuse to participate in any of our security measures and we can't monitor all of their fireplaces. However, most of the entrances and exits to and from Knockturn Alley are being watched."

After a brief pause Albus cleared his throat. "Very good, William. At least they aren't waiting too long to initiate these security measures. I'm sorry it has come to this but at least now we have a chance." Turning towards Snape he said, "Severus, I believe you are next."

Snape took a deep breath and stared vacantly at a point near the center of the table for several seconds before starting his report. "He is frustrated and angry. He still doesn't know how we are getting our information. He didn't reveal his plans for the attack until just before midnight on Christmas Eve and he doesn't know how we found out. It would seem that the tables have been turned. He no longer knows whom he can trust. It makes my job a little more dangerous but . . ."

"Are you going to be all right, Severus?" Ron asked, clearly concerned that his least favorite professor who also happened to be one of his most reliable sources of information was in danger.

Snape actually smiled briefly, something he had begun doing periodically since realizing that some

people actually cared about his welfare. "I will be fine . . . Ron. And if things get too dangerous I have a way out."

Ron nodded his acceptance of Severus' reassurances.

Harry wondered what Severus meant when he said he had 'a way out' but held his peace.

"Thank you, Severus, William," Dumbledore said thoughtfully. "It would seem we have a slight advantage. And it would also seem, William, that with what you have told me of your planned discussion with Harry, Hermione, Minerva and Remus that we are closer to finding a permanent solution to this problem than we have ever been. With that said I think the time has come for us to break into our discussion groups and get to work."

As the professors and students paired off Ron, Severus and Alastor moved over to one of the small meeting tables that had been set up around the periphery of the room as did Kingsley and Neville and Luna and Tonks. Albus and Ginny moved towards one side of the circular table while Minerva and Remus walked around to join Harry, Bill and Hermione.

"What have you got for us?" Remus asked as he sat down.

"What I've got is a theory which is, in essence, a variation or perhaps modification of the Potter-Lupin-Granger-Padfoot Defensive Charm. It's a little more complex than the charm you guys developed last summer because it is a nested charm, kind of like the Modified Patronus Charm, and, if it works as predicted, will serve very nicely as a customizable imprisonment charm."

Harry and Remus leaned in. "So," Remus said. "What is it?"

Bill leaned back slightly and briefly glanced at the men on either side of him. We've been doing some research, studying the ancient texts - both magical and muggle - and we've found a few vague references to something called Purgatory. So far as we have been able to determine, Purgatory currently only exists in the spiritual realms and can only really be described as a place of punishment for willful acts of malice. From what little we have been able to find, Purgatory is a place to which all truly malevolent souls are condemned for however long it takes them to beg forgiveness for their sins and mend their ways. It is not one of your typical fire and brimstone visions of hell we are talking about here but actually something much worse. In the Purgatory we have been researching a soul is isolated from the rest of the spiritual community. The only company they will have during this period will be all of the physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual pain and suffering they have caused in their lifetime. They still have all of their wits about them so they are able to think and feel and reason but there is no escape until they truly repent.

"What makes this Purgatory truly frightening is that repeat offenders are visited upon not only by all of the pain and suffering they have caused in their most recent incarnation but by all of the pain and suffering they have caused in all previous incarnations as well. "Now, keep in mind that this is all theory. We don't actually know if it will work but some of our best minds have been working on it and they seem to think it will. The nice part about it is that you three have already done the hard part." Harry, Hermione and Remus exchanged looks then looked at Bill curiously. "When you built the Potter-Lupin-Granger-Padfoot Defensive Charm you built the shell, the delivery mechanism if you will, that is an unbreakable charm in and of itself. All we have to do is modify it slightly and nest the rest of the charm within it. But since you guys developed the original charm we thought we should ask your permission before proceeding."

Harry, Remus and Hermione looked at each other for a moment, green eyes meeting amber meeting brown, then with a single nod said, "Do it!" in unison.

Bill chuckled. "We thought you might say that."

"It sounds a lot like what we have been looking for," Remus said, his voice calm but his eyes filled with the pain of loss and the anger of betrayal. "But how can it be used as an imprisonment charm?"

Bill leaned back in his chair and sighed. "That's where the real work begins. If it works we won't be able to just go using it on every criminal or thief because we all make mistakes when we are young and wind up hurting people without meaning to. We can't legitimately make people suffer for their mistakes. The charm will have to be modified to fit the crime the person is accused of committing. Otherwise . . ."

Harry cut out the rest of Bill's explanation. He was too busy thinking about Tom's many crimes and all of the pain and suffering he had caused and was still causing. How could anyone set a limit on that and even then how could anyone craft a spell large enough to hold it all. Oh, he wasn't fooling himself, he knew that he had caused a fair amount of pain and suffering in his time as well but it was nothing compared to Voldemort's activities and even then most of it had been inadvertent. "I want an unmodified version of the charm," he blurted out suddenly, cutting off Bill's description of the precautions that were going to have to be taken to make sure the charm was not abused. "I'm only going to use it once," he said innocently when the others turned to look at him suspiciously.

Remus studied him for a moment, his golden eyes quickly scanning his face for any signs of deception, then slowly nodded his head. "Yes, I suppose you will need it at least once," he said.

"When do you think you will have it finished?" Remus asked.

Bill, who had not yet been informed of the part Harry was to play in the coming war, glanced suspiciously over at Harry for a moment. "It's going to take some time because it is going to be one of the most complex spells ever created and we have got to make sure it is unbreakable so we are thinking maybe late June or early July; and if you are going to use it, Harry, even if you are only going to use it once you are going to have to internalize it like you did the Potter Charm during your demonstration last year."

Harry nodded his understanding and acceptance.

"Well," Bill said, pushing back from the table and standing up, "I had better get back to the shop. Things aren't as safe as they once were in the alley and even with all of the security in place I don't like leaving Fred there alone any longer than I have to."

"Why do you have the twins separated?" Harry asked.

Bill smiled. "They're too valuable. We don't mind them being together during the day when they are working and people are around but when it comes to sleeping arrangements we want them in two separate locations. After all, they are the makers of some of our most effective weapons. We don't want to lose either of them but if it comes to it we would rather lose one than both."

Harry stared over at Ron and Severus, lost in thought, for several seconds. "Yeah," he finally

whispered then said, "Tell them . . . Give them my best and tell your people that I want that charm as soon as possible. But more than that, I want it to work."

Bill looked curiously at Remus who shrugged his shoulders and said, "It's something Harry has to do."

Bill glanced warily at Harry then back at Remus who shook his head to discourage any questions. "Alright, Harry," Bill said. "Will do."

"Thanks," Harry said, smiling weakly. "I appreciate it."

As the bookcase slid up and out of the way Bill left the library and entered Albus' main office where Harry heard him use the fireplace to floo to Number 12 Grimmauld Place where he supposed he would turn around and floo to the twins' shop in Diagon Alley.

Harry was about to ask Remus what he thought of the charm Bill had described when Albus and Ginny came over. Albus was smiling and his eyes were twinkling merrily and Ginny was grinning from ear to ear. "I have spoken with Peeves," the Headmaster said cheerfully. "It would seem our successes against the dementors and banshees was more than enough to convince the ghosts, poltergeists and ghouls to side with us; and as I was telling Ginevra, according to William, your foresight in protecting the goblins, even though they were fighting for the opposition, was one of the deciding factors in convincing then to side with the light." Then he chuckled. "Of course, the Weasley's fireworks, portable swamps and other weapons of war may have played a role in their decision as well."

Harry smiled as Remus snorted his laughter.

"And," Albus continued, "as I have been discussing with Ginevra, I have been contact with Brian. His official title is High Lord of the High Elves but he is a very humble man who does not believe in using his authority any more than absolutely necessary. Now that you and Ginevra have bonded and become soul mates it is possible for you to become blood brothers with his son, Joseph, who bonded with his soul mate over the holidays as well.

"I assure you that the two events were, to our knowledge, separate and unique. They do, however, hold some interesting possibilities." The headmaster's eyes glazed over briefly as his mind apparently wandered of to consider some of these possibilities. Then, shaking his head as if to clear his mind and return to the present, he said, "Becoming the blood brother or, as it will be in Ginevra's case, the blood sister of a High Elf is a bit more complicated than becoming the blood brother of a Wood Elf. It involves the sharing of your energies. It is a permanent, spiritual bond, similar to the one you and Ginevra share. There are, however, a few differences. For example, in this bonding you and Joseph will become soul mates as will Ginevra and Joseph's soul mate. Once that is completed you will be bound to Joseph's soul mate and he will be bound to Ginevra." Dumbledore paused then shook his head again. "It is all very complicated, Harry, and it will take time to explain it fully. But we have two months to prepare so I wouldn't worry about it just yet."

Harry looked down at Ginny who was smiling happily as her eyes sparkled with excitement. He smiled warmly at her as the love he felt for her coursed through his body. Reaching out he took her hand and felt the connection between then strengthen.

Albus smiled at them and then, looking over at Remus, winked conspiratorially. "I think we will

leave you two to get better acquainted," Albus said with a soft chuckle. "I would, however, like you to read this book when you have time," he said, pulling a small book from within the folds of his robes and handing it to Harry. "It will help prepare you for what is to come.

Startled from his intimate, spiritual conversation with Ginny Harry looked up, suddenly aware that someone was talking to him. "Huh?" he asked.

Professor Dumbledore chuckled. "I said you might want to read this book as it will prepare you for the bonding ceremony with the High Elves."

"Oh," Harry said, blushing slightly at being caught in the act of staring into Ginny’s eyes. Taking the book he read the title, Spiritual Bonds and Blood Brothers, a Guide to Bonding with the High Elves. He looked for the author’s name but found none so he figured it must be another one of Albus' creations. Looking up into the eyes of his old mentor he said, "Thank you."

Albus smiled and his eyes twinkled merrily. "You are quite welcome, Harry. Now I suggest you and Ginevra continue and conclude your conversation before calling it a night.

Chapter 41. Remembering Padfoot

The next morning Harry awoke to the smell of Eggs Benedict. Rolling out of bed he put his glasses on, put his bathrobe on and walked out into the sitting room. When he could see into the kitchen area he looked up and saw Ginny busily preparing their breakfast while happily humming to herself. Shaking his head he turned around and went into the bathroom to take a shower.

Five minutes later he was just about to get out of the shower when he heard Ginny's voice call out to him from somewhere inside the bathroom, "Good morning, Harry."

Harry's eyes grew wide and he pulled the shower curtain closed as he looked up in shock. What was Ginny doing in his bathroom? "Er, Ginny?"

"Yes?" he heard her ask nonchalantly but with a hint of mischievous glee.

"Er, what are you doing?"

"Fixing breakfast, silly," she giggled. "After all, we did give Winky and Dobby the weekends off and Saturdays are my days to cook."

Regaining his composure Harry shook his head and chastised himself for forgetting about their arrangement. "Er, okay. Do you mind if I get dressed?"

Ginny giggled again. "No. Just give me a second and I will be out of here." Then, a few seconds later, she said, "All right, Harry. The bathroom is all yours," and closed the door.

When Harry got out of the shower he noticed some extra bottles of shampoo and conditioner as well as an additional hair brush on the vanity and an extra toothbrush next to the sink. He was definitely going to have to talk to Ginny about this. Sharing his trunk with her was one thing but sharing his bathroom was going just a little bit too far.

When he was dressed he walked out into the kitchen and smiled. Ginny was happy and that is all that really mattered. But still he wanted to know what she was thinking. "Uh, Ginny?" he began as he sat down across from her.

"Hmm?"

"Er, I don't mean to pry or anything but what's going on?"

Ginny looked up from her plate, caught off guard for a moment, then smiled. "Oh, you mean my stuff in the bathroom?"

"Mm hmm," Harry nodded.

"Well," Ginny said as if stating the obvious, "We do have that awards ceremony today and since all of my dress robes and battle robes are over here I thought I would take a shower and get ready over here."

Harry looked at her curiously for a moment as he thought this over then shrugged his shoulders. "Oh. Okay then. I was afraid you were thinking about moving in or something."

Ginny burst out laughing. "Oh, Harry!" she laughed. "You poor innocent soul. I'm not going to move in for a couple more years yet. But I am going to take the occasional shower over here so you had better get used to it."

Harry blushed. "I can see that there are a lot of things I am going to have to get used to," he said more to himself than anyone else but Ginny heard him and laughed some more.

"Yes there are, Harry," she said as she expertly flipped a half spoon full of strawberry preserves across the table and hit him in the nose.

"Hey!" Harry said. "I just got out of the shower!"

Still laughing, Ginny got up and went over to the sink where she wet a washcloth. When she returned she took Harry's glasses off and washed his face. "Honestly!" she scolded herself as she carried his glasses back to the sink to clean them off. "I grew up with six brothers. You would think I would have the sense to find a man who could at least wash his own face."

Even though she was little more than a blur, Harry folded his arms across his chest and glared at her until she returned and placed his glasses back on his face and kissed him on the cheek. "Thank you," he said then, with a scowl, added, "I can tell that this is going to take a long time."

It had been agreed that the six, plus Remus and Tonks, would wear the battle robes that they had received for Christmas from the dragon keepers to the banquet and awards ceremony that afternoon. So after breakfast Harry and Ginny did their homework in the study, Ginny working on her potions essay while Harry began brewing the Animagus Potion he had discussed with Albus, Minerva and Severus that Thursday. They had already discussed the technicalities of the spell and it had been decided that, if he was successful, he would remain an unregistered, 'illegal' animagus for his own safety. They had also decided that if Ron, Hermione, Neville, Luna and Ginny were successful, as Ginny and Luna were being trained as well, that they would remain unregistered.

The potion and the spell were actually the two easiest parts of the process. The hardest parts were learning the habits of their animagus forms. They had to study their animal forms in depth, learning everything they could about them, and then learn to meditate and focus upon what it actually felt like to be that animal for hours on end before they could even think about trying either the potion or the spell.

Harry had an advantage in the meditation department because he used it on a daily basis to reinforce the Occlumency Wards around his mind. He also had an advantage in that he had been working with the model of the Hungarian Horntail for a little more than two months and knew what to expect when it came to imagining himself moving as another form. The others were slightly miffed at these advantages but were nevertheless excited to see what became of his efforts.

At around noon Ginny excused herself and stepped into Harry's bathroom to take a shower and get ready. While she was showering Harry changed into his battle robes and laid Ginny's out on the bed while listening to her singing in the shower. She really did have a very nice voice and he found that he actually liked listening to her.

The one thing Harry found himself thinking about while checking his potion before leaving it to simmer for the next twelve hours was that he felt he could actually get used to the idea of settling down to a domestic life with Ginny as his wife. But, he remembered, as Ginny stepped out of the

bedroom and into the sitting room, he still had to do something about Tom and even then the danger would not be passed because there were all of Tom's followers and dark lord wannabes that had to be dealt with. But then again, if the charm Bill and Fleur were working on lived up to their expectations that might not take so long after all. Then he could think about settling down and asking Ginny to marry him.

That last though startled him to no end and he was glad he was nowhere near his potion because he felt sure he would have dropped something. As it was he nervously ran his hands through his hair when Ginny plopped down beside him on the couch and cheerfully asked, "Well, are you ready?"

Harry started and looked over at her, desperately trying to quell his nerves. "Er, yeah!" he said almost too brightly which caused Ginny to look at him curiously. "I mean, yeah," he said more softly, in keeping with the occasion. "Let's go."

They met Ron and Hermione in the common room a few minutes later and Neville and Luna at the top of the stairs in the Entrance Hall a few minutes after that. Tonks and Remus were waiting for them at the bottom of the steps.

Harry had once again expanded the Great Hall to accommodate the thousands of people who would be attending the banquet and ceremony. The first thing Harry noticed as they approached the entrance, aside from the hundreds of large circular tables, each large enough to comfortably seat twelve couples, were the banners. Most of the house banners had been removed to leave the ceiling space clear. Along the front wall, however, the large Hogwarts banner was flanked by the smaller house banners - Slytherin and Huffelpuff on one side and Ravenclaw and Gryffindor on the other - and they were, in turn, flanked by the banners from every department in the Ministry of Magic as well as St. Mungo's and a few lesser known wizarding institutions. It would seem that everyone who participated in the defense of Hogwarts, no matter their capacity, was going to be honored.

"Names?" a middle aged wizard in the formal midnight blue robes of the aurors asked.

Returning to the present Harry looked at the man briefly then said, "Harry Potter, Ginevra Weasley, Ronald Weasley, Hermione Granger, Neville Longbottom, Luna Lovegood, Remus Lupin and Nymphadora Tonks."

The auror took a quick step back. "Uh, yes, sir. If you will follow me, please. Your table is down in front."

Harry groaned, wondering when people he had never met would stop treating him like some kind of royalty. Ron leaned into his shoulder a few seconds later and snickered, "Get used to it, mate. You're famous."

"Yeah," Harry growled, "but I don't want to be famous. I just want to be me."

As Ron burst out laughing Harry scowled and Ginny squeezed his hand. "Ignore him," she growled. "He's just being a prat."

When they arrived at their table they were seated with Mr. and Mrs. Granger, Mr. and Mrs. Babcock, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, Mr. Lovegood, Mrs. Longbottom, Fred, George, Bill, Fleur, Charlie, Percy and, surprisingly, Dobby and Winky who were dressed in their battle robes as well. Penelope Clearwater had broken up with Percy shortly after he had turned on the rest of his family after the

Tri-wizard Tournament and refused to take him back until he got his priorities straight. Harry could tell that he was working on it and that it hurt him to think that he had ruined his life for a job but there was nothing he, Harry, could do about it. Mrs. Weasley looked up and smiled as Harry, Ron, Neville and Remus pulled the chairs out for their dates and complimented the girls on how nice they looked. When she turned her attention to the boys, however, she had Ron to turn around so he could see the full effect, which embarrassed him to no end.

A few minutes later the doors to the Great Hall closed and Madam Bones approached the podium at center stage, beneath the Hogwarts banner. An image of the royal blue and gold Ministry of Magic seal appeared on the wall above and behind her and slowly faded into existence as the spacious auditorium grew silent. "Ladies and gentlemen," she began, "I stand before you this day as a representative of the people. I am not a politician. Neither do I aspire to be such. I have, however, been appointed to serve as the Interim Minister of Magic to see us through this difficult time as there are those who seem to think I have what it will take to see us through these dark and dangerous times. But this day is not about me; it is about you.

"Since the beginning of this war most of you have served in the defense of all that is right and good in some capacity. There have been many battles and skirmishes and I fear that there will most likely be many more. Many of you have lost loved ones in these battles and again I fear that many more lives may be lost before all is said and done. That said, I am going to turn this podium over to our host, the Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Albus Dumbledore."

Madam Bones' brief statement was greeted with polite applause. As she stepped back Albus stood up and stepped forward. Before approaching the podium, however, he took hold of Madam Bones' hands and said something to her. She smiled and nodded then returned to her seat. Albus stepped up to the podium and smiled, gazing out at his audience over his half moon spectacles, his blue eyes twinkling merrily as he made eye contact with at least a few. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said. "A moment of silence, if you would, as we remember those who have already fallen in this war."

The Great Hall fell silent. A few shuffling feet could be heard but nothing substantial. Harry’s thoughts immediately turned to Cedric Diggory - the first friend he had lost in this war - and to Sirius - his godfather. He wanted to include his parents in that list but he didn’t know if he should. His thoughts then turned to the Dursleys. He hadn’t liked them; indeed, he had had many issues with their treatment of him; but he had never wanted them dead. He included them in his list because the Death Eaters had killed them to get to him.

A moment later Albus cleared his throat. "Thank you," he said. "Now then, before we begin it is my great honor and privilege to award two fine young men with the Order of Merlin, First Class for their work in the development of Weasley’s Whiz-Bang Fireworks, their portable swamps and a number of other weapons of war which, I might add, started out as jokes." Fred and George started to stand up with the applause but Albus held his hand up for silence so they returned to their seats. "I also wish to make another announcement concerning these two young men."

When the hall was silent again he continued. "Last year these two young men - Fred and George Weasley - left school before they could take their final examinations, due to an unfortunate misunderstanding with the, then, Minister of Magic. I have taken the liberty of submitting samples of their work to the review board and I am please to announce that they have earned the highest marks in Charms and Potions in half a century. Ladies and gentlemen I give you Mesers Fred and George Weasley, two of the most highly qualified wizards you are ever likely to meet in our world."

The applause was deafening. As everyone else in the auditorium stood in ovation Fred and George fell out of their seats. Bill and Charlie helped them up and their mother ran around the table to hug and kiss both them. For once in their lives they didn't seem to mind being on the receiving end of her attention and hugged her back. Their father, Ginny, Ron, Percy and Hermione weren't far behind but Harry hung back. This was their moment. True, he had helped them by giving them his Tri-wizard winnings but other than that they had done it all on their own. He would talk to them later; but for now he was content to be happy for them. He gave then two thumbs up and smiled. Fred and George, however, ran around the table and pulled him into a sandwiching bear hug. "We owe it all to you, Harry!" they yelled.

"No," Harry laughed, "you owe it all to two very twisted minds that think nothing is more important than a good laugh."

When the commotion had died down and the twins had returned to their seats after receiving their awards Albus said, "could I ask Mister Harry Potter, Mister Remus Lupin and Miss Hermione Granger to step forward please. Harry, Hermione and Remus looked at each other with confused expressions on their faces. They already knew all of the awards that were going to be handed out as they had helped organize the event the week before and this did not fit into the program as they knew it. Standing up they approached the stage and walked up to stand behind Albus.

When they were all up on stage Albus began explaining the reason behind this unexpected turn. "As you know," he began, "until recently there has no defense against two of the three Unforgivable Curses. This past summer two of my students and one of my Defense Against the Dark Arts professors developed a defensive charm that successfully rebounds these curses. Many of you know this spell as The Potter Charm; but its full name is The Potter-Lupin-Granger-Padfoot Defensive Charm. The people responsible for the development of this charm are Harry Potter, Remus Lupin and Hermione Granger. The name Padfoot is an honorary, included in memory of a good friend who was lost in a battle in the Department of Mysteries last June.

"For years it was thought that Sirius Black was a Death Eater, spy and traitor - the man who betrayed James and Lily Potter to Voldemort. When questioned under the influence of Veritaserum, however, the Death Eaters who were captured in that battle revealed that Sirius never was one of their number and that one Peter Pettigrew - the man Mister Black was accused of killing - is still alive and is one of their associates. Padfoot, the fourth name in the official title of this charm, was placed there as a memorial to Sirius Black - a man who died, honorably, protecting his godson, Harry Potter."

After a brief pause Albus cleared his throat. "It is my honor and privilege to present Harry Potter, Hermione Granger, Remus Lupin and, posthumously, Sirius Black with Orders of Merlin, First Class for their work in the development of this charm and, as in the case of Sirius Black, for holding on to his faith through twelve years of incarceration at Azkaban without benefit of a trial and for giving his life for something he believed in. It would have been easy for him to give up on life but he did not. He believed in something and he held onto that belief to the end. It is my fervent hope and desire that we should all follow his example and when the time comes when we are asked to choose between that which is easy and that which is right we will choose wisely."

The auditorium was silent for a moment as the weight of these words settled into the hearts and minds of everyone present. Then, slowly at first, the people began clapping and rising to their feet. Before long everyone in the auditorium was standing and the sounds of cheers, whistles and

applause filled the expanded Great Hall for several minutes.

Harry, Hermione and Remus turned towards each other - the shock evident on their faces - and let their jaws fall slightly open. As the Headmaster stepped back to present them with their awards he said, "It's the least we could do."

Harry and Remus looked at each other then back at Albus and said, "Thank you."

As Hermione smiled up at all three of them Albus said, "Which one of you would like to accept Sirius' award?"

Harry looked at Remus and Remus looked at Harry, neither one of them wanting to usurp the other's relationship with Sirius. After several seconds Hermione, sensing the impasse, asked, "Why don't we give it to the Order?"

The other two looked at her for a moment then, nodding their approval of this solution, turned to Albus and said, "We want you to accept it on his behalf."

Dumbledore smiled and nodded his head, his blue eyes sparkling with their acceptance of the Ministry's apology.

Looking down at the handsomely polished oak plaque in his hands, once he had returned to his seat, Harry noted The Great Seal of the Ministry of Magic of Great Britain engraved in gold and covering the top one-third of the wooden monument. Below this, in two lines surrounded by gold and silver sparks which seemed to emanate from the two crossed wands at the bottom of the inscription, were the words "Order of Merlin First Class." The bottom third of the plaque, also engraved in gold, began with his name on one line followed by the date and then a brief description of why it was being awarded.

Ginny looked at it with him for a moment and then pulled him into a hug. Harry smiled sheepishly at her and blushed slightly. Glancing over at Ron and Hermione, Harry noticed that Ron seemed to be truly happy for her. As he looked around the table he noticed looks of pride on everyone's faces but none more so than on the faces of Hermione's parents. In that moment he was suddenly happy that he had played a roll, no matter how small, in helping to secure Hermione's future in the wizarding world.

As the applause died down and began to fade away Dumbledore cleared his throat and said, "The next honors we have to bestow go to two people - a husband and wife team of Physicists, honorary members of the magical community - who played a major role in making it possible for us to defeat and destroy the dementors and banshees. The Doctors Babcock, using a combination of magical and non-magical techniques, were able to map the magical energy signatures of the dementors which made it possible for our people to develop an effective charm that proved to be their undoing and, from all eye-witness accounts, was instrumental in freeing the souls and positively charged memories and energies trapped within. We owe them a debt of gratitude no amount of money will ever be able to repay. Therefore, it is my great honor to present the Doctors Babcock with Silver Wands, the highest honor we in the wizarding world can bestow upon any non-magical member of society."

Once again the auditorium erupted in ovation. This time, however, it lasted for almost five minutes with several cheers, whistles and fireworks displays. Andromeda even raced forward from her

table near the back of the room and hugged her parents.

After the smoke cleared and the applause died down Albus said, "Our final major awards go to six students without whom Christmas Day 1996 would have been the day Hogwarts fell to Voldemort and his followers. Ronald Weasley and Hermione Granger played major roles in planning and organizing the security measures that ultimately played such a major role in the success of our defense; Neville Longbotton and Luna Lovegood played major roles in planning and preparing for our medical needs both during and after the battle as well as our transportation needs; and Harry Potter and Ginevra Weasley were responsible for securing the aide and assistance of the wood elves, fairies, pixies and centaurs. And, through subsequent events, have also secured the support of the ghosts, goblins, ghouls and poltergeists."

As the six friends stood up Harry looked at Ron and knew that his best friend had finally come into his own. The look on his face was one of self-confidence and pride. It was not a look of arrogance but rather one of silent acceptance that he didn't have to be the best in anything but that simply being himself was enough to make him stand out in any crowd.

The rest of the afternoon and evening, with a break for dinner, were dedicated to honoring and awarding all who had fought and served in all of the many battles and skirmishes since the second war had officially began, in any capacity. Every one was honored - from Pansy Parkinson, who had bedpan duty on Christmas Day, and Blaise Zabini, who kept the children entertained and out of trouble, to Kingsley Shacklebolt, Roger Davies, Cho Chang and Orville Burns who were on the front lines of the last major battle. Some aurors and hit-wizards were not present because they were on duty guarding suspected targets but their medals and awards were announced and presented in their absence. Harry, Ginny, Ron, Hermione, Neville, Luna, Remus and Tonks accepted their awards for the parts they played in defending the dragon preserve; but Charlie was presented with a box of medals an ribbons to take back with him to present to his coworkers.

The last two presentations, which took place that evening, were more or less thank you presentations given to Emric, Prince of the Wood Elves and Mira, Queen of the Fairies. Even though he knew they would be hesitant to accept anything from a human, Harry would travel down to the Forbidden Forest the next day to present a thank you commendation to the centaurs.

Chapter 42. Leo and Blackie

On the third Saturday of January, 1997 - after what was rapidly becoming their traditional Saturday morning breakfast of Eggs Benedict - Harry and Ginny bottled Harry's Animagus Potion and walked to the Headmaster's Office. Albus, Severus, Minerva and Remus were waiting for them in the Headmaster's Library and looked up expectantly when they entered. "Are you ready, Harry?" Minerva asked after they had a taken their seats.

Harry took a deep breath, looked at the bottle of potion on the table in front of him then sighed and looked up at his Transfiguration Professor. "I think so," he said. "I'm pretty sure the potion is right. I've got the spell pretty much memorized and I can visualize myself as both the lion and the panther without too much effort. So, yes, I think I'm ready."

Are you sure you want Ginevra to be here for your first attempts?" Albus asked.

Harry turned to look at Ginny, his heart filled with concern for her safety in case anything went wrong and he became trapped in either of his animagus forms but he knew that she wanted to be there and that he wanted her there. So, with a reassuring squeeze from her, he looked over at Albus and said, "Yes. But I want you to have your wands ready just in case."

The four professors nodded. "Which are you going to try first?" Remus asked.

Harry looked at the potion again and then over at his soul mate and smiled, "Well, since Ginny's potential form is a lioness I think I will try for the lion first."

"Good luck," Severus said as Harry reached for the bottle.

Harry glanced over at his Potions Master and realized that Severus really did mean what he had just said. "Thanks," he said as he climbed up onto the table and stepped to stand in its center. After a brief glance at Ginny, whereupon she mouthed, "I love you," Harry tilted the bottle back and quickly drank the foul-tasting brew.

He didn't feel anything at first. But then again he knew that, once the potion had been consumed, he had less than five minutes to assume his animagus form and return to his human state for the process to be complete. But since he was trying for two forms he had even less time than that to transform from human to lion to human to panther and back to human.

Closing his eyes he began meditating, envisioning himself as the enormous African Lion that had come out of his wand a little more than two weeks previous. As his thoughts focused upon everything he had learned about the lion - its bone structure, its muscles, its fur, its anatomy, physiology, habits and traditions - he felt himself slowly but surely becoming that lion. After almost a minute he opened his eyes and found himself looking straight into Ginny's smiling face. He opened his mouth to ask her if it had worked but instead of words coming out of his mouth he heard a soft growl. "Very good, Harry," Minerva said. "You now have four minutes so please return to your human form."

With three minutes to go he was back in his human form and standing in the center of the table. "So far so good," Remus said. "Now go for the panther."

Once again Harry closed his eyes and began concentrating. This time, however, he began

concentrating on everything he had learned about the black panther. It was still a member of the cat family but it was very different from the lion he had just become. He was sweating and he could feel himself getting tired but he knew that this was something he both wanted and needed to do so he kept his focus and ignored the fatigue. A little more than a minute later he heard Minerva say, "Very good, Harry. You now have ninety-three seconds to return to your human form and complete the process."

Harry turned to look at her and growled a much higher pitched grown than before but still a jungle cat's growl. Eighty-nine seconds later Harry was standing, in his human form, in the center of the table. The professors were applauding and Ginny was screaming, "You did it, Harry! You did it!" Harry, however, was exhausted and collapsed. He didn't faint or pass out but he was spent and in desperate need of a restorative draught.

Remus and Severus helped him off the table and into a chair and Severus handed him a bottle of one of his most powerful restorative draughts. "Congratulation," he said. "You are the first Double Animagus in over five hundred years."

Harry nodded. "Thanks," he said, sweat pouring off his brow. "Now I know why there are so few animagi. That's a lot of work."

"Yes it is, Harry," Minerva said. "That is why I was so surprised when you decided to try for both forms. Most witches or wizards who are able to become animagi only have enough energy for one set of transformations. I must say, however, that I am very proud of you."

Half an hour later, after promising Albus and Minerva that he would practice both forms on a regular basis and promising Remus that he would be with him on the next full moon, Harry and Ginny made their way back to the Gryffindor Common Room where Ron, Hermione, Neville and Luna were waiting for them, while doing their homework.

When they entered the common room Luna looked up from her position on the couch and nudged Neville who was reading one of the books Victor had recommended. Looking up Neville marked his page and set the book down, which got the attention of Ron and Hermione who were working on Transfiguration and Arithmancy essays respectively.

With a nod from Ginny the four gathered up their homework and followed Harry and Ginny up the stairs and into the sixth-year boys dormitory. "How'd it go?" Ron asked after he had closed the door.

"You'll see," Harry said. "But right now I just want to go lay down." As soon as they were all in his sitting room Luna closed the trunk's lid and Harry lay down on one of the couches. As the others began asking questions Harry glanced up at Ginny, who was sitting next to his head, and said, "Do you think I ought to show them?"

"Do you feel up to it?" she asked.

Harry smirked. "The way it was explained to me is that the first time is always the hardest. But after that it just keeps getting easier."

"Ginny looked at him questioningly. "If you're sure."

Harry nodded. "Which one do you think?"

Ginny giggled softly. "They're both very impressive, Harry, but for some reason the panther seems a bit more . . . domesticated than the lion."

Harry nodded. "All right then. The panther it is. You might want to call Dobby and Winky after I've transformed so they will know what to expect and not be frightened."

Ginny giggled again. "This ought to be interesting."

Harry closed his eyes and started to meditate on his panther form. He knew it was easier than his first four transformations because it didn't take anywhere near the amount of energy or time and before he knew it he could feel himself purring. He heard four gasps from his friends and looked up at Ginny who reached down and scratched behind his ears. Harry rolled over and stretched out, laying his front paws and head across Ginny's lap. Ginny laughed. "Do you like that, Harry?"

Harry purred his contentment and moved his head into her hand.

Moments later he felt someone gently caressing his back and briefly stopped purring. Glancing up at Ginny he saw her smile and mouth the word, "Luna," so he relaxed and lay his head back down. He was about to drop off to sleep when he heard two frightened screams. Apparently Dobby and Winky had come into the sitting room and spotted him lying on the couch.

Operating on the pure animal instincts of his panther form Harry immediately tensed and sprang off of the couch. In a leap and a bound he was safely out of the sitting room, through the curtain and hidden in his bedroom. He wasn't afraid . . . well not much. But he was startled and didn't want to let his animal instincts lead him into doing something he might regret later. So, he stayed in the bedroom and listened while Ginny explained his animagus forms to Dobby and Winky and told them that he liked being scratched behind the ears. Gee, thanks, Ginny, he thought. That's all I need: Two house elves treating me like a pet.

Five minutes later, after Ginny had calmed their "children" down and they had placed a large bowl of water on the floor for him Harry stuck his head through the curtain and looked reproachfully over at Ginny, which earned him gales of laughter from Ron, Hermione, Neville, Luna and especially Ginny. He then trotted out to drink gratefully from the bowl of water the house elves had set out for him.

Dobby and Winky, who had hidden behind Ginny's legs, slowly crept forward at Ginny's insistence and gradually reached out to pet Harry's shoulders. Their pets were very hesitant at first but gradually grew more and more confident. Before long both house elves were confidently rubbing their hands along his neck and shoulders and occasionally scratching him behind the ears.

Hermione, despite herself, was so captivated by what was happening that she had totally forgotten about her homework and was cautiously approaching Harry from the front. Harry, who was laying down with his eyes closed and purring contentedly while Dobby and Winky caressed his neck and shoulders, could sense her presence and feel her apprehension. When she was kneeling down on the floor, directly across the water bowl from Harry's head, she cleared her throat and said, "Harry?"

Harry opened his eyes and looked up at her.

"May I?" she asked.

Harry sensed that she was nervous but determined and wanted to pet him if only to prove to herself that she could so he closed his eyes and laid his head back down. Moments later he felt one of Hermione's shaky hands scratching behind his ears.

As Harry became aware of the world around him, through the panther's senses, he realized that It was going to take time and practice to get used to his animagus forms' views of the world. But then again that is what practice was for. He also knew that in order to fine tune his animagus senses he would have to spend a lot of time in the Forbidden Forest, which meant that he would have to reveal himself to Bane, Ronan and the rest of the centaurs so that he could work in relative safety.

After an hour in his panther form he felt Ginny scratching the top of his head to wake him up. When he opened his eyes and looked up she said, "I think its time you showed them your other form."

Harry growled and stood up. When everyone had backed away he wondered what would happen if he tried to transform into his lion form without reverting to his human form first. Closing his eyes and focusing his mind on his lion form he fixed that image in his mind and mentally cast the spell. Moments later there were gasps from Hermione and Luna, squeaks of surprise from Dobby and Winky and a "Wicked!" from Ron.

Neville hesitantly stood up and walked over. "I . . . is that really you, Harry?" he asked.

Harry looked up and nodded his head.

Neville walked around Harry, quietly studying him, until he was facing him again. "M-may I?" he asked.

Harry bowed his head towards his friend and let him scratch behind his ears. Moments later he felt Dobby and Winky rubbing his neck, shoulders, front legs and sides.

A few minutes later Ginny knelt down in front of him and, looking him in the eye, said, "Harry? Is it alright if I put Dobby and Winky on your back?"

Surprised, Harry looked up at her with a curious expression on his face.

"Well, they are almost family," she explained. "And I think it would be a real treat for them to get to ride a lion."

Harry looked up at her, a look of consternation on his face, but he knew he couldn't refuse her. So, with a heavy sigh he looked down at the water bowl in a posture of dejected resignation for a few seconds then looked back up and nodded his head.

Ginny smiled sweetly and said, "I knew I could count on you, Harry. That's why I love you so much."

For the next thirty minutes Harry gave Dobby and Winky 'pony' rides around the various rooms of his trunk. He took them around the conference table, through kitchen, into and out of the bedroom, through his office, toured the library and into and out of their spacious quarters in the third chamber, which Harry noticed had an entire room dedicated to the twins' inventions. He made a note to himself to order some modified portable swamps and a collection of their new attack fireworks. The trunk's Room of Requirement and owlry weren't ready yet but Harry knew that he would be spending a lot of time in both of those rooms when they were finished, practicing and

fine-tuning his senses and abilities.

Needless to say, Dobby and Winky had a blast. It did, however, get kind of irritating for Harry when Dobby kept bouncing up and down screaming for him to go faster. Ginny, Ron, Hermione, Neville and Luna had fun too and laughed several times, which earned them reproachful glares from one very frustrated lion.

His reward for playing pony for the house elves was, however, well worth it. After crouching down to let them off they immediately began scratching his sides and moving down towards his belly. When they were low enough Harry rolled over onto his side and then onto his back. Before long Harry had seven sets of hands scratching and petting him while his friends and . . . family carried on an excited conversation about the animagus transformations they hoped to achieve in three weeks time. Ron, who was scratching under Harry's chin at the time, had to ruin it, however. In Harry's mind he was in Lion Heaven, enjoying all of the love and attention he was receiving, when Ron said, "You know, Harry, you're nothing big pussy cat." Harry immediately looked up at his friend from his position on the floor and glared at Ron while snarling menacingly. Everyone laughed and after the laughter had died down Ron smiled down at his friend's prostrate lion form and said, "Just kidding."

After almost an hour in his lion form Ginny stood up and said, "I think it's almost time for lunch, Harry. So unless you want to eat raw steak for lunch I suggest you turn back into your human form."

Harry looked up at her as if to ask, "Do I have to?" but the look on her face brokered no argument so he rolled over, got up and walked into the bedroom. Moments later he walked back out, in his human form, with a cheesy grin plastered across his face and looked around at his friends. "Well?" he asked. "What do you think?"

As the weeks rolled by and the number of casualties and fatalities in the outside world began to mount no one at Hogwarts was left unaffected. A few of the Slytherins tried to remain aloof as they were purebloods and tended to agree with Voldemort's goals. But when members of their families began to fall victim to Voldemort and his followers, and without their blond prince to lead them, even they, although hesitantly at first, joined with the rest of the student body in a concerted effort to help each other through the difficult times that lay ahead.

On Valentine's Day Ginny, Ron, Hermione, Neville and Luna bottled their Animagus Potions just before dinner and took them to their regular Order meeting that night. Harry and Minerva had been working with them, whenever possible, over the past few weeks to help them prepare and - even though they felt the five were ready - were slightly nervous because they both knew how much energy it took to become an animagus. And Severus, under the guise of a particularly powerful disillusionment charm, even visited Harry's trunk several times over the course of the previous week to make sure their potions were correct. He didn't want anything even remotely associated with their potions to go wrong. Harry secretly suspected that Severus had actually begun to care about them but didn't want to say anything because he knew that the greasy haired Potions Mater had a reputation to uphold and he wasn't about to ruin it for him.

When they walked into the Order meeting that night all of the regulars were in attendance as were Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, Bill and Fleur. After all of the greetings had been made, messages delivered, hugs exchanged - The Weasleys were serving as messengers and surrogate parents for Hermione,

Neville and Luna - and everyone had settled down, Albus called the meeting to order. "Yes, yes. Welcome and Happy Valentine's Day. I believe we all know why we are here this evening. We will dispense with our regular business after we have completed the most important tasks of the evening. Which of you would like to go first?" he asked, looking calmly over at the five hopeful students.

The five looked nervously around the table and at each other for several seconds before Ginny stood up and climbed up onto the table. Godric's sword had been mounted and hung above the fireplace shortly after the battle on Christmas Day so there was no fear of anyone harming themselves that way; but nevertheless everyone stood back and drew their wands just in case something went wrong and Ginny lost control while in her animagus form.

Taking her bottle of potion from her pocket Ginny looked over at Harry who smiled his encouragement. "Just relax and concentrate," he said. "And it will all be over in a few minutes."

Ginny smiled, nodded her head resolutely, drank her Animagus Potion, closed her eyes and began to concentrate on her form. Almost two minutes into the process she opened her eyes at her mother's gasp and found herself looking into Harry's eyes. Harry was beaming. He could tell she was tired but he also knew that she had to return to her human form within the next three minutes for the process to be complete. "That's great, Gin!" he said, smiling broadly. "Now all you have to do is return to your human form."

Ginny tilted her head slightly and growled as if asking him to repeat himself. "She doesn't understand!" Minerva gasped. "Quickly, Harry! Transform and explain that she has to reverse the process or she will be stuck as a lioness for the rest of her life."

Harry briefly glanced at his Transfiguration Professor then looked back at Ginny who was eyeing him curiously. Quickly transforming into his lion form Harry jumped up onto the table, causing it to rock slightly, and started grunting, growling and purring at Ginny, explaining that she had to transform back into her human form and that she had less than two minutes in which to do it.

As soon as he had explained it to her Ginny closed her eyes and began concentrating on her human form. With seconds to spare she resumed her human form and collapsed across Harry's back. It was close but the process was complete. Harry, still in his lion form, gently carried her over to the edge of the table where Remus, Severus, Arthur and Molly helped her down and gave her a bottle of restorative draught. As soon as he had been relieved of his burden Harry leapt down and lay down beside Ginny. He decided to stay in his lion form just in case one of the others needed help.

Ron went next. As he was climbing up on the table Minerva cautioned him about keeping his wits about him and not losing himself to the though processes of his animagus form. After receiving a reassuring smile from Hermione and quickly glancing at Harry, who was intently watching him from the floor, Ron drank his potion, closed his eyes and began to concentrate. A minute and a half later one of the largest timber wolves anyone had ever seen, albeit a ginger haired timber wolf, was standing on the table. The wolf - Ron - looked down at Harry and snarled in mock challenge, which earned him a full, deep-throated, deafening roar. Ron was most thoroughly cowed and backed up to sit on his haunches in the center of the table where he closed his eyes and began to concentrate on the reverse transformation.

With fifteen seconds to spare Ron returned to his human form and slid off the table. When he was sitting down, after drinking the restorative draught Severus had given him, he turned to look at

Harry and said, "You know, you can be pretty intimidating sometimes, Harry." Harry just looked up at him, curled his lip and growled.

Ginny giggled. "Pussy cat, indeed," she translated and started laughing.

After the laughter died down - the adults didn't know about the private joke but all of the students got it - Hermione climbed up onto the table and stepped to the center. After a brief moment's hesitation she looked at Ron and smiled. "Bottoms up!" she said almost lightly and lifted her bottle of potion to her lips.

One minute and fifteen seconds later a brown otter was standing in the middle of the table. She scampered over towards the edge to look down at Harry but slipped and slid off, curling into a ball just before hitting the floor and rolled. When she stopped Hermione uncurled and looked around. She was less than ten centimeters away from Harry's massive shout.

Getting back to her feet she scampered over and, standing on her hind legs, rested her front paws on Harry's nose and looked into his eyes. Harry woofed and growled a few times and reminded her to return to her human form. Scampering back towards the table Hermione was stopped by Minerva who said, "Two and a half minutes, Hermione. I suggest you perform the reverse transformation right where you are."

Hermione stopped, looked up at her Transfiguration Professor, nodded her understanding and closed her eyes. With forty-five seconds to spare Hermione, in her human form, stood blushing at her own enthusiasm. "Oops," she said. "Sorry about that. I guess I got a little carried away." Then, looking down at Harry, she said, "Hi." Harry tried to laugh but it came out as a series of grunts.

Neville was next. Due to the nature and size of his potential form, however, it was decided that he should remain on the floor. Once a space had been cleared away and Harry had moved to stand a few meters in front of his friend, Neville drank his potion; glanced at Harry, who gave him a reassuring nod; closed his eyes and began to meditate.

It took Neville almost a full two minutes to complete the transformation; but when he did an enormous Texas Longhorn bull, with a horn span of at least two meters, was standing in his place. Even Harry was slightly intimidated by his presence. But he couldn't let it show because Neville still had to do the reverse transformation. So, with a few grunts and a reassuring nod, Harry encouraged his friend to reverse the process.

With seconds to spare Neville completed the reverse transformation and breathed a sigh of relief. Harry was so happy for his friend that he returned to his human form and shook his hand while Ron patted him on the back and Luna gave him a hug. Then all yes were on Luna.

Harry looked at her and said, "I'll tell you what, Luna. Just for you I'm going to use my other form."

Those who didn't know that Harry had two animagus forms looked at him curiously but Luna walked over and hugged him. "Thank you, Harry," she said as she smiled and strode confidently towards the table.

When Luna reached the center of the table she turned around and looked down at Harry, in his panther form. Harry was sitting on his haunches next to Ginny. Hermione was kneeling on his other side with Ron's arm around her shoulders and Neville was sitting, resting in a chair, behind

the others. With a nod from Harry and a reassuring smile from Neville, Luna raised her potions bottle to her lips, drank the draught, closed her eyes and began to meditate.

In just under two minutes a dirty-blond falcon, with Luna's grey-blue eyes, was standing in the middle of the table. She was so excited that she began hopping up and down, flapping her wings and calling out to her friends. Recognizing the potential danger of her becoming trapped in her animagus form if she didn't settle down, Harry quickly got up, trotted over to the edge of the table, lifted himself up and peered over the edge of the table at their new air-born reconnaissance expert. Nodding his approval he growled at her to return to her human form, dropped back down to the flood and returned to lay down beside Ginny. With twenty-four seconds to spare Luna returned to her human form, jumped off of the table and ran over to hug Harry. Harry in turn purred and gently rubbed his head against her hair.

After she drank her restorative draught and everyone had taken their seats Minerva told Luna that she would have to take flying lessons and Harry and Ginny volunteered to talk to Hedwig and Henry about helping her. The rest of the evening was spent discussing the progress that was being made with the various werewolf packs; the intelligence reports that had come in over the past few days detailing Tom's latest recruiting efforts, most of which Harry already knew about; and the various security measures that were being taken at every level in both the public and private sectors. Ron and Neville discussed the various battle tactics and strategies that were being used by the Death Eaters as well as the many curses, hexes and charms they used and which spells could be used to block them. Luna and Hermione presented their findings on the latest healing techniques and opened the door to the possibility of reaching out to the Muggle Medical Community to try and find a cure for Neville's parents.

Neville looked up hopefully at this but knew not to get his hopes too high because the healers at St. Mungos had repeatedly told him that nothing could be done. It was only when Ginny reminded him that they had once thought it was impossible to destroy a dementor that he dared to smile and hope, for the first time, that he might actually get his parents back.

Harry and Ginny then gave their report on their recruiting efforts. Ginny was working with the Sprites and, through some of Bill's contacts in Egypt, the Sphinxes. Harry had been in almost constant contact with the High Elves; and the Vampires, after the rather decisive battle in December, had approached Albus, wishing to know if they could be of service. Negotiations were currently underway to secure an arrangement with the vampires similar to the one that had been worked out with the werewolves.

It was decided that Hagrid should approach Aragog to secure the acromantulas' support and assistance in guarding the Forbidden Forest so that, through their combined efforts, the centaurs and spiders could guard the castle from that direction and provide the students with an additional degree of safety from attack. It was also decided that, at the earliest possible moment, Harry would begin approaching the snakes to secure their services as spies.

Towards the end of the evening Bill and Fleur outlined their progress on the Purgatory Charm. Bill had contacted some of his friends in Egypt and obtained a copy of the Egyptian Book of the Dead to see if any of the spells contained in it could be used to reinforce the charm that was slowly taking shape. Likewise, Fleur was studying several of the French and German muggle classics to see if anything could be obtained from that sector as well. All in all it was a very productive meeting and everyone left feeling more confident about the progress that was being made.

The next day, being a Saturday, the six found themselves in Harry's trunk studying and helping Ginny and Luna begin their revising for their O.W.L. exams. After lunch, which Harry helped Ginny prepare as they were cooking for six humans and two house elves, Harry turned to his friends and said, "Alright you guys. I think it's about time you show Winky and Dobby your animagus forms."

For the next two hours Ron and Ginny gave Dobby and Winky 'pony' rides through the trunk; Hermione scampered around, hiding under the couches and chairs to escape Winky's loving embrace; Luna hopped from chair to chair, gradually learning how to glide; and Neville walked patiently around the sitting room and office area - his horns prevented him from entering the bedroom, library and conference room and he didn't want to scuff up the kitchen floor. Dobby and Winky were, needless to say, ecstatic. The last thing they did before going back to their homework was take a picture with Dobby's camera - he had taken up photography as a hobby and almost rivaled Colin in his enthusiasm.

After Dobby set his camera up outside the entrance to the bedroom he had Neville back up to where he was head and shoulders in front of the suits of armor guarding the conference room. Harry then lifted Luna up so she could perch on his head. Neville snorted at the strange sensation of having a falcon perched on his head at first but soon, apparently, got used to it. Ron walked over and sat proudly in front of Neville and Hermione scampered over to take her place between his front paws. Ginny then walked over and sat down in front of the suit of armor to Neville's right and Winky got down on her knees and scooched back so that she was sitting between Ginny's front paws. When Harry had transformed into his lion form and seated himself in front of the other set of armor Dobby focused the camera, set the exposure and timer and ran over to sit between Harry's massive front paws.

When the picture was developed in Dobby's dark room later that afternoon Harry had been caught in the act of yawning and the others had all been caught turning to look at him. Dobby and Winky, however, were smiling and waving like there was no tomorrow. Harry understandably blushed when he saw the picture and cringed when Dobby told him he was going to enlarge it, frame it and hang it in the library but he agreed to let him do it because it was a visual record of his friends and he didn't know how many of them would survive the coming war. He was fairly confident that they would win but there was still that little voice in the back of his mind that reminded him that nothing was certain and that he might still lose a few friends to Tom and his Death Eaters.

Chapter 43. The Ides of March

In early March it was decided that Ron and Neville would begin conducting seminars on the first and third Saturdays of each month to teach the aurors, hit-wizards, security personnel and members of the Order of the Phoenix about everything they had learned about Death Eater tactics. They were hesitant at first because always before it had been either Harry or Remus doing the lecturing but when they promised to attend, as a show of moral support, they agreed. The only hard part, once they had gotten their instructors to agree, was figuring out how they were going to get the word out to the people who needed this information in a timely manner so that those who were on duty those nights could make arrangements to attend. It was finally decided that they would spread the word via word-of-mouth and even then only through secure channels.

The next problem lay in the format of the presentations. Since they already knew that everyone learned differently it was decided that they would do large, multimedia presentations. It was decided that, upon entering the Room of Requirement, the participants would be presented with a manual detailing the information that would be covered during the seminars. Ron would then begin the seminars by lecturing on the Death Eaters' standard attack formations and the most effective defensive maneuvers that would work against each of these formations. Neville would then follow with descriptions and listings of the Death Eaters' favorite spells and fighting techniques and the most effective shielding charms and countermeasures that could be used against each. These lectures would then be followed by life-size, three-dimensional footage of Death Eaters in action.

Perhaps the most difficult part of the presentations was going to be the visual portions of the programs because it would mean externalizing the memories stored in Harry’s crystal ball. After a great deal of debate it was decided that Harry and Albus would combine forces to create a special room, within the Room of Requirement. The room would be would be a circular auditorium capable of comfortably seating at least five hundred people. It would have a sunken stage that would double as a pensieve projector. Harry would place the memories Ron and Neville needed in a separate crystal ball that would be programmed to interact with the room’s playback features and Ron and Neville would operate it from a specially designed control platform that would let them select which scenes they wanted to show, adjust the volume on the battles being played out, pause a particular scene so that they could discuss what was happening in greater detail, run through a scene in slow motion so that the participants could study the scenes in greater detail and rewind the action so that they could answer any questions that might arise about a particular action, spell or formation.

In short, Ron and Neville were becoming the Defense Against the Dark Arts instructors for the magical world’s equivalent of the muggle military. They would be teaching military tactics and strategy to aurors, hit-wizards and security personnel from around the world and, even though they were a bit apprehensive at first, they were warming to the idea and looking forward to their first presentation, which would take place on the third Saturday of the month.

The early morning dueling classes were still going on except that they had been opened to everyone from fourth year up which meant that Harry, Neville, Remus, Tonks, Alastor and Kingsley each had close to one hundred students. Each of them also had one teaching assistant. Harry and Ginny and Neville and Luna were, of course, teamed together. Ron was teamed with Remus while Hermione was teamed with Tonks and Cho and Colin were teamed with Alastor and Kingsley.

None of the classes were divided along house lines. Indeed, every attempt was made to make sure that all four houses were equally represented in each of the classes. This worked out so well that by the end of the second week of March it was not uncommon to see a seventh-year Slytherin helping a fourth-year Gryffindor or a sixth-year Huffelpuff helping a fifth-year Ravenclaw.

The school was truly coming together to fight the common foe and it showed. The house tables were no longer the exclusive territory of any one house. Meals were shared, more often than not, with dueling partners, which had been specifically paired to help tear down as many house boundaries as possible. Indeed, by the third week of March the only boundaries that remained were the sleeping arrangements. Severus, of course, had to maintain his image (for safety's sake) but he didn't object too strongly unless one of his students tried to bring a 'foreigner' into the Slytherin Common Room.

The laboratory classes were going well as well. Most of the members of the D.A. were able to hold their own against at least three opponents for fifteen minutes or more and Neville had advanced to being able to disarm six opponents in an hour and a half. It usually took him close to half an hour to disarm his first opponent but after that they tended to go down fairly quickly. Neville's most worthy opponents (baring Harry, as they never went against each other unless it was as an exercise for Harry) were usually Ron, Hermione, Ginny or Luna. Neville was never tested against more than one of them at a time because he just wasn't up to those standards yet.

When it came Harry's time to duel most of the class would stand back and watch as Harry went up against his ten best. Since he was not allowed to use anything other than his wand in class he was hard pressed to disarm them all but usually managed it in just under two hours (even when they were arrayed in a circular pattern around him). When he was asked to help with some of the other classes - something he found himself doing quite regularly after Quidditch practice - he would usually find himself going up against ten or twelve of the best duelers from whichever class he was working with. He very seldom got hit with anything more serious than a mild stunner and almost always won. But that wasn't the point. The point was to get him used to fighting multiple opponents with different, and sometimes unpredictable, fighting styles.

When it came to dueling with partners, however, Harry and Neville were the team to beat. No one else, even any combination of instructors, could even come close. On the few occasions they were allowed to team up they could easily best and disarm an entire class in under an hour.

Harry and Albus dueled several more times, usually in inclement weather and/or after dark so that very few would be inclined to observe and learn of Harry's developing abilities. Harry hated keeping this secret from his friends but he did understand why it had to be done. Their last few duels had been particularly challenging because they had been held in the quidditch pitch at night, in less than ideal weather conditions, and under the influence if disillusionment and invisibility charms so that rather than seeing where the attacks were coming from they would have to sense them. If anyone had watched these duels all they would have seen were sporadic bursts of energy flying around the pitch with no visible points of origin.

To make matters worse, both Harry and the Headmaster were allowed to use everything at their disposal, save Harry's Elemental abilities. This meant that Harry had to defend himself against and attack with all forms of wanded, wandless, ethereal and spiritual magic. This included many spells whose energy signatures were invisible to the naked eye and could only be sensed on a deeper, intuitive level. As if this weren't bad enough, Albus started fighting dirty during the third of these

'invisible' duels by conjuring and transfiguring a wide variety of either invisible or transparent objects and creatures.

Most of these duels ended in a draw but occasionally one or the other of them would win. Neither of them was ever seriously hurt; but they were both, more often than not, thoroughly exhausted after three hours of some of the most intense dueling either of them had seen in a very long time. True, Harry's experiences with dueling were extremely limited; but Albus' experiences spanned more than a century and included some of the most vicious fighting the wizarding world has ever known.

Harry's metamorphmagus training was not going as well as he would have liked, however. He could change the length and color of his hair pretty much at will; he could change his eye color with a little extra effort; he could even change his skin tone and, to a limited extent, his bone structure; but he couldn't get rid of the scar. Tonks laughed at him one night when he made himself look like Ron's twin and, with a quick glamour charm to hide the scar, sent him back to the Gryffindor Common Room as a prank to see what would happen and expected a full report at breakfast the next morning.

When Harry walked into the Gryffindor Common Room a few minutes later - the suits of armor weren't fooled but everyone else was - he glanced around to make sure Ron wasn't around and, as he saw his best friend disappear up the stairs towards their room, decided to have a little fun at Ron's expense. Walking over and kneeling down beside Hermione he said, in an almost perfect imitation of Ron's voice, "Er, 'Mione, what did I just go up to my room to get?"

Fortunately Harry had taken his glasses off and shoved them in his pocket before saying anything so when Hermione looked up with what Harry could only assume was of consternation on her face she didn't know that it was Harry speaking to her and not Ron. "Oh, honestly, Ron!" she scolded. "Can't you remember anything? Come on! Let's go find your Transfiguration book together."

Hermione scolded and berated Ron all the way up to the sixth-year boys' dormitory. When they opened the door Ron was standing right in front of then with a look of surprise on his face at seeing his girlfriend standing in front of him looking thoroughly flustered. When Hermione looked up and saw Ron her mouth fell open. "Ro . . ." she started but was quickly shoved from behind and plowed into her boyfriend who dropped his Transfiguration text and caught her in his arms.

Harry quickly stepped in behind her and closed the door. Putting his glasses on and rapidly scanning the room to make sure no one else was around he looked over at Ron and said, "Hi."

Ron's mouth fell open. "Harry?" he asked.

Harry chuckled and smiled. "In your flesh," he said.

Hermione looked between the two then turned to scowl at Harry. With her hands on her hips and a very stern look on her face she said, "Harry James Potter, that was not funny!"

"Actually," Ron said, "it really was kind of funny. You should have seen the look on your face when you saw me. It was almost priceless."

Hermione spun around and glared up at Ron. "You two," she said. "You are both . . ."

Hermione would have said more but at that moment Harry's trunk began to open. Harry quickly pulled his glasses off and gave Ron a quick conspiratorial wink. "I'll be right back, Luna," Ginny said as she crawled out of the seventh chamber. "I'm going to go look for my Herbology notes." When she turned around Harry and Ron were standing on either side of Hermione with identical smiles on their faces. Ron had his hand over her mouth and Harry had his arm around her back, holding her arms securely in place. "Hi, Gin," they said in unison at which point Ginny promptly fainted.

Harry turned to look at Ron and said, "Oops."

Rom looked over and, nodding his head, said, "Yeah."

Hermione, however, broke free of their grasps and rushed to Ginny's side, suddenly more concerned for her friend's welfare than in scolding two prankster wannabes.

Five minutes later, after Harry had reverted to his normal self and they had levitated Ginny into Harry's bedroom after explaining to Luna what had happened, Ginny woke up and looked at Harry who was sitting on the bed beside her. "What happened?" she asked.

Harry explained about his metamorphmagus training with Tonks and the fact that, even though he was fairly limited in his abilities by Tonks' standards, he could make himself look like another person if he wanted or had to. He explained about the joke he had played on Hermione and the irresistible temptation to prank her as well. He ended by apologizing profusely and helping her up off the bed.

Ginny fell into his arms and started giggling. "That's okay, Harry," she said. "Just don't let Mum catch you looking like Ron."

Harry looked down at her, thoroughly confused. "Why not?"

Ginny burst out laughing and said, "One set of identical twins in the family is enough. I don't think she could handle two.

The Sunday after Ron and Neville's first seminar, which was eight days before the next full moon, Winky and Dobby approached Harry and Ginny during breakfast with broad smiles on their faces and looking rather smug, proud of themselves for a job well done. Harry and Ginny looked down at their . . . children, curious as to what they had done. After almost a full minute of the house elves silently congratulating themselves but offering no explanations Harry looked sternly down at Dobby and said, "Alright, Dobby. Out with it. What have you done?"

Dobby didn't flinch, however, and held his head up high. "When you is finished," Dobby stated matter-of-factly. "We will show you when you is finished."

Harry and Ginny looked at each other nervously for a moment then, as if on cue, laid their silverware down, wiped their mouths on their napkins, tossed their napkins back down on the table and stood up. "You will show us now," Ginny said sternly.

Dobby and Winky, still smiling and looking smug led the young couple out of the kitchen, across the sitting room, through the study and into the library.

The first thing they noticed upon entering the library is that it somehow seemed larger. The entire center section of shelves had been moved and a large study table had been erected near the

window, which was now clearly visible from the door. Before they could take in all of the modifications, however, Winky said, "This way!" and led them along the wall to their right.

When they reached the wall the house elves turned left and led them to the middle of that wall and stopped. With a curious glance from Harry Dobby gestured to the three-meter break in the shelves along the wall. "Here is your Come and Go Room, Harry!" he squeaked excitedly.

Harry looked up at the large vacant space and saw a large sign set into the wall. The top line said, "ROOM OF REQUIREMENT." Below that, in a much smaller, flowing script, it said "The Come and Go Room." Harry smiled down at his friends. "You did it?" he asked.

Dobby and Winky smiled and nodded their heads enthusiastically. "Yes, Harry!" Winky squeaked. "It is finished."

Harry could tell by the expectant looks on their faces that they wanted him to try it so, after asking everyone to step back, he started pacing back and forth beneath the sign, thinking about wanting an exercise room where he could practice his ballet, gymnastics and tumbling moves. On his third pass a door appeared. When he opened the door and walked in he found himself in a large gymnasium / dance studio. One end of the room was dedicated to dance, with a dance bar mounted along one wall and mirrors all around, while the other end was dedicate to gymnastics and the large center section was occupied with a full sized tumbling mat. The gymnastics equipment included a balance beam, a pommel horse, a set of parallel bars, a set of uneven parallel bars and a set of rings.

After walking in and looking around at all of the equipment Ginny looked up at Harry, curiosity evident on her face. "Tumbling and flexibility," Harry said, with a knowing smile. "I'll show you later." Then turning around and dropping to his knees he pulled Dobby and Winky into a hug and thanked them. "This is brilliant, guys! I don't know how I will ever be able to than you enough!"

"There is no reason to thank us, Harry," Dobby said excitedly. "But there is more!"

"More?" Harry asked, standing up and looking down at the two very smug looking house elves.

Winky smiled and nodded her head vigorously. "Follow us please."

After leaving Harry's Room of Requirement the two house elves led their master and mistress along the way towards the massive Wizarding Window that now occupied most of the north wall of the library. As they walked along the window Harry glanced across at the door as they passed by the open area and study table and his jaw just about hit the floor. Several meters beyond the massive table stood a small conversation pit; and several meters beyond that stood a couch and two chairs - all decorated in the traditional Gryffindor colors - positioned around an enormous fireplace. Above the fireplace hung the Potter Family Crest. To the left up this hung a huge color photograph of Hogwarts that Harry could only guess must have been taken from somewhere down near the gates before the start of term last September. The grass was still green; the sky was, for the most part, blue with a few puffy white clouds drifting lazily past; and Hagrid could be seen working in his garden while Fang sniffed around the base of a nearby tree. The equally large portrait that hung to the right of the fireplace was the blown up version of the picture Dobby had taken of them in their animagus forms. Harry couldn't help but chuckle and shake his head at Dobby's enthusiasm.

When they reached the west end of the library they turned and walked along that wall until they

reached a doorway that was positioned directly across from the Room of Requirement. The sign above this door read "Dobby and Winky."

Opening the door Dobby led them into a short hallway with two doors on either side. The first one on the right had a sign on it that read "Armory." Opening this door Dobby led them into a large room filled with all kinds of weapons. There were swords, sabers, rapiers and daggers, many of which had to be at least three hundred years old. There was a collection wands from the past, each of which had a complete description of its history of who, in Harry's family, it had belonged to and what it had primarily been used for. The listings also had the name of each wand's maker, its core properties, the kind of wood it was made of and its length. There was also a large section dedicate to Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes which contained generous supplies of all of their practical jokes and weapons of war.

After touring the armory they went across the hall and entered the "Wardrobe Room." Apparently, once Winky had gotten used to the idea of wearing clothes and accepted the fact that Harry and Ginny wanted them to be comfortable, she had taken up sewing as a hobby. There were racks upon racks of dress robes for both Harry and Ginny as well as a large assortment of elegant evening gowns all of which were tailored to fit Ginny and spelled to grow with her as she grew older. Needless to say, Harry and Ginny were stunned. Ginny very nearly danced around the room looking at the wide variety of clothes she never would have dreamed could be at her disposal a year ago. Harry, however, was a little put out because until recently he had never really had any use for more than a few changes of clothing; but he relented when Winky showed him her and Dobby's wardrobes which matched his and Ginny's.

After leaving the wardrobe room Harry and Ginny were given tours of "Dobby's Dark Room," "Winky's Sewing Room" and the rest of the house elves' living quarters, which Harry and Ginny were both pleased to see were both spacious and comfortable. The next stop on their tour of the 'new' library was the owlry. As they approached the door just below and to the right of the 'family' portrait Dobby said, "Once we learned of your animagus forms we made a few minor changes in our plans for the owlry. We hope you won't mind."

"Dobby," Ginny said in amazement, "this is so amazing, what you've done, that I can't see how we could object to a few changes in your plans for the owlry."

Winky smirked at Dobby as she opened the door and said, "We hope you like it."

This time both Harry's and Ginny's mouths fell open as they stepped through the door and entered what could only be described as an enormous open-air . . . park. It had a wide variety of trees, many of which were ideal for climbing; a small pond, perfect for an otter to play in; a small stream with several small water falls and natural water slides that Hermione would thoroughly enjoy; plenty of open space and grassland for Neville; and a small forest that Ron, Harry and Ginny could use to practice their stalking skills in.

"How big is it?" Harry asked in amazement.

"We is making it two kilometers by three kilometers, Harry," Dobby said.

"And half a kilometer high so Hedwig, Henry and Miss Luna can get plenty of exercise," Winky added.

"We is thinking about adding a garden and an orchard or two so we can grow our own fruits and vegetables," Dobby finished for them.

Recognizing that Dobby and Winky needed something to keep themselves occupied when they weren't helping the Hogwarts house elves or helping out around the trunk Harry and Ginny knelt down and pulled their friends/children into hugs. "I think that's brilliant!" Harry said.

After transforming into their animagus forms (Harry transformed into his lion form) and giving the house elves rides around the 'owlry's' grounds they returned to the library and stopped in front of the fireplace before returning to the main living quarters. "Er, Dobby?" Harry asked. "Not that I mind or anything but why did you put a fireplace in the library?"

Dobby looked entirely too smug for his own good. "This is not a normal fireplace, Harry," Dobby said as a grin spread across his face. "This is a special floo fireplace that can only be used for talking and, even then, can only be used to talk to Professor Dumbledore, The Order of the Phoenix Headquarters, Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes, The Burrow and the Defense Against the Dark Arts Professors."

Harry and Ginny looked at each other and then looked back at their friends. "Brilliant!" they exclaimed in unison.

From the expectant looks on Dobby and Winky's faces they knew that they should try it out so Harry turned to Ginny and said, "Why don't you call Mum while I go fix lunch?"

Ginny nodded and said, "Okay," before walking over and taking a handful of floo powder from the jar on the mantle, kneeling down in front of the fireplace, throwing the powder into the grate and yelling, "NUMBER TWELVE GRIMMAULDE PLACE, LONDON!" A moment later, as Harry watched from behind, the remodeled kitchen of Harry's house in London - a room he had yet to see in person - came into view. "Mum?" Ginny called out. "Mum, are you there?"

Moments later, after the sound of a bowl falling to the floor and breaking was heard coming from somewhere in the room, Molly Weasley appeared in front of the fireplace, a look of fear, apprehension and concern evident on her face. "Ginny dear," she gasped. "Is everything all right? Are you all right? Are Ron, Hermione and Harry Okay?"

Ginny looked up at her mother's worried face and nodded. "Yes, Mum. Everything's fine and we are all okay. We are just testing the fireplace Dobby and Winky installed in Harry's library."

Molly pulled a chair up and sat down, fanning herself with her hands. "Oh. Thank Goodness! I was afraid something might have happened at the school."

Harry knelt down next to Ginny and stuck his head into the emerald flames. "Hi, Mum," he said.

"Oh, hello, Harry dear. What's this about a fireplace in you library? It isn't in your trunk is it?"

Harry smirked and nodded. "Yes, Mum. It's in my trunk but it can only be used for fire talking." Then turning to look at Ginny said, "Well, I'm going to go fix lunch. You two have a nice visit and I'll call you when lunch is ready."

The next weekend Harry and the others spent several hours exploring the owlry in their animagus forms. Hermione thoroughly enjoyed herself sliding down the banks and into the pond only to

swim around a bit before scampering back up to do it again. Neville walked and galloped around as he watched Luna, Hedwig, Henry and Pig fly around. He had gotten used to Luna landing on his horns occasionally but was a tad put off when all four birds landed on his horns. It wasn't so much the fact that they did it as it was the fact that Pig was so light that he had a hard time keeping his head straight when both owls decided to land on one horn to stay as far away from the annoyingly chipper pest. This meant that Luna and Pig had to crowd each other at the very tip of Neville's other horn to help him keep a relatively straight head.

Ron played, as best he could, with Hermione but soon found that water was not his favorite habitat. After his first few splashes he gave it up, shook himself dry and watched from the shore. Harry, Ginny and Crookshanks spent their time exploring the forest and lounging in the trees.

While all of this was going on Remus and Tonks reclined in two lawn chairs just outside the small cottage that marked the entrance to the library, visiting and drinking pumpkin juice, while Dobby and Winky worked on their garden. Harry had secretly watched as Remus and Tonks had grown closer over the course of the year. He didn't know if anything would come of it or not because of Remus' conscience and fear of getting intimate with anyone due to his lycanthropy but he was glad that Remus had found a friend, someone he could talk to without fear of being judged.

It had been decided, after a little convincing, that Remus would use Harry's owlry for his next transformation. Harry, Ginny and Ron would join him at the start and, after the transformation was complete, Hermione and Tonks would join them. Neville and Luna were still a bit iffy about being in the presence of a werewolf during a full moon. They didn't have anything against him as a human being; they were just a bit nervous about being around him while he was in his wolf form. When Remus objected to Hermione and Tonks joining them (Hermione as herself) Ron and Harry transformed into their animagus forms (Harry in his panther form this time) and when Remus realized that they were showing him what he would have to get through if he even thought about hurting either of them he relented and agreed that they could join them.

Chapter 44. Where Loyalties Lie

At the end of the last Potions class before the Easter Holiday Severus pulled Harry aside and closed the door to his classroom after everyone else had left. Harry looked curiously over at the Potions Master as he locked and cast a silencing charm on the door. "What's wrong, professor?" Harry asked once the Potions Mater had turned back to face him.

Severus walked briskly over and sat behind his desk. Once seated, he unlocked and opened one of his drawers. Pulling out a small scrap of parchment he studied it for several seconds, placed it back in the drawer and closed and locked the drawer again. After sitting silently for a few more seconds he looked up and said, "I will not be at Friday night's meeting." At the confused expression on Harry's face he continued. "The Dark Lord has called a meeting for that night."

Harry pulled a chair out from behind one of the desks and sat down facing the man he had learned to hate but who, over the past seven months, had come to call 'friend.' "I'm already guessing that Albus knows so why are you telling me?"

Severus looked up suddenly and glared at Harry, his cold, black eyes pinning Harry to his seat. "I'm telling you," Severus growled, "because there is a very high probability that I will not be coming back from this meeting!"

Harry's mouth fell open.

"Oh, don't worry," Severus spat, in his usual silky voice. "Your secrets are safe. But I want you to know that if I should not return the Headmaster has made arrangements for you, Weasley, Granger, Longbottom and Krum to teach Potions for the rest of the year."

Harry thought about this for a moment then stood up. "After carefully replacing the chair he had been using he looked cautiously over at Severus and said, "All right. Is there anything else?"

"Yes!" Severus said darkly. "I will have a potions bottle in my pocket. I know you can do it because I have seen some of your work at Headquarters. If worse comes to worse, Harry, make sure I take that potion. I am not afraid of a little pain; but I will not reveal any of the Order's secrets."

Harry nodded. "If you don't mind me asking, sir," he began hesitantly, "what is going to be in the bottle?"

Severus' eyes flared again and Harry could tell that he should not have asked that question. "Never mind, Potter!" Severus fumed. "Now get out of my sight!"

Harry was slightly taken aback by Severus' sudden rage but said nothing and as soon as Severus had unlocked the door and removed the silencing charm walked quickly from the room.

"What was that all about?" Ron asked an apparently fuming Harry.

Harry, Severus and Neville had perfected their acting skills over the course over the past year so that Severus' cover would not be blown, even though Severus suspected that someone had discovered his role as long ago as September. "Ill tell you later," Harry growled as they raced up the steps and out of the dungeons.

Harry begged out of the Order meeting on Good Friday because he wanted to monitor the Death Eater meeting. He hadn't felt right about it ever since his impromptu meeting with Severus but for the life of him he couldn't figure out why. He had been monitoring Tom's moods and emotions, through his scar, since late in November and had even been able to translate many of them into thoughts. But nothing - nothing more than, when turned around, a sense of foreboding - accompanied his impressions of what would be taking place at this meeting.

When he lay down that evening he quickly entered the ethos, activated his crystal ball and went in search of Voldemort and his minions. He found them in the same graveyard Wormtail had used when resurrecting his master a little less than two years previous. Tom was standing in front of the headstone Harry had been tied to on the fateful night, surrounded by what remained of his inner circle. Of the thirty Harry had seen that night fifteen plus two (Severus and Bellatrix Lestrange) remained.

Over the months Harry had learned where each member of Tom's shrinking inner circle stood. And as the circle grew smaller he had learned to tell them apart by their standing postures. He found Severus without much trouble and did a quick search of his person to locate the potions bottle Severus had told him about. Finding it in a trouser pocket he pressed it gently into Severus' leg to let the former Death Eater know that he was there. With a quick, almost imperceptible nod of his head Severus acknowledged Harry's ethereal presence and Harry could sense his former enemy relaxing slightly.

Over time Harry had learned to program his crystal to record these meetings on its own so that he could look around and try to discover what was going on behind the scenes. So far he had reproduced almost fifty charts and diagrams of planned attacks on sheets of parchment at Order Headquarters, which had helped save countless lives and resulted in the capture of innumerable Death Eaters. This time, however, his attention was focused on Severus.

After the opening of the meeting, during which all of the members of Tom's inner circle were required to step forward, kneel before their master, kiss the hem of his robe and mutter an oath of allegiance, Wormtail and Lestrange gave their reports on the most recent attacks in the south and north. As usual Harry had to restrain himself from ethereally attacking Wormtail - an attack he was not at all certain would succeed as he had never lifted anything heavier than a bottle of ink while in the ethereal and even then had been drained of energy for close to two hours - but he didn't really mind because, more often than not, Tom would wind up punishing Peter for him and tonight was no different.

"What do you mean we lost another battalion?" Tom screamed in his high-pitched, nails-on-chalkboard voice. "We are losing too many!"

"B-but, m-master," Wormtail stammered. "They were new and inexperienced . . ."

"I don't care!" Tom hissed angrily. "They should have been trained!"

"Th-they were, m-master."

"NOT WELL ENOUGH!" Tom bellowed, his red serpentine eyes flashing dangerously. "I want our people trained! Drive them till they drop if you have to but I want them trained!"

"Y-yes, m-master."

Apparently Tom had had enough of Wormtail's groveling for one night because he raised his wand and began hissing dangerously at Wormtail. As it was parselmouth Harry could understand the curses and threats he was making but poor Peter could do little more than grovel at Tom's feet trembling with fear. "It's a good thing I need you, Wormtail," Tom said in a deathly calm voice, "because if I didn't I would be sorely tempted to kill you." Peter looked up, his eyes betraying his gratitude at once again being spared. But Tom wasn't finished. He raised his wand, pointed it directly at Peter's masked face and screamed, "CRUCIO!"

For the next five minutes Peter was held under the Cruciatus Curse, writhing in the ground and screaming uncontrollably. Tom was pouring so much power into the curse that the skin on Wormtail's arms began to split open and from the amount of blood soaking through his robes Harry could only assume that the skin on his legs and chest was splitting as well. When Tom lifted the curse he spat at Peter's crumpled form and screamed at Nott and Rookwood to take him away and heal his wounds.

Then, turning to Severus, his flaming red eyes narrowed and his reptilian nostrils flared. "So, Severus," he hissed, his voice once again dangerously calm, cool and deadly, "What news have you for me on Dumbledore and his golden boy, Harry Potter?"

Severus bowed and slowly stepped forward. When he was little more than a meter from the Dark Lord he got down on his hands and knees and kissed the hem of Tom's robes for the second time that night. After rising to a crouched position Severus backed away until he was three meters from his master and then knelt down. Looking up into his master's face - one of the very few Death Eaters who dared be so bold - he said, "I have no news to report, Master. I know that they are aware of the events taking place outside of Hogwarts through the newspapers and other media outlets but other than that all I can say is that Dumbledore seems to be keeping a particularly close eye on the Potter brat." He spat the last words of this sentence out with the usual amount of venom he reserved for those he particularly loathed. "It would seem that ever since the events of last year he is trying to protect the boy at all costs."

"Aaaaaargh!" Tom screamed at the top of his lungs, causing even his faithful Nagini to shiver in fright. "You lie, Snape! I know you have been spying for Dumbledore! I have known ever since Potter's first year! Or have you forgotten that I was under Quirrell's turban that year?" Raising his wand and pointing it at Severus' masked face he continued. "But then you probably didn't think I would remember all of those threats did you. I want the truth, Severus, and I want it now. LEGILLIMENS!"

The curse hit Severus square between the eyes but he didn't flinch. Harry could feel the former Death Eater fighting the curse and succeeding admirably. After almost a minute Tom let the Legillimens Curse drop and changed tactics. "We shall see how strong you are after you have begun to experience my wrath," Tom hissed dangerously. Then, raising his wand once again, he screamed, "CRUCIO!"

At first Severus didn't give in to the pain and refused to scream. But after almost a minute he started to whimper slightly. Then, as Tom poured even more power into the curse, the skin began to peal away from his arms, legs, chest, abdomen and back, exposing all his nerves to the crisp night air. Harry wanted to turn away but he knew that he could not. Carefully reaching into Severus' pocket - he didn't want to alert Tom to his presence - he began sneeking the potions bottle out of Severus' trousers and up towards his mouth. He did everything he could to keep it away from

Severus exposed nerves but by this time Severus was writhing and bucking so much that a few bumps were inevitable.

Severus had already lost his mask and Harry had gotten the bottle as far his collar when Tom ended the curse. "Tell me the truth!" Tom screamed.

"NEVER!" Severus yelled back.

"CRUCIO!"

Severus was writhing in pain as the skin and fleshy meat pealed off of his hands. What happened next startled everyone. Severus stuck his tongue out and bit it off. Tom was so enraged that he didn't notice the tiny blue potions bottle pop out from under Severus' robes, uncork itself and empty its contents into Severus' mouth.

Harry watched in horror has Severus swallowed the potion mixed with blood. Less than a minute later Severus Snape - Potions Master, Former Death Eater and Spy for the Order of the Phoenix - was dead.

Harry stopped the recording at that point and returned to his body. After shakily getting to his feet and staggering into the library he grabbed a handful of floo powder, knelt down in front of the fireplace, threw the powder into the grate, stuck his head into the emerald flames and said, as he was still to traumatized to speak at anything above a whisper, "Headmaster's office."

A moment later, as the Headmaster's Office appeared before him Harry was not surprised to see Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Remus, Tonks, Neville, Luna, Minerva, Kingsley and Alastor either sitting or standing in front of Albus' desk while Albus fidgeted nervously in his seat. As soon as Harry's head appeared in the flames Remus, who had been pacing nervously in front of the desk looked up and came running over. "Harry?" he asked, noticing the traumatized look of horror in Harry's eyes. "Are you alright?"

Harry nodded his head. "Yes," he whispered. "I'm fine."

"And Severus?" Albus asked hopefully.

Harry swallowed and looked sadly up at his friend and mentor. After taking a deep breath he sighed with grief then croaked out, "Dead."

After all of the gasps and screams had died down Albus slowly walked over and knelt down in front if the fireplace. "Did he say anything, reveal any of our secrets?"

Harry shook his head. "No."

"Are you going to be all right?" Tonks asked.

Again Harry sighed and shook his head. "I don't know," he whispered. "I've got some Dreamless Sleep Potion I can use but I don't know if that will even be enough."

"You stay right where you are, Harry," Ginny said as she raced forward. "I'll be there in a few minutes. You aren't going to bed without me. You need someone to hold onto you so don't you even think of refusing!"

Harry looked up at his soul mate and nodded his head. "Okay," he whispered. "I'll meet you here in a few minutes."

Five minutes later, after racing through the castle and up into the Gryffindor sixth-year boys' dormitory, Ginny walked into Harry's library followed closely by Dobby, who was carrying two large mugs of warm milk, and Winky, who was carrying a tray laden with several dozen freshly baked chocolate chip cookies. When Ginny saw the haunted look in Harry's eyes she ran to him and pulled him into a hug. Harry was still too traumatized by what he had seen to say or do much but he did manage to turn towards her and whisper a heart felt, "Thank you." Dobby and Winky left the milk and cookies on the coffee table and silently returned to their quarters after telling Ginny that they would take care of any messes in the morning and that they would do the cooking this weekend so that they could spend all of their time together.

Harry and Ginny stayed up talking long into the night. It was almost midnight when Ginny helped Harry into the study and got his pensieve out for him to use while she changed. Harry nodded his thanks and spent the next hour removing the memories of the Death Eater meeting from his mind. While he was doing this he promised himself that he would either get a new penseive after the war was over or find some way of storing these memories for future generations so that they could learn from his experiences.

Ginny rose early the next morning and visited with her parents for a few minutes before getting dressed and taking Harry's ball to Albus, in his office. Harry was still sleeping soundly but she left Winky to watch over him in case he should wake while she was away. After a brief conversation with the Headmaster she visited Minerva in her office and told the Head of Gryffindor House what she was doing. Then, after returning to check on Harry who was still mercifully sleeping, she took Dobby with her over to the fifth-year girl's dormitory and moved all of her stuff, trunk included, into Harry's trunk and asked Dobby to change the name on the trunk to read "HARRY POTTER and GINNY WEASLEY." She was moving in and there was nothing Harry or anyone else could either say or do to change her mind. In her heart she knew that Harry needed her and she was going to be there for him.

Harry slept soundly until almost noon.

That Saturday was a Hogsmeade weekend but neither Harry nor Ginny felt like taking advantage of the opportunity. And since it was Remus' turn to teach neither of them felt like doing much more than relaxing and taking it easy. They both did a little studying and revising for their upcoming exams but other than that they didn't really do much more than talk.

That evening, after the seminar, there was a knock on the lid of the trunk and a few minutes later Harry, Ginny, Ron, Hermione, Neville, Luna, Remus and Tonks were sitting around in the various chairs and couches in the sitting room visiting while Dobby and Winky provided them with a variety of drinks, biscuits, cookies and treats. The ever-faithful house elves went out of their way to make sure that anything Harry drank was alcohol free. They did not want him slipping into an alcoholic stupor after what he had seen.

"Well," Neville said sadly, after they had talked around the subject for a while, "he certainly proved himself loyal to the cause. Albus showed us the crystal after we got back from Hogsmeade and even though there was a time when I thought he deserved to die like that I wouldn't wish that off on anyone."

"Yeah," Ron said solemnly. "I guess Albus was right. He did have his reasons for trusting him. And Severus certainly proved himself worthy of that trust."

They talked long into the night, sharing their feelings and discussing what they should do to honor the memory of their colleague and friend. It was decided that, whether they ever found his body or not, they would talk to Albus about holding a public service for the man in the Great Hall in the afternoon of the following Saturday. Each of them would deliver a short speech, beginning with Remus who would describe the Severus Snape he knew while attending Hogwarts and ending with Harry who would describe the evolution of their friendship and his death. He was not going to be overly graphic in his descriptions but only graphic enough to show the extraordinary amount of courage the former Head of Slytherin House had shown when faced with his own death. It was also decided that while his coffin would be draped with a Slytherin House banner they would press to have Gryffindor, Huffelpuff and Ravenclaw House banners placed within his casket.

A bloodcurdling scream was heard coming from Hogsmeade on Easter Sunday as the early risers discovered Severus' mangled body lying in the center of the all-wizarding village's main street. A runner was sent to the castle and Albus was summoned from his sleep. Half an hour later, as Albus approached the scene, a small crowd of onlookers parted to let him through. As he knelt down beside his Potions Master's body, Severus' robes soaked in his own blood, he spied a bloodstained envelope tucked into the folds of Severus' robes. After checking it for spells he carefully withdrew the envelope and examined it.

The envelope was addressed in blood to "Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry." It was sealed with an emerald green, wax copy of the Dark Mark. Carefully opening the envelope and extracting the piece of parchment it held he read the note, which had, once again, been written in blood.

> Dumbledore,
>
> I don't know how you are getting all of your information but this source has dried up. I hope you are happy now that your precious Potions Master is now dead.
>
> Voldemort

A tear trickled down the ancient wizard's cheek as he read this note but he kept his emotions to himself. He would be using his pensieve later on; but first he needed to get the body to the Hospital Wing and begin making arrangements for the funeral.

The trip back up to the castle was one of the longest journeys Albus Dumbledore had ever made. Hagrid and Fang came out to greet him but immediately turned away when they saw what was lying on the stretcher the Headmaster had conjured to carry this burden. Many of the professors and all of the students who had risen for their early morning workouts turned away as he passed and more than just a few got sick. Harry and Alastor were among the few exceptions, Harry because he had seen it happen and Alastor because he had already seen more death and destruction than any one man should ever have to endure.

The next week was very quiet. Classes went on as usual. Harry and Hermione teamed up to teach

the first and second year Potions classes and Ron and Neville teamed up to teach the third and fourth year classes while Victor took the fifth, sixth and seventh years. Victor was also appointed Temporary Head of Slytherin House. Even Argus Filch kept a low profile that week.

After lunch on Saturday Severus' black Mahoganoy coffin was carried to the front of the Great Hall. Banners from Gryffindor, Huffelpuff and Ravenclaw were draped over his body and the Slytherin banner was draped over his coffin. The service was well attended by the entire student body, the faculty, staff and most of the Order of the Phoenix. Speeches were given and Severus Snape's life was laid out for all to see. When Harry described his death there were more than a few gasps and cries of anguish, anger and outrage. When it was over Severus' wand was placed on top of his casket and he was laid to rest in a place of honor in the castle's cemetery.

Afterwards students from all houses approached Albus and the heads of house to find out if there was anything they could do to help avenge the Potions Master's death. It was not until the second week of May, however, that an opportunity arose for them to take advantage of this outpouring of good will and put it to the test. On that Friday night, as Harry was monitoring and recording the Death Eater meeting, Tom revealed his plans to simultaneously attack Hogwarts, Hogsmeade, The Ministry of Magic, Diagon Alley, St. Mungo's and a number of other strategic points of interest throughout western Europe in the last week of October with all of his forces. Harry made sure he got a complete list of all of the targets before presenting it to Albus at their next meeting.

On Monday, May 19th, 1997 a notice went up on all of the school bulletin boards asking all students, third year and above, who wished to fight Voldemort and help avenge the death of the late Severus Snape to report to the Great Hall at 3:00 PM on Saturday, May 24th for their first meeting.

Harry was surprised at the turnout. Every student from third year and above showed up for the meeting. A few first and second year students even tried to sneak in but were caught and sent back to their common rooms. All of the students attending the meeting were told to write letters home explaining why they wished to fight and Albus and their heads of house would send letters explaining the reasons behind their requests and the arrangements that were being made for extensive, summertime training in dueling and self defense.

Chapter 45. Competitions and Preparations

As exams grew nearer Luna and Ginny began spending more and more time studying in Harry's trunk, the quietest and most well equipped place in the whole castle for studying. Harry, Neville, Hermione and Ron were doing everything they could to help them but they had their own exams to worry about so their help, even though Hermione did help them prepare their study schedules, was limited to - Charms (Harry and Neville), Herbology (Neville), Transfiguration (Harry and Hermione), Potions (Ron and Neville) Arythmancy (Hermione), Defense Against the Dark Arts (Harry, Ron and Neville) and History of Magic (Hermione) - more than one sleepless night was spent either in Harry's library, in his study, or in the conference room. Dobby and Winky took over all of the cooking and cleaning chores at the end of the second week in May and refused to let anyone help them because, as Winky said one night when Ron asked if he could help her with dinner, "Winky is thanking you for the offer, Master Ron, but Winky and Dobby is understanding how important these tests is and is wanting you to spend your time studying. There is being plenty of time for you to learn how to cook after you is finished with your exams."

Ron had actually gotten used to the idea of treating Dobby and Winky as equals and was becoming fascinated with their magical abilities. Once he realized just exactly how human they really were and took the time to get to know not only Dobby and Winky but many of the Hogwarts house elves he found that he tended to agree with Hermione on a few of her original S.P.E.W. goals and objectives. House elves really were very powerful creatures and he wanted to learn everything he could about them so that he could include them in his plans for the defense of Hogwarts and Hogsmeade.

More often than not, in the last few weekends leading up to their final exams all six would spend their days and nights, except for when they were needed for their respective seminars, in Harry's trunk. On these occasions Harry and Ginny would share the main bedroom and the Trunk's Room of Requirement would be transformed into a two-bedroom suite. Ron and Hermione would share one bedroom while Neville and Luna would share the other. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, Mr. and Mrs. Granger, Luna's father and Neville's Gran had all been informed of these arrangements and, while they were all hesitant and slightly nervous about the situation, trusted their children to do the right thing and not do anything that they might regret later. On top of that, Albus had insisted that all six of them be subjected to a number of contraceptive charms that could only be removed by either himself or Madam Pomfrey.

The nice thing about these charms, as Harry and Ginny had discovered on the afternoon of the day Severus' body had been found, is that not only did they render them temporarily sterile but manipulated their hormones in such a way that they did not desire sexual intercourse. They didn't mind snuggling and cuddling, but intercourse was not something they even thought about. One of the side benefits to these charms, aside from the fact that they were very effective in preventing unwanted pregnancies, was that they made studying and concentrating a lot easier. Even with these charms in place, however, many's the night, as exams drew nearer, that Ginny cried herself to sleep on Harry's chest and many's the morning her orange juice was laced with a calming draught.

Of course Harry was not immune to the effects of pressure. Indeed, he probably felt it worse than most because on top of his studies he had his spying duties for the Order, his teaching duties and his Thursday evening classes with Albus. There were many nights Harry wanted to give in and cry himself to sleep in Ginny's arms but he wouldn't. He wanted to remain strong for her so he found

his solace in comforting the girl he loved.

Bill and Fleur had brought copies of all the work they had done on the Purgatory Charm to Hogwarts at the last meeting. Everything looked right but there was still something missing. They had people working on it around the clock but no one seemed to be able to figure out what the missing component was. They were hoping, since Harry, Remus and Hermione had designed the original, shell charm that they, along with Albus and Professor Flitwick, would be able figure it out.

The fifth and seventh year students were being excused from their dueling labs and early morning training sessions so that they could spend more time studying for their O.W.L. and N.E.W.T. Exams but most of them still participated in the early morning runs because not only had they grown used to the routine but, according to Ginny and Luna, the exercise seemed to sooth their nerves and give them more energy, providing them with that little extra something they needed to make it through the day.

The Defense Against the Dark Arts Professors (Harry included) had picked their teams of duelists for the competition, which would be held the day after the Quidditch final (Gryffindor vs. Ravenclaw), which was to be held the Saturday after the conclusion of exams. None of the duelists were to be told of their participation in the exercise until the morning of the competition so that, as in the case of an actual duel, they would not know anything of their opponents' individual strengths or weaknesses or who they would be partnered with. And the professors would know only who their team's members were so that they could not give their team an unfair advantage by briefing their students on what to expect.

Harry had, since early May, been working with many of his best students on the art of fighting while under the influence of disillusionment and invisibility charms. He knew that it was an underhanded and dirty trick to play on his fellow professors but he wanted to give his students the greatest possible advantage, not only in this competition but in the upcoming war. Some of them were better at it than others but they were all progressing rapidly in learning to sense the magical energies around them and in defending themselves against invisible opponents. Harry's ten best fighters were Ginny, Ron, Hermione, Neville, Luna, Cho, Colin, Susan Bones, Padma Patil and Pansy Parkinson, who had joined his group at the start of the second term. He knew that four of his fighters - Ginny, Luna, Colin and Cho - would be exhausted after taking their O.W.L. and N.E.W.T Exams but he had faith in them and knew that they would rise to the occasion.

Harry, Remus, Tonks, Kingsley and Alastor would be monitoring the duel from the air while the rest of the professors and students watched it from the battlements, the Astronomy Tower and from the roof the castle. They would be in constant contact with each other and Albus through a communications charm that would let them monitor the charms being used by their respective teams but would not let them be heard by any of the duelists. All in all it was shaping up to be an exciting competition.

Gryffindor won the Quidditch final due, in no small measure, to the skill of their players and the fact that four of their members were flying the new Electra 5000 Battle Series of brooms which were at least twice as fast and fifty times more maneuverable than even their closest competition which was the Electra 5000 Racing Broom.

Once everyone had arrived in the Great Hall for breakfast on the morning of the competition Albus stood and waved his wand. As the doors closed a silence fell over the hall and all but a few turned

their attention to the Headmaster. "Good morning," Albus said cheerfully. "As you know, today has been set aside for a competition between the Defense Against the Dark Arts Laboratory classes. Your five Defense Against the Dark Arts Professors - Professors Lupin, Moody, Potter, Shacklebolt and Tonks - have chosen the ten best duelists from their classes as representatives of their best efforts. Over the course of the next few minutes they will be informing you of their choices. Once their selections are made you will have one hour to strategize over breakfast. After that you duelists will be moved to your starting positions and those of you who wish to observe, which I am hoping is most of you as this should prove to be a very informative competition, will be directed to the observation posts which have been established around the school grounds.

"Could Professors Lupin, Moody, Potter, Shacklebolt and Tonks please step to the head of the hall."

While Remus, Alastor, Kingsley and Tonks stood up from their seats at the Head Table Harry got up from his seat between Ginny and Luna and stepped back over the bench. "I'll see you guys in a bit," he said as he turned and made his way to stand in front of the Head Table with his fellow professors.

When they were all standing in front of Albus he handed each of them a stack of ten modified playing cards. On the back of each card was a team name - in Harry's case it was "Potter's Pirates" - and on the face was the location from which they were to start. None of the professors had been informed of their team's starting position because every effort was being made to make it as realistic as possible even though it was going to be a disarm only competition.

After a few more brief comments to the student body about the rules of the competition and that they would be monitored by their professors, Albus turned to the five and, with a smile and a twinkle, said, "Off you go."

As they set off Tonks Grabbed Harry's arm and threatened, "You better not have chosen Neville, Harry."

Harry turned to her and smirked. "Why not, he's in my class?"

"Arrgh!" Tonks growled at him. "But that's so unfair. I mean, we have been working with him since July!"

Harry could swear he heard Remus and Kingsley chuckling at Tonks' reaction but it was Alastor who came to his rescue. "Luck o' the draw, lass," he growled. "Luck o' the draw."

Tonks threw Alastor a dirty look and stalked off to deliver her cards to her chosen students. Harry chuckled and shook his head as he made his way down between the Gryffindor and Ravenclaw Tables. Cho and Marietta looked up as he approached. Harry rested his hand on Andromeda Babcock's shoulder and, looking down at the young first-year girl, said, "Good morning, Andromeda. How are your parents doing?"

Andromeda looked up and smiled. "Last I heard they are doing fine. They say they are working with the Department of Mysteries again, trying to see if they can find a way through a giant's natural defenses."

Harry nodded. "Good," he said. "Tell them I said hi, will you?"

Andromeda nodded her head. "Will do, Harry."

Then, turning to Cho, who was sitting directly across from Andromeda, handed her a card and, smiling softly, said, "Cedric would be proud."

Cho looked up and smiled. "Thank you, Harry," she whispered and Harry could see a small tear trickling down one of her cheeks.

Reaching out he wiped it away with his thumb and said, "I suggest moving your breakfast to the Gryffondor Table because six members of my team are Gryffindors."

Cho smiled up at Harry and nodded her head.

Harry's next stop was Colin who was sitting next to his brother Dennis. Stopping behind the two boys Harry cleared his throat and said, "Well, Colin, Dennis? Are you guys staying here this summer?"

Colin and Dennis both jumped slightly then turned around and nodded. "Yes we are, Harry," Colin said. "After they received our letter I guess they talked to their guards and decided that if we want to fight, even though they think it's a shame that teenagers should have to fight in a war of this magnitude, they will support us one hundred percent."

Harry frowned slightly then nodded. "Good," he said. "I hope and pray that you don't have to fight but I'm glad your parents are supporting your decisions."

Colin matched Harry's slight frown. "I hope we don't have to either, Harry. But if we do we are not going to let you down."

Harry nodded and handed a card to Colin. "Thanks," he said. "I suggest you move down to sit with Ginny, Ron, Hermione, Neville and Luna as they make up the bulk of your team."

Colin nodded and stood up to move down the table.

Harry's next stop was to stand behind and between Ginny and Luna. Smirking mischievously he said, "Well, guys, exams are over and quidditch is finished for another for another year. Do you feel like getting a little exercise?"

Ron looked up at him and tilted his head to one side. "Huh?"

Harry laughed and handed each of them a card. Then, looking around at the other, nearby occupants of the table, said. "I suggest you budge over, mates. This section of the table is going to become the Potter Pirates' war room for the next hour."

Before he left to hand his cards to the last three members of his team he leaned over and whispered into Ginny's ear, "I'm sorry, Gin, but I can't help you. It's all up to you guys. We've done everything we can to train you; now it is up to you to use what you've learned."

Ginny smiled up at him and said, "Alright then. I'll ask Dobby to move your plate up to the Head Table."

Harry smiled back at her. "Okay," he said with a shrug. Then, as he remembered something he had

meant to tell Colin, said, "Could you tell Colin that there is a certain house elf who would like to talk to him about photography."

Ginny giggled. "Yeah, sure."

Looking around Harry saw Padma and Parvati sitting together at the far end of the Ravenclaw Table. Since the school year was over and there was no need for robes it was nearly impossible to tell them apart since they had the unfortunate habit of dressing alike. Harry hated it when they did that because it made his life all that much more difficult. But since he had gotten away with it before he decided to try it again. Walking casually down to the end of the Ravenclaw Table and stopping opposite them he glanced up and said, "Hey, Padma."

The one on the right looked up and smiled. Hey, Harry"

Harry smiled to himself. It had worked again. Handing Padma one of his last three cards he said, "Here. They are meeting at they Gryffindor Table, up around Ron and Ginny."

Padma smiled and nodded. "Okay. Thanks, Harry."

As Padma got up and stepped over the bench Harry turned and looked up and down the lengths of the Huffelpuff and Slytherin Tables. The Huffelpuff Table was closer but Susan was seated at the far end visiting with some of her friends while Pansy, at the Slytherin Table, was only halfway up and on the far side visiting with Blaise Zabini and Orville Burns. She seemed to have gotten over Draco and had taken Harry's advice. She was now looking at the qualities that lay within her friends' hearts and not paying quite so much attention to the amount of money they had or any of the other, superficial qualities most people like to flaunt.

Turning away from the Ravenclaw Table Harry walked around the end of the Huffelpuff Table and made his way up towards Pansy. Stopping behind Millicent Bulstrode he looked across at Orville. "Hi, Orville," he said. "How's you knee doing?" Orville had injured his knee during the battle on Christmas Day and had never quite gotten over it.

Orville looked up from his conversation with Pansy. "Oh, hi, Harry. It's still a little stiff. I'm going in to London next week to have the healer's at Saint Mungo's look at it; but I plan on being back by the end of the week."

Harry nodded. "If you need anything make sure you let us know." Then turning to Pansy he said he handed her a card and said, "I hate to break up a good conversation, guys but they need you over at the Gryffindor Table, Pansy." Pansy looked up and smiled, her eyes dancing with the happiness and joy she felt at being chosen as one of the top ten duelists in her class. "Just look for Ron and Ginny's red hair."

"Thanks, Harry," she said as she excused herself from the table and began making her way across the Great Hall.

Harry turned away from the Slytherin Table and bumped into Remus. "Oh, sorry about that, Remus," he said. "I guess I wasn't paying attention."

Remus chuckled. "That's quite alright, Harry. But I must say that I think I am beginning to agree with Tonks."

Harry stepped back and looked at his friend in shock. "What?"

Remus chuckled again. "I'm only kidding, Harry. But you must admit that you do have three of the best strategists and seven of the best fighters this school has ever seen on your team."

Harry laughed. Then, assuming Alastor's brogue, said, "As a good frien' o' mine once said: Luck o' the draw, laddy. Luck o' the draw."

Remus laughed. "Hey, that's pretty good, Harry! You may make an auror yet." Even though the war wasn't over by any means the end of term and the conclusion of exams did call for a certain amount of levity and as Harry made his way up to the head of the Huffelpuff Table he couldn't help but shake his head and laugh.

Susan looked up as Harry approached and smiled. "Hi, Harry."

Harry smiled back. "Hi, Susan. How's your aunt doing?"

Susan giggled softly to herself then blushed a light shade of pink. "Last I heard she was doing fine," she said lightly. "She's still the Acting Minister of Magic, you know. And she's always asking about you."

Harry blushed slightly then groaned. Handing Susan the last of his cards he said, "They are meeting over at the Gryffindor Table." Then grumbled, "And you can tell Yenta that I am already spoken for.

That entire end of the Huffelpuff House Table erupted into laughter. It was well known throughout Hogwarts that Susan's aunt had been trying to fix them up since the beginning of the year. It would seem that, where her niece was concerned, Madam Bones was almost as bad as Molly Weasley. Harry didn't mind being friends with Susan but everyone at Hogwarts also knew that Harry and Ginny were together and that, baring the death of either one of them, there was nothing that was going to tear them apart. "Oh, I've told her, Harry!" Susan laughed. "But I don't think she wants to listen."

Harry groaned and, shaking his head, turned and walked towards the Head Table where Dobby had moved his plate and made a space for him between Victor and Professor Sprout.

An hour later, as Harry, Remus, Tonks, Kingsley and Alastor kicked off from in front of the castle's main entrance to monitor the duel, Potter's Pirates were standing at the ready around the great oat near the lake; Remus' Renegades were at their staging area in the quidditch pitch; Kingsley's Clan was stationed near a small clump of trees on the far corner of the castle grounds; Tonks' Trolls were getting ready on the fringes of the Forbidden Forest, near the front gates; and Moody's Miscreants were preparing themselves in one of the castle's smaller courtyards. When everyone was in place and ready Albus shot a shower of red sparks from the top of the Astronomy Tower and the competition began.

The first thing Harry heard through his charmed communications link was Tonks gasping and then complaining about Harry's team cheating. "What's wrong, Tonks?" Remus asked.

"Harry's team just went invisible!" Tonks said indignantly.

Harry looked over to where his team had been and could easily see the light distortion patterns of ten people moving off in fice sets of two. "I don't see what you're complaining about, Tonks," he

said. "I can still see where they are."

Tonks huffed. "Yeah but . . . None of the other teams can! They weren't taught to look for distortions. They were taught to fight!"

"Speak fer yerself, lass," Alastor said. "I taught mine to look fer every kind of concealment charm. O' course I didn't think they'd be fightin' against invisibility charms today but this will give them all somethin' t' think about when we're finished."

Albus chuckled into the link. "Indeed it will, Alastor. Indeed it will." Then, turning his attention towards Harry, said, "Good thinking Harry. I'm glad you taught them to fight using every advantage. But tell me, how good are they at fighting an invisible foe?"

Harry thought for a moment then said, "Of the ten I think I would have to say that Ginny, Hermione and Neville are the best. After that I think It would have to be Luna, Cho, Padma, Ron, Susan, Colin and then Pansy. None of them are on your level, Albus, but I think they can hold their own against most ordinary witches and wizards."

An hour later, after almost half of the combatants had been disarmed, Harry excused himself from the battle and drifted out over Hogsmeade. "What is it, Harry?" Remus asked, concerned.

"I don't know," Harry said. "I want to get away for a few minutes to see if I can make sense of it."

Touching down outside the Shrieking Shack Harry cut himself out of the link, stepped up onto the porch, leaned his broom against the wall and sat down. His scar was telling him that Tom was up to something but he didn't know what it was. So, dropping into the ethos, Harry went in search of his enemy and found him at the Riddle Manor, holding court with one hundred of his top fighters. He was standing on a small stage in a large ballroom near the back of the house. "Today," he hissed," we will destroy Hogsmeade and kill that pitiful, muggle-loving old fool, Albus Dumbledore. We will attack at dusk and we will not stop fighting until the task is complete. In this mission we will have three objectives. The first is, of course, to take Hogsmeade. The second is to kill Dumbledore. Our third and final objective is to kill Harry Potter. Once those three tasks are complete Hogwarts will be mine and the rest of the world will learn what it means to fear the Dark Lord. They will kneel before me or die."

For the next hour he outlined, in great detail, his plans for the attack. When it was all over Harry cut himself back into the communications charm and asked, "How's it going, guys?"

Kingsley chuckled. "You are definitely winning, Harry. Tonks and I are out of it. Remus still has three and Alastor has five; but you still have all ten."

"Call it off." Harry said dryly.

"What is it, Harry?" Albus asked.

"Tom is coming. He says dusk but I want to give ourselves at least an hour."

"Very well," the Headmaster said. Moments later he cut himself out of the communications charm and, casting a particularly loud Sonorus Charm on himself, said, "Attention all students! This competition is being canceled until further notice. We have eight hours to prepare for an attack by Voldemort and his followers. Third-years and below please report to your common rooms and

await further orders. Fourth-years and above please report to the Great Hall. Will Harry Potter, Neville Longbottom, Ronald Weasley, Hermione Granger, Ginevra Weasley, Luna Lovegood and all of the professors please report to my office immediately. This is not a drill. I repeat, this is not a drill. Thank you." With that Albus Dumbledore, the venerated Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, removed the Sonorus Charm from his voice and strode quickly from the top of the Astronomy Tower.

Fifteen minutes later, as the last of the professors and the youngest members of the Order of the Phoenix found seats in the Headmaster's Office, Harry conjured a large map of Hogwarts, Hogsmeade and the surrounding terrain, including all of the secret tunnels and passages that led either into the castle or onto the castle grounds. As the vast majority of the tunnels and passages were unknown to most of the faculty, many of them were surprised at their existence.

For the next three hours Harry went over Tom's plans, Ron and Neville discussed battle strategies and, with input from all of the Defense professors, made plans on which students would be teamed with which professors and where they would be stationed and Hermione discussed the defense of the castle proper. Hagrid was sent into the forest to talk to Aragog; Albus went down to the lake to talk to the merpeople; Madam Pomfrey and Victor left to get the Hospital Wing ready for any casualties; Professor Flitwick left to begin making portkeys for the fighters that would take them directly to the Hospital Wing; and the rest were Taken to the Great Hall to gather their troops and move into their defensive positions.

The possibility of transporting all of the younger students out of the area via either portkey or floo was discussed but dismissed due to the fact that they had so little time. The first second and third years would be encouraged to take their trunks and belongings with them into the dungeons so that they could begin flooing out, to Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes and Diagon Alley once the fighting began but until then all hands would be needed to get the castle ready. The tunnels from HoneyDukes and the Shrieking Shack would have to be guarded because Wormtail had told Tom of their existence and Tom had included them in his plans. Even the partially collapsed tunnel from the Hog's Head would have to be guarded because Peter didn't know that it had collapsed and they didn't know how far onto the grounds it came.

Professors Vector, Sinistra and Sprout were placed in charge of organizing the evacuation of the younger students; Luna was placed in charge of making sure that each team of fighters had at least one partially trained healer in their midst; Ginny was placed in charge of organizing the house elves to serve as messengers, couriers and orderlies to make sure everyone had what they needed in the way of food, water and weapons; and Fred and George were contacted and asked to bring several cases of their portable swamps, Death Eater charmed fireworks and other weapons of war as well as healthy supplies of their Calming Candies and Potter Charms. They didn't need anyone going to pieces in the middle of a pitched battle so everyone was going to be issued small bags of Calming Candies and Potter Charms, no matter their level of experience, because in addition to Tom's top one hundred fighters he was bringing one thousand of his mid-level fighters as well. This was promising to be a very long, drawn out and potentially bloody campaign and everyone was made aware of that fact. The only bright spots in the whole affair, so far as Harry and Neville were concerned, was that somewhere in the maelstrom they might actually get a crack at Bellatrix LeStrange and Peter Pettigrew.

Chapter 46. The Defense of Hogsmeade

After the twins had been sent back to their shop with a list of names and addresses of the first, second and those few third-year students who would not be spending the summer training and Mrs. Weasley had been contacted to help with the evacuation from that end, Harry, Ron, Neville and Ginny went into the Forbidden Forest to contact their elfish counterparts and to talk to Bane and Ronan about defending the forest. Ron, Hermione and Harry had spent many hours with the centaurs getting to know the forest through their eyes and learning about each of their individual strengths and weaknesses. On their way into the forest they stopped by Hagrid's cabin so that he could join them and fill them in on the acromantula's plans so that their presence could be factored into the equation.

When they entered the now familiar clearing Bane, Ronan and many of their top lieutenants were already waiting for them. "You are late, Harry Potter," Ronan said. "What took you so long?"

Harry smirked, shrugged his shoulders and looked confidently into the centaur's eyes. "That's a lot of people to sort out," he said. "They don't all have the same level of ability so we had to team them up according to their strengths and arrange for the evacuation of those who will not be staying the summer."

Ronan nodded his head. "Yes."

"Will you be contacting the wood elves this time, Harry Potter?" Bane asked.

Harry nodded. "Yes, and the high elves."

There was a sudden murmuring from two of their lieutenants and Harry looked up just in time to stop them from attacking a representative of the forest's snakes. "STOP!" he shouted. Don't shoot! This is a friend."

The centaurs eyed the snake nervously as it slithered into the clearing. Kneeling down at its approach Harry recognized it as one of the snakes he had been talking to on a regular basis. Slipping into parseltongue he looked it in the eye and said, "Greetings, Samson. Have you come to aide in our defense?"

The snake rose up and, nodding its head, hissed back, "Yes, Harry Potter, we have come to assist our friend in the defense of his castle."

Harry nodded. "Very well, Samson. We will include you in our plans but first we must summon some more of our friends."

Harry lowered his hand and let the snake slither up his arm and drape himself around Harry's shoulders and neck. Turning to Ginny he said, "Gin, While Ron and Neville and I are summoning the wood elves do you think you could call Mira, the pixies and the sprites? I really don't want to kill any of them . . . I mean, I know we are going to have to hurt and disarm them but I want to let Tom know what he's getting himself into one step at a time. If we can beat him before we reveal all of our weapons so much the better but somehow I don't think that's going to happen. We will try to leave the goblins, ghosts, ghouls, poltergeists and vampires out of it for now because I want to save them for the final push but if worse comes to worse . . ."

Harry left the thought unfinished because Ginny nodded her head in understanding. "You guys get the wood elves, I'll get the fairies, pixies and sprites." Five minutes later, Bane, Ronan, several of their top lieutenants, Emric, his top two lieutenants, Mira, Queen of the fairies, Darla, Queen of the pixies and Stephanie, Queen of the sprites were all either standing or hovering around a large map Ron and Neville had conjured of the Hogwarts grounds, the Forbidden Forest, Hogsmeade and the surrounding area. The map was very detailed and showed what they knew of Voldemort's planned attack and the human defenses that had already been set into motion.

Harry and Ginny, meanwhile, stepped to one side of the clearing and pulled out the starlight crystals they wore around their necks. Kneeling down, much as they had when they became soul mates, they removed the necklaces from around their necks, placed them together in their hands, bowed their heads, closed their eyes and began chanting a very peaceful and melodious elfish summoning charm. As they completed the song a blindingly bright white light enveloped them for several seconds. When it faded Harry was kneeling, knee-to-knee, with Ginny on his right and Eileen, Joseph's soul mate, on his left and Joseph directly across from him. Their crystals were once again dangling from the chains around their necks.

As he opened his eyes Harry couldn't help but smile. The feelings that accompanied this particular summoning charm were almost as wonderful as the feelings of peace and emotional prosperity he experienced whenever he heard the Phoenix Song. Reaching out and joining hands with the two young women on either side of him he looked up into the smiling eyes of his second elfish blood brother. "Welcome, Joseph." Then, turning to look into Eileen's eyes, he said, "And I welcome you too, Eileen. I wish that I could say that this is a social call but I fear that we are in need of your assistance. We have but a few, short hours to prepare our defense of Hogwarts and Hogsmeade. I wish we had more time but I did not learn of this attack until this morning. Tom seems to be trying to play games with us. We know that he is planning a major attack for late in October but the planning of this attack comes as a complete surprise.

"The faculty, staff and students are preparing for war and they are being made aware of their roles as we speak but I fear that this may not be enough. Albus is talking to the merpeople and asking them to help us by guarding the lake. Our friend, Hagrid has enlisted the aide of the acromantulas to assist us in guarding and protecting the forest. But it is a large forest so we have also turned to the centaurs, your cousins, the wood elves, and the snakes to help defend the forest as well. And still I fear it may not be enough.

"We have enlisted the aide of your cousins, the house elves, as well as the pixies, sprites and fairies to aide us in this time of need; but still I want to be sure. So we are turning to you in hopes that you will assist us as well."

Joseph looked across at his blood brother, his face framed with a silky curtain of dark brown hair that fell down around his shoulders and his bright green eyes dancing merrily in his elfish face, and laughed. "Oh, Harry," he laughed. "You are always so formal and polite. What are we going to do with you?"

Ginny and Eileen giggled at Harry's embarrassment as he blushed through several shades of pink but Harry simply kept his head down and shrugged his shoulders.

Joseph and Eileen stood gracefully and helped Harry and Ginny to their feet, still chuckling at Harry's embarrassment. As they made their way over to the others Joseph threw his arm around

Harry's shoulders, being careful not to dislodge a very startled Samson, and said, "You know, Harry. All kidding aside, when this is all over we are going to have to take you and Ginny over to our realm for a visit so you can get used to our customs and traditions."

Harry looked up at Joseph, the excitement of possibly learning more about the high elves than could ever be conveyed through any number of books, evident on his face. "Do you mean that?" he asked.

Eileen laughed and Joseph nodded. "Yes, Harry, I mean it. The last two humans to visit our realm were Albus and Elizabeth and that was long before I was even born. I think it is time we invited you and Ginny to visit our world."

Ginny gave out a sudden squeak of delight and pulled Harry into a hug. "Oh, Harry!" she gasped. "Can we?"

Harry hugged her back and then let her down. "I don't see why not," he said as a loving smile played across his face. "The only problem is that we still have a certain dark wizard to deal with."

Ginny's enthusiasm could not be dampened so easily, however, and she very nearly danced back to the others while pulling Harry along behind her. Joseph and Eileen chuckled and laughed at their friend's predicament.

When they reached the map Harry and Ginny called Dobby and Winky, as well as a few of the more senior Hogwarts house elves, and once they had arrived they spent the next three hours planning and strategizing for the defense of both Hogwarts and Hogsmeade as well as the Forbidden Forest, the lake and the surrounding countryside. With two hours to spare runners were sent into Hogsmeade and most of the village was evacuated to the castle and the dungeons where they, too, would be evacuated to Diagon Alley so long as the Floo Network held up.

At dusk everyone and everything was set. The Hospital Wing was ready. Several healers had flooed in from St. Mungo's to assist Madam Pomfrey and Victor and several of Victor's sixth and seventh year students had made sure that the cupboards were well stocked with potions and neatly organized according to Poppy's exacting standards; Victor himself was heading up the airborne reconnaissance with twenty of the school's best flyers; the centaurs, wood elves, snakes and acromantulas were patrolling the Forbidden Forest, setting additional traps and checking for any possible gaps in their security measures; the high elves were patrolling the shores of the lake and the surrounding hills; the older students (fourth-year and above) we positioned at strategic locations in and around Hogwarts and Hogsmeade; and the fairies, pixies, sprites and house elves were stationed with their assigned groups, ready to start running messages and supplies wherever needed.

Harry and Neville, as the school's best dueling team, were stationed at one of the few intersections in the heart of Hogsmeade, lurking in the shadows, getting ready for what could well be one of the most decisive battles of the war. The sky above was heavily overcast so it was promising to be an exceptionally dark night, which would make fighting difficult at best. Neville and Luna were standing a few meters away talking in hushed whispers. Ron and Hermione were across the street holding a similar conversation, talking, Harry suspected, about love and encouraging each other to be strong.

Harry and Ginny were sitting in silence, with their backs to the wall and holding hands, simply

enjoying each other's company. In the closing moments of the day Ginny broke their comfortable, companionable silence. Sensing that something was bothering her boyfriend and soul mate she squeezed his hand and said, "What's wrong, Harry?"

Harry looked up and across the street at his two best friends who were currently locked in a passionate embrace then turned his face towards Ginny, his beloved angel for whom he would do anything or give any amount of money if only she would return to the castle and stay safe. But at the same time he knew that he couldn't ask her to do that because this was as much her war as it was his and he knew that she would never forgive him if he even tried to shelter her from this storm. "This isn't it you know," he said softly, looking into her gently loving eyes. "I can't kill him. I know it's up to me to get rid of him but I don't want to become a murderer."

Ginny squeezed his hand even tighter and leaned her head on his shoulder. "I know," she said softly. "But the prophecy didn't say you had to kill him. If I remember correctly the prophecy only said that you have the power to vanquish him. That doesn't mean you have to kill him. There are other ways to vanquish someone you know. I'm not saying he doesn't deserve death because in all likelihood he does but there are other ways to vanquish someone."

As she said this Harry's mind raced back to the duel between Albus and Tom in the atrium at the Ministry of Magic the previous year. "There are far worse things than death, Tom," Albus had said. But what did he mean. Then he remembered everything Bill and Fleur had told them about the Purgatory Charm and he realized that a life in purgatory, such as the life Tom had created for himself, would be far worse than death. All they had to do now was find that missing element and make it work.

Getting to his feet and turning to help Ginny to hers he heard the first pops as Death Eaters apparated into Hogsmeade. Pulling Ginny into his arms he kissed her deeply then whispered into her ear, "Just do me one favor, Gin. Try to stay safe and if you get in trouble use your portkey."

Ginny hugged him fiercely and buried her face in his chest. "I will, Harry. But you have got to promise me that you will too."

Harry kissed the top of her head. "I will," he whispered. "I promise. I will."

Pulling back and looking up into his eyes she whispered, "You had better!" then turned loose of him and ran across the side-street to join with Ron, Hermione and Luna who were getting set to defend the intersection.

Harry looked across at Ron and Hermione and, even though he could just barely make them out in the deepening gloom, could see that they were smiling nervously back. After giving them his most reassuring smile he turned to Neville and said, "Disillusionment charms, don't you think?"

Neville smiled grimly back and nodded his head. "Yeah."

Moments later Harry opened the communications charm between himself and Victor. "How are you doing, Victor?" he asked.

"Ve are doing fine, Harry."

"Disillusionment charms in place?"

"Da."

"Then I don't suppose you could give us a little light down here could you?"

"Da. Vun light show coming up."

Turning one last time towards Neville Harry said, "You ready for this, Neville?"

"Yeah," Neville said, a determined edge in his voice. "Let's do this thing."

As the first round if Weasley's Whiz-Bang Fireworks exploded over the streets of Hogsmeade Harry and Neville threw themselves out into the main street and the fight was on. They were so used to fighting as a team that they didn't even need to see each other to be effective. And they were moving so fast and in such erratic patterns that they would have been hard to hit even without the disillusionment charms in place. As it was, however, they were nearly impossible to see and all but impossible to hit. And they weren't just going for disarming their opponent; they were going for disabling them. Some of the ancient curses and hexes they were using shattered bones and cooked the flesh of those they hit. They weren't Unforgivables but a few of them were awfully close.

As the night wore on the battle grew more and more intense. By eleven o'clock most of the buildings in Hogsmeade were either burning or had been destroyed The Shrieking Shack had, thus far, been spared but the train station had sustained heavy damage. The casualty counts were high, particularly among the Death Eaters who found themselves out manned and out maneuvered at every turn. Screams of the dieing could be heard coming from the Forbidden Forest as Death Eaters were met by the bites of venomous snakes, the hungry pinchers of giant acromantulas, the poisoned darts of the wood elves or the swords and arrows of the centaurs and high elves. There were, however, several casualties and a few deaths among the student body as well

1. As the battle leaked into the early morning hours Harry and Neville both heard the high-pitched, mocking laughter that had haunted both of them for a year. Glancing quickly at each other they turned back to the Death Eaters they were dueling and finished them off with two rather powerful bone breaking curses and raced, side-by-side in the direction of Bellatrix LeStrange's mocking laughter. They found her in an alley leading out of town, towering over Ron and Hermione who were guarding Luna who was working feaverishly on a badly injured Ginny. "So," Bellatrix was cackling, "I've found four of the six! Where are the other two? Potter and Longbottom? I was so hoping to meet them tonight because I gave a gift for them from my master."

Harry and Neville glanced at each other and, with a nod, transformed into their animagus forms. Harry, in his panther form, crept up behind her as she continued to taunt their friends. When he was close enough he sprang and, digging his claws into her shoulders, drug her to the ground. She went down screaming and Ron and Hermione cringed at the amount of blood that was spilled in that one attack and turned to shelter Luna and Ginny from the flying crimson liquid. But Harry and Neville weren't finished.

As Bellatrix started to get up and began staggering to her feet Neville caught her with his horns and threw her into the air. When she came down he caught her under the chin with the tip of one horn and drove it threw her skull. For the next five minutes, as all of the pain and anguish they had suffered at the hands of this woman coursed through their veins, Harry and Neville so totally dismembered Bellatrix LeStrange's body that by the time they were finished the largest

recognizable piece of her body that could be used to identify her as having once been a human being was a fingernail.

When they were finished, although they were not proud of what they had done, they transformed back into their human forms and ran over to their friends. "Are you all right?" Harry asked urgently.

Ron and Hermione both looked very pale and Harry and Neville could both see that they were bleeding. With tears in his eyes Ron shook his head. "Ginny needs help," he whimpered.

As Harry ran to Ginny's side Neville shook Ron and Hermione's shoulders and screamed at them. "Use your portkeys and get out of here! We'll take care of Ginny! Now go!'"

Ron and Hermione mutely nodded their heads and, activating their portkeys, were gone in a flash.

Kneeling over Ginny, Harry looked at Luna, desperation evident in his eyes. "How is she?" he asked.

Luna grimaced. "She'll live, Harry. But I'm afraid the portkey might kill her." Cradeling Ginny's head in his arms he began crying softly. "Oh, Ginny. Please hold on. I don't think I will be able to live without you. Please hold on."

Ginny moaned softly. Harry looked into her face and for a moment thought he could see her eyes start to flutter open. Then they relaxed and she was peaceful once more. As Neville stood guard Harry leaned over and gently kissed Ginny on the lips. They were still warm so he knew that she was alive but he knew that she needed help. Standing up he screamed, "Dobby! Winky!"

With two almost simultaneous cracks the two house elves appeared at his side. "Yes, Har . . ." Dobby began but was cut off.

"Take Ginny and Luna to the Hospital Wing. But be careful, too much stress might kill Ginny."

Dobby and Winky took one look at Ginny and, without saying another word, snapped their fingers and were gone, taking Ginny and Luna with them. As Harry and Neville turned to leave and get back into the fighting the burning building they had been standing next to collapsed in upon itself.

Half an hour later Harry and Neville were still going strong. They knew that they should be getting tired but, as Albus had cautioned them all to expect, in the heat of battle your adrenaline will kick in and you may exhaust yourselves without even knowing it. The streets were already littered with bodies, mostly Death Eaters but with a few locals and students thrown into the mix. The Death Eaters who had died had died from their injuries and not as a direct result of any curses. The students and others who had died had died because they had panicked and not reacted quickly enough to get out of the way of the Killing Curses that were being sent their way.

Towards dawn, as the battle raged at one end of the street, a loud explosion was heard at the other end of town and all fighting temporarily stopped as a high-pitched laughter echoed hauntingly through what was left of Hogsmeade. Turning around Harry glanced at Neville and dryly said, "Cover my back. This one's mine."

Neville glanced back at the intimidating presence of Lord Voldemort. His black cloak billowed in the unnatural wind that seemed to surround him; his white reptilian face and bony hands reflected the flames of what was left of the burning buildings that had once stood at that end of town; and his

red snake-like eyes seemed to glow from within. Neville had heard Harry's descriptions of him and had seen images of him in Harry's crystal but to actually see him in person was quite different. There seemed to be an ice-cold aura of anger and hatred that surrounded him. Neville didn't know How Harry had faced him five times and still come out alive. In that moment he felt a new form of respect welling up in his heart for the man, for Harry Potter was indeed a man, he called friend. "Yeah, sure."

As Harry approached his nemesis, stepping over the many bodies that littered the street, he noticed a much shorter wizard standing beside him. Wormtail. There was no mistaking it. His silver hand was glowing in the firelight. "Hello, Peter, Tom," Harry said calmly as he approached his prey. "And how are you this fine morning?"

Peter was about to respond but Voldemort cut him off. "What did you call me, Potter?" Tom screamed. "I thought you would have learned never to use that accursed muggle name in my presence after what happened last year!"

Harry calmly pocketed his wand. He wouldn't need it for this; and besides, their wands had the nasty habit of not working against each other. Smirking he said, "I don't know, Tom. I guess I'm just not a very fast learner am I."

Voldemort screamed once again and started to raise his wand. But Harry raised his empty hands and, with an almost imperceptible twitch of the little finger of his right hand, forced Tom's arm back down to his side.

Harry closed his eyes and shook his head. "No, I don't think so, Tom. You see, I'm an unarmed wizard and in order for this to be a fair fight I would have to have a wand. But the sad fact is that our wands won't work against each other. You do remember what happened the last dime we dueled don't you?"

Tom was fuming. Harry had him in a full body bind and he couldn't get out of it. Turning his head towards Wormtail he screamed, "Kill him! Kill him, Wormtail and prove your loyalty to me!"

Harry shook his head again. "Sorry, Tom. Won't work. You see that nice, shiny magical hand you gave him two years ago won't work against me. And his wand is even more worthless. I'll tell you what though, Mister Riddle. I'll let you go this time because I have something special planned for you. You want immortality? I'll give you immortality. You may not like what it brings you but I will give you immortality. So, until we meet again," he said, turned around and started to walk away.

He hadn't gone more than a few steps when he felt Tom recovering from his shock and outrage. "You'll pay for this, Potter!" Tom screamed. "AVADA KEDAVRA!"

Harry immediately erected his shield and activated the charm but it wasn't needed because no sooner had these words left Tom's mouth than he heard Wormtail scream, "NO!" and felt him throw himself in front of the curse.

Whirling around Harry once again placed the full body bind on Voldemort and walked up to look him in the eye. As emerald green met blood red, blood red began to quiver with fear. Glaring into Tom's eyes Harry growled, "You had better learn to fear me, Tom! Do you want to know why Peter's hand and wand were useless against me? I'll tell you! I saved his life three years ago so he owed me a life debt. Now, if you are finished I have some business to attend to and I would appreciate it if

you didn’t get in the way." And with a flick of his wrist he threw the startled yet seething Tom Marvolo Riddle through the air and into a grove of trees several kilometers to the south and on the other side of the railroad tracks.

As the sun began to peek over the eastern horizon Harry looked down at Wormtail’s lifeless body and, shaking his head, said, "Be glad it wasn’t Moony, Peter. I’d hate to see what he would have done to you."

Looking back up the street he watched as the few remaining Death Eaters apparated away and his friends turned to watch him in stunned silence. Levitating Peter’s body in front of him he made his way up the street, carefully stepping over the bodies of the fallen and grievously injured. When he reached the end of the street Neville looked at him curiously and then looked down at Wormtail’s body. "Peter Pettigrew," Harry said. "I’m going to take his body up to the castle to prove to Remus that the traitor is finally dead. I’d appreciate it if you guys could go through the bodies to see if there are any survivors." Neville and the others nodded mutely. "Right then. I’ll see you later"

As Harry made his way up to the castle he was aware of the stares and looks of awe and amazement he was receiving but, personally, he was too tired to care. He just wanted to deliver Peter’s body to Remus, find out how Ginny was doing and go to sleep.

Chapter 47. A United Front

As Harry made his way onto the school grounds Bane, Ronan and Emric approached him from the edge of the Forbidden Forest. Harry could see that all three of them were in heed of medical attention but he was too tired to do anything about it. Stopping on the graveled path leading up to the castle he waited for them to reach him. When they did Bane was the first to speak. "Is it over, Harry Potter?" he asked.

Harry looked up and nodded. "For now anyway. How did your people fare?"

Bane bowed his head. "Fifteen dead and many injured."

Harry looked down at the ground and chewed on his lowed lip for several seconds as he struggled to control his emotions. Finally looking up, his eyes brimming with tears, he whispered, "I'm sorry." Then, brushing away the tears he said, in a choked voice, "I'll send some of our healers out to help if you would like."

He could tell that Ronan was about to retort and say that they didn't need any human help but Bane cut him off. "That would be good, Harry Potter. But send them under the direction of Rubeus Hagrid. He knows our needs better than most humans and can guide them in our care."

Harry nodded tiredly. "Alright then," he said softly. "I'll send as many healers as we can spare." Then, turning to Emric, said, "And how have your people fared?"

Emric glanced up from his musings of the body that was floating in front of Harry. "Forty-three that we know of and at least two hundred injured."

"Healers?" Harry asked.

"We still have a few; but more are on the way. They should be here within the hour."

Harry nodded and turned to leave when Ronan's curiosity got the better of him. "Who is this you float to the castle, Harry Potter?" he asked.

Harry glanced down at Wormtail's lifeless body as it floated several centimeters above the ground. A part of him loathed and despised the man. But another part of him felt pity for the weak character that was Peter Pettigrew, a man who needed the approval of those around him to such an extent that he would sell his soul into the service of a madman. "A traitor," Harry said simply and turned to resume his journey back up to the castle.

As he made his way past Hagrid's cabin he paused and gazed longingly into Hagrid's vegetable patch and hoped his friend was all right. Hagrid and his group of students had been given the task of defending the train station and the docks. He knew that the train station had been heavily damaged but he had no way of knowing what the casualty and fatality counts were from that part of the battlefield.

When he was still a few meters from the base of the steps leading up to the castle's main entrance he felt Albus watching him. Looking up he saw the ancient wizard standing in front of the partially opened door, his wand arm in a sling. Looking curiously up at the old man he asked, "What happened?"

Albus did something then that Harry never thought he would ever see. He blushed. "Alas," Albus said sadly. "It is an old man's folly. I tripped while returning from my visit with the merpeople and broke my wrist. I am not as young as I once was and even in the wizarding world the elderly take longer to heal than do our youth. But tell me, how did you fare?"

Harry grimaced. "Neville and I now have the blood of several hundred Death Eaters on our hands. We didn't use any of the Unforgivables, but some of the curses we did use were awfully close."

Albus nodded sadly. "Yes," he said. "Such are the wages of war. And what of Tom?"

Harry looked up at the Astronomy Tower and choked back his tears. "I couldn't do it, Albus. I just couldn't do it. I had my chance but I couldn't kill him. He's afraid. In fact, he's very afraid. But the last I saw of him he was still alive."

"There is nothing to be ashamed of, Harry," Albus said, trying to sooth his young friend's feelings of guilt. "You will get another chance."

Harry looked back at his mentor, guide and friend, tears once more brimming in his eyes, threatening to spill down his cheeks. Angrily wiping the tears away with the soiled sleeve of his torn and tattered shirt he nodded then whispered, "Yes I will, Albus. Yes I will, but at what price?"

Albus nodded his understanding. "I understand, Harry. But understand this: The price of a thousand physical lives is nothing compared to the price of one soul."

Harry nodded. "You're right, of course, Albus. That's one of the things Godric and Salizar both spent a lot of time drilling into my head. They want me to win this war but they do not want me to win it at the cost of even one soul." Then, changing the subject, he asked, "How's Ginny?"

Albus frowned slightly and motioned for Harry to follow him into the castle. Letting Peter's body fall to the ground Harry ran up the stairs and burst through the doors. He was halfway across the Entrance Hall when Albus' words stopped him in his tracks. "She is alive, Harry!" Albus called after him. "She is alive but resting. We had to remove all of the charms so that her body can heal properly, but she is alive."

Harry skidded to a stop at the base of the Main Stair and almost collapsed to the floor. Leaning heavily on the marble banister Harry waited for Albus to reach him. "How badly is she hurt?"

Albus sighed. "Almost as badly as she was at Christmas. You, Joseph and Eileen will have to combine your forces to pull her through but it can be done. Word has already been sent and they are on their way."

Harry nodded. "Okay. What about the others?"

"Ron and Hermione are resting in the Hospital Wing; and Luna is helping Poppy with the wounded. All of the professors have reported in and are returning to the castle. Some of them are a bit worse for wear but they are all alive."

"What about Hagrid? Will he be able to help the centaurs?"

Albus looked at Harry curiously so Harry explained about his brief meeting with Emric, Bane and Ronan. "Ah," Albus said as understanding dawned in his bright blue eyes. "Yes. I believe Hagrid will

be able to help and I believe we can spare Luna and a few others to help as well."

Harry smirked but nodded then asked the question he had been trying to avoid. "How about the students?"

This time almost all the twinkle went out of the Headmaster's eyes. "At last count thirty-seven were dead and over two hundred injured," he said sadly. "We are in the process of notifying their families and adding their names to the memorial. A service will be held for all of the fallen next week."

As they approached the Hospital Wing and made their way past the many stretchers and bunks that lined the corridors and hallways Harry could not help but recognize several of the students he had helped train among the injured. Dean looked to be resting comfortably but Harry could tell by the strained look on his face that he was anything but comfortable; Seamus looked up at him as they passed and grimaced as one of the healers from St. Mungo's healed a rather nasty gash on his leg; Hanna Abbot smiled weakly up at him as they passed and gasped as Luna healed a cut on her shoulder; and Marietta Edgecomb waved halfheartedly, her left cheek and lower jaw wrapped in a poultice to cover what looked to be a rather nasty burn. Harry's heart went out to all of these people - these students and children - because they had only just begun to experience the horrors of a war many of them were too young to even begin to understand.

When they reached the door to the Hospital Wing Harry asked his final question. "How did the evacuation go?"

At this Albus smiled and the twinkle, although not as strong as it had been, returned to his eyes. "It was very successful. We were able to get almost everyone out. The one hold out, however, is a very determined young first-year Gryffindor by the name of Mark Evans."

Harry looked up at the name. "My cousin?" he asked.

Albus chuckled and handed Harry a letter. "Yes, Harry, your cousin. It would seem his parents are quite fond of you and would like you to look out for their son while they are in hiding. They will visit when and if they can but they would you like to help him prepare for what lies ahead and give him the benefit of your experience."

Harry accepted the letter and glanced at it before looking back over at Albus. "Are you serious?" he asked.

Albus smiled and the twinkle was back in full force. "Quite."

Harry groaned but tucked the letter into his pocket as he opened the door leading from the waiting room into the infirmary for his aged friend. How did he get himself into these things? Well, he would just have to see how things went and hope for the best. He and Ginny had had plenty of practice with Dobby and Winky (Dobby more so than Winky) so maybe babysitting Mark wouldn't be so bad.

As they made their way through the infirmary Harry noticed that many of the most critically injured were lying in these beds. If Ron and Hermione were in here they must have been more severely injured than they looked. And yet they had stayed behind to protect Ginny. In that moment he knew that he owed them a debt of gratitude he might never be able to repay. "Where are Ron

and Hermione?" he asked.

"This way," Albus said. "But please be careful when approaching them. Their injuries are bad enough. It would seem, however, that they have witnessed something so horrific that they have gone into shock. No one has been able to get a word out of them since their arrival."

Harry stopped and looked down at his blood stained hands then looked up into Albus' eyes as they studied him for any signs of understanding before leading him to his friends. "I think I know what they saw," he said. "When Neville and I found them Bellatrix LeStrange was standing over them. Neville and I transformed into our animagus forms and essentially tore her apart before their eyes."

Albus nodded. "Yes. That would explain why they were covered in blood when they arrived. It would also explain why they have been either unable or unwilling to speak since their arrival. Perhaps seeing you alive and well might help them to overcome their shock."

Harry looked up at him curiously.

"War is a dirty business, Harry," he explained. "Sometimes what the eyes see and what the brain interprets are two different things. They may have seen you and Neville dismembering Ms. LeStrange but under the circumstances their brains may have interpreted it as Ms. LeStrange killing you and Neville."

Harry nodded. "Alright. Where are they?"

"This way," Albus said gently and led Harry to a pair of curtained off beds just outside Madam Pomfrey's office.

Separating the curtains Harry stepped through and looked upon the faces of his two best friends. Their eyes were open but their faces were blank. They were staring up at the ceiling, seemingly unaware of their surroundings.

Stepping forward Harry reached out and took one of their hands in each of his own. Looking first at Ron and then Hermione he saw that their eyes had turned to look at him. "Ron," he said. "Hermione. I don't know if you can hear me or not but I want you to know that I'm really sorry you had to witness that because Neville and I aren't proud of what we did to Bellatrix. It was the heat of battle and the passion of the moment. We both felt she had a lot to answer for and apparently we got a little carried away. I want you to know that Neville and I are fine. We won this battle and we are both doing fine."

At that moment a tear leaked from one of Hermione's eyes and began tracing a course down her cheek and Ron hoarsely whispered, "Harry?"

Harry smiled down at his friends. "Yes. It's me, Harry. Neville and I are fine. Neville is currently searching for survivors in what's left of Hogsmeade and I'm on my way in to see Ginny. But I had to see how you guys were doing first."

Hermione began crying openly and reached out to pull Harry into a hug. Harry leaned over and hugged her and let her cry herself out on his shoulder. "Oh, Harry!" she cried. "We thought . . ."

"Shhh," Harry soothed. "Everything is going to be alright. I promise you that, other than a few cuts

and bruises, I'm fine. I'm not going anywhere. I am the-boy-who-lived after all and I gave Tom something to think about."

Hermione turned loose of Harry's neck and hit him playfully on the shoulder. "You are not the-boy-who-lived," she scolded. "You are Harry James Potter and we love you just the way you are. But don't you ever go doing anything stupid like that again!"

Harry stood back up and turned towards Ron. "What she said," Ron said them held his hands up. "Don't even think about hugging me, Potter. I only accept hugs from three women and, believe me, you aren't one of them."

They all three busted out laughing, Ron and Hermione flinching slightly with the pain but reveling in the sure and certain knowledge that one of their best friends was alive and well. They visited for several minutes, talking about anything but the war, before Harry excused himself by saying, "I hate to leave you guys but I have got to go check on my girlfriend." When he said this they both visibly paled. Upon seeing their reaction Harry added, "Don't worry. I'll do everything in my power to bring her back and I haven't even begun to tap my power yet."

When they reached the door to the private room Albus placed his hand on the doorknob and held it fast. Harry looked up at him curiously for a moment and started to ask what was wrong when Albus smiled softly and started to chuckle to himself. "Now, Harry. Before you enter this room I want you to understand that you and Ginevra have made two house elves very happy and, consequently, they are more faithful to the two of you than any two house elves I have ever seen."

Harry looked curiously into Albus' sparkling blue eyes and the Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry just smiled as he quietly pushed the door open. Mrs. Weasley was already there, sitting in a chair next to the head of the bed. Ginny was resting peacefully in the bed, her flaming red hair laid out like a curtain on the pillow, disappearing behind her shoulders and beneath the sheets. The gentle contours of her slender figure were artfully obscured by the blankets and sheets draped across her body. Her face was peaceful and relaxed and, to Harry at least, she looked like an angel.

The gentle rise and fall of her chest told him that she was still breathing and, therefore, alive. The skin on her face and arms was slightly pale which served to make her freckles stand out a little more than usual but it was not so deathly pale that he felt as though she was in danger of dieing any time soon. And yet something about her countenance communicated the idea that she was in need of a major dose of magical healing if she was going to come through this without any permanent physical damage.

Glancing around the room he saw that Dobby and Winky were pacing the floor nervously, occasionally glancing at Ginny to see if there had been and change, and that their trunk was standing open along the near wall. As he stepped into the room Dobby and Winky turned to him and screamed, "Harry!"

Harry immediately knelt down on one knee and scooped the two house elves he had grown to love as though they were his own children into his arms. "Hey, guys," he said gently then glanced over at their trunk. "I take it we are moving in here for a while."

Dobby and Winky leaned back to look at him. "Yes, Harry," Winky said.

"Madam Pomfrey isn't liking it at first . . ."

"But Headmaster Dumbledore is explaining . . ."

"That yours is being a very special trunk . . ."

"So she is agreeing . . ."

"To let us move in," Dobby finished.

Harry chuckled and shook his head. "You two are almost as bad as the twins."

Dobby looked thrilled to be compared to the inventors of Canary Creams but Winky looked to be highly insulted. "Humph!" she said as she turned her back, crossed her arms and lifted her chin up haughtily. "There is being no reason for you to be insulting Winky, Harry!" she chastised.

Harry laughed and pulled her into a hug. "I'm not insulting you, Winky," he said. "Those two are two of the best friends anyone could ever hope to have."

Winky smiled and hugged him back. "Alright then."

Harry chuckled and smiled at the strength of Winky's character and squeezed her back. Looking up he saw that Mrs. Weasley was standing next to the bed, watching their little reunion. Standing up he walked over to her and pulled her into a hug. "Don't worry, Mum," he whispered. "There is an elfish ritual that can only be performed between blood brothers, blood sisters and soul mates that will help her and Joseph and Eileen are on their way."

Mrs. Weasley pulled Harry into her arms and clung to him for several seconds before letting go. Thank you," she whispered, the unshed tears evident in her voice.

As Harry walked over to look down upon his fallen angel he felt Albus' presence at his side. "She will be all right," Albus said. "She has been resting peacefully since her arrival. Luna was able to stop the bleeding and heal most of the superficial damage but the vast majority of her deeper injuries can only be healed with the kind of magic you, Joseph, Eileen and Ginevra share."

Harry nodded. "How long until they get here?"

"I believe you have enough time to get cleaned up and read that letter I gave you before they arrive. I would, however, suggest you let one of the healers check you over before taking a shower. In fact, I believe Doctor Stone has specifically requested you as a patient." Conjuring a stool for Harry to sit on he added, "I believe he is rather upset and will be lecturing you on staying out of trouble." Then, conjuring a set of adjustable screens and arranging them so that Harry could have some privacy, said, "I suggest you get undressed and I will send him in as soon as he has a free moment."

Stepping behind the screens Harry grimaced at the idea of facing another one of Francis' lectures but resigned himself to his fate. "Yeah, okay," he said as he pulled the letter Albus had given him out of his pocket and laid it on the stool.

For the next few minutes Harry gingerly removed most of his clothing and hung their bloodstained remains over the top of the screens. He winced several times as the cloth was pulled away from his wounds and he heard Mrs. Weasley gasp several times as his clothes appeared draped over the

screens. When he was finally down to his boxers he looked apprehensively at the letter, picked it up and cautiously seated himself on the stool, being careful no to open any of the wounds he had only just discovered on his legs, back, chest and arms.

Examining the front of the envelope he saw that it was from "Tom and Heather Evans, Little Winging, Surrey, England" and that it was addressed to "Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Scotland and Harry Potter." Shaking his head Harry smiled to himself and wondered how anyone could place him on the same level as Albus. But then again, the Evanses were muggles and probably didn’t know any better. Turning the envelope over he lifted the flap and removed the neatly folded letter. The paper was a lot lighter than the parchment he was used to and he almost immediately recognized it as printer paper. Unfolding the letter he opened it and began to read.

> Dear Headmaster Dumbledore and Harry,
>
> We realize that this is an unusual request. But under the circumstances we think you will understand. With the help of our guards and Harry's former babysitter (we have been cautioned not to mention any names should this letter be intercepted and wind up in the wrong hands) we have been monitoring the progress of the war that is taking place in your world. Due to our status in your world, and the escalation of the war, we have decided to go into hiding until such time as it is safe for us to return. Our son, Mark Evans, knows of this decision and is understandably upset. We do not, however, wish for his education to be interrupted by this war. It is, therefore, our request that you, Professor Dumbledore and Harry, please watch out for our son and teach him everything he will need to know to defend and make a life for himself in your world.
>
> We have talked this over with our parents, all of whom were involved in our second world war and, while they do not really understand your world do agree that some strange things are happening and that certain sacrifices will have to be made. We have exchanged several owl posts with Mark and are fairly certain that he understands our concerns, both for his education and future and for all of our safeties. He is a very determined young man and we can only hope and pray that he will survive this war and live to lead a long, healthy, happy and productive life.
>
> The reason this letter is addressed to the two of you stems from our conversations over the Christmas Holiday and our reassurances from Harry's babysitter that Mark could not ask for two better guardians while we are in hiding. Please take care of our son and make sure he knows that we love him. He looks up to you as the older brother he's never had, Harry, and we know that we can trust you. We will try to find some way to contact both of you from time to time but if this war is anything like our parents' war then we do not know when, if or how often this will be possible.
>
> Sincerely,
> Tom and Heather Evans (the loving parents of Mark Evans)

As Harry folded the letter and put it back in the envelope it occurred to him how devastating war really was. There was not only the death and destruction that accompanied the fuzzy logic that was war but there were also the families that were torn apart, through no fault of their own, for safety's sake. In that moment he almost regretted not killing Tom when he had the chance but knew that if he was going to come out of this thing with anything close to resembling an intact soul he could not

use any of the Unforgivables. He would have to talk to Mrs. Weasley about helping him take care of Mark. He wasn't going to push him off on her because Mark's parents were trusting him to take care of their son but he would not hesitate asking her for guidance and direction.

The door to the private room opened moments later and Harry heard the familiar voice of his doctor asking for him. "Harry?" Doctor Stone's voice said as the door closed softly behind him.

"Over here, Francis," Harry said. "Behind the curtains."

When Doctor Stone stuck his head around the end of the screen nearest the door he gasped then quickly stepped behind the curtain and drew his wand. "I'll save the lecture for later, Harry," he said. "Let's get you healed up first."

Harry nodded and grimaced in pain as he turned towards the wall and assumed the spread eagle position so that his friend see the extent of the damage and heal as many of the cuts and bruises as possible. Fifteen minutes later Francis said, "This might hurt a bit, Harry."

"What?" Harry winced as Francis suddenly pulled his boxers down.

"That," Francis said apologetically. "You've got a rather nasty gash on your hip and unfortunately your pants were embedded in the wound."

Harry gritted his teeth and nodded. When Francis was finished healing that wound Harry asked, almost afraid of the answer, "Is that it then?"

Francis stood up and stepped back. Twirling his finger in the air he gave Harry an appraising look and said, "I don't know. Arms out to your sides and turn around." After one complete revolution Harry looked hopefully at his friend who was smirking slightly. "Yes, that's it, Harry. You can get dressed now. And I don't want to have to come back here for at least three months. I'm already on call twenty-four/seven at Saint Mungo's because of this war. I don't need you adding to my workload."

Harry and Francis had build up a pretty good working relationship over the course of the previous year and even though Harry knew that his friend could be extremely serious when needs be, most of his comments were touched with an edge of humor. "I don't see what you're complaining about," Harry jibed. "You haven't been here in almost six months. And besides, I thought you liked getting out of the city."

"Oh I do," Francis laughed. "I just don't like coming up here because you need putting back together is all."

Harry smirked as his friend and doctor stepped around the screens and left the room. After calling Dobby and asking him for a fresh pair of pants and a clean pair of pyjamas Harry got dressed, picked up the letter and, after excusing himself from Mrs. Weasley's presence, climbed into his trunk to take a shower. After placing the letter on the kitchen table he went into the bathroom and crawled into a steaming hot shower where he spent the next fifteen minutes getting all of the blood, dirt, mud and grime out of his hair and off of his body. He actually felt dirtier than he was because he knew that he was responsible for the deaths of several hundred Death Eaters and so he scrubbed extra hard. But no matter how hard he scrubbed the stench of death would not come off. He didn't like what he had done but at the same time he knew that it had been a necessary evil.

When he emerged from his trunk, after putting on some clean clothes, cleaning his glasses and brushing his teeth, Joseph and Eileen were waiting for him. They both looked dirty, tired and worn. Harry invited them to spend the next few days with him in his trunk, an invitation they gratefully accepted once he explained about its Room of Requirement and assured them that it could replicate their rooms at home.

After they had rested a few more minutes Joseph, Harry and Eileen asked Mrs. Weasley, Winky and Dobby to leave the room and wait outside. This particular healing ritual was a very private affair which called for Harry, Ginny's primary soul mate, to bond with her in every non-physical sense of the word while Joseph and Eileen chanted a particularly long and complicated incantation that, once started, could not be stopped for any reason or they would risk losing Ginny forever. Removing their starlight crystals from around their necks they placed all four crystals around Ginny's neck and, holding her hands in his own, Harry closed her hands around the crystals and dropped into a deep meditative state which would allow him to reach out and become one with Ginny - his beloved angel - in ways that few could ever hope to imagine.

As Joseph and Eileen began the incantation Harry could feel the room starting to fill with the purest, softest white light imaginable. The very air seemed to glow and radiate a healing sense of purpose, well being and love. As the light grew more and more intense he felt himself being drawn into the emotional and spiritual bond he shared with Ginny and soon found himself back at the Burrow, In Ginny's place of safety.

Looking up he found her sitting on the beach again, tossing pebbles into the otherwise tranquil waters of the lake. Walking over he sat down beside her and said, "Hi."

Ginny looked over at him and smiled. "Hi yourself. I did it again, didn't I."

Harry nodded. "Yeah, I'm afraid so."

Giggling softly Ginny said, "You don't give up do you?"

Harry smiled back and shook his head. "No. Once a soul mate always a soul mate."

Ginny let herself fall back on the grass and laughed. "Oh, Harry!" she laughed. "What am I going to do with you?"

Harry leaned back and lay down beside her. Then rolling onto his side looked down into her eyes and smirked. "I don't know. But I do know one thing. I'm not giving up without a fight."

Ginny smiled warmly up at him. "That's what I love about you, Harry," she said as she reached up and pulled him over on top of her and into a warm and passionate kiss.

After a minute or two he rolled back over onto his side and said, "What's that?"

Ginny looked at him in confusion for a few seconds. "What's what?"

"You said that that's what you love about me. I was just wondering what 'that' is."

Ginny bust out laughing again. "You, silly. Harry Potter, the man I love."

Harry smirked again. "Oh. Well if you put it that way I guess it's okay then."

Ginny looked up at him and scowled. "Oh, you!" she giggled as she hit him playfully on the shoulder.

Harry flopped over onto his back. "Oh!" he gasped. "She got me, Albus! I'm a goner! You're going to have to find someone else to plat footsy with Tom."

Ginny quickly rolled over and flopped down on his chest, looking down at his closed eyes as he feigned death. The grin on his face, however, gave him away. "That's not funny, Harry!" she scolded. "Don't you even joke about something like that."

Harry opened his eyes and smiled. "Oh, okay," he said, blushing slightly. "I won't joke about it. Although I must say that I did put the fear of God into him this morning."

Sitting up Ginny looked at him and said, "You did?"

Harry nodded. "Mm hmm."

"Well don't keep me in suspense!" Ginny urged. "Tell me what happened!"

For the next several minutes, as Joseph and Eileen chanted the incantation and healed Ginny's body Harry told Ginny about the last few hours of the battle and his dissing of Tom Riddle.

As the last few measures of the song wound their way into their consciousness Harry led Ginny back to her body and returned to his own.

When the elfish healing ritual came to its conclusion the blindingly bright white light that was filling the room became concentrated in the four crystals in Ginny's hands and gradually faded to their normal radiance as the excess energy entered Ginny's body and healed all of her injuries. Ginny's eyes flew open with a gasp moments later and the first thing she saw was Harry standing beside her bed, smiling down at her. "Hi," he said.

"Hello again, she said then looked over at Joseph and Eileen and smiled. "Thank you."

"You are most welcome, my sister," Eileen said, her radiant blue eyes sparkling merrily as her silver blond hair cascaded down her back as though it were some kind of magical waterfall. "You will need to rest for a few days but you should be up and around before the end of the week."

Ginny scowled and looked over at Harry. "Has she been taking lessons from Madam Pomfrey?"

Joseph chuckled. "No, Ginny, I assure you that she has not been taking lesson's from your Madam Pomfrey. She has, however, been taking lessons from my mother, which could be better or worse depending upon your point of view. You are going to be weak for the next few days but it important that you get up and walk at least four times a day. So, come on. Up you get. It is time for your first walk."

Ginny lifted the sheets to make sure she was decent and, when she saw that she was clothed in her flannel pyjamas, smiled and threw the covers down. "Okay!" she chirped. "Let's go!"

"Easy does it, Ginny," Eileen cautioned. "You're going to be a little dizzy at first and your legs are going to be a little wobbly so Harry and I are going to be holding onto your arms."

Ginny threw her legs over the side of the bed and sat up. She almost fell back into the bed as a wave

of dizziness washed over her but Harry caught her and helped into a sitting position. "Oh," she moaned as she closed her eyes and waited for her world stopped spinning. "I see what you mean. I think I'll take your advice on that one."

A minute later Joseph opened the door and first Eileen, supporting Ginny on her right side; then Ginny; then Harry, supporting Ginny on her left, exited the private room and began walking down the length of the infirmary. She was too weak to go far, though, so they stopped at Ron and Hermione's beds and, after a tearful reunion with her mother, sat down between their beds and visited with her brother and best girlfriend while she rested.

Most of the talk in the castle that week was about the Battle of Hogsmeade and what had happened. When the final counts were in, fifteen centaurs, fifty-one wood elves, thirty-two high elves, forty-seven students, twelve villagers, eighteen acromantulas, twenty-seven snakes and one thousand fifty-seven Death Eaters had died. It was decided that all of the Death Eaters' bodies would be sent back to their families (via portkey) once they were identified, as a gesture of good faith. Some had argued that that their bodies should be burned but Harry and Albus were strongly opposed to that idea. They had each lost friends without ever having a body so that they could grieve properly and they could not, in good conscience, do that to anyone if it was within their power to avoid it. And so it was decided that a letter would be drafted, with Madam Bone's assistance and approval, and pinned to each Death Eater's body explaining the circumstances of their death and expressing the Ministry's condolences for their family's loss. Remus and Harry drafted a special letter to accompany Peter's body that they included with the official letter before they sent his body back to his parents.

Harry had met Mark in the Gryffindor Common Room late in the morning after the battle and introduced him to Emric, Onric, Woodring, Joseph, Eileen, Winky, Dobby, Bane and Ronan and at least temporarily moved him into his trunk since he was the only first-year student staying and didn't really have any other friends. He set Dobby and Winky to the task of giving the first two chambers of his trunk the appearance of having false bottoms so that they could convert one of them into a suite of guest rooms for Mark and the other into a suite of rooms for Joseph and Eileen where they could stay whenever they came to visit. The entrances to these suites would be through Dobby and Winky's quarters so that they wouldn't have to redesign the library yet again.

Needless to say Mark was excited to meet Harry, Ginny, Ron and Neville's elfish counterparts and wanted to lean everything he could about them. Harry cringed when Mark started asking Joseph and Eileen rapid fire questions about everything elfish but they patiently spent hours visiting with him, answering his questions and dispelling many muggle myths about what the high elves could and could not do. More than ever Harry appreciated the role patience was playing in his life and vowed to learn patience, not only with others but with himself as well.

Mrs. Weasley agreed to spend a little time each week at Hogwarts teaching Harry how to cook in a Wizarding Kitchen. She was very impressed with Harry's trunk but especially liked the kitchen area because it was so modern compared to the ones she was used to. Before she left, however, she did sit Harry and Ginny down and talk to them about their living arrangements and she was very adamant about them waiting until after they had been married a few years before they even though about having children. And even then she wanted them to wait until Ginny had been out of school at least two years before they got married. They could live together, they could even sleep in the same bed but anything above or beyond snuggling or cuddling was a definite no no. She even went so far as to have similar talks with Ron and Hermione and Neville and Luna. She was not

satisfied until Albus and Poppy promised to put the charms back on all of them as soon as they were healed.

The memorial service for the fallen was held that Saturday and was attended by humans, centaurs, wood elves, high elves, a few snakes and even an acromantula or two. Almost everyone was nervous when the acromantulas emerged from the forest, none more so than Ron, but gradually accepted their presence. Albus delivered the eulogy for the witches and wizards that fell in the defense of Hogsmeade. Emric spoke for the wood elves as Eileen spoke for the high elves. Hagrid delivered a truly moving eulogy for the acromantulas who fell and Harry translated Samson's farewell to his fallen comrades. Bane and Ronan both spoke on behalf of the centaurs and pledged their allegiance to the defense of the forest, the castle and the grounds.

Madam Bones was the last to speak and, after a short speech thanking everyone who participated on the side of the light, unveiled a polished, stone monument with the names of the fallen all listed with equal honor and dignity.

That evening, at what would have been the Leaving Feast, all of the house banners had been removed from the Great Hall and replaced with the black banners of mourning. Since all but one of the first year students, all of the second-years and a few of the third-years had already left in the evacuation and everyone else was remaining at Hogwarts over the summer holiday it was not your typical Leaving Feast. Oh, the house elves went all out to prepare a sumptuous meal fit for kings and queens but the usual festive atmosphere that accompanied this occasion was gone and many feared that it would not return in their lifetimes.

Ginny, Ron, Hermione, Neville, Luna and Mark were sitting together at the Gryffindor Table, surrounded by their friends, but Harry was sitting at the Head Table with the rest of the Defense Against the Dark Arts professors. When everyone was settled and the Great Hall began to buzz with the activity of several hundred conversations Albus stood and, tapping the side of a crystal goblet with his knife, called for the attention of all present. When all conversations had ceased and he was certain he had everyone's attention Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, began to speak. "Ah, yes," he said with a sigh. "Another year has passed. This time, however, those of you who have chosen to remain and train to fight will not be going home for another six weeks. And many of you will not be going home at all until the conclusion of next year, if then. "There are a little more than eight hundred of you here tonight. Alas I wish there were more but with all of the fighting that has gone on this past year we have lost more than fifty of your fellows. The banners, as you can see, are black. These banners will remain in place for the next few days in memory of those who have fallen. And, breaking with tradition, we will not be awarding the House Cup this year."

As a few students gasped in shock and amazement he explained. "Oh, don't worry. We will find some other way to reward you for your efforts but for now we are going to take this opportunity to honor those members of all houses who have fallen by awarding the house cup to them in memory of their sacrifice."

He paused for a moment to let this sink in and slowly the students began to rise and applaud their headmaster's decision. Then, taking his seat, he motioned for Harry to rise and deliver his portion of this year's End of Year speech.

Standing nervously Harry glanced around at his fellow professors, all of whom were smiling

encouragingly, and, when everyone had resumed their seats and given him their attention, cleared his throat. "Er," he began, "I . . . I mean . . . Well . . ." A few girls started giggling which, amazingly, helped him get over his sudden bout of stage fright. "Alright," he said. "I'm still a student and I still have another year to go. But the Headmaster and the other professors have asked me to deliver this little speech to let you know what you will be doing for the next six weeks.

"In the muggle world it's called boot camp. Most of you have been getting up before dawn for the past six months to exercise and learn a few spells. That's all well and good because without you we could not have won this latest battle. But that is nothing compared to what you will be experiencing over the next six weeks. From here on out you will be getting up at four o'clock in the morning. You will be given one hour to get ready for the day and warm up. At five o'clock you will begin running laps around Hogwarts and Hogsmeade. Don't worry about the ground because we have placed charms on it to withstand your trampling. At six o'clock you will return to the Great Hall for a light breakfast. At six thirty you will report to your assigned classrooms for tumbling, gymnastics and flexibility training. You will work on these exercises for two hours. At eight thirty you will be given a short, fifteen-minute break. At eight forty-five you will return to you classrooms where you will spend the next three hours learning the spells, curses, charms, hexes and transfigurations you will need to defend yourselves and those around you. At eleven forty-five we will all break for lunch.

"After lunch, at one o'clock, you will report to the various training arenas that have been set up on the school grounds where you will be learning dueling from myself and the other Defense Against the Dark Arts instructors, archery and swordsmanship from the centaurs and wood elves, hand-to-hand combat and martial arts from the high elves, the art of aerial combat from Professor Krum and Madam Hooch and a few basic healing charms and techniques from Madam Pomfrey, Doctor Stone and the other healers that have been sent on loan from Saint Mungo's. You will be rotated through each of these afternoon classes on a weekly basis. After that we will break for dinner.

After dinner you will have the choice of relaxing and studying or going down to help rebuild Hogsmeade. The reconstruction of Hogsmeade is being funded by Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes so you will be paid for your efforts. Our goal is to rebuild Hogsmeade and have it rise from the ashes, stronger than she was before, to give our people hope and to let Tom Marvolo Riddle - the self-styled dark lord who likes to call himself Lord Voldemort - know that we will not bow down to his wishes either now or in the future."

Harry's speech was met with thunderous applause. When everyone had resumed their seats Harry glanced over at Albus who smiled and gave him a nod. "And now," Harry said with a smirking smile, "tuck in." With these two words the tables filled with food. The house elves had gone overboard for this feast and everyone's favorite foods were prepared in abundance.