

Harry Potter and the Clash of the Titans

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Table of Contents

1. Horace Slughorn	1
2. Conversations I	10
3. The Young Riddle	14
4. Enoch	27
5. Conversations II	32
6. Complications with Good News	43
7. Brains Vs. Brawn	48
8. Hogwarts	55
9. The Horcruxes	66
10. The Ring	70
11. A Confession	76
12. Gringotts	81
13. Summer's End	88
14. Bill and Fleur's Wedding	102
15. The Delayed Feast	108
16. Potions and Planning	117
17. Closing Ranks	125
18. The Elder Wand	130
19. Death	135
20. Silence	153
21. Resurrection	161
22. Looking to the Future	167
23. Epilogue	175

Chapter 1. Horace Slughorn

Harry was surprised when Albus left the leaving feast early, leaving more than half of his meal untouched. Although he had only attended a few leaving feasts in the past he had never known Albus to leave any meal before pudding. Glancing over at Minerva he could tell that she was just as curious. Turning his attention back to the aging headmaster as he made his way out of the Great Hall Harry could tell that something was bothering him.

Not wanting to draw any undue attention to Albus' disappearance Harry waited until after pudding before following his mentor and guide out of the Great Hall. Reaching out with Ethereal Consciousness he found the headmaster sitting in his office studying a memory in his pensieve. Making his way quickly through the castle's maze of hallways and corridors Harry soon found himself approaching the gargoyle guarding the entrance to his friend's office.

With a barely perceptible nod, the gargoyle leapt aside as he approached, clearing the way for his ascent. Mounting the stairs Harry quickly climbed to the landing outside the headmaster's office and was surprised to find that the heavy, oaken door was slightly ajar.

Hesitating briefly, Harry knocked lightly before entering. Fawkes trilled softly as he entered the outer office and Albus glanced up from the memory he had been studying. "Ah, Harry," the headmaster said congenially. "How was your dinner?"

Harry smiled at the old man's seemingly trivial concerns as he entered the headmaster's inner sanctum. Shrugging his shoulders slightly he said, "It was okay I guess, but I'm curious. Why did you leave so soon? What's on your mind?"

Albus hung his head as if in defeat for several seconds before responding. "With everything that has been going on this year," he said, "I fear that I may have overlooked something.

"If nothing else, our adversary is a cunning man. While cutting into my steak this evening something clicked. A light came on, if you will. I had an epiphany, a very disturbing epiphany but an epiphany nonetheless, and did not want to waste any time. So I came up here and began following up on its leads."

After a brief, pregnant pause, during which Harry felt slightly disappointed that Albus seemed intent upon leaving him hanging, Harry shook his head at the esteemed headmaster's habits of speaking in riddles and leaving volumes left unsaid and asked the obvious. "What have you learned?"

Albus looked up and Harry could feel himself being invited into the old man's mind. Before entering, however, he hesitated just long enough to be sure that it was a legitimate invitation and not a figment of his imagination.

What met his mind's eye when he accepted the invitation was a rapid-fire collage of memories. There were scenes of a young Tom Riddle at an orphanage when Albus was delivering his letter and telling him about Hogwarts and the magical world; scenes of Tom's first few years at Hogwarts, which included several disturbing conversations with his professors; scenes from the original Chamber of Secrets episode, which included Myrtle's death and the aftermath; and scenes from conversations Albus had had with people who had had dealings with Tom after his graduation.

After what seemed like hours, but which had, in reality, been little more than a few seconds the connection was broken and Harry collapsed onto one of the nearby couches. Almost a minute later he looked over at the wizened old man sitting behind the desk and, after several false starts, said, "Wow, so that's the kind of person we are up against."

Albus nodded his head gravely. "Yes," he sighed, "I'm afraid so. I'm afraid that getting rid of Tom Riddle is not going to be as easy as simply killing him."

Harry glanced curiously up. "Do you remember the conversation Tom had with the former head of Slytherin House?" When Harry nodded Albus continued. "Do you know what a horcrux is, Harry?"

Harry shook his head.

"The creation of a horcrux is among the darkest of the dark arts. It involves intentionally murdering someone with the goal of splitting your soul so that you can place a portion of your soul inside a vessel of sorts. It is, I fear, the means through which Tom Riddle hopes to attain immortality."

Harry breathed in deeply and, leaning back into the couch, let the air out slowly as he considered the ramifications of what he had just learned. "So what you are saying is that so long as Tom has an intact horcrux we will never be able to completely destroy him."

Albus nodded gravely. "Yes. That is precisely what I am saying. What is even more disturbing, however, is that Tom seems to have created more than one."

Harry's head shot up and his eyes widened in shock and disbelief. "What!?" he asked. "More than one? Is that even possible?"

With a sigh of resignation Albus sat back in his chair. "Yes," he said tiredly, "I'm afraid so." His eyes misted over with a far away look for a moment as he seemed to lose himself in a memory. "Not many people know this but Igor Grindelwald had three. Each one was different and all of them had to be destroyed before the final battle."

Returning to the present Albus looked over at Harry and said, "What we don't know is how many Tom has created, where they are and how to destroy them. We do, however, know that he has created more than one."

Pushing himself into a more upright posture Harry looked over at his mentor, a guarded glint of determination in his eyes, and asked the obvious questions. "How do we know he's created any and why are you so certain he has created more than one?"

"Many years ago," Albus began, "while Tom was still a student here at Hogwarts, his head of house came to me after a rather disturbing conversation with one of his favorite students. He told me that Tom Riddle had asked him about horcruxes. He was understandably nervous and didn't give many details of this conversation but at least he did let me know about it. My suspicion was that he knows more than he is telling and that this information may prove critical to our success."

"As to how we know that Tom has created at least one horcrux, the fact that he has come back, seemingly from the dead, speaks volumes in favor of this conclusion because no matter how powerful we may be there is no return from death. My reason for suspecting multiple horcruxes

stems from the events that transpired towards the end of your second year.

"That diary, the one you destroyed with a fang from that basilisk, was a horcrux. Had that been his only horcrux he would not have been able to come back. What we need to know is how many horcruxes Tom created, where he hid them and how each of them is to be destroyed."

Harry sat back, resting his elbow on the arm of the couch and thoughtfully perching his chin on the thumb of the corresponding hand. After several seconds of battle-weary consideration wherein his mental musings traversed many possible scenarios Harry looked up and said, "Do you know where he is? Can we get to him before Tom? Do you think he will talk to us?"

A wry smile spread across Albus' face. "One of my contacts in the Ministry has been tracking Horace for the past several months. It would seem he has chosen the life of a wanderer since word of Tom's return was made public, never staying in one place for more than a week. But, yes, we do know where he is. As to whether or not we can get to him before Tom ... only time will tell. However, the fact that Tom is currently licking his wounds from his latest defeat may work in our favor. As to whether or not he will talk ... well, let's just say that we can only hope. Horace is not as open with his affections as he could be. He is not necessarily greedy but he does tend to primarily pursue those relationships he feels will, if he plays his cards right, benefit him in the long run and is not inclined to willingly surrender any information unless he can see an immediate benefit, for himself in doing so."

Harry leaned back in his seat and thought this over for several seconds, weighing his options carefully before speaking his mind. If nothing else, his experiences over the past year had taught him the value of a patient and measured response. "From what you've said," Harry began, "his information could determine the outcome of the war. Based upon that alone it is obvious, to me at least, that we need him. In addition, it sounds like he is a shrewd businessman and will not part with that information unless we have something of value to offer him in return. I don't want to break the bank or anything, Albus, but what do we have that he would want?"

Sighing softly, Albus looked Harry in the eye and said, "We have safety, security, his old teaching job and a chance to rub elbows with one of the most famous people in our world today."

Harry's eyes grew wide as the realization of what Albus was suggesting dawned on him. "Me?" he asked. "Why would he want to know me?"

Albus rocked back in chair and laughed. "Oh, Harry!" he laughed. "Do you not realize how famous you are?"

Harry looked at him curiously for a moment and then sighed in resignation. "Yeah, I guess. But I'm nothing special."

After he had stopped laughing Albus looked thoughtfully over at the young man in front of him. "In your mind, I am happy to say, you are no one special; but in the eyes of the people you are very special. One of the reasons I placed you with the Dursleys was so that you could grow up away from all of the fame that would come your way as a result of the events that transpired that fateful night. I did not want you to be ... shall we say, full of yourself. I deeply regret that they were incapable of showing you the kind of love you so richly deserved but at least one part of my plan was successful: You are a humble hero, Harry; and for that I am eternally grateful.

"Public perception, however, is an entirely different matter. If you will recall the reception you received when you first entered The Leaky Cauldron with Hagrid you should have some idea as to just exactly how famous you are in the eyes of the people. Horace Slughorn is a man who feeds off of the fame of others. He befriends those who are already famous or who he thinks will make names for themselves and goes out of his way to groom them in such a way that, when the time comes, they will return the favor. The reason I am telling you this is because, with your permission, I would like to use you as the bait we will need to reel him in."

Harry leaned back and withdrew into himself as he worked his way through what Albus was suggesting. On the one hand they needed the information that only Horace Slughorn could provide. On the other he didn't like the idea of serving as bait, much less using his supposed fame as a means to any end, to lure him in. The battle raged in his mind for several seconds as he went back and forth between the two positions.

Albus seemed to sense the nature of this internal battle and remained silent. Fawkes, however, seemed to sense Harry's need for emotional support and flew over to perch on his knee. "Hullo, Fawkes," Harry said as he automatically reached up and started stroking the phoenix's feathers. Almost a minute later, his mind on the verge of making a decision, Harry looked up and asked, "I won't have to play his games will I? I mean, I'm willing to bait the rook if it will get him here and we can get the information out of him but to be honest with you, I have more important things to do than hang around with some glory hound."

Albus smiled, his eyes twinkling merrily, and nodded his head. "No, Harry, I don't think you will have to play his games. He may try to reel you in but you are under no obligation to play his games. In fact, if he becomes too overbearing you have my permission, as an Associate Professor, to deduct house points from him."

Harry couldn't help himself as a broad grin spread across his face. "Which house will he represent?" Harry asked while fighting to control his laughter.

"Horace Slughorn was the head of Slytherin House while he was here and I am hoping he will take up that mantel upon his return because even though Victor has done an admirable job filling in for Severus I'm afraid we will be needing both him and his abilities in other areas."

Harry grinned at the prospect of being able to take house points away from Slytherin but immediately promised himself that he wouldn't do it unless absolutely necessary. "What subject will he be teaching?"

Dumbledore smiled. "Horace was one of the best potions masters Hogwarts has ever seen. He may be a little out of practice but with more than fifty years of experience behind him I don't think it will take him long to return to his previous levels of excellence."

Displaying a wisdom beyond his years Harry nodded his head slightly. "Alright," he said. "When do we leave?"

Albus placed his hands on his desk and stood up smiling. "The sooner the better, I think. We know where he is tonight but if we wait too long he will most likely move again. It will then take a few days for us to find him again, days I am not willing to risk with Tom on the loose."

Fifteen minutes later, as Harry and Albus were walking across the grounds towards front gates, the

headmaster sighed. "Harry," he began, "I'm afraid you were a bit preoccupied last year and missed the sixth-year classes on apparation. I have been able to temporarily modify the wards to allow aparation on the quidditch pitch during our training sessions so that I could apparate but I'm curious. Since you have never formerly learned to apparate and since the wards did not seem to be able to stop you back in December, what is the process you use when transporting yourself from one place to another?"

Harry was silent as they approached the gates, his mind transporting him back to the battle on Christmas Day and the forward through their many duels on the quidditch pitch, as he tried to figure out how he had performed that particular bit of magic. When they reached the gates he looked up and said, "I don't know, Albus. It's almost as if it has always been a part of me. All I really do is wrap myself in a blanket of energy and mentally move that energy from one place to another. I know I used it several times during the battle in Hogsmead last week to get the drop on a few Death Eaters but that was a rarity because I didn't want to leave Neville's back uncovered any longer than absolutely necessary." After they had passed through the gates and were approaching the edge of the antiapparation wards he glanced over at his mentor and friend and finished his thought. "I've never really thought about it before but why do you ask?"

Albus stopped just beyond the wards. "Apparation, even for the most accomplished witch or wizard, creates a signature cracking or popping sound. Whatever it is that you are doing is totally silent.

"I will be teaching you to apparate this summer so that you will be able to get your license after your birthday as I would like you to keep this ability to yourself. For now, however, as I am familiar with Horace's location, I would like you to take a firm hold on arm. The sensation is somewhat different than what you are used to but ... that, I fear, is the nature of the beast."

Harry looked at his headmaster with a curious expression on his face for a moment before doing as instructed and taking a firm hold on the wizened old man's arm. "Are you ready?" Albus asked.

Almost as soon as Harry nodded his head he felt Albus' arm threaten to twist away so he redoubled his grip as he began to experience the sensations of apparation: He felt as though several crushing bands of steel had wrapped themselves around his head, neck, chest, arms and legs and were squeezing with incredible force. For a moment it felt as though his eyes were being pushed back into their sockets, his ears were being forcefully pressed into the sides of his head and that the air was being forced from his lungs. All in all the experience felt as though he had been forcefully dragged through an extremely small hosepipe.

And then it was over. The next thing Harry knew he was shaking his head and blinking his eyes to clear his vision and regain some sense of normalcy. As his vision cleared he became aware of the fact that they were now standing near the center of an apparently vacant town square. Albus chuckled. "Yes, the sensation does take some getting used to. Oh, and you can turn loose now, Harry."

Harry glanced down at his hand that was still gripping the headmaster's arm as though his life depended on maintaining physical contact with his elderly friend. He turned loose of Albus' arm and glanced sheepishly up at his mentor. "Sorry."

Albus chuckled once more and said, "Quite alright, Harry. The first time is always the most difficult." Then, turning on his heel and walking swiftly out of the village square he said, "This way, I think."

Several intersections later they turned up a narrow, cobbled street leading up into the low hills to the west of the village. As soon as they turned the corner Harry felt a perimeter, warning ward go off. "He knows we're here," he said.

Albus nodded slightly. "Yes, he does. I sincerely doubt he knows who we are but he does, indeed, know that someone with magical abilities has passed through his perimeter."

As they continued up the street Harry could feel several hurried spells being cast in a small, single-family dwelling towards the end of the block and almost without warning Albus picked up the pace so that they were jogging up the road. When, less than a minute later, they reached the front gate leading into the small garden that surrounded the cottage Albus stopped. "Oh dear," he said. "Oh dear dear dear." Then, turning to Harry, he said, "Wand out, Harry. And stay close."

The cottage's front door hung at an odd angle from one hinge and the windows on either side looked to have been recently shattered. Going instinctively into battle mode, Harry drew his wand and began scanning his surroundings both visually as well as with his magical senses while staying close to Albus in case they needed to defend themselves. Albus had assumed a similar defensive posture and together they cautiously made their way up the path towards the front entrance.

When they reached the stoop Albus lit his wand so that they could peer into the darkened interior of the home. When he saw the state of the entryway Albus made a soft noise in the back of his throat that told Harry to stay close because, while the hallway before them looked to have been the scene of a major battle the reasons behind its appearance remained unclear. Harry suspected Albus sensed that things were not as they appeared but his training would not let him turn around to assess the danger for himself.

Moments later Dumbledore whispered, "My right, your left in ten feet, Harry."

When they turned into the room Harry stood guard at the opening while Albus surveyed the damage. After surveying the room Albus made a thoughtful noise in the back of his throat then said, "You can relax, Harry. All is well."

Harry slowly lowered his wand and turned around to face the room. It was a mess. A grandfather clock lay in splintered pieces on the other side of the room; a piano, its keys strewn about, lay overturned to his left; the couch was overturned, its cushions torn asunder; and a crystal chandelier lay shattered across the coffee table in the center of the room. Turning to his right, following Albus' progress into the room, Harry noticed an overturned armchair that seemed to be in reasonably good shape considering the condition of the rest of the room. It was for this reason that Harry was slightly taken aback when Albus drew his wand back and plunged it into one of the chair's cushions. If he thought that was strange it was nothing compare to his reaction when the chair let out a yelp of pain. "Ouch!" the chair yowled before righting itself and transforming into a short, rather plump, disgruntled looking man.

"Ah. Good evening, Horace," Dumbledore said jovially. "How have you been?"

The short, squat man briefly scowled up at his former colleague, causing the ends of his wide, walrus-like mustache to quiver irritably. "What do you want, Dumbledore?" the haggard looking man asked.

Albus considered the portly former potions professor, an amused look on his face, for several

seconds. "Oh, not much," Dumbledore replied calmly. "All we ask is a little information in exchange for a degree of safety, security and your old job back."

Slughorn's hung his head briefly before looking up. "You know, Albus," he said with an air of resignation haunting his voice, "if you had come to me a year ago I would have said no, but the past twelve months have not been kind. To be honest with you, old friend," he said with a sigh, "I'm tired of running, hiding and always looking over my shoulder. I know you've fought and won a few battles but exactly how secure is Hogwarts?"

Taking this as his cue Harry stepped fully into the room. "With the centaurs, acromantulas and snakes guarding the forest; the merpeople and the giant squid guarding the lake; and contingents of wood elves, high elves, fairies and pixies patrolling the surrounding countryside I think its safe to say that Hogwarts, wards aside, is more secure than it has ever been."

Horace's eyes grew wide when he saw Harry. "Oho!" he said. "Oho! So that's how it is, Albus. You've brought Mister Potter along to help convince me. Is that it?"

Harry inwardly groaned at Slughorn's acknowledgement of his supposed fame and was glad Albus had warned him about this possibility.

"Actually, Horace," Albus began, "yes. I have brought Harry along to help me convince you to return. But it is not solely for the reason you suppose. With Severus' death we are in need of a potions master and you are in need of a safe and secure location where you can enjoy your remaining years.

"It has been said that I am the only one that Tom Riddle has ever feared. After the second battle of Hogsmead, however, it would seem that he has come to fear young Harry here as well. We are prepared to offer you a safe and secure home at Hogwarts in exchange for the information Harry has requested and your services as a potions master for the next few years."

Horace looked between the two warriors, his eyes shifting from Harry to Albus to Harry and back again for several seconds and Harry could tell that he was waging an internal battle with the various aspects of his personality. With a flick of his wand Horace righted one of the overturned chairs and repaired it cushion before collapsing into it with a sigh. After several seconds, during which Harry and Albus repaired much of the damage done in Horace's rush to avoid detection, he looked up at Harry and asked, "Does he really fear you?"

Harry glanced over at Horace with a thoughtful look on his face. Breathing in deeply he thought back to their most recent confrontation. "Yes," he said softly, "he does. He now knows how powerful I have become. I honestly don't think Tom Riddle will be coming back to Hogwarts any time soon and even though I still have one year to go I will be doing everything in my power to bring Riddle's reign of terror to an end."

Slughorn's face became unreadable for several seconds as he apparently weighed his options. "But can you protect me from You-know-who?"

Albus shook his head sadly. "Horace, my dear friend, you know his name. He was, after all, one of your favorites almost fifty years ago."

Horace flinched then blushed, a sense of resignation finally claiming his features as he apparently

came to terms with the role he had inadvertently played in the creation of a monster. "Yes," he sighed. "I know. What do you want?"

"We want to know how many horcruxes he was planning," Harry said, choosing the direct approach rather than couching his words in any form of subtlety.

Horace fell silent for several minutes, his body radiating an air of resignation, and simply watched as Harry and Albus completed their repairs. When they were finished and had seated themselves in anticipation of his decision Horace looked up and softly said, "Six. He said that he was going to create six horcruxes because seven is the most powerful magical number and he wanted his soul to be in seven parts."

Harry's eyes bulged slightly. "Six?" he asked in disbelief. "Six horcruxes?"

Horace nodded, a guilty blush creeping up his neck. "Yes, I'm afraid so. And I'm ashamed to say that I thought highly of Tom Riddle while he was in school. He showed such promise; but when he started talking about horcruxes I didn't know what to do. I told you about that conversation, Albus, because I was scared. He had taken me into his confidence and, to be honest with you, I feared for my life. I still do, in fact. But if he fears both of you and if you can guarantee my safety then I will return."

"We can guarantee your safety," Albus began, "so long as you are on Hogwarts grounds. And we will assign a body guard to you whenever you leave the grounds."

Horace immediately looked at Harry, a hopeful look in his eyes. Harry shook his head. "No," he said. "I'll help you out when I can but I don't know how often that will be. We will, however, assign one of our better fighters to act as your personal body guard whenever you leave the castle grounds."

Slughorn looked slightly crestfallen but nodded his head in understanding.

"Very well," Dumbledore chirped. "When will you be returning, Horace?"

The round little man stood up and looked around the room, a sad smirk playing across his features. "I've had to abandon most of my worldly possessions over the past few months," he said thoughtfully before looking up at the two warriors in front of him. "All I've kept are a few necessities so if you can give me a few minutes I will be ready to return tonight."

Harry considered Horace Slughorn for several seconds, realizing that even though the man had gone out of his way to stay out of the fighting the war had taken its toll upon him as well. "Very well," Albus said from Harry's right. "You will have to forgive us, Horace, but recent events have taught both Harry and myself not to let anyone out of our sight until our mission has been completed. So, if you don't mind, I will accompany you while you gather your things."

Horace looked as though he was about to protest but then apparently thought better of it. "Oh, very well," he said. "I suppose it is only to be expected. I haven't been keeping up with the most recent news on the war but what I have read is enough."

"Harry," Albus commanded, "the perimeter is yours."

Harry nodded quickly and reclaimed his position on the couch, dropping into a light meditative state and expanding his consciousness to include the entire village as well as the surrounding

countryside.

"What's he doing?" Horace asked curiously.

"Harry is monitoring our perimeter," Albus said cryptically. "It is one of his ... special abilities, shall we say. Time, however, is of the essence, Horace, so I suggest we get busy."

Five minutes later, as Albus and Horace returned to the sitting room, a small trunk and a carpet bag in hand, Harry roused himself. "All's clear," he said. "But we don't want to apparate away because, even though it is the Ministry, we are being monitored. I know they did a purge last summer but I would rather be safe than sorry."

Horace's eyes widened in shock and horror. "They've been monitoring me?" he squeaked.

"At my request," Albus said softly. "I asked Amelia to begin tracking you at the end of April. Not only do I need a new potions master but I have feared for your safety, given your history with Tom Riddle."

Horace laughed nervously. "You and me both, Albus. You and me both." Then changing the subject he asked, "If we can't apparate, how are we going to get to Hogwarts?"

Albus looked over at Harry. "Harry," he asked, "do you feel up to it?"

Harry nodded and held out his arms. "Hold on to your luggage and hold onto my arms," he said.

Albus did not hesitate but Horace, unsure of what was about to happen, reluctantly reached out and took hold of Harry's right arm. The next thing Horace knew he was standing in Albus' office at Hogwarts. "H-h-h-how ... how did you do that?" he squeaked as the blood drained from his face.

Harry quickly turned towards the pudgy professor, taking him by the arm and guiding him to a cushy armchair before he fainted. "Trade secret, I'm afraid," he said with a wink in Dumbledore's direction.

After Harry was sure Horace was safely settled into his chair he glance over at the headmaster. "I'll leave you two to your business. I'm going to head up to the dorms. I'll see you in the morning."

Albus nodded, a gentle, grateful smile the only confirmation Harry needed to know that their mission had not only been successful but that they had suitably impressed Horace with the urgency of their situation.

Chapter 2. Conversations I

When Harry climbed down into his trunk, which had been moved back up to the, now, seventh-year Gryffindor boys dormitory earlier in the day, fifteen minutes later he found Ron and Mark engrossed in a game of chess while Ginny, Hermione, Neville, Luna, Joseph and Eileen looked on. Apparently Dobby and Winky had decided to call it a night and gone to bed. "Who's winning?" he asked as he wrapped his right arm around Ginny's waist and pulled her into a one-armed hug.

Ginny leaned comfortably into his side and smiled up at him. "Ron is. But I think he has made it his mission to teach Mark everything he knows about chess and strategy this summer."

Harry chuckled softly but even he noticed that there was something slightly off about his laughter. It wasn't the stress or strain of the war or anything like that – if it had been something as simple as that he would have cracked months ago – but something was definitely off and he was pretty sure it had something to do with what he had learned about the lengths to which Tom Riddle had gone to ensure his survival and solidify his immortality.

Everyone in the room looked over at him, curious and concerned expressions on their faces, but Joseph was the first to speak. "What is it, Harry?" he asked. "What have you learned that has affected you so?"

Harry looked over at his blood brother from the realm of the high elves and grimaced. "What can you tell me about horcruxes?" he asked softly.

While all of the humans in his sitting room were looking at him with blank expressions on their faces Joseph and Eileen's faces drained of all color as their eyes widened in shock and disbelief. "We know of them, of course," Eileen said haltingly, her normally confident and musical voice trembling with uncertainty and fear. "Why do you ask?"

Harry let his arm drop from around Ginny's waist as he let out a deep sigh of resignation. "Tom Riddle's goal was six," he said as he turned away from his friends and walked over to sit on one of the couches as Eileen let out a short scream and Joseph audibly gasped. "We don't know how many he has created thus far but his goal was, and perhaps still is, six."

Eileen's knees buckled as she fainted and Joseph quickly scooped her into his arms, carrying her over to the other couch where he lay her down as gently as possible and made her as comfortable as he could. When he was satisfied with her positioning he turned around and walked hesitantly over to sit down next to Harry, resting his elbows on his knees and bending over while taking several deep breaths that helped him regain some of the color he had lost moments earlier. "Six?" he asked.

Harry nodded sadly. Yeah. Six. I'm going to meet with Albus tomorrow to see if he has any ideas as to what the others might be and where they might be hidden but apparently I was able to destroy one of them at the end of my second year."

The chess game forgotten, the others had taken seat around the room and were listening intently to Harry and Joseph's discussion. Joseph turned his head and looked over at Harry, a look of suspicion and curiosity marring his features. "How?"

Harry closed his eyes and sighed once more. After he opened his eyes he stared at a brown spot in the center of the rug for several seconds before responding. Reaching out and taking hold of Ginny's hand he said, "That diary was a horcrux. After I killed the basilisk I pulled the fang out of my arm and used it to stab the diary."

"Did you know what you were doing?" Joseph asked.

Harry shook his head. "No. All I knew was that the diary had to be destroyed and that the fang was the closest thing at hand."

Joseph chuckled and shook his head then, a few moments later, burst out laughing. "Oh, Harry," he laughed. "Either Tom Riddle was supremely stupid when he created that horcrux or you were incredibly lucky to have been bitten by a basilisk!"

Harry grimaced. "I think I'll go with the former. If it hadn't been for Fawks I would not have survived that strike."

Joseph sobered almost immediately. "Fawks?" he asked. "Albus' phoenix?"

Harry nodded as he softly smiled at the memory of Fawks coming to his rescue.

"So you have been touched by basilisk venom and phoenix tears?" Joseph asked, a note of awe in his voice.

Harry nodded his head again. "Yeah, I guess you could say that. Why? What's so special about that?"

At that moment Eileen began to stir and Joseph jumped, quickly moving to her side. As she slowly came around Joseph said, "Oh not much. Its just that basilisk venom is one of the few things that can be used to destroy a horcrux and the only known antidote to basilisk venom is phoenix tears."

"Oh."

When Eileen woke up Joseph helped her sit up and then sat next to her.

"Excuse me," Hermione said hesitantly, " but what exactly is a horcrux?"

Eileen looked over at Harry, her eyes wide with terror, then slowly turned her head to look over at Hermione. "The creation of a horcrux is the darkest of the dark arts," she said softly, her voice still quavering slightly. "To create a horcrux you have got to intentionally kill someone with the intent of splitting your soul and placing the split portion of your soul inside a magical container. A horcrux is an intact magical object which contains a portion of a person's soul."

Hermione's, Ron's, Neville's, Luna's and Ginny's faces all paled as they realized just how cold and cruel a person had to be to create one horcrux, let alone six. Mark Evans, however, scooted himself as far back into his chair as he could and pulled his legs up, hugging them tightly to his chest. As the youngest member of this "family" and the only one who had not yet had any first-hand experience with the horrors of war his eyes reflected the terror his mind could not yet comprehend. They were wide with fear and shown with the haunted look of a man who did not need to experience war to know the horrors it entailed. "D-does that mean that the only way we are going to be able to get rid of him is by destroying all of his horcruxes first?"

Harry looked over at his second cousin and nodded, saying, "That's exactly what it means, Mark. If we don't get rid of all of his horcruxes first, even if we destroy all of them after the fact, he will remain a malevolent presence trapped on Earth without a body until he is able to possess someone's body. I don't want to give him that chance," he said as he gently squeezed Ginny's hand, "so we have got to destroy all of his horcruxes before the final battle."

Ron, who had been listening intently to the entire conversation, blew his breath out through pursed lips. "Great," he said. "Just great. I don't suppose there is any defense against a horcrux is there?"

Joseph shook his head. "No, Ron, there isn't. If we are going to with this war we have got to destroy them. All of them." Turning back to Harry he said, "If you don't mind me asking, Harry, where did this episode take place?"

Harry could feel Ginny's body tense as soon as the question was asked but, responding to the urgency in Joseph's tone, chose to answer his friend after squeezing Ginny's hand to reassure her that everything was going to be alright. "It was in the chamber of secrets," he said cautiously. "Why?"

Eileen's face lost most of its color again. "Why is it called the chamber of secrets?" she asked.

Harry looked down at his hands for several seconds. When he looked up he could see that both Joseph and Eileen were watching him with anxious expressions on their faces. "I really don't know why it is called the chamber of secrets," he admitted, "but I do know that the password is in parseltongue."

"How was it opened?" Eileen squeaked.

Harry looked over at Ginny, using his eyes to ask permission to tell of her involvement in that chapter of the school's history. The look of grim determination in her eyes and her quick nod of her head told him all he needed to know and for the next several minutes he, Ron, Hermione and Ginny told the two elves about the events surrounding Ginny's first year at Hogwarts.

When they were finished Joseph and Eileen sat back in their couch, remaining silent for several heartbeats before expressing their concerns. "So let me get this straight," Joseph began, "you were able to open the chamber of secrets, Ginny, because you were being possessed by Tom Riddle's diary and you were able to open the chamber of secrets, Harry, because you are a parselmouth ..."

"Which is an ability Dumbledore thinks Tom passed on to you when his killing curse failed," Eileen finished.

Harry nodded. "Yeah, that about sums it up," he said.

Joseph leaned back into his corner of the couch and studied Harry in silence, almost as if he were meeting him for the first time, for several minutes. "I think," he said after the silence had gone well beyond deafening and remain there for several minutes, "the time has come for us to pay a visit to Ethrindell."

Eileen nodded her agreement. "Yes," she said. "I agree. I'll contact the council first thing in the morning and see if we can set up a meeting for sometime later in the week."

"Ethrindell?" Harry asked.

Joseph nodded. "Yes. By blood, Ethrindell is what you would call a muggle. By magical talent and ability and levels of wisdom, however, he is essentially a god. No one knows how old he is or, indeed, even where he is from. All we know is that while he is physically a human being, he has been a part of our realm for as long as anyone can remember and even our earliest records make mention of him."

"He is one of our greatest teachers," Eileen added, "and he has been observing your world – this world,"

"But why should we want to meet with him?" Harry asked innocently.

Joseph leaned forward for a moment and then fell back into his corner of the couch. Then, with a sigh, he said, "From what you've said, Harry, I have a feeling that we are dealing with more than just a few horcruxes and, as bad as they are, if my suspicions are correct, what we may be dealing with is far worse than anything any of us could have imagined even three months ago. I want to consult with him because he has been observing this world for the past several hundred years. I want you to be there because you are a central figure in this war and I have a feeling that it is all going to come down to one of the most difficult decisions you will ever have to make."

Harry looked across his sitting room at his blood brother, a true elven warrior who had proven himself in the heat of battle more times than he could count. Sitting back, resting his shoulders against the scarlet couch's soft, velvety cushions, he looked up at the ceiling for several seconds and the slowly lowered his head until he was looking at Joseph again. "What do you suspect?" he asked.

Joseph blushed. It wasn't much but it was enough to tell Harry that even though his friend did suspect something he was not willing to commit to it due to his current levels of inexperience where practical divination in matters of magical endeavor were concerned. "I ..."

Harry shook his head. "No. Don't worry about it. I have a meeting with Albus tomorrow afternoon. We'll talk about what he knows and suspects and take it from there. Do you know if he knows Ethrindell?"

"I believe he at least knows of him. As to how well he knows him, however, I have no idea."

"Do you think it would be alright if I asked him to join us?"

Chapter 3. The Young Riddle

At 4:30 the next morning Harry woke with a start. With the Earth's elliptical orbit around the sun, in concert with its tilted axis the days had been growing longer since the middle of December and this close to the Summer Solstice the sun's first rays peeked over the horizon at 2:30 in the morning.

Harry tried to chastise himself for sleeping in as he made his way into his trunk's bathroom to take a quick shower before starting his day but failed miserably because he had been tired last night. He didn't know how he was able to teleport through Hogwarts' anti-apparation wards but he did know that it took a lot out of him, and doing it with two wizards holding onto his arms was not easy in the slightest.

When he exited the bathroom ten minutes later, clothed only in his boxers, he glanced over at Ginny who was snoring softly while hugging a pillow to her chest and shook his head. He was more than thankful for Ginny's love and devotion but today was the first day of some of the most intense training many at Hogwarts would ever be asked to endure and he wondered how Ginny and the others would feel after six weeks of what could only really be described as a kind of magical boot camp.

He threw his towel at her head, hitting her squarely in the face as he left their room and received a startled scream of indignation for his efforts. "What was that for, Potter?" Ginny growled as Harry stepped through the curtain, entering the sitting room on his way to the kitchen.

"Time to get up, Gin," he said. "It starts today. You have twenty minutes to shower, get something to drink and be in the Entrance Hall."

Ginny grumbled something unintelligible about slave drivers and wet towels but got out of bed and made her way into the bathroom.

Twenty minutes later, as the last of the students who were spending their summer at Hogwarts stumbled into the Entrance Hall Kingsley pushed himself away from the wall next to the partially opened doors. "Good morning," he said. "It rained last night and there is a light drizzle this morning so watch your footing." With that he led the way out the castle's front doors and onto the grounds.

Harry was running with Neville towards the back of the pack when, on their second lap around the castle grounds, he caught a glimpse of a particularly small student as he fell out of line and leaned heavily against a nearby tree. Breaking away from the pack Harry jogged over to the tree and, to his amazement, found Mark Evans leaning into the tree as he struggled to catch his breath. "Mark," he asked, "what are you doing out here?"

Mark looked up at Harry, his face flushed. "If I'm going to live in this world," he said between gasps, "I'm going to fight for it."

Harry smiled briefly then shook his head in amazement. Squatting down next to Mark he looked up into the young boy's eyes. The determination he saw in his second cousin's eyes told him that Mark was serious and that he would be devastated if someone were to tell him that he was too young. Nodding his head in understanding Harry waited until Mark had caught his breath then looked him in the eye and said. "Alright. You can fight. All I ask is that you take your time with these early morning runs. Most of the students have been running and working out since January and

their bodies are used to it. You are at least two years younger than most of them and I don't want you to hurt yourself. One of the things I learned last summer is that there is such a thing as being too young to work out. I'll talk to Remus, Kingsley, Alastor and Tonks and see if we can come up with a program that will make it possible for you to train with the rest of us without damaging your body."

Mark smiled down at Harry. "Thanks," he said.

"No problem. I think two laps is enough for you this morning so why don't you make your way back up to the castle and I'll meet you in the Great Hall for breakfast."

Mark nodded his head and Harry could sense a mental sigh of relief, that Harry was not mad at him and that he was not being told that he was too young to fight, as he turned away and started walking up towards the castle.

At breakfast Harry visited with the other Defense Professors about Mark and even though Alastor was hesitant to let him fight the others understood his motivations and it was decided that they would all take it in turns to train him to the best of their abilities.

After breakfast Harry explained the situation to Mark and told him that they would do their best to train him to fight.

After a brief intermission the students reported to their assigned classrooms – Mark was with Harry's group – and began their flexibility and coordination training. Harry began his class by explaining that the best way to avoid being hit by a spell was to be somewhere ... anywhere else and that what they would be learning during their morning sessions were a number of flexibility, coordination and tumbling skills that would hopefully help them avoid being hit by any harmful spells in the heat of battle when all else failed. He then dove into a review of the various stretches he had learned the previous summer and while he went out of his way to make sure everyone was doing them correctly he did find himself spending more time working with Mark than anyone else. Mark's body was still pre-pubescent and Harry did not want him to hurt himself.

That afternoon, after four hours of drilling students on dueling techniques with Alastor, Remus, Tonks and Kingsley and after dinner in the Great Hall, Harry took a quick shower and made his way up to the Headmaster's Office.

As he approached the entrance the stone gargoyle leapt aside revealing the spiral stair leading up to Albus' sanctuary. He had taken a few lumps during dueling practice that afternoon and was ready for a nap but knew that he could not really rest until Tom was utterly and completely defeated so, with a heavy heart, he nodded to the gargoyle in acknowledgement and mounted the steps to begin the summer's lessons.

When he reached the top step he knocked politely on the heavy wooden door. "Come In, Harry," Albus called from within.

Harry raised his hand to push the door open but was pleasantly surprised when the door swung open of its own accord. Looking up he saw that Albus appeared to be just as surprised as he was. "Apparently Hogwarts senses your fatigue, Harry, and has chosen to open the door for you."

Harry smiled weakly and mentally reached out to thank the castle. He was briefly shocked when he

felt the castle respond but was too tired to do anything about it so let it pass.

Entering the Headmaster's Office Harry collapsed into his customary chair and, after taking several replenishing breaths, looked up at Albus and raised his eyebrows, silently asking his friend what they were going to be discussing.

Albus smiled knowingly as he steepled his fingers while resting his elbows on his desk. "With Horace's confession, and the very real possibility that Tom has indeed created six horcruxes, our task has become slightly more complicated."

Harry quirked an eyebrow at this understatement of their situation but held his tongue as Albus continued his monologue. "From the memories I shared with you after dinner yesterday you know that Tom Riddle is a half-blood. His mother, an unremarkable witch named Merope Gaunt, used a love potion on an unsuspecting muggle named Tom Riddle, whom she had loved from afar for years, in hopes of convincing him that she was worthy of his love. You also know that he left her as soon as she stopped using the potions even though she was pregnant with his child. You know that Merope Gaunt sold all of her worldly possession, including at least a few priceless family heirlooms, one of which was Salazar Slytherine's locket. And finally, you know that she lived long enough to give birth to her son and to name him after his father and her father. One of the memories I have held back is my memory of delivering Tom's letter of acceptance to Hogwarts. "

Standing up, Albus walked over to one of his cabinets and retrieved his pensieve. After returning to his desk and placing the stone basin in its center he placed his wand to his temple and withdrew a memory from his mind, placing it in the pensieve and swirling it around to give it life. "Now, Harry," Albus said as he completed his preparations and stepped back from his desk, "as we review this memory I would like you to pay close attention to the revelations concerning Tom's early history as well as his reactions to learning that magic is real and that he is a wizard."

Harry looked up at his mentor with a curious expression on his face. "At the end of your second year," Albus explained, "you voiced your concern that you could not help but notice certain similarities between yourself and the young Tom Riddle you met in the chamber of secrets. I would like you to observe this, even younger, Tom Riddle and his reactions so that when all is said and done you will know that there are several major differences between yourself and the man who became Lord Voldemort."

After thinking about Albus' words for several seconds Harry slowly nodded his head and stood up. "All right," he said.

Stepping away from his desk Albus made a sweeping gesture towards his pensieve and said, "After you."

Harry stepped forward and, upon reaching the leading edge of the headmaster's desk, leaned into the silvery surface of the stone basin. As his nose broke the surface he felt himself falling through timeless darkness that represented the interface between memory and reality. Moments later, as he felt his feet making contact with firm ground, he opened his eyes and beheld a bustling old-fashioned London street.

"Ah," Dumbledore said brightly, making his presence known at Harry's side, "there I am."

Looking up Harry spotted a tall, lean figure crossing the street towards them in front of a horse-drawn milk cart. This younger Albus Dumbledore's long hair and beard were auburn in color. Having reached their side of the street he strode off along the pavement, drawing many curious glances due to the flamboyantly cut suit of plum velvet he was wearing.

"Nice suit, sir," Harry chuckled before he could stop himself.

"Yes, quite," Dumbledore chuckled as they followed his younger self a short distance before turning through a set of iron gates into a bare courtyard fronting a rather grim, square building surrounded by high railings. He mounted a few steps leading to the front door and knocked once. After a moment the door was opened by a scruffy girl wearing an apron.

"Good afternoon," the younger Albus said politely, "I have an appointment with Mrs. Cole, who, I believe, is the matron here?"

"Oh," said the bewildered-looking girl as she took in Dumbledore's eccentric demeanor. "Um ... just a mo' ... MRS. COLE!" she bellowed over her shoulder.

Harry heard a distant voice shouting something in response. The girl turned back to the younger Dumbledore. "I guess you can come in. She's on her way."

As a group they stepped into a hallway tiled in black and white. The whole place looked and felt shabby by comparison but was spotlessly clean. Before the door closed behind them a tall, severe, bony, harassed-looking woman came scurrying towards them. She had a lean face that appeared more anxious than unkind. She was talking over her shoulder to another aproned helper as she walked towards them.

"... and take the iodine upstairs to Martha, please. Billy Stubbs has been picking at his scabs and Eric Whalley's oozing all over his sheets." Then, with a sigh, she shook her head. "Chicken pox on top of everything else," she half-muttered to herself before looking up and smiling at Dumbledore. Her mouth fell slightly open as she stopped dead in her tracks, looking as astonished as she would had a giraffe just crossed her threshold.

"Good afternoon," Dumbledore said, holding out his hand.

Mrs. Cole simply gaped.

"My name is Albus Dumbledore. I sent you a letter requesting an appointment and you kindly invited me here today."

Mrs. Cole blinked. She blinked again. "Oh, yes," she said feebly, apparently deciding that Dumbledore was not a hallucination. Well – well then – you had better come into my office. Yes."

She led the younger Dumbledore into a small room that seemed part sitting room part office. Harry and Albus followed them into the comfortably informal office. It was as shabby as the rest of the hallway and the furniture was old and mismatched.

Mrs. Cole invited Dumbledore to sit in a rickety chair as she seated herself behind her cluttered desk, eyeing him nervously.

"I am here, as I told you in my letter, to discuss Tom Riddle and arrangements for his future,"

Dumbledore said.

"Are you family?" Mrs. Cole asked.

"No," Dumbledore said succinctly, "I am a teacher. I have come to offer Tom a place at my school."

"What school's this, then?" she asked, her voice neutral but her eyes communicating a hopeful desire.

"It's called Hogwarts," Dumbledore said confidently.

"And how come you're interested in Tom?"

"We have been observing him for some time now and believe he is in possession of certain qualities that we are interested in."

"You mean he's won a scholarship? How can he have? He's never been entered for one?"

"Well, you see," Dumbledore said pleasantly, "his name has been down for our school since birth ..."

"Who registered him? His parents?"

There was no doubt that Mrs. Cole was an inconveniently sharp woman. Apparently Dumbledore thought so too as Harry saw him slip his wand out of the pocket of his velvet suit while, at the same time, picking up a perfectly blank piece of paper from Mrs. Cole's desk.

"Here you are," Dumbledore said as he handed her the piece of paper while surreptitiously waving his wand in a complex pattern Harry did not recognize. "I believe this will make everything clear."

Mrs. Cole's eyes slid out of focus and back again as she gazed intently at the blank sheet of paper in her hands.

"Hmm," she vocalized to herself then looked back up at Dumbledore. "Everything seems to be in order," she said, handing it back to Dumbledore. Then her eyes fell upon a bottle of gin and two glasses that most certainly had not been present moments before.

"Er... May offer you a glass of gin?" she asked in a falsely refined voice.

"Thank you very much," Dumbledore said, beaming.

It soon became clear that Mrs. Cole was no novice when it came to gin drinking. Pouring both of them a generous measure, she drained her own glass in one gulp. Smacking her lips frankly, she smiled at Dumbledore who did not hesitate in pressing his advantage.

"I was wondering," Dumbledore began diplomatically, "whether you could tell me something of Tom Riddle's history? Believe he was born here, in the orphanage?"

"That's right," Mrs. Cole said, helping herself to more gin. "I remember it clear as anything because I'd just started here myself. New Year's Eve and bitter cold, snowing, you know. Nasty night. And this girl, not much older than I was myself at the time, came staggering up the front steps. Well, she wasn't the first. We took her in, and she had the baby within the hour. And she was dead in another hour."

Mrs. Cole nodded impressively and took another generous gulp of gin.

"Did she say anything before she died?" Dumbledore asked. "Anything about the boy's father for instance?"

"Now, as it happens,, she did," Mrs. Cole, who seemed to be rather enjoying herself now, with the gin in her hand and an eager audience for her story, said. "I remember she said to me, 'I hope he looks like his papa,' and I won't lie, she was right to hope it, because she was no beauty ... and then she told me he was to be named Tom for his father, and Marvolo for her father ... yes, I know, funny name, isn't it? We wondered whether she came from a circus ... and she said the boy's surname was to be Riddle. And she died soon after that without another word.

"Well, we named him just as she'd said, it seemed so important to the poor girl, but no Tom nor Marvolo nor any kind of Riddle ever came looking for him, nor any family at all, so he stayed in the orphanage and he's been here ever since.

Mrs. Cole almost absentmindedly helped herself to another healthy measure of gin. Two pink spots had appeared high on her cheekbones. Then she said, "He's a funny boy."

"Yes," Dumbledore said knowingly, "I thought he might be."

"He was a funny baby too. He never cried, you know. And then, when he got a little older, he was ... odd."

"Odd," Dumbledore asked, "in what way?"

"Well, he ..."

But Mrs. Cole pulled up short, and there was nothing blurry or vague about the inquisitorial glance she shot Dumbledore over her glass.

"He's definitely got a place at your school, you say?"

"Definitely," Dumbledore confirmed.

"And nothing I say can change that?"

"Nothing."

"You'll be taking him away, whatever?"

"Whatever," Dumbledore repeated gravely.

Mrs. Cole squinted at him as though deciding as to whether or not she could trust him. Apparently she decided that she could because, in a sudden rush, she said, "He scares the other children."

"You mean he is a bully," Dumbledore asked.

"I think he must be," Mrs. Cole said, frowning slightly, "but it's very hard to catch him at it. There have been incidents ... Nasty things, really ..."

Even though Harry could sense that the younger version of his mentor was intrigued, Dumbledore

did not press her. She took another long drink from her glass of gin and the rosiness in her cheeks grew more pronounced.

"Billy Stubbs rabbit ... well, Tom said he didn't do it and I don't see how he could have, but even so, it didn't hang itself from the rafters.

"But I'm jiggered if I know how he got up there to do it. All I know is that he and Billy had an argument the day before. And then ..." Mrs. Cole took another gulp from her glass, slopping a little over her chin this time ... "on the summer outing – we take them out, you know once a year, to the countryside or seaside – well, Amy Benson and Dennis Bishop were never quite right afterwards, and all we ever got out of them was that they'd gone into a cave with Tom Riddle. He swore they'd just gone exploring, but something happened in there. I'm sure of it. And, well, there have been a lot of things ... funny things ..."

She looked at Dumbledore again, and though her cheeks were flushed, her gaze was steady. "I don't think many here will be sorry to see him leave."

Dumbledore bowed his head slightly in his understanding of her words then calmly look into her eyes as if measuring her resolve. "You understand, of course, that we will not be keeping him permanently. He will have to return here, at the very least, every summer."

Mrs. Cole grimaced slightly but nodded her understanding. "Oh, well, that's better than a whack on the nose with a rusty poker I suppose," she said, the corners of her mouth twisting into an uncomfortable smile. Even though two-thirds of the gin was now gone, most of which had been consumed by Mrs. Cole as Dumbledore's glass was still mostly full, Harry was impressed that she seemed quite steady on her feet when she stood. "I suppose you'd like to see him, then?" she asked.

Yes, very much," Dumbledore said, rising to his feet as well.

Mrs. Cole led Dumbledore out of her office and up the stone stairs, calling out instructions and admonitions to helpers and children as she went, Albus and Harry following silently in their wake. Harry noticed that all of the orphans were wearing the same kind of grayish tunic and that they all looked reasonably well cared for.

As they made their way up the stairs it occurred to him that Tom Riddle had actually had a relatively comfortable childhood. While Mrs. Cole did slightly resemble his deceased aunt in physical appearance She did not appear to be overly harsh or cruel and seemed to go out of her way treat all of the children with equal care and concern. He also made note of the fact that, at least according to Mrs. Cole, Tom's reputation at the orphanage seemed to be of his own making. It was almost like night and day. His life at the Dursley's had been a living hell, being treated, as he had been, as a house elf. Tom's life at the orphanage, however, had been relatively easy. All of the chores had been shared and he had had ample opportunity to make friends, something Harry had been denied due to his family's desire to "beat the magic out of him."

"Here we are," Mrs. Cole said as they turned off the second landing and stopped outside the first door in a long corridor. She knocked once and entered.

"Tom?" she said, "you've got a visitor. This is Mr. Dumberton ... sorry, Dumbledore. He's come to tell you ... well, I'll let him do it."

Dumbledore, followed closely by Harry and Albus, entered the room, and Mrs. Cole closed the door on them as she left. It was a small room with nothing in it except an old wardrobe and an iron bedstead. A boy was sitting on top of the grey blankets, his legs stretched out in front of him.

There was no trace of the Gaunts in Tom Riddle's face. Merope had gotten her dying wish: He was his handsome father in miniature, tall for eleven years old, dark-haired and pale. His eyes narrowed slightly as he took in Dumbledore's eccentric appearance. There was a moment of silence.

"How do you do, Tom," Dumbledore said, walking forward and extending his hand in a friendly gesture.

The boy hesitated briefly then stood up and took Dumbledore's hand in his own, and they shook hands. Dumbledore motioned for Tom to be seated as he drew a hard wooden chair up beside the bed so that looked something like a hospital patient with a visitor.

"I am Professor Dumbledore."

"'Professor'?" Riddle repeated skeptically. He looked wary. "Is that like a doctor? What are you here for? Did she get you in to have a look at me?" he asked, gesturing towards the door through which Mrs. Cole had left with his thumb.

"No, no," Dumbledore said as an understanding smile began to spread across his face. "Nothing like that."

"I don't believe you," Riddle said. "She wants me looked at doesn't she? Tell the truth!"

He spoke the last three words with a ringing voice that was almost shocking. It was a command and it sounded as though he had given it many times before. His eyes had widened slightly and he was glaring at Dumbledore, who made no response except to continue smiling pleasantly. A few moments later Riddle stopped glaring, though he did look, if anything, warier still.

"Who are you?"

"I have told you," Dumbledore said patiently. "My name is Professor Dumbledore and I work at a school called Hogwarts. I have come to offer you a place at my school ... your new school, if you would like to come."

Given his earlier statements, Tom's reaction to this news was not surprising in the least. He leapt from the bed and backed away from Dumbledore, looking furious. "You can't kid me!" he very nearly screamed. "You're from the asylum. That's it, isn't it? 'Professor,' yes, of course ... well, I'm not going, see? That old cat's the one who should be in the asylum! I never did anything to little Amy Benson or Dennis Bishop! You can ask them, they'll tell you!"

Shaking his head slightly Dumbledore patiently said, "I am not from the asylum, Tom. I am, as I said, a teacher and, if you will sit down, I will tell you about Hogwarts. And, of course, if you would rather not come to the school, no one will force you..."

"I'd like to see them try," Tom sneered.

"Hogwarts," Dumbledore said, ignoring Tom's comment, "is a school for people with special

abilities..."

"I'm not mad!" Tom spat.

"I know you are not mad," Dumbledore said, once again displaying levels of patience Harry could not help but admire. "Hogwarts is not a school for mad people. It is a school of magic."

The room was suddenly occupied by a ringing silence. Tom Riddle stood frozen in place, his eyes flickering between each of Dumbledore's, as though trying to catch one of them lying.

"Magic?" Tom whispered, his voice betraying his convictions. "It's real, then, what I've been doing."

"Yes," Dumbledore said, his curiosity piqued. "Tell me, Tom, what is it you are able to do?"

"All sorts of things," Tom breathed. A flush of excitement was rising in his cheeks: he looked almost fevered. "I can make things move without touching them. I can make animals do what I want, without training them. I can make bad things happen to people who annoy me. I can even make them hurt if I want to."

His legs were trembling. He stumbled forward and sat down on the edge of his bed, staring at his hands, a look of disbelief, hunger and greed in his eyes. "I knew I was different he whispered with conviction. "I knew I was special. Always, I knew there was something ..."

"Yes, Tom," Dumbledore said, gently inserting himself into Tom Riddle's moment of revelation. "You are quite right. You, Tom Riddle, are a wizard."

Tom lifted his head. His face was transfigured: There was a wild, almost maniacal happiness occupying his features that caused the hairs on the back of Harry's neck to stand on end. It was frightening, really, because rather than making him look more handsome his finely carved features seemed to take on a rougher, almost bestial, expression.

"Are you a wizard too?"

"Yes, I am," Dumbledore said, a hint of humility in his voice."

"Prove it!" Tom demanded in the same commanding voice he had used when he had said, "Tell the truth."

Dumbledore sat back in his chair and raised his eyebrows slightly at Tom's tone. "If, as I take it, you are accepting your place at Hogwarts ..."

"Of course I am!"

"... then you will address me as either 'Professor' or 'sir.'"

For a fleeting moment Tom's expression hardened before it softened and he said, in an unrecognizably polite voice, "I'm sorry, sir. I meant ... please, Professor, could you show me ...?"

Something about his posture told Harry that Tom was not as sincere in his request as he seemed. It was almost as if Tom had grown up manipulating people by playing a perpetual game of cat and mouse. He would attack until he got a reaction and then back off and attack again, from a slightly different angle, until he got what he wanted. In that fleeting moment it occurred to Harry that the

only things Tom Riddle was interested in were those things that would serve his purposes. To Tom Riddle he was the only one that mattered and that truly frightened Harry. He knew that those kinds of people existed but he had always thought that it was a matter of training. But Tom Riddle had had every opportunity in the world to turn out differently. Instead he had chosen a life of power, greed and manipulation.

Harry was sure that Dumbledore was going to refuse, that he would tell Tom that there would be plenty of time for practical demonstrations at Hogwarts, that they were currently in a building full of muggles and must, therefore, be cautious. To his surprise, however, Dumbledore drew his wand from an inside pocket, pointed it at the shabby wardrobe in the corner and gave it a casual flick.

The wardrobe burst into flames.

Tom jumped to his feet; Harry really couldn't blame him for howling in shock and outrage; all of his worldly possessions must be in that wardrobe. But even as Riddle rounded on Dumbledore, the flames vanished, leaving the wardrobe completely undamaged.

Tom stared from the wardrobe to Dumbledore. Then, his expression greedy, he pointed at the wand. "Where can I get one of them?"

Dumbledore studied him for a moment then said, "All in good time, Tom. I think there is something trying to get out of your wardrobe."

And sure enough, a faint rattling could be heard coming from inside the wardrobe. For the first time in Harry's experience Tom Riddle looked frightened.

"Open the door," Dumbledore said in a calm but commanding tone.

Riddle hesitated a moment then crossed the room and threw open the wardrobe door. On the topmost shelf, above a rail of threadbare clothes, a small wooden box was shaking and rattling as though there were several frantic mice trapped inside.

"Take it out," Dumbledore said, his voice slightly cooler than before, betraying the fact that he was beginning to lose patience with Tom's antics.

Tom took down the quaking box. He looked unnerved.

"Is there anything in that box that does not rightfully belong to you?" Dumbledore asked.

Riddle threw Dumbledore a long, clear, calculating look before responding. Finally, after what seemed an indeterminable amount of time, Tom said, "Yes, I suppose there might be, sir." His voice was cool and expressionless.

"Open it," Dumbledore commanded, his voice clearly indicating the fact that he was beginning to suspect Tom's motives.

Tom took the lid off and tipped the contents out onto his bed without looking at them. Harry, who had expected to see something much more exciting, was amazed when all he saw was a mess of small, everyday objects: a yo-yo, a silver thimble and a tarnished mouth organ among them. Once free of the box the objects they stopped quivering and lay still upon the thin blankets.

"You will return these items to their rightful owners with your apologies," Dumbledore said calmly, replacing his wand inside his jacket. "I shall know whether it has been done. And be warned, Tom: Thieving is not tolerated at Hogwarts."

Riddle did not look even remotely abashed; he was still staring coldly and appraisingly at Dumbledore. Several seconds later he said, in a colorless, toneless voice, "Yes, sir."

"At Hogwarts," Dumbledore continued, "we teach you not only to use magic but to control it. You have – inadvertently, I am sure – been using your powers in a way that is neither taught nor tolerated in our school. You are not the first, nor will you be the last, to let your magic run away with you. But you should know that Hogwarts can expel students and that the Ministry of Magic – yes, there is a Ministry of Magic – will punish lawbreakers much more severely. All new wizards must accept that, by entering into our world, they will be expected to abide by our laws."

"Yes, sir," Riddle said again.

It was impossible for Harry to tell what the young Tom Riddle was thinking; his face was an unreadable mask as he put the little cache of stolen objects back into the box. When he had finished he turned to Dumbledore and baldly said, "I haven't got any money."

"That is easily remedied," Dumbledore said as he withdrew a leather pouch from one of his pockets. ""There is a fund at Hogwarts for those who require assistance buying books and robes. You may have to buy some of your spellbooks and supplies second hand, but ..."

"Where do you buy spellbooks?" Riddle interrupted. He had taken the heavy moneybag without even thanking Dumbledore and was now examining a fat, gold galleon.

"In Diagon Alley," Dumbledore said. I have your list of books and required supplies with me. I can help you find everything ..."

"You're coming with me?" Riddle asked, looking up.

"Certainly, if you ..."

"I don't need you," Riddle said coolly. "I'm used to doing things for myself, I go 'round London on my own all the time. How do you get to this Diagon Alley, sir?" he asked, catching the glimmer of disappointment in Dumbledore's eye.

Harry thought that Dumbledore would insist upon accompanying Riddle, but was once again surprised. Dumbledore handed Tom the envelope containing his list of supplies and, after telling Riddle exactly how to get to the Leaky Cauldron from the orphanage, said, "You will be able to see it. The muggles around you, however, that is to say the non-magical people around you, will not. Ask for Tom, the barman. That should be easy enough to remember as he shares his first name ..."

Riddle gave an irritable twitch, as if trying to dispel an irksome fly.

"You dislike the name 'Tom'?" Dumbledore asked curiously.

"There are a lot of Toms," Tom muttered. Then, almost as though he could not suppress it, as if it burst forth from him despite his best efforts to suppress it, he asked, "Was my father a wizard? He was called Tom Riddle too. They've told me."

"I'm afraid I don't know," Dumbledore said gently.

"My mother can't have been magic or she wouldn't have died," Tom said, more to himself than Dumbledore. "It must have been him. So, ... when I've got all my stuff ... when do I come to this Hogwarts?"

"All of the details are on the second piece of parchment," Dumbledore said. "You will leave from King's Cross Station on the first of September. There is a train ticket in there too."

Riddle nodded. Dumbledore got to his feet and held out his hand again. Taking it, Riddle said, "I can speak to snakes. I found out when we've been to the country on trips ... they find me. Is that normal for a wizard?"

Harry could tell that the young Tom Riddle had withheld this information until the end, apparently determined to impress Dumbledore.

"It is unusual," Dumbledore said after a moment's hesitation, "but not unheard of." His tone was casual but his eyes moved curiously over Riddle's face.

They stood for a moment, man and boy, staring at each other. Then the handshake was broken and Dumbledore was at the door.

"Good-bye, Tom. I shall see you at Hogwarts."

"I think that will do," Albus said from Harry's side and moments later they were soaring weightlessly through the darkness once more. After passing through the pensieve's interface they landed squarely in the present, in the Headmaster's Office.

When they had returned to their seats Harry looked across at his mentor and, after several seconds of contemplative silence, said, "Wow ... just wow."

"Yes," Albus agreed. "It has been quite some time since I reviewed that particular memory and I must say that, in retrospect, I probably should have taken much more drastic measures than simply keeping an eye on him and monitoring his activities. But then again, one of the principles I religiously observe is that I cannot interfere with the processes of free will."

Harry nodded his understanding. "Yes. Merlin spent a lot of time making sure that I understood that principle."

Albus smiled briefly. "Ah, yes. Merlin does tend to spend a lot of time on those lessons he feels are most important. And I cannot say that I disagree with him. We must allow the processes of free will to be fulfilled, for that is how the people of this and every other world learn, internalize and personalize the lessons of life."

Harry quirked an eyebrow at Albus' casual mention of 'other worlds' but let it pass. "Erm, Albus," Harry asked hesitantly as he broached the subject Joseph and Eileen had brought up the night before, "Do you know someone named Ethrindell?"

Harry suddenly had Albus' full attention. "Yes, I do," he said. "It was Ethrindell who taught me to

sense magical energies. It was also Ethrindell who helped me refine my abilities after my mentor passed and before my final confrontation with Grindelwald. Why do you ask?"

We were talking last night, after I left your office and returned to my trunk, and Joseph and Eileen think I should meet him."

"Do you know why they suggested it?" Albus asked calmly.

Harry shook his head. "Not really," Harry confessed. "They just think I ought to go see him."

Albus steepled his fingers and sat quietly behind his desk, occasionally humming a nonsensical tune, for several minutes. When he came out of this meditative state he looked back over at Harry, a grim expression on his face. "Yes," he said. "If Joseph and Eileen think you should travel to the elven realm to meet with Ethrindell then by all means do so. I have my suspicions and feel relatively certain in the conclusions I have drawn but Ethrindell is far wiser and much more experienced than I could ever hope to be. When will you be leaving?"

"I don't know," Harry admitted. "They only just mentioned it last night. What I would like to know is if you think it is a good idea and as to whether or not you would like to join us when we go."

Albus smiled and nodded his head. "Yes, Harry, I think it is a very good idea and I would be honored to join you in this journey. Who all will be accompanying you?"

"I really don't know that yet either," Harry said. "Joseph and Eileen will be going, of course, as it is their world and I do not wish to intrude without a guide. I would like to take Ginny along because she would never forgive me if I didn't include her ..."

Albus chuckled. "Ah, a wise decision, Harry. A very wise decision."

Harry blushed and then smiled. "Yes, I thought so too."

"I was also thinking of including Mark in this excursion because it is a once in a lifetime opportunity that I would have loved to have had when I was his age."

"Anyone else?"

Harry shook his head. "No," he said, "I need the others to stay here to train. If there is time after the war and if the elves are willing I will ask that Ron, Hermione, Neville and Luna be given the chance to visit as well, but I don't want to overwhelm them with too many humans at once."

Albus nodded. "Yes. A wise decision."

Almost an hour later, after working with the dragon for a time – Harry had progressed to the point of making its movements and actions seem fluid and was taking the first steps towards flight – and visiting about the training program, they called an end to their meeting and Harry made his way back to his trunk in the Gryffindor sixth-year boy's dormitory.

Chapter 4. Enoch

Over the course of the next few days most of the students were able to get into the routine of rising early, running several laps around the castle grounds, breakfast, training, lunch, training and helping to rebuild Hogsmeade. The reconstruction efforts were going so well, in fact, that the Hogwarts Express, its carriages transfigured into freight cars, was making almost daily runs into London for supplies.

At one point, while Harry was helping Aberforth rebuild the entrance to the tunnel leading from the back of the Hog's Head Inn to a hidden chamber near the base of the Astronomy Tower, he saw Hermione and Millicent Bulstrode comforting a little girl who had lost her cat. He later learned that after much searching, Millicent and Hermione even going so far as to explore the fringes of the Forbidden Forest, they had called off their search and Millicent had sent an owl to her parents requesting that one of the kittens from her cat's most recent litter be sent up on the next shipment from London.

The kitten had arrived the next afternoon, safely tucked away in the engineer's pocked, and the little girl had immediately taken to the furry creature. Her parents, her father still nursing a wound from the most recent battle, had profusely thanked Millicent for her generosity, which had, for a brief moment, thrown her for a loop. Apparently it had never occurred to her that the way to win friends was to be nice to them. Harry smiled when he saw Millicent smile and return to her job of layering the newly arrived lumber with multiple protection charms before releasing them to her classmates for the reconstruction effort with a certain spring in her step that had not been there moments before. He also noticed that her spell work seemed to go much more smoothly as well. And her effectiveness only increased when Professor Flitwick noticed these subtle changes and complimented her on her charms.

Aberforth, who was working alongside Harry as they helped rebuild the Three Broomsticks, seemed to notice the changes as well and nodded his head. "Yep," he said, while taking a break after levitating one of Rosmerta's new windows into place. "It's amazing how much good one simple good deed can do."

Harry nodded his agreement then turned back to his task of squaring up the doorframe before installing the hardware in preparation for hanging the new door. It seemed to him that everyone involved in the reconstruction effort, no matter their house affiliation, was discovering that reaching out to those around them and offering their assistance no matter how seemingly insignificant was a good thing and that the personal rewards were immeasurable in terms of financial gain.

A trip to the Realm of the High Elves, and a meeting with Ethrindell, was scheduled for that Saturday. Ron was disappointed that he was not being invited but understood that, even though he was one of the best strategists and fighters at Hogwarts, he still had a long way to go and was slightly mollified when Harry explained that he needed Ron, Hermione, Neville and Luna to keep tabs on current events to take the appropriate measures while he, Ginny and Albus were away. In other words, Harry was counting on them to protect Hogwarts and Hogsmeade and to lend their assistance to the Ministry of Magic while they were away.

Mark was excited to say the least and Ginny was ecstatic.

On Saturday morning, while everyone else was out running laps, Harry, Ginny, Mark, Joseph and Eileen made their way up to the Headmaster's Office where they were to meet Albus and take a portkey to Derry Lodge, in the Scottish highlands. Harry had checked the area the night before and determined that the best place for them to arrive was behind the lodge because, even though there was currently no one camped anywhere nearby, there were always the early risers and a dirt road did pass directly in front of the structure.

Harry, Ginny and Mark were dressed in casual muggle clothing. Joseph and Eileen had warned them that Enoch, the guardian of the portal they would be using, had erected a number of wards around the summit of Ben Macdhui, some more effective than others depending upon the sensitivities of those approaching the gate, and that it was not uncommon for him to summon the elements and conjure a storm or, as a last resort, drive the supremely unwelcome over the nearby cliffs through disorientation and fear, so they had packed their winter cloaks in their daypacks along with some food, water and a change of clothing.

Albus was dressed in his climbing gear from late in the last century. While it looked comfortable and functional the style was, to say the least, a few years out of fashion. Harry smiled inwardly when he saw the combination. While the costume might have looked quite dashing on a much younger Albus Dumbledore it looked nothing short of comical on the aged wizard standing in front of the headmaster's desk.

Albus smiled brightly, his eyes twinkling madly as he held out the length of rope that was to be their portkey. Harry supposed that Albus had guessed his reaction to his getup and struggled to suppress his mirth.

Joseph and Eileen were dressed in their casual elven garb, their more formal garments tucked away in their daypacks.

"Ah, good morning!" Albus greeted heartily. "Are we all set?"

When they had all gripped the rope Albus tapped the rope with his wand. As soon as his wand made contact the six of them were swept up into swirling world of light, color and sound. Moments later they landed with a thump in the twilight filtering down through the trees behind a large stone building that Harry knew to be Derry Lodge.

The air was crisp and clear. A light breeze promised an easy start, as it would keep the temperature and flies down. After orienting themselves with their surroundings Harry checked the road to make sure no one was coming while Joseph checked the camping grounds with the same intent. When all was pronounced free and clear they set off.

The first hundred yards, after crossing the narrow footbridge set back from the lodge and its surroundings, was a small moor. It wasn't anywhere near as boggy as Fred and George's portable swamps but it was a challenge nonetheless, especially when it came to helping Ginny and Mark across the muddy bog that cut through the middle of the expanse. Ginny almost fell back into the mud after making it safely across and Mark had to be thrown across the ribbon of mud.

Albus, however, cheated slightly by apparating across the moor.

The next few miles consisted of a wide, well-groomed walking path of packed sand with the occasional large rock poking through the surface. This path ranged from between four to eight feet

wide with the occasional paved, stone causeway where the spring runoff could cross without eroding the main path.

They stopped at the foot a rough, narrow path that led up into the hills. Its sides were steep and the way was course with large rocks providing the more than the occasional obstacle. Albus eyed it warily for several seconds before shrugging his shoulders, glancing around to make sure they were still quite alone, withdrawing his wand and conjuring a sturdy staff. "Ah well," he said, "I guess there is nothing for it, then. Onward and upward."

Albus led the way up the hill and along the way, apparating across the occasional stream, until they reached a swiftly flowing stream at the base of a steep hill that was less than a mile from their goal. He stopped on the banks of this stream and leaned heavily upon his staff. Glancing up at the hill he said, "And the wards start here. I dare not apparate across because, if memory serves, Enoch does not take kindly to people apparating into his territory."

He glanced over at Joseph, who was standing a few feet up the hill from the main path, for confirmation. "Yes," Joseph said. "We have got to wade across this stream. After that we will be in Enoch's domain. The water isn't deep. Neither is it especially cold, but the current is swift enough that it could topple you if you aren't careful."

As a group they sat down on the hillocks near the crossing, removing their shoes and socks and rolling their trowser legs up to above their knees.

When everyone was ready Harry and Joseph helped Albus across, closely followed by Ginny and Eileen who were helping the much smaller Mark. When they reached the far bank Harry could feel the wards taking affect. As they sat drying their feet and replacing their shoes and socks Harry glanced over at Joseph who nodded his confirmation. "Yes, we are now in Enoch's domain. He knows we are here and he is watching. He doesn't know who we are but he does know that we are three men, two women and one boy. From here of his wards will cause you to feel lightheaded and slightly nauseas. If your inner world is pure that is all you will feel. It will most grow more intense the closer we get to the portal but that is all. The closer we get the more accurate will be Enoch's judgment of your character. I honestly don't think we have anything to worry about but just in case, stay close."

The train on this side of the stream was little more than a faded goat path that pretty much went straight up the hill. The going was tough and made even more so by the fact that they had to pause and rest after every few steps because one or more of them was feeling light headed or nauseas. When they finally reached the top of the steep incline almost an hour later Ginny sat down heavily on a small boulder. "Phew!" she breathed, "Enoch really doesn't like visitors, does he."

Eileen shook her head, chuckling softly to herself. "No, he doesn't. That's why he is a Gateway Guard. But don't think that Joseph and I are immune to the wards' effects because we're not. This is the first time I have approached this entrance and I'll be honest with you, Ginny, I don't want to do it again."

Joseph laughed nervously. "Me neither. I much prefer using one of our more magical means but, perhaps unfortunately, Ethrindell aside, they are reserved for elves and cannot be used by anyone else."

After they were all rested and recovered from the climb they set off on the final leg of their journey.

The dizziness and nausea did not abate, however. If anything, in fact it grew worse because even though the terrain was relatively flat they still had to pause ever now and again to catch their breath and let the sensations pass.

The wind began to pick up as they approached the summit and the previously blue sky began to fill with heavy, moisture-laden clouds.

Joseph stopped almost a hundred yards short of the summit and motioned for everyone to stay still. A fog was rolling in and a bone-chilling cold that had nothing to do with the weather was beginning to make its presence known. "And now we wait," he said. "We have just entered his inner sanctum. In a few minutes we should begin to get the uncomfortable feeling that we are being watched. After that it is just a matter of time before Enoch makes his presence known. I suggest you get your cloaks out because we may be here a while."

Harry started to draw his wand but Eileen stopped him before he could cast any spells. "No!" she said forcefully. "No magic is allowed. Enoch is tolerant but his wards are very sensitive and the manipulation of any form of magical energy within these wards, especially this close to the portal, could be disastrous."

Harry blushed, "Thanks," he laughed nervously. "Sorry about that. I guess using magic is getting to be something of a habit."

Moments later they all became uncomfortably aware of the fact that they were, indeed, being watched. Shortly after that the fog rolled in thick and heavy. They all huddled together to conserve body heat but with the restriction on the use of magical energies it was not easy. Then, almost fifteen minutes later, they began to hear the laughter of pixies all around and, in the distance, something that could only be described as large feet taking long, even strides across a bed of wet gravel.

All six members of their party were huddled together, shivering from the natural cold of the fog as well from the unnaturally bone-chilling cold of Enoch's wards. Mark, in particular, was shivering so much that his teeth were chattering. Without even knowing why, Harry instinctively wrapped his winter cloak around both Mark and Ginny as though he knew that adding his warmth to their own would help to both dispel some of the chill and reassure them that they were not alone.

A few minutes later the sounds of approaching footsteps stopped mere meters away and the overwhelming odor of damp, musty fur assaulted their noses. Ginny was curled into his chest, pulling Mark into a three-way hug for warmth, So Harry looked over at Joseph, who was busy comforting Eileen and hugging Albus to keep him warm, for confirmation and saw that his eyes were as wide as his felt.

With a supreme effort Harry closed his eyes, mastering his emotions and schooling his features. Turning his head slowly in the direction the footsteps had been coming from he took several deep, calming breaths and slowly opened his eyes. Standing less than five meters from the group was a giant of a ... creature. It was at least twice as tall as Hagrid and looked five times as menacing. "Er ... erm ... Enoch?" he asked.

The giant, fur-covered creature seemed to nod its head. It was more of a bow than a nod, though, because he didn't seem to have a functional human-like neck.

Coming out of his stupor Joseph, in a haltingly commanding voice, said something in a language Harry didn't recognize, but he did hear all of their names mentioned at least once.

The creature bowed again and slowly turned around. Motioning for them to follow Enoch began slowly walking towards the summit. Gathering their courage, Harry and Joseph guided the others and followed at a distance. Moments later a portal, a dimensional tear in the fabric of the space-time continuum opened and Enoch stepped through with first Albus then Eileen and Joseph then Mark and Ginny and finally Harry following him through. As the portal sealed itself all of the effects from Enoch's wards vanished and they could all see the furry, silver-haired beast for what he was.

Enoch was tall, at least twenty feet in height. He was covered, from head to toe, in a short silver-grey fur that was slightly longer at his shoulders but could not be described as shaggy in any aspect. He was trim and muscular, his massive chest and shoulders hiding nothing of his muscular physique. His neck was short. Proportionally speaking Harry could only guess that it was less than half the length of the average human neck, which would explain its seeming lack of functionality. His arms were long and muscular, hanging down to within a few inches of his knees. His face was rough and course but, tufted and pointed ears aside, was not overly menacing in appearance, at least not in the light of day. In the swirling mists atop Ban Macdhui, however, it was easy to see how Enoch could present a truly frightening and intimidating presence.

Joseph said something else to Enoch in the strange tongue then turned back to the others as Enoch once again bowed. "The only language Enoch understands," he said, "is an ancient form of Gaelic. He is a natural telepath in that he can read your thoughts and emotions without having to resort to magic but he is also a very honorable and ethical presence in that he will not invade your privacy without your permission. There is an elven translation charm that can be used, if you wish, to help you understand his dialect."

The statement was made in such a way that it served as a question as well as a test of sorts. Joseph, and Harry supposed Enoch as well, was asking if they were interested enough in learning about the true realities of the world in which they lived to set aside their prejudices and fears in favor of true enlightenment.

Somehow Harry knew that his answer to this implied question would play a major role in determining how successful he would be in the long run so, with very little hesitation, he nodded his head. "Yes," he said, "I would like to understand Enoch and, if possible, become his friend."

Ginny, Mark and Albus all nodded their heads in agreement.

After everyone, at Eileen's urging, had joined hands, Enoch between Harry and Joseph, Joseph closed his eyes and, after dropping into a deep, meditative state, sang a short elfish song. When he was finished Harry opened his eyes, not knowing when he had closed them, and looked up at Enoch. "Hello, Enoch," he said. Thank you for allowing us entrance into your realm."

The gentle giant smiled down at Harry and in a deep, warm, rumbling voice, said, "You are welcome, Harry Potter. You are a good man, Harry Potter, and it my pleasure to welcome you to the elven realm."

Chapter 5. Conversations II

After all of the introductions had been made (Mark being the most hesitant to approach Enoch) and pleasantries exchanged, the group of travelers turned towards their destination and began the long journey into the heart of the elven realm.

The trail down from the elven realm's side of the portal was no less arduous or challenging than the climb up had been on the other side. One of the major differences, however, was that they had been confronted by sensations of dizziness, nausea and fear on the way up they were experiencing a comforting, tingling sensation throughout their bodies. It was almost as though their physical bodies had been asleep and were only just now waking up. Harry noticed that Joseph and Eileen relieved and that Albus looked almost as though he were welcoming back an old friend he had not seen through many, long years of painful separation. Ginny looked surprised and, somehow, happy. Mark, on the other hand, looked frightened. Harry could tell that he was trying to hide it but his eyes told the tale of a young boy who was out of his element and who was experiencing things he could not explain.

For himself, Harry didn't know what to think. His body ... well, his entire body was tingling. It had begun gradually as a mild buzzing sensation that had grown progressively stronger as they made their way down the mount. It didn't hurt but it was ... it was unexpected. It was a comforting sensation that seemed to be taking place on a cellular level. It was almost as if his cells were waking up, making it possible for him to see, touch, taste, hear, feel and experience dimensions of reality he had never known existed.

When they crossed the stream at the bottom of the hill Harry looked and, for the first time, noticed that the air and sky was glowing and radiating, seemingly from within, with an energy all its own. Looking around he noticed that the water, grass, heather and flowers were glowing with a similar inner light.

Joseph let out an explosive sigh of relief. "It's good to be home," he said.

"Yes," Albus said, nodding his head in agreement, "I haven't felt this ... alive since before Grindelwald.

As they made their way down the valley the world seemed to come to life around them and Mark, whom Harry had feared might be reacting badly to their current situation, began to smile and every other step seemed to be a skip. When they rounded a corner and stepped out of the trees a sparkling city that, energetically speaking, blended in perfectly with its surroundings hove into view. It was so magnificent that everyone stopped in their tracks, their mouths falling open in unison at the wonder of it all. "Wow," Mark breathed. "Is that where you're from?"

Joseph nodded his head. "Yes. This is our capital city. It is a part of the valley just as the valley is a part of it."

"You may have noticed," Eileen began, her voice very reminiscent of a tour guide's timbre, "a tingling sensation moving through your bodies as we climbed down the mountain. This is our world's way of welcoming you into the elven realm. The energies of our world reach out to embrace the very essence of your being. If you had been found unworthy in any way this tingling sensation would have felt like your world's Cruciatus Curse. The only really difference would have

been that, rather than the pain affecting your nerve endings, the pain would have affected every cell in your body and you would have been driven quite insane moments after your arrival.

"You may have also noticed that the air, water, plants and animals seem to radiate and glow with an inner light all their own. I don't know how to explain this except to say that this is the nature and way of our world. We are one and at peace with the forces and energies of creation."

"It must be depressing for you to come to our world," Ginny said."

Joseph and Eileen were silent for a moment. Then, with a sigh, Joseph said, "Yes, Ginny, it is not something we enjoy doing because there is a profound sense of loss that comes with our excursions into your world. But all of our warriors know that love and honor most always come before personal comfort. Besides, visiting your world is a learning experience few elves have experienced. It opens our eyes, if you will, to how good we have it and motivates us to help you fight for what is right."

Half an hour later, as they approached the city's outer limits, a young man, a human by all appearances, who, physically, looked to be in mid twenties but whose energies communicated an ancient wisdom at least as old as the elven realm itself approached from the valley's lower reaches. His head was bowed in concentration so they could not see his face but his stride was strong, even and unerringly smooth. It almost looked as though he was gliding over the ground. When he was less than ten feet from the group he looked up and smiled. "Hello, Joseph, Eileen," he said, striding forward. "Welcome back, Albus."

Albus smiled and, for the second time in as many weeks, Harry could swear he saw his mentor blush. "Ah," he said, "Hello, Ethrindell. How are you doing, my old friend?"

Ethrindell smiled and as he did so the air around him seemed to glow a brighter shade of white. "I am well, Albus." Then, glancing over at Harry, Ginny and Mark, said, "Mr. Potter. I must say that your parents would be proud. I did not know them personally but I did watch them and, believe it or not, I have been watching you more closely than most."

In that moment, Harry's eyes widened in recognition. "I – I – you ..."

Ethrindell chuckled. "Yes, Harry. I was that stranger. I helped heal a few of your more serious injuries that time when Dudley beat you up and stuffed you into the rubbish for getting a better on that math quiz. I could watch and occasionally lend a helping hand but I could not intervene. If I had been able I would have brought you into the elven realm before your aunt activated the blood wards."

Turning to Ginny he said, "Hello, Ginevra. My name, as I am sure you are aware, is Ethrindell. I am an observer and student of this thing we call life. I ... well, they say I am a teacher but between you and me I am little more than a teacher's assistant. Life and experience are the true teachers. All I will ever be able to do is help a few people get past their emotional reactions so that they can learn and satisfy their curiosity."

Turning towards Mark he smiled and said, "And Mr. Mark Evans. How are you, my friend?"

Mark's eyes widened. "D-do I know you?" he asked.

Ethrindell laughed out loud. When he had calmed down enough to speak he said, "No, Mark. You do not know me and we have never met. I have, however, been watching you. Given your magical abilities and your relationship, no matter how distant, to Harry I was fairly certain the two of you would meet. And I must say that, even though I wish your meeting had taken place under better circumstances, I am glad that you are now a member of Harry's small circle of friends."

Glancing back over at Harry he said, "Yes, Harry, I know Mark's inclusion in your life has been somewhat forced upon you, but Mark has more to offer than you might think."

Harry nodded and smiled down at Mark who smiled nervously back.

Ethrindell winked at Harry as Mark's stomach growled in protest at its current lack of food. "Ron would be proud," he said, to which everyone laughed. "Come," he said, turning towards the city's walls. "I know a quiet little café where we can talk while you all fill your bellies."

A few minutes later, after a short walk through one of the nearby neighborhoods, they found themselves seated at a private table in the shade of an enormous elm, overlooking a babbling brook, with large plates and bowls of fruit before them. The only exception was Ethrindell who sat quietly and contentedly watched and listened while the others sated their appetites.

Harry glanced up occasionally, curious as to why Ethrindell seemed so familiar, and could not help but notice that the man they had traveled so far to meet was not eating. At first he thought it was Ethrindell simply being polite; but when they had all eaten their fill and Ethrindell had yet to eat even one piece of fruit he grew concerned. "Ethrindell?"

"Hmm?"

"Aren't you hungry?"

Ethrindell sat back in his chair, his eyes misting over slightly as he seemed to withdraw into himself for a moment. Then he blinked and looked across at Harry, a gentle smile spreading across his face as his eyes began to sparkle with an inner light all their own. "In response to your question, Harry, let me ask you a question." He paused momentarily to give Harry time to blink his emotional consent. "In your opinion, are muggles capable of performing feats of magical endeavor?"

Harry could tell that this was a leading question and that Ethrindell was, perhaps out of habit, stepping into his accustomed role as mentor and guide. Harry, accepting his role as student, leaned back into his seat and, cautiously chewing his lower lip, carefully weighed his options before responding. "I've never really thought about it, ..." he admitted. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed that Ginny's brow was furrowed as her eyes darted between Ethrindell and himself. "... but I don't think so, at least not magic as we understand it."

Ethrindell nodded his head, apparently satisfied with Harry's response. "Yes," he said. "You are correct. The key to your answer, however, is your inclusion of the phrase 'at least not as we understand it' because of muggles are, indeed, capable of performing feats of magical endeavor."

Ginny's eyes flew open and Harry could tell that she was on the verge of protest. Ethrindell, however, smiled calmly and nodded his head. Turning to Ginny he said, "Tell me, Ginevra, what is magic?"

Ginny's mouth fell open with the simplicity of the question but as she moved to answer nothing came out. She spluttered a few times as she tried to answer but finally gave up. Bowing her head in resignation she finally admitted, "I don't know."

Ethrindell turned to Dumbledore. "Albus?"

Albus was silent for a few moments, apparently lost in thought. "Magic," he began, "is the manipulation of the forces and energies of creation with the goal of changing or improving one's environment."

Ethrindell nodded. "Precisely; and what are the forces and energies of creation."

"A force is anything that can produce, change or stop the motion of an object. An energy is that which has the capacity to do work," Mark said automatically. When everyone turned to look at him, expressions of curiosity and surprise on their faces, he blushed. "My dad is a science teacher at Stonewall," he explained.

Ethrindell smiled gently, as if to reassure Mark that he had done nothing wrong. "Well said, Mark. Now, what are the forces and energies of creation?"

"According to my dad, muggle scientists only recognize a few of the more physical forces and energies as legitimate but ..." Mark said then faltered.

"But in the magical world we use forces and energies that muggle scientists cannot normally sense, let alone measure and use," Ginny said.

Harry looked over at Ginny and smiled. He knew that she had taken an interest the differences between the muggle and magical worlds and how the muggle sciences could benefit the magical world ever since their work with the Babcocks the previous year and was pleased to see that she seemed to be doing some research on the side.

"And we elves," Eileen said, "while we are aware of and can use both muggle and their magical forces and energies, are aware of and can use a whole other class of forces and energies even their most advanced practitioners are not aware of."

Ethrindell nodded. "Yes. Can anyone tell me why this is?"

Something from his *Maturo Auctus* suddenly clicked into place and Harry decided to see if this was the answer Ethrindell was trying to get them to recognize. "It all boils down to genetics," he said. "While muggles, witches and wizards are genetically identical, a number of strands, in what some muggle scientists are starting to call 'junk DNA' are active in the members of the magical community."

Ethrindell smiled and nodded his head encouragingly.

"It is these differences that make it possible for us to sense and use the magical energies; and it is the activation of these few strands of DNA that provide for the creation of our magical cores."

"Well stated, Harry," Ethrindell said. Glancing over at Joseph and Eileen he said, "The genetic structures of elves are slightly different from their human counterparts which makes it possible for you to sense and use the forces and energies you do. But that does not make you any better than

them, just different."

Ethrindell was silent for several seconds, his eyes misting over as he seemed to recall some particularly horrifying events. "The thing about the activation of these particular strands is that it was a planned upgrade. Problems began to arise when only a few people could sense and use the forces and energies your magical community takes for granted. Those who could not feared those that could and persecuted them until they went into hiding. That is where the prejudice began. Then your early 'pureblood' families made matters worse by demanding isolation. In this way a genetic upgrade that had been designed to elevate the entire species was short-circuited. If nature had been allowed to take its course," Ethrindell said sadly, "your world would be much different. I'm not saying that you would not have to deal with the occasional Gellert Grindelwald or Tom Riddle but the majority of your race would no longer be homo sapien sapien. Instead, most of you would be homo sapien magus."

Pausing briefly, Ethrindell shifted gears and launched into an examination of muggle magical methods.

"Muggles, as you call them, have access to, and are able to use, all three of the major fields of magical endeavor. For simplicity's sake, I have chosen to label these three fields physical magic, spiritual magic and dimensional magic.

"Physical magic includes everything associated with the manipulation of their physical environments. It includes everything from digging ditches to building skyscrapers, from making clothes to washing dishes and from planting seeds to harvesting crops. In addition, while you study potions, your muggle counterparts study and use something called chemistry." Ethrindell hesitated, momentarily shifting his head from side to side as though weighing the properties of two similar substances. "The primary difference between potions and chemistry is that while potions is primarily concerned with the combination of ingredients to achieve a desired outcome, chemistry's focus lies in synthesizing out the basic components and recombining them, sometimes in ways that nature never intended, to achieve a desired result.

"Spiritual magic can be broken down into two major classifications. These are internal spiritual magic and external spiritual magic. Internal spiritual magic, at its most basic, consists of all of the book you read, songs you listen to, people you associate with and lectures and concerts you attend as these all have a cumulative affect upon the growth, evolution and development of your soul. As the saying goes, 'garbage in, garbage out.' The information you surround yourself with and take in will, after working its way through the spiritual structures of your personality, make itself known through your own thoughts, words and actions.

"External spiritual magic consists of all of the books you write, stories you tell, songs you sing or compose, lectures you deliver and so forth and so on as these, although you may not realize it, have an impact upon the growth, evolution and development of those personalities you come into contact with."

"Ethrindell paused and drank from the glass of water that had, until that moment, remained untouched. Dimensional magic, where muggles are concerned, is simply making the most of the space and time available. In your world you have things like the magical tents you used at the quidditch world cup and your trunk, which really do make the most of the space available, and time turners, which allow you to travel back in time a few hours at a time so that you can make the

most of your time, but even these examples are somewhat basic and rudimentary compared to what is actually possible ..."

Albus cleared his throat. "I hate to interrupt, my old friend, but you have not yet answered Harry's question."

Ethrindell grinned. "Patience, Albus. Patience. I had to lay the groundwork so that Harry could understand the answer."

Looking over at Harry he said, "You were wondering why I was not eating and asked if I was hungry."

Harry nodded.

"As I have tried to explain, there is an evolutionary process going on. As horrible as they were, the Dursley's were homo sapien sapiens. You, however, are a homo sapien magus, a few additional strands of your DNA have been activated to make it possible for you to work your magic. In time, at this rate it may be anywhere from several thousand years to a few million, all of your DNA stands will become active.

"Now then, genetically speaking, I am homo sapien sapien. So how, you might ask did I come to be here and how, if, as I believe Joseph has informed you, am I able to perform feat of magical endeavor that make me appear to be almost god-like."

Joseph blushed and Ethrindell grinned mischievously. "There are two paths to this goal, Harry. The first is to follow the natural order of things and to be born into a body in which all DNA strands have become active, essentially forcing a spiritual evolution as a matter of physical circumstance. The second is to perform an end-run around this slower process by focusing your energies upon the growth, evolution and development of your personality to the point of no return.

"That is the path I took. When I was still relatively young – older than you are now by several years but several thousand years younger than I am – I embarked upon the path of spiritual development. It took some time but eventually my personality became on with the forces and energies of creation. This body you see before you is little more than a shell. It is the means through which I am able to interact with my physical environment. Even though it is a homo sapien sapien body, my spiritual status is such that I am able to absorb all of its nutritional needs directly from the forces and energies of creation."

Harry looked across the table at Ethrindell, his mind racing to make sense of what he had just heard. For his part, Ethrindell let him think it over for almost a minute before interrupting his thoughts. "We can talk more of this later if you like but we currently have more important things to discuss so, if you would like Joseph and Eileen to give Ginevra and Mark a tour of our fair city, you and Albus and I can get down to business." Ethrindell's tone was friendly and light but Harry sensed that they would be discussing things Ethrindell would rather not share with those without an absolute need to know.

After the others had left and were out of sight Ethrindell's demeanor changed and he looked abnormally grave. "Come," he said, "let us walk."

When they had left the city behind and were walking along a faded game trail Ethrindell let out a

heavy sigh. "Harry," he began, "when Tom Riddle came to your parent's home that evening his intent was to create his sixth and final horcrux. You were to be his final horcrux sacrifice."

Harry tripped over the ridge of a stone that was protruding out of the ground and stumbled forward a few steps.

"He was so focused upon his goal of killing you and creating his sixth horcrux that the murders of your parents was enough to tear his soul apart. When he tried to kill you and the curse failed the main portion of his soul, his personality, fled, leaving the severed portion behind. As is the nature of the spiritual forces and energies of life, the severed portion of Tom's soul was attracted to the nearest living presence and attached itself ..."

Harry grew pale. "You mean that ... that I'm ... a horcrux?"

Albus bowed his head. "I was afraid of something like this," he said. "Parseltongue is not a very common ability and, so far as I know, it does not run in your family. When you exhibited this ability in your second year I began to suspect that you might have inadvertently become a horcrux."

They walked in silence for several seconds. "The bad news is that you are, indeed a horcrux, Harry," Ethrindell finally said, breaking the silence. "The good news is that, thanks to the events at the end of your second year, that portion of Tom Riddle's soul that shares your body is nowhere near as strong as it once was." Before Harry could react he asked, "Tell me, Harry ... I want you to think back and tell me if your parseltongue abilities are coming to you as fluidly as they did in your second year."

Harry was silent for almost a minute as he thought back to the events of his second year and compared them to his experiences working with the snakes of the Forbidden Forest this past year. "It's still there ..." he said, breaking the silence, "... but it's not as easy as it used to be."

Ethrindell nodded his understanding. "Tell me, Harry, do you know how to destroy a horcrux?"

Harry shook his head. "No"

"Albus?"

Albus looked up from his contemplations. "The most effective substance that can be used to destroy a horcrux is basilisk venom." Harry looked up in surprise and Albus smiled in recognition of Harry's startled expression. "The other major substance that can be used to destroy a horcrux is fiendfyre." Harry looked over at his mentor, a curious, quizzical expression on his face, but kept his peace as Albus concluded his statement. "There are a few others, of course, but those are the two most effective techniques."

Ethrindell nodded his head and motioned for Harry and Albus to be seated on the small gathering of boulders they were approaching. "Yes," he said, taking a seat on one of the large stones, "Now, please forgive me for following your adventures so closely, Harry, but I had to be sure."

"When that basilisk's venom entered your system its primary target was that portion of Tom's soul that resides within your body. It did not kill it because to do that would have killed you in turn. It did, however weaken it significantly. With the addition of the phoenix tears, which healed your body by the way, that portion of Tom's soul was weakened still further. As things stand at present,

that portion of Tom's soul is little more than a severely weakened, lingering presence."

Ethrindell looked down and studied his hands for a few seconds before continuing. "I hate to tell you this, Harry, but the only way we are going to be well and truly rid of Tom Riddle is if he is allowed to personally kill that portion of his soul that resides in your body."

This statement struck Harry with such force that he suddenly found breathing to be one of the most difficult exercises he had ever attempted. "D-does that mean I have to die to defeat Tom?" he asked nervously.

Ethrindell was silent for a moment then began chewing his lower lip as he considered his options. "Not necessarily," he said slowly. "It will be tricky but I think it can be done."

"What?" Harry asked hopefully.

Ethrindell let a few heartbeats pass before responding. "I have been studying the forces and energies of creation for almost as long as this planet has been in existence, Harry," he said thoughtfully. "It should be possible to customize your rebounding charm to protect your soul and to push that fragment of Tom's soul forward for extermination. It will be tricky but I am more than willing to dedicate myself to the cause ..."

They sat in silence as Ethrindell contemplated the intricacies of what they would be attempting. "Of course, for it to work, you will have to be willing to sacrifice your life so that others may live and enjoy their lives without fear ..."

Harry looked up. "It's going to be a tricky piece of magic," Ethrindell explained, "and one of its component parts is going to have to be your willingness, on all levels, to make the ultimate sacrifice for your friends, neighbors, acquaintances and people you have not even met and may never meet."

Albus reached down and plucked a long blade of grass from the ground at his feet. After examining its length he looked over at Ethrindell. "Is there no other way?" he asked, the concern evident in his voice."

Ethrindell let out a heavy sigh. "No," he said, sighing even more heavily. "Tom has gone to extraordinary lengths to ensure his survival. If you wish to be rid of him you are going to have to go to resort to some extraordinary and, I might add, extremely risky spellwork."

"And that is just to get rid of the part of his soul that is attached to my body," Harry said numbly.

Ethrindell nodded and stood up again. "Yes," he said, starting to follow the game trail once again. "It is all going to come down to you in the end, Harry. Your friends and Albus and I will do everything on our power to help you but, in the end, it is all going to come down to you."

The enormity of the situation weighed heavily on Harry's shoulders and he was glad that the others had gone off to see the sights. He looked up from where he was seated and saw that Ethrindell and Albus were walking slowly up the valley along their faded path. He supposed it was their way of giving him some time to be alone with his thoughts and was grateful for their concern. Standing up, he jogged to catch up. When he was within a few meters he slowed his pace, his mind set, and strode determinedly up to where they were waiting. "Alright," he said. "That's one horcrux. What

about the others; and how to I defeat him?"

Ethridell nodded as a gently proud smile appeared on his face. "Good," he said. "I can see that you have decided to fight, to bring an end to Tom Riddle's reign of terror no matter the price.

"We will take those questions in reverse order, however, because if you are going to use the purgatory charm to defeat Tom you are going to have to know his life and the most effective means at our disposal is for you to use your ethereal abilities to view his life as you search for the remaining horcruxes and to do that I am going to have to teach you how to track both people and objects through both space and time."

Harry looked up suddenly, curious about Ethridell's casual mention of the charm Bill and the others were working so hard to develop. "The purgatory charm?" he asked. "You sound like you've used it."

"Ethridell nodded solemnly. "Yes," he admitted. "Once. It was not something I wanted to do but under the circumstances, and the fact that I loved my brother so much that I could not let him continue without doing everything in my power to help him see the error of his ways, it was necessary."

Harry was taken aback by this revelation; and from the looks of it Albus was taken off guard as well.

"The purgatory charm," Ethridell began anew, "was designed to serve as one of the most poignant acts of love any one being will ever be able to bestow upon another.

"In some of this planet's most ancient texts it says that we should not fear correction. Those who, like Voldemort, which quite literally means 'fear of death,' fear death, fear correction. The purgatory charm was designed in such a way as to temporarily strip away all of a person's crimes against humanity so that they can recall both who and what they were before they started making those choices that began leading them down the path to destruction.

"When all of their sins have been stripped away they are confronted with a recitation of the laws governing the growth, evolution and development of all souls. They are then confronted by all of the choices they have made and the resultant outcomes. After the ramifications of their decisions have had time to ... cook, the person's soul is placed in a form of isolation wherein, while they still have all their wits about them, the only company they will have is all of the physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual pain and suffering they have caused through malicious intent until such time as, within their heart of hearts, they choose to change their ways and take steps to correct the wrongs they have perpetrated.

"The entire process only takes a few seconds but the spell's record is irrefutable. In other words, it works. Only rarely does a soul refuse the help offered through the auspices of the purgatory charm. When this happens the soul self-destructs and the body dissolves. I've never seen it but the documentation does exist.

"Now then," Ethridell said, "the things that make the purgatory charm work, and the structures that your current models are missing, are an in-depth understanding of the subject's life, on the part of the caster, and an honest, heart felt, desire to give the subject a chance to clean up their act."

Harry nodded his understanding. "So you want me to review Tom's life while searching for the

horcruxes so that I can gain that understanding."

Ethrindell nodded. "You really are the only one in your world who has a chance of successfully casting the purgatory charm, Harry, because you are currently the only one who's ethereal abilities are advanced enough to be able to review his life."

"The power he knows not ..." Harry mumbled.

"Yes," Albus said thoughtfully. "It would seem so, Harry."

Harry looked over at Albus and grinned. "Did you know any of this?"

Albus shook his head. "No. I had a few suspicions but I could not be sure of anything."

Several minutes later, as they approached a wide stream flowing out of the surrounding hills, Ethrindell turned off the path they had been following and fairly marched to the top of a low hill, motioning for Harry and Albus to follow.

When they reached the summit Ethrindell said, Harry, I am going to ask you to trust me with your abilities for a few minutes."

Harry looked up curiously.

"Your remote viewing abilities," Ethrindell explained, "while they are substantial and you have been able to accomplish many wonderful things with them over the past few months, they are untrained for the task ahead. So, with your permission, I would like you to enter into your usual meditative state with the simple goal of learning what I have to offer. All I want you to do is consciously connect with the energies and then let me guide you to your destination, much as you allowed Albus to guide you through your initial efforts last year."

Thinking back to one of his early sessions with the headmaster the previous year Harry nodded his head and sat down with his legs stretched out before him and his back resting against a small standing stone. Moments later, shortly after relaxing into his meditative state and surrounding himself with and activating the neutral energies of creation, Harry found himself back in the orphanage from Albus' memory. This time, however, he was watching as a young woman gave birth to a baby boy with a shock of black hair on his head. He watched as the midwife cleaned the baby and comforted the mother. He listened as the new mother named her baby, insisting that he be named Tom, after his father, Marvolo, after her father, and pleading with the young Mrs. Clark that he be given the surname Riddle. He continued to watch, his attention riveted on the young mother, as she held her son, telling him that he loved her and caressing his head, until she died.

In the final moments of her life he became aware of the baby's life energies and saw that they were both innocent and pure. As his mother died and her soul left her body, however, he noticed that the quality of the baby's life energies was diminished, almost as if, in death, his mother was clinging to the love she felt for her son – a love she had never felt in life – so desperately that she had taken all of her son's love with her when she died.

For the next several minutes he found himself memorizing the baby's energy signature so that he could reconnect with it at will when he had time to review Tom's life in detail. After that he found himself looking down upon the diary he had destroyed at the end of his second year.

This time, however, the diary was in a stationary shop, being customized for a sixteen-year-old Tom Marvolo Riddle. He followed the diary as Tom took it back to the orphanage and then as Tom took it with him to the village of Little Hangleton in search of his parents' families. He watched as Tom murdered his father and grand parents and transferred a portion of his soul to the diary. He then watched as Tom framed his uncle for the murders and removed an ugly ring from his uncle's finger. Somehow he knew that this ring was destined to become Tom's second horcrux.

For the next few minutes time and the events surrounding the diary seemed to pass in a blur. Harry watched as the diary lay hidden at the bottom of Tom's trunk for several years; watched as it was passed to Licius Malfoy, one of Voldemort's most faithful, for safe keeping; watched patiently as it lay hidden in a vault in Malfoy's cellar for almost fifteen years; and watched as it was removed from the vault and planted on an unsuspecting Ginny.

He purposely fast-forwarded through the next several months as the diary seduced and gradually took possession of Ginny's soul, draining her of her energy reserves. He knew that he should probably pay attention to this phase of the diary's tale but his love and respect for Ginny's privacy overrode that desire. If she wanted him to know, she would tell him.

Time slowed again at the point wherein Harry entered the Chamber of Secrets and found Ginny lying, almost lifeless, at the foot of Slytherin's statue. He watched that scene play out, paying particular attention to the flow of energies in and around Ginny, the diary and the shade of Tom Riddle as it gloated. When Harry saw himself plunging the basilisk's fang into the diary in response to an inner, whispering voice he watched in amazement as the horcrux was destroyed and the curse broken.

The next thing Harry knew he was opening his eyes and the sounds of the elven realm were filtering through the fog of energies he used while spying on Tom's activities. As the world came into focus he shook his head and looked up at Ethrindell and Albus who were watching him, expectant expressions on their faces.

"Interesting," he said. "According to the energies, Tom was an ordinary, innocent baby boy until his mother died. Apparently she took most of his love with her, love that she had never received from her family."

Ethrindell nodded.

"The diary was his first horcrux. I was able to follow it from the stationary shop where Tom purchased it to its destruction in the chamber of secrets. His second horcrux was, and still is, a ring he removed from his uncle's finger after framing him for the murders of Tom Riddle senior and his parents. From what you showed me last night, Albus, I am guessing that it was the Gaunt family ring."

Albus nodded. "Yes, that would make sense because when Morphin was arrested there was no sign of the ring and Marvolo was notorious for using that ring as a status symbol."

Chapter 6. Complications with Good News

When Albus, Harry and Ethrindell were scheduled to meet up with the others near the café almost an hour later Harry was leafing through a small book, outlining in some detail the inner workings of the purgatory charm, that Ethrindell had give him to study. It had been authored by the charm's designers, with many first-hand accounts of its use included for reference. Ethrindell had cautioned him not to begin reading it until they had returned to Hogwarts but then that he should study it every chance he got until it was a part of his very soul because it was only through the internalization of this charm that he would be able to successfully cast it.

Harry had just placed the book in the inside pocket of his jacket for safe keeping when Ginny, Mark, Joseph and Eileen rounded the corner, Ginny smiling more brightly than Harry thought possible. "Oh, Harry!" she screamed gleefully as she ran into his arms, "this city is so wonderful! We have simply got to come back!"

Harry chuckled as he staggered under the impact of her flying embrace. "Don't worry, Ginny," he laughed, "we will."

Glancing down at Mark, Harry could see that his second cousin had thoroughly enjoyed himself as well. His eyes were dancing merrily and the genuine smile on his face was more than enough to tell him that Mark was happy. "How about you, Mark;" Harry asked, "did you have a good time?"

Mark nodded enthusiastically. "Yes I did!" he said excitedly. "They took us to a reflecting pool where I was able to watch my mum and dad and sister settle in to their new flat. They wouldn't tell me where they are because of the war, but I could watch them!" Harry glanced over at Joseph who nodded knowingly but tilted his head towards Eileen, telling Harry that this little excursion had been Eileen's idea.

Harry caught Eileen's eye and smiled, silently thanking her for giving Mark this small but emotionally significant gift. Eileen nodded her head in understanding and smiled back, thanking Harry for recognizing her contribution to Mark's mental health.

"And then one of the shop keepers gave me this book on elven magic!" Mark said, holding up a large, leather-bound book. "She said it is just a primer but that it was a good place to start learning about elven culture and traditions."

Harry smiled and knelt down in front of Mark as the excited boy showed him the book. Leafing through the table of contents Harry nodded approvingly. "This looks like an interesting book, Mark," he said. "I'd like to borrow it from you some time, after we take care of Voldemort."

The festive mood was dampened considerably at the mention of Tom Riddle's assumed name but it was not enough to totally erase the tourists' excitement over their discoveries.

After a brief lull in the conversation Albus cleared his throat. "Yes, well, I suppose we should be returning to our world. After all, we do have a few more battles to fight and a war to win."

Ethrindell nodded in agreement. "Yes," he said. "You now have the tools you will need to find and destroy Tom's treasures, Harry. I am going to get to work on that spell we discussed and will be in touch."

Harry nodded.

"Understand this, however," Ethrindell added, speaking to the entire group, "While you have only been in the elven realm for a few hours, two weeks will have passed by the time you return to Hogwarts."

A few minutes later, after bidding Ethrindell farewell, the small band of travelers left the city and began their return trip to the summit of Ben MacDui. The sense of loss was mild at first, but the closer they got to their goal, and the further they retreated from the elven realm's capitol city, the more pronounced it became. By the time they crossed the stream at the foot of Enoch's hill on the elven realm's side of the portal Ginny was in tears. Harry could feel the sense of loss as well but his time in the elven realm had pretty much dedicated to preparations for war and he had not taken in as many of the sights, sounds and wonders of this truly magical world. He could tell that Mark was struggling with his grief, wanting to cry while, at the same time, wanting to be strong, and offered to carry his book so that, in a moment of indecision, he wouldn't drop it or cast it aside as an unwanted reminder of the elven realm.

Mark hesitated at first but as the book grew heavier in his arms he handed it to Harry who packed it away inside his own daypack.

Enoch greeted them near the summit of his mount and, after exchanging pleasantries, warned them that there was currently a severe rain and hail storm blanketing the hills and valleys around Ben MacDui. His offer to help them off the hill and through the wards was accepted and, after donning their hats, gloves and winter cloaks, Enoch opened the portal and they stepped through.

The howling wall of wind-driven rain and hail that greeted them was enough to cause all of them to begin staggering under their light burdens. It was enough, in fact, that Enoch almost immediately latched onto Mark and Albus and pulled them close for their safety. The others, however, were forced to cling to each other for warmth and support.

After almost an hour of slipping and sliding down the hill's steep slopes they reached the stream at the edge of the wards. Enoch helped them across the stream and made sure they were going to be alright before returning to his side of the stream, waving good-bye and turning back for the long, slow march back up to the portal.

The wind was still howling in their ears as they set off down the valley and the rain and hail were pelting them unmercifully. When they were fifty yards from the wards Joseph turned to Harry and, to be heard above the gale, yelled, "Harry! We are far enough away from the wards! Do you think you can do it?"

Harry looked over at him through his rain-soaked glasses then around at the others who were looking curiously between the two. Mark was already starting to snuffle and cough and Harry could tell that unless they did something soon they would all be extremely ill and Madam Pomfrey would be more than just a little upset.

Nodding his head, Harry closed his eyes and began gathering the energies he would need to teleport himself as well as five passengers and all of their gear to Hogwarts. As the others gathered around him Albus leaned close and said, "Take us to the Hog's Head Inn, Harry. The meeting room, I think. I don't want you to risk the wards with all of us."

Harry nodded his understanding and moments later all six travelers were standing in the upstairs meeting room at the Hog's Head Inn. Moments later the door burst open and Aberforth rushed in, wand drawn and an ugly curse on his lips. When he saw who it was, however, he dropped his wand and breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank God!" he breathed. Then, kneeling down to retrieve his wand, said, "Where have you been? Everyone's been worried sick ..."

Albus was the first to react. "We were in the elven realm. Harry and I visited one of my old teachers while the others toured the city."

Aberforth nodded curtly and began casting drying and warming charms all around.

When everyone was warm and dry Aberforth invited them down to the ground floor where Ron, Hermione, Neville and Luna were taking a break from the reconstruction efforts with a few of their friends. The Hog's Head had, mercifully, escaped major damage and had been one of the first structures repaired. It was being used as an unofficial town hall until the new town hall could be built.

As they made their way down the stairs Aberforth called out, "It's okay. You can relax. It's just Albus, Harry, Ginny and our missing travelers."

The sounds people relaxing, standing down from their battle stations if you will, and returning to their seats was heard as they descended the lower flight. When they entered the pub Ron, Hermione, Neville and Luna were waiting for them. "What took you so long, mate?" Ron asked.

Harry smiled as he glanced around the room. After making sure he knew everyone in the room as trustworthy he said, "Time distortions, Ron. For us it has only been a few hours. According to what we were told, though, it has been a couple of weeks for you."

Ron nodded briefly, signaling his acceptance of this explanation, and then turned and led the way back to their table, a table Aberforth had just expanded to make room for the new arrivals. When everyone was seated Harry looked across at Ron, his face hardened into a mask of indifference. "Report," he commanded. "What has been happening while we were away?"

Everyone started talking at once. When it became clear that he was not going to be able to understand anything Harry held his hands up and raised his voice. "Please," he said, "one at a time. Ron, you first."

Had this meeting taken place ten months earlier Harry knew that Ron would have been exceedingly pleased with himself for being asked to make his report first. Now, however, Ron was almost all business. He pushed his butterbeer aside and waited as Daphne Greengrass served the new arrivals a late lunch.

"There was another mass breakout from Azkaban last week. Both sides suffered major casualties. The few from our side who survived described a battle that made the carnage from last Halloween seem mild by comparison. Their memories are on file and ..." he hesitated, "... they aren't pretty. It reminds me of Romania," he said, shaking his head. "Neville and I are studying them to get some idea as to the kinds of spells that are using and how their battle tactics have changed."

Harry nodded grimly. "What have you learned?"

Neville apparently took this as his cue to report. "We don't know how they are doing it but somehow they seem to be able to pump more power into their spells. Luna and Hermione's contacts in the Department of Mysteries have come up with an interesting theory. I will let them explain it to you but I will say that if their theory is correct the only way we are going to beat them is with training and skill because brute force alone won't do it."

Harry looked expectantly over at Luna and Hermione. Both seemed hesitant to speak but, with a nudge from Hermione, Luna cleared her throat. "It started out as a wild, shot-in-the-dark guess, really, but after studying the survivors' memories our contacts in the Department of Mysteries seem to think it may be what is happening. Apparently, they are able to draw energy from each other through the dark mark."

"And a few of our other contacts in the Ministry are reporting that witches and wizards are disappearing at an increasingly regular rate," Hermione added. "We can only assume that they are being involuntarily marked, to be used as an energy source, while he trains his best fighters for the final push."

A privacy charm had been cast at the outset of this meeting but with Hermione's pronouncement the entire pub seemed to fall silent.

Almost a minute later Harry looked up from his contemplative silence and turned towards Joseph. "Joseph," he asked, "Can you contact Ethrindell and tell him that I need his help with something?"

Joseph nodded. "I will do it tonight."

Turning back to those who had remained behind Harry said, "Anything else to report?"

Ron smiled this time. "Well, if you would like a little good news, Bill and Fleur have set a date. They are going to be married at the end of July and Remus ... Owch! Hermione, what was that for?"

Hermione scowled at her boyfriend. "That's their news and I think they should be the ones to tell Harry," she scolded.

Ron reached down and rubbed his ankle but was grinning all the same. "Yeah, alright. I get the message. I guess you'll just have to talk to Remus tonight."

In the Great Hall that evening, as they were sitting down for dinner, Harry noticed that Remus and Tonks seemed to be quite happy about something. He watched them from his seat at the Gryffindor table throughout the main course and could not help but notice the shy, blushing glances, secret smiles and occasional brush of the hand. After the remains of the main course had vanished and the pudding selections began to appear Harry excused himself and calmly walked up the aisle towards the staff table.

When he reached the head table he turned and walked over to stand in front of Remus. Tonks, who was sitting to Remus' right noticed him first and nudged Remus' elbow, indicating Harry with her fork when he gave her his attention.

Remus looked up, smiling despite himself, and said, "Oh, hi, Harry. What can I do for you this evening?"

Harry scowled. "Alright you guys," he said, "what's up? What happened while we were away? Ron

almost said something down at the Hog's Head but Hermione said that it was your news. So, what is your news?"

Remus' smile almost split his face. "Well ..." Remus began, "you see, Harry ..."

"We would have waited until you got back ..." Tonks interrupted.

"But ... well ... things just kind of happened."

Harry looked between the two of them curiously, wondering what the heck they were talking about, until Tonks held up her hand, wiggling her fingers and displaying a shiny gold wedding band.

Harry's mouth fell open. "Y – you mean you – you – you got married?"

Remus and Tonks both smiled brightly. "Yep," they said in unison.

Harry stepped back, an ear-to-ear grin splitting into a full out smile. "Congratulations!" he laughed. "I can't say that I didn't see it coming," he said happily, "but why the rush?"

This time Tonks blushed a little more brightly than Remus. "How would you feel about becoming a godfather in about eight months?" Remus asked nervously.

When Harry's mouth fell open this time Remus had to reach across the table and close it for him. "I – I would be honored," he whispered.

Remus smiled happily at Harry's acceptance. "Good," he said. "Now I suggest you go back to your table and eat you pudding because it looks like Ron is eyeing your treacle tart with more than just a little interest."

Harry glance over at the Gryffindor table and saw that Ron was, indeed, making motions towards confiscating his treacle tart. "Keep your hands off my treacle tart, Weasley!" he called out good naturedly before turning back to Remus and Tonks.

Reaching across the table he gave Tonks a hug and shook Remus' hand, congratulating them on their marriage and Tonks pregnancy and promising to come visit them in their chambers later in the week, before turning back and walking quickly back to his seat to rescue his treacle tart from Ron's hollow leg.

"What's their news?" Ginny asked when he had returned to his seat beside her.

"I'll tell you later," Harry said, "when there aren't so many ears around."

Ginny nodded. "You had better," she threatened.

When Harry told Ginny the good news that night, after placing an additional silencing charm on his trunk, she screamed with happiness and wanted to go congratulate them immediately. It took some doing, but Harry finally convinced her to wait until after classes the next day, his reasoning being that they might not want everyone to know about Tonks' pregnancy.

Chapter 7. Brains Vs. Brawn

Early the next morning, while they were running laps around the grounds, Joseph caught up with Harry as he passed Severus' grave for the third time that morning. "Ethrindell will be contacting you in your dreams tonight," he said.

Harry looked over at Joseph, a curious expression on his face. "He said that he will be projecting himself into your dreams tonight. It is much easier for him to visit with you in this way than for him to physically relocate."

Harry nodded his understanding. "Is there anything I should do to prepare for his visit?"

"Yes," Joseph said as they jogged through the cemetery gates, "Your occlumency shields will have to be temporarily lowered. Before you do that, however, you should take steps to protect your mind from Tom's intrusions as well as from any other negative forces that might be tempted to prey upon your life-force energies."

"Any suggestions?"

Let me ask you a question," Joseph began then stopped. "And please try to understand that Ethrindell told me to take this approach with you on this subject."

Harry nodded as they approached a maze of boulders. "What do they teach you about angels, spiritual teachers and spiritual guides here at Hogwarts?"

Harry stumbled over the first boulder in the maze. When he recovered he focused all of his attentions on the maze until they were both safely through. "Not much, really," he said thoughtfully. "I think they were mentioned once in Professor Binns' class in first year but other than that, not much. Why?"

Joseph shook his head but there was an odd grin on his face as he formulated his response. "Ethrindell said that might be the case. He said that each new generation, if you will, strives to divorce itself from the previous generation's understandings. He also said that your willingness to explore the homo sapien sapien spiritual philosophies is one of the things that made it possible for you to find a solution to a homo sapien magus problem.

"Angels, spiritual teachers and spiritual guides are very real, Harry," Joseph said as he entered a small copse of trees. "They live to serve. That is their purpose. We all have, at a bare minimum, three angels. They will not do all of the work but they are more than willing to help; and since you have already done most of the work, by developing your natural occlumency abilities, all you really have to do is temporarily modify the wards you have established to keep everyone out and ask them stand guard while you are meeting with Ethrindell."

"And how do I do this?" Harry asked, his voice all business.

Joseph grimaced slightly at Harry's tone and in that moment Harry knew that others were beginning to notice the changes that were taking place within his own personality. He didn't like it because he knew that whatever it was that was happening to his soul could make him cold and impersonal. As soon as he realized this he promised himself that he would cling to the happy, fun-loving side of his personality with everything he had in the hope that it would not take too long

for him to recover from the war after it was all over.

"All you have to do," Joseph said cautiously, "is drop into a light meditative state – the temptation will be to go deeper because that is what you are used to, but you must resist the urge because you do not want to block them out – and reach out to the angelic hosts, requesting your angels come forward. You might see them in your mind's eye or you might simply sense their presence. It doesn't really matter how you perceive them; what does matter, however, is that you know that they are your angels and that they are dedicated to helping you. Ethrindell told me to warn you that, with that fragmented portion of Tom's soul residing within your body, his demons might try to come forward. It is going to be a tricky operation, Harry, but I have faith in you. You can do it."

As the jogged past the lake before turning to head into the castle for breakfast, Joseph said, "Even though I do have faith in you, Harry, you might want to use the school's room of requirement just to be on the safe side."

Harry glanced over at his elven friend askance.

"Just as a precaution," Joseph said. "This is, after all, uncharted territory for you and, under the circumstances, I would rather you be safe than sorry."

Harry nodded grimly.

During breakfast Harry and the other Defense Against the Dark Arts professors held an improvisational meeting to discuss their adversary's use of the Dark Mark as an energy booster. While Harry was in favor of telling the students about this new development so that they would pay more attention to what their teachers were telling them and so that they would, hopefully, learn to fight smarter Alastor was against it because he felt it might frighten them even more than they already were. Kingsley sat quietly and listened to both sides of the argument before voicing his opinion, but in the end he sided with Harry because, while some might be somewhat intimidated by this news, he wanted to give them every opportunity and reason to learn how to fight smarter. Remus and Tonks agreed with Harry. In the end it was decided that Harry would deliver a short speech immediately after breakfast explaining the situation and encouraging everyone to find a dueling partner, someone they felt comfortable working with; someone they could trust with their lives; and, most importantly, someone they could talk to, as an equal, after their duels.

When the first students were finishing their breakfasts Harry cast a quick spell that closed and locked the Great Hall's doors. At the curious looks being cast their way by those trying to report to their classrooms Harry cast a mild sonorous charm on himself and said, "There have been some new developments you should be aware of. If you will all please be seated I will be saying a few words before we release you for your morning drills. In addition, in light of this development, we think the time has come for another demonstration duel so this afternoon Professors Lupin and Shacklebolt and Neville and I will be going against twenty of you for one hour or until one team is completely disarmed. Afterwards, Professor Moody will be lecturing all of you on the importance of teamwork and using your brains to overcome apparently superior forces."

Tonks elbowed Harry in the ribs as those who had been stopped by the closed doors returned to their seats. "A bit confident aren't you? Are you sure you can win this duel you guys have set up?"

After removing the sonorous charm Harry shrugged his shoulders. "I'm not sure of anything right now, Tonks," he admitted. "We are going to be going up against twenty of our best fighters and

Neville and I haven't worked together for almost two weeks. All I'm going to say is that it should be interesting and that Alastor should a lot to talk about."

Tonks nodded then looked over at him with concern in her eyes. "The stress starting to get to you, Harry?" she asked.

Harry closed his eyes and bowed his head. After several seconds of silence he sighed and nodded his head. "Yeah, I'm afraid so. If what I learned in the elven realm is any clue, if you thought that spell Remus, Hermione and I developed last summer was something then you haven't seen anything yet. The purgatory charm will work. The only problem with it is that I am really the only one who will ever be able to cast it on Tom. And before that can happen I have got to use an untested spell that is being designed for one specific purpose."

Tonks' eyes widened involuntarily. "Oh," she said. Apparently something in Harry's voice had told her that she really didn't want to know anything more than he was willing to tell her.

As soon as the last person was finished eating Harry stood up and walked over to stand in front of the center of the head table. "Good morning," he began. "I'm sure most of you have heard about the recent battle at Azkaban." Almost everyone nodded. "I'm also relatively certain that at least a few of you have heard rumors about Tom Riddle's followers' spells being more powerful than expected." Again, almost everyone in the room nodded their head and a few murmurs were heard.

Harry waited for the commotion to die down before continuing. "We are going to do everything in our power to find out just exactly what they are doing but I can tell you this,. Early evidence suggests that some of Tom's best fighters are drawing energy, through their marks, from their less skilled warriors. In fact, early evidence suggests that many of the disappearances you have been reading about are people who are being kidnapped and marked so that Tom's warriors can draw from their magical energy reserves."

Several people gasped and a few raised their voices in outrage and indignation while a few others began asking how they were supposed to fight against such odds. When the general hubbub died down to a manageable level Harry raised his hands for silence. "I know this sounds discouraging," he said, "but believe it or not, we still have the advantage."

Harry had everyone's attention now. "Throughout history – both muggle and magical – the battle has seldom gone to those who rely on brute strength. More often than not the battles and, indeed, the wars have gone to those who are pure of heart and who use their brains to overcome the odds. While Tom Riddle was rather clever in his days at Hogwarts he has allowed his lust for power and domination over others cloud his judgment.

"For the next three weeks we are going to be focusing on the mental side of this war. We are going to be studying the enemy's individual fighting styles and strategies. We are going to be working with our dueling partners to develop fighting styles and strategies of our own that will give us an overwhelming advantage over Tom's bullies.

"From here on out, Ron Weasley and Neville Longbottom will be doing nightly presentations on strategy and fighting tactics. Attendance is mandatory. By the end of this summer most, if not all, of you will be fighting on the same level as some of our most experienced aurors. We will win this war. There is no other choice. We either win or we lose everything our ancestors fought so hard to gain."

There was a heartbeat of stunned silence. Then, one by one, the teachers and then the students began rising to their feet clapping and cheering.

Harry glanced over at Ron and Neville whom he had essentially volunteered to go before their friends and peers to tell them everything they knew about the Death Eaters and how they liked to fight. He saw that, while they were standing and applauding like everyone else, there was a certain look of determination in their eyes that told him that they would not let him down.

Later that morning, after stretching, gymnastics and ballet, Ron and Neville approached Harry. Neville was the first to speak. "Whose idea was this duel?" he asked

Harry smiled at his dueling partner. "It was actually Tonks' idea," he said, "but Kingsley, Remus and Alastor were quick to agree and I can't say that I disagree with it."

"Who are you planning on dueling?" Ron asked.

Harry was silent for a moment as he thought through his options. Then, with an uncharacteristically feral smile, said, "I'll tell you what, Ron. You choose twenty of our best. I don't even want to know who they are until it is time to duel. The only stipulations are that it is a disarm only competition. Nothing too dangerous and no unforgivables."

Ron returned Harry's feral smile with zeal. "Good," he said, grinning maliciously. "I hope you guys are ready for a fight."

After Ron left Neville groaned. "I have a bad feeling about this, Harry."

"Why?" Harry asked, honestly seeking his friend's opinion.

"Because up to now the only two people I know who have gone up against invisible opponents and won are you and Albus; and even then you have only been dueling each other. You and I can fight invisibly and stay out of each other's way but what about Remus and Kingsley?"

"What makes you think we are going to be going against invisible opponents?"

Neville looked incredulously over at his friend and dueling partner. "Because it worked too well during the competition that's why. If you had given us another five minutes it would have been over."

Harry tilted his head to one side then smiled. "Well then I guess this will be a real test of all of our abilities then, won't it."

Neville grimaced. "Yeah, I guess you could say that. I still don't like it but ... yeah."

After lunch Harry and Neville met Remus, Kingsley, Tonks and Moody in the center of the quidditch pitch. Tonks had started going by Dora but old habits were hard to change, especially when his mind was so cluttered with other, more pressing issues, so Harry continued to think of her as Tonks. There would be time after the war, he hoped, to get used to the idea of Tonks' new identity but for now Tonks would remain Tonks.

"So, who are we going to be dueling?" Remus asked as the students began to fill the stands.

Harry shrugged his shoulders. "I have no idea. I gave the task of choosing our opponents to Ron. I told him I wanted twenty of our best."

"Oh," Tonks said excitedly. "You do like living dangerously, don't you; so what are the rules of engagement?"

Harry bowed his head and let a small grin play across his face before looking over at their opposition, which was gathering at one end of the pitch. "Disarm only; no unforgivables; and nothing too dangerous. Other than that, anything goes."

"How good are you guys at fighting invisible opponents?" Neville asked Remus and Kingsley after Tonks and Moody had left to take their seats in the stands and the four of them were making their way down to their end of the pitch.

Remus looked up suddenly. "What! What do you mean invisible opponents?"

After Neville explained the reason behind their tactics in the competition at the end of June Remus shook his head and groaned while Kingsley laughed out loud. "I'm going to kill you for teaching your student to fight invisibly, Harry," Remus said half-seriously. "I can take out an invisible opponent if needs be but I am no great shakes at it."

"I have to agree with Remus," Kingsley laughed. "I have fought a few in my time as an auror but never more than one at a time." Then, turning serious, he asked, "What do you suggest?"

Harry glanced back at their opponents. Ron had chosen well. Ten of them were from his own class, nine of the ten he had chosen for the competition plus one, and the others were a mixture of the other four classes. "I have a feeling that half of them are going to use disillusionment charms as soon as the duel starts. Since Neville and I are used to fighting under those conditions, I suggest we disillusion ourselves as well. We will take care of their invisible fighters and cover you two as best we can." Turning to Neville he said, "I am going to suggest silencing charms on our feet and that we only use non-verbal spells."

Neville nodded.

"And prank warfare?" Remus asked.

Harry's grin almost split his face. "Nothing too dangerous and no unforgivables."

Remus smiled. "Right, then. Let's go hunting!"

A few minutes later, after explaining the rules of engagement, Alastor shot off a stream of red sparks signaling the duelers to begin. Almost immediately, ten of the student duelers and Harry and Neville vanished. Harry and Neville dropped back behind Remus and Kingsley to give them a free field of action and Harry cast a privacy charm so they could talk without being overheard by anyone. Then, while Neville erected and maintained a shield, Harry reached out with his magical senses and found that the other teams' invisible warriors had broken up into two teams of five, each team working its way around either side of the pitch in hopes of flanking their professors and winning the duel. He could also sense that his and Neville's disappearance had given them pause because they were traveling much more slowly than he would have expected.

Grabbing Neville's arm he told his friend to drop his shield and immediately teleported the two of

them to one side of the pitch where they patiently waited for the nearest team to pass in front of them. When they were close enough Harry crept up and fired a silent stinging hex, from within their midst, across the field, striking one of the other team's member in the leg. From the yelp of pain he assumed his target must have been Ron.

In the melee that followed – the confusion of two five-man teams of invisible fighters firing spells across the pitch at each other – Harry teleported Neville and himself to behind their visible opponents and quickly disarmed them while their attention was diverted by their ongoing duel with Remus and Kingsley and the hail of spell fire that was going on between themselves and their professors.

By the time the five remaining invisible student duelers realized that they had been tricked into fighting their own teammates, two on one side of the pitch and three on the other, multiple stunners were headed their way and it was too late to block them, or even dodge. As they went down Harry could sense the confusion and frustration they were feeling. Harry didn't like fighting dirty by creating a friendly fire situation but this was a demonstration duel and he needed the students to know that fighting smart could overcome superior numbers and, by extension, superior strength when properly applied.

The entire duel was over in less than fifteen minutes and before the last disillusionment charm was removed Alastor was hobbling out onto the field to begin his lecture. Before beginning, however, he hobbled over to Harry and said, "Good God, Potter. Don't you know how to lose? That was one of the best demonstrations of brains versus brawn I have ever seen."

Harry mumbled something about not liking to fight dirty and not wanting to show off but Alastor waved him off. "I appreciate your humility, Harry, and your sense of fair play is admirable but, as you know, this is war."

Harry nodded before walking off the pitch and joining Ginny in the stands.

"That," Mad-eye began after everyone was seated, "was one of the most brilliant demonstrations of brains versus brawn I have ever seen. I know most of you didn't see what was happening with the disillusioned combatants so I will describe it to you: Those of you who went invisible had a good plan. You were going to try to outflank your professors by sneaking up the sides of the pitch. That was your first mistake. If you are going to fight while under disillusionment charms you should know where your comrades are at all times. You should never give your opponents the opportunity to create a friendly fire situation, like Potter and Longbottom did by firing one simple stinging hex from behind your teammates.

"One of the things you have got to remember when using a disillusionment charm is that whenever you move you create a visible ripple effect in the air around you. The reason you did not see either Potter or Longbottom was because they apparated to their destinations and waited for you to reach them. The reason you could not see them is because they didn't move any more than absolutely necessary.

The other three things Potter and Longbottom did that made it difficult for you to locate them were the casting of silencing charms on their feet, the casting of a privacy charm so they could communicate without being heard and the exclusive use of non-verbal spells."

For the next several hours Moody outlined the principles of fighting brawn with brains and went

into detail about some of the most effective techniques, using several examples from the demonstration duel.

Chapter 8. Hogwarts

That evening, after helping Ron and Neville with their presentation and explaining his need to spend the night in the castle's room of requirement to Ginny, without going into too much detail so that she would not fear for his safety but doing everything in his power to assure her of his fidelity, Harry made his way up to the seventh floor and approached the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy and his dancing trolls. As he paced back and forth in front of the tapestry he thought of a safe and secure room where he could relax, work with his angels, potentially confront a number of demons and make contact with Ethrindell.

When the door appeared he walked over and opened it. The room behind the door was a small cube of a room, roughly four meters on a side, with no sharp corners and a single mattress lying in the center of the floor. Stepping into the room he noticed that the floor had some give to it. Walking around the room, feeling and testing the walls he came to the conclusion that the floor and all four walls, and possibly the ceiling as well, were all being protected by a series of cushioning charms.

Making his way over to the mattress Harry kicked off his shoes, which promptly vanished, and lay down. The soft lighting in the room faded to black. Moments later Harry felt himself being levitated into the air and away from the mattress. Before his mind could register any sense of panic a presence entered his mind, a presence he somehow knew to be the castle's soul, and reassured him that he was perfectly safe and that it would do everything in its power to protect him should he do battle with any demons.

He didn't know where in the room he was floating but assumed it was close to the center. After consciously relaxing every muscle in his body Harry let all of his cares and concerns drift away. In his mind he acknowledged each of his concerns, paying attention to their energy structures and the kinds and amounts of energy they were demanding and consuming to maintain their structure, and let them go, releasing them to the vacuums of space and time where they dissolved into nothingness.

Harry didn't know how long it took him to completely clear his mind that evening because in his inner world of thoughts, emotions and intellectual and emotional energies time meant nothing. And then there were those stressors that kept returning, trying to attach themselves to his spiritual energies. All he knew was that when he was finished his mind was clearer than it had been in months. It was so clear, in fact, that he could sense an alien presence that seemed to be clinging to life by attaching itself to his body's life-force energies.

Turning towards this presence he studied its structures and found that it was a shriveled and badly damaged soul-fragment that rightfully belonged to his adversary. As he began to study its history, as a fragment, he became aware of the pain of separation it felt when it was forcibly torn from its parent body and its relief at finding a source of life-energy to latch onto. While the soul fragment was a part of, and rightfully belonged to, Tom's soul, almost sixteen years of constant exposure to Harry's soul and the love his mother had gifted him through her sacrifice had taken a lot of the wind out of its sails. It still had an element of demonic possession and contamination within its basic structure but had, for the most part, been cleansed of these negative energies.

Following the soul fragment's history into his second year Harry now understood why he had felt a kinship with Tom's diary. The two soul fragments had recognized each other and tried to reach out

to re-establish their connection. In the chamber of secrets it hadn't known what to do. It had known that it was a part of Tom but the monster that had risen from the diary was so evil, and its relationship with Harry's soul so strong, that it could not have chosen which path to follow. In the end it had chosen to let the two battle it out.

When the basilisk had bitten Harry's arm it did not know what to expect and was understandably terrified when it felt itself being torn apart due to the magical properties contained within the venom. Even though it was severely damaged, it was happy when Fawkes cried into the wound. Phoenix tears could heal physical wounds and stop the destruction of a horcrux but they could not repair the damage done on a spiritual level.

For the next several years it had clung to Harry's life-force energies as desperately as a drowning man would cling to a life preserver. Then, last year, when he had been attacked on Privet Drive, it had temporarily lost its grip, only recovering enough to once again attach itself to Harry's life-force energies when Harry had returned after his *materio auctus* had reached its conclusion.

Harry almost felt sorry for this fragment of Tom's soul because it desperately wanted to survive but he knew that for Tom to be utterly and completely defeated ... vanquished ... this fragment would have to be destroyed as well.

Turning his attentions away from the fragment Harry released all of his personal cares and concerns about the fragment to the vacuums of space and time and turned his attention to the task at hand. Reaching out with his mind he projected a request to speak with his angels.

For a while, an indeterminate amount of time as time does not really exist in this realm, nothing happened. Then almost as if they were emerging from a shadow, Harry became aware of three angelic beings – beings of pure light, love and energy – came forward. The first radiated a sense of guidance, protection and divine justice. Somehow Harry knew that this angel's name was Michael and that he was his guardian angel. The second angel radiated strength, endurance and emotional support. This angel's name, as angelic names go, was Barry. The third angel radiated healing, compassion and brotherhood. His name was Raphael.

As they approached Harry was curious and somewhat dismayed that two of his angels were archangels. He was not disappointed or sorry about this but he was curious as to why two of his angels should be so highly placed. While they were still some distance away Harry began to feel an overwhelming sense of universal and unconditional love as well as the desire to be of service to an honored general. He didn't know how to respond to their descriptions of his status so humbly bowed his head and thanked them for coming.

"What can we do for you, beloved?" Michael asked.

Harry looked up and, taking in their surroundings, realized that they were standing in a lush field filled with tall, green grasses and a wide variety of blooming wild flowers. "I need your help," he said.

Barry nodded.

I have a mental link with a particularly dark wizard who likes to call himself Voldemort. The only way I am able to keep him out of my mind is by using occlumency..."

"Yes, we are aware of this," Raphael said.

Harry shuffled his feet for a moment, trying to think how he should proceed, then, forgoing all formalities, said, "The thing is ... I need to make contact with Ethrindell, from the elven realm, and to do that I have got to let my occlumency shields down. I was just wondering if ... if you could stand guard and protect my mind from him, as well as from any other intruders, while we are discussing this new development in the war."

Michael smiled. "All you need do is ask, my brother."

"Will you?" Harry asked in an explosion of hopeful energy.

All three of his angels nodded patiently. "Yes, we will."

Harry let out a sigh of relief. "Thank you!"

Not knowing how to proceed, Harry hesitated until Raphael gently said, "All you have to do, Harry is ask. We are on duty until you ask us to stand down."

Harry nodded. "Thanks," he said. "I'll be back in a bit."

With a mental sight of relief Harry slowly dropped his occlumency shields and relaxed while reaching out to make contact with Ethrindell.

Since he had never either tried or experienced this kind of communication before he didn't know what to expect so, with some trepidation, Harry reached out to the energy signature of Ethrindell's soul in a manner similar to the technique he used when finding the dragon compound by latching onto Charlie's energy signatures the previous September.

At first he didn't think it had worked. But then he began to feel a familiar presence in his mind. He knew that it was Ethrindell, but at the same time it felt familiar in a way he could not describe. It was almost as if an old friend – a friend almost as old as Tom's soul fragment – was returning.

When Ethrindell had fully arrived Harry recognized him as the comforting presence from many of his early, childhood dreams. "Ethrindell?" he asked.

Ethrindell smiled and nodded as he stepped fully into Harry's mental world. "Hello, Harry. How are you doing?"

"But ... You ... How?"

Ethrindell smiled his understanding of Harry's confusion. "Like I said," he said, "I have been keeping an eye on you, Harry. You didn't think I would let you grow up with the Dursley's without some form of counseling did you?"

Harry looked at Ethrindell curiously.

"Let me put it this way, Harry," Ethrindell said as he began walking along a path that had suddenly appeared. "I was aware of the prophecy before Sybill Trelawney made her recitation. When Tom chose you I began taking an active interest in your case. When his soul fragment attached itself to you after Tom marked you as his equal I knew you were going to need some help because I did not

want that fragment to become overly influential in your life. And when Albus placed you with the Dursleys I knew that there was only one way I could be of assistance without directly interfering in your life. I had to counsel you in your dreams, work with you on a subconscious level so that you would not become the next dark lord – a dark lord even more powerful and more dangerous than Tom Riddle ever thought of being."

Harry stumbled briefly as he followed Ethrindell along the path.

"You see, Harry," Ethrindell said after Harry had regained his composure, "the odds were stacked against you to begin with and Albus, in his dedication to the greater good, saddled you with a situation that could have gone terribly wrong had I not found some way to intervene."

"I'm not saying that you could not have come through and overcome the odds on your own but I didn't want to take any chances."

Harry grinned slightly. "Thanks," he said.

"You are most entirely welcome. Now, what can I do for you? Joseph said that you received some rather disturbing news upon your return but would not elaborate. He said that it was your tale to tell and that he did not want to contaminate this meeting by voicing any of his opinions beforehand."

Harry nodded his understanding and then, for the next fifteen minutes, outlined what he knew about Tom's use of the dark mark as an energy booster. Since he had done a little remote viewing the night before and gone back in time to discover the origins of this new twist he was able to tell Ethrindell that it was Tom's response to his defeat in Hogsmeade at the end of June. "What I would like to know," Harry said after he had completed his descriptions, "is, first, how am I supposed to fight that kind of power. I mean, if I am going to be letting one of his killing curses through to destroy his soul fragment, who's to say that it might not be powerful enough to kill me as well? The other thing I would like to know is if there is any way if there is any way to tie the purgatory charm to the dark mark so that when it is cast on Tom it will effect everyone who has taken the dark mark."

Ethrindell looked up in surprise. "That's a pretty tall order," he said several seconds later. "The power issue is relatively easy to resolve, he said, thinking out loud. "It does not, however come without a few risks."

Turning towards Harry he said, "You are able to tap into the castle's energy reserves, correct?"

Harry nodded. "Yes ..."

"Then that shouldn't be a problem," Ethrindell said, returning to his musings. "The problem may lie in the fact that Hogwarts was built at the intersection of several major, as well as a few minor, ley lines, the planet's natural energy grid. So, whenever you tap into the castle's energy reserves you are also tapping into the planet's reservoirs; and I have no idea what the consequences could be if you channel more energy than your body, and training, can handle."

Harry quirked an eyebrow but held his peace.

"Most people don't know this, Harry," Ethrindell began anew, "indeed, I would be surprised if

anyone but me knew about this little idiosyncrasy but each time this planet passes through the galactic plane the human race experiences a genetic upgrade. Each time your planet passes through the galactic plane several strands of formerly inactive DNA become active and the seeds are planted for the creation of a new generation, a generation that is sensitive to a number of forces and energies that previous generations could only observe and think about.

"A few children are born before each upgrade whose DNA has already been activated. Their purpose is to prepare the way for those who will follow in their footsteps, to ease them into it if you will. You are one of these children, Harry.

"You don't know how much I wanted to intervene, on your behalf, and teach you about these sensitivities and how to use them to the benefit of all mankind; but my charter would not allow it. And now, now that time is so short, I have been given permission to teach you everything I can so that you will not only be able to defeat Tom Riddle but prepare the way for those who will follow."

Harry could feel Ethrindell's frustration at not being allowed to intervene. At the same time, however, he could sense that a plan was brewing in his mind."

"Here's what we're going to do," Ethrindell said, a glint of determination in his eyes. "Starting tomorrow you will be taking yourself out of the afternoon activities. During the afternoons you will spend your time reviewing Tom's life, seeking out and destroying his horcruxes and preparing the purgatory charm to do what you want it to do. After dinner you will be working with the castle's energies and developing a working relationship with the castle. At night you will be asking your angels to protect your mind so that I can teach you what you need to know to defeat Tom. We are going to be using a brand of dimensional magic that will give us the equivalent of five years of study and practice time for every hour of sleep because I want to give you the kinds of time you will need to learn everything you will need to know. In the mornings, however, you will continue with your running and drills. You are going to have to be in shape for this to work, Harry, and the best way to do get in shape is to exercise."

Harry moved to protest that he was already in shape but Ethrindell cut him off. "I know you think you are in shape, Harry, and physically you are in very good shape; but, with what you will be learning in our sessions, you will be experiencing whole new dimensions of physical conditioning that your friends cannot even begin to imagine."

Harry moved to say something but the look in Ethrindell's eyes brooked no argument so he closed his mouth and nodded his agreement to Ethrindell's terms.

"Now," Ethrindell said after a brief pause to let the energies clear so that he could safely change subjects, "as to using the dark mark against Tom to take out all of his death eaters with one fell swoop, that will take some tricky spell work. I am guessing that you do not want to hurt those who have had the dark mark forced upon them ..."

"Unless they have since voluntarily joined in Tom's bid for world domination," Harry amended.

Ethrindell was silent for a time as he thought this over and then nodded his head. "Agreed," he said. "In that case you are going to have to study all of the forces and energies associated with the dark mark and how they are used. You are also going to have to study the hearts and minds of those who have taken the mark, both voluntarily and involuntarily, to determine which energy signatures the charm should be linked to." After a moment's hesitation he added, "And I must warn you, Harry.

What you are planning is going to take an enormous amount of energy ..." he hesitated. "And you may not survive."

Harry's eyes widened briefly and his thoughts momentarily turned to his children who were waiting to be born. But then he thought about something Ethrindell had said about Albus' dedication to the greater good. If it would take sacrificing his life to bring an end to Tom Marvolo Riddle and his followers then it was worth it. He only hoped Ginny, James and Lily would understand.

Succinctly nodding his head he said, All right. Anything else?"

Ethrindell seemed to be taken slightly aback by Harry's resolve for a moment but then smiled. "Just one more thing," he said. "You might want to make a return trip to the chamber of secrets to milk the basilisk's remains of its venom. You are going to need it to destroy the horcruxes."

Harry nodded. "Alright, then," he said.

Not wanting to seem rude, Harry tried to think of a polite way to end their conversation. Apparently his thoughts were not as private as he would have liked because Ethrindell provided him with the excuse he needed. "I think that is enough for tonight," Ethrindell said calmly. "I am, however, going to suggest that, once you have gotten yourself together, you go to Slytherin's chamber and milk that carcass."

Harry nodded and smiled, grateful for the change in subject and the lilt of humor in Ethrindell's voice.

After bidding Ethrindell good-bye and thanking his angels for guarding his mind (and informing them of Ethrindell's schedule) Harry found himself lying on the mattress the castle had conjured for his use in the Room of Requirement.

Harry yawned and stretched and opened his eyes. The room was dimly lit and slowly growing brighter. Sitting up, Harry found his shoes in a corner near the door. Reaching out with his mind he thanked the castle and was startled when he received a 'you're welcome' response in return.

As Harry began tying his shoes he wondered what time it was. Almost as soon as the thought had appeared a visual image of the clock in the Gryffindor Common Room appeared in his mind telling him that it was 23 minutes past midnight. He almost dropped the laces he was working with when this happened and fumbled to complete the bow. He kept his mind silent as he tied the other shoe and then, standing up, began slowly pacing around the room, wondering if he was losing his mind or if he was actually communicating with the castle.

After several minutes of pacing he decided to try an experiment. Reaching out with his mind he thought "Hogwarts?"

The response was both gentle and reassuring. "Hello, Harry," the castle responded in a gentle grandfatherly voice that Harry somehow knew only he could hear.

"Are ... are you the castle?"

"I am, if you will, the soul of the castle you know as Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry," the voice answered patiently.

"Are ..." Harry hesitated, unsure as to how he should phrase this question. "Are you alive?" he asked.

The castle was silent for a moment, as if pondering the ramifications of its response, and then telepathically nodded its head. "Yes, in a sense I suppose I am alive. I am an intellectual, emotional and spiritual record of everything that has happened within the walls and upon the grounds of this school since the laying of the first stone unto the present day. And I will continue recording these events on into the future."

When Harry hesitated the castle explained, "Last year, when you started working with your crystal ball, you came into contact with a young, rudimentary soul that had only recently – recently as in it has only been in its current form a few years – become an independent entity. I am somewhat older, but nowhere near as old as the planet. And where spiritual age – the age of experience – is concerned nothing is anywhere near as old or experienced as Creation."

Does that mean," Harry asked hesitantly, "that you have a record of everything that has ever taken place has ever taken place at Hogwarts?"

Again it telepathically nodded. "Yes. I have a record of everything. I do not sleep and record everything."

Then you know about my conversation with Ethrindell?"

"Yes," the castle confirmed, "I do."

"So, what do you think?"

"About helping you defeat Tom Riddle?"

Harry subconsciously nodded.

"I remember Tom Riddle," the castle said. "He was very talented. He could have gone far; but he was brutally ambitious and something of a bully. He didn't openly bully anyone but I am not blind. If he wanted something he would manipulate people and circumstances until he got it. He could have had many friends but preferred power."

The castle hesitated for a moment then said, "Yes, I will help you defeat Tom Riddle."

Several minutes later, as Harry approached Moaning Myrtle's lavatory he said, "I have a question."

"Yes," the castle said.

I know the entrance to the chamber of secrets can only be opened using parseltongue but ... can you open it?"

Harry could swear he felt the castle smile. "Actually, yes, I can," the castle said.

"Good," Harry said. I'm having a hard enough time speaking to living snakes and I honestly don't know if I will be able to open the passages."

The castle seemed to smile sympathetically.

When Harry reached Moaning Myrtle's bathroom he pushed the door open and walked in. Myrtle

was hovering in the corner, above the stalls to his right, looking curiously down at the already opened passage. When she saw Harry she looked down at him and said, "Hello, Harry. I didn't see you there. Are you going back down there?"

Harry kindly smiled up at the ghost. "Hello, Myrtle. Yes, I'm afraid so. I've got to see how much venom is left in the carcass of that basilisk. I'm going to need it to defeat the boy responsible for your death.

Myrtle smiled and gleefully swooped around the perimeter of her room before coming to a stop in front of Harry. Smiling excitedly, Myrtle asked, "Do you really know who he was?"

Harry nodded. "Yes. Do you remember a Slytherin Prefect named Tom Riddle?"

Myrtle's mouth fell open and she floated in front of Harry in silence for several seconds. "Remember him?" Myrtle asked softly, disbelief evident in her voice. "Of course I remember him!" she said. "How could I not? He was so dreamy," she said as she began to float airily around the remaining sinks. Then turning to look coquettishly over her shoulder at Harry she fluttered her eyelashes suggestively and said, "I had a crush on him you know."

Harry blushed slightly. "Yeah, well, I'm afraid Tom was, and still is, something of an evil git."

Myrtle floated to a stop and slowly turned around to face Harry. "No," she said softly, shaking her head in disbelief. "No. It couldn't have Tom. He was so handsome." She quickly swooped over to float in front of Harry, baring her progress towards the chamber of secrets. "No! It couldn't have been Tom! You're lying!"

Harry shook his head sadly and said, "I'm sorry, Myrtle," he said. "It was Tom. It was Tom who summoned the basilisk and it was the basilisk's eyes that killed you."

Myrtle was stunned. She floated in silence for a few moments, her face set in shock, then suddenly screamed and swooped through Harry and up to the far corner where she began weeping and moaning more earnestly than Harry had ever thought possible.

When Harry stepped out of the chute, after jumping into and sliding down the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets, his feet crunched on the collection of old bones and his nose turned up at the stench. Telepathically reaching out to the castle he said, "I don't suppose you could give me a little light down here?"

Hogwarts seemed to think for a moment then said, "I could, but I think the time has come for us to begin working together, as a team."

When Harry hesitated the castle continued, in a soft, leading voice, "I want you to reach out, Harry. Close your eyes and reach out with your mind. Ignore the physical world you are accustomed to dealing with and feel the energy."

It took some time to block out his physical senses, due to the overwhelming stench of rotting and decayed flesh, but in time he was able to do it. Then, as he dropped through the various layers of meditative awareness, he slowly became aware of the naturally occurring magical energies flowing around and through Hogwarts.

At first it was an overwhelming sense of awareness. It was almost as if the entire history of the

castle was racing through his mind. Then he felt himself being guided and directed away from those memories towards a closer examination of the structural energies. Once there he began examining the qualities of those energies. When he had isolated the energies associated with light and temperature he found himself traveling through the castle's many passages to the Chamber of Secrets.

Focusing on the energies of light and heat he slowly and carefully directed them towards the creation of an environment that was both comfortably warm and well lit. When he was satisfied with what he had accomplished he felt himself being pulled back up through the many layers of awareness until he was at the cusp of being either asleep or awake. "Very good, Harry," the castle's voice said into his mind. "I can see that this is going to be an interesting working relationship. Your *matero auctus* provided you with the basic information you needed to make it through your last year. This year you will be working with me and we will be exploring fields of magical endeavor that few have ever thought possible. But before we can begin exploring those possibilities we have got to get you ready for your confrontation with Tom."

When Harry opened his eyes the cavern was well lit and relatively warm. It didn't smell any better but at least he could see where he was going.

Looking around he said, "I wonder what this place would look like without all the bones and rot?"

"It actually looked quite spectacular when it was first finish," Hogwarts said. "But a thousand years of neglect does tend to take its toll."

"If I survive this confrontation with Tom," Harry thought, finally being honest with himself that he was not at all sure he would survive given the requirements of the spells involved, "I would like to spend some time cleaning this place up a bit."

The castle telepathically nodded. "I don't think you are going to have to wait that long, Harry," it said. "For what you will be learning over the next few weeks and months I think it might be a good idea if you were to separate yourself from the rest of the student population while you are training."

"Why?"

"You will be learning things that they, quite simply, will not understand. For example, their fifth law of transfiguration holds that you cannot conjure food. For what you will be learning these laws do not apply."

As they approached the cave-in the castle said, "You might want to use some of your wandless magic to transfigure a few of these stones. You will need something to contain the venom. Given that it is basilisk venom I am going to suggest that you line them with the basilisk's skin."

Several minutes later, after Harry had permanently transfigured several stones into sealable mason jars, lined them with basilisk skin and levitated them through the opening, he was approaching the entrance to the chamber proper when something occurred to him. "I have a question," he thought.

"Yes?"

"What is it that makes it possible for me to do so many things I could not do before my *matero*

auctus?"

The castle chuckled. "Ah, Harry. I thought you would never ask.

"What is the difference between hope and faith?"

Again, when Harry hesitated, the castle continued. "If you are like most, faith, in your mind, is a religious concept."

Harry nodded.

For understanding's sake, however, I am going to ask you to take a slightly different approach to your interpretation of faith."

Harry nodded his assent.

"Hope is the uncertain expectation that your thoughts, words, actions, spells and incantations will have the desired impact upon the various elements within your chosen environment. Before your maturo auctus this was how you were approaching all of your schoolwork. There is nothing wrong with this – indeed, where people and free will are concerned hope is your only recourse. Since your maturo auctus, however, you have been working from a position of faith. In this case faith can be defined as the sure and certain knowledge that your thoughts, words. Actions, spells and incantations will have the desired impact upon the various elements within your chosen environment.

"This is the main difference, Harry, and that which has made you seem much more powerful than you were. In addition, during your maturo auctus you spent a lot of time studying and learning about a wide variety of things. It was this learning process that opened a number of magical doors to you. My job," and here the castle nodded its recognition of the risks Harry would be taking to bring an end to Tom's reign of terror, "is to help you explore the contents of the rooms so that you can truly live up to your full and true creative potential while helping to prepare the people for what is coming."

Over the course of the next several hours Harry and Hogwarts milked the basilisk's carcass of five gallons of venom and several hundred gallons of blood and bile that could be used in a variety of obscure potions and dissected the great snake, saving and preserving those portions that could be used and vanishing those that could not. During this gruesome task it was decided that Harry would use the Chamber of Secrets as his private study and training grounds to protect the rest of the student body from both the horcruxes and their destruction.

When he returned to his trunk it was deserted. Checking the clock in the kitchen he found that it was almost noon so, he climbed back out and made his way down to the Great Hall for lunch. He was understandably tired when he entered the dining hall but tried not to let it show. Walking about half the length of the Gryffindor table he tapped Ginny on the shoulder. When she looked up he wordlessly asked if he could sit down. He knew his fatigue was showing as he was just barely holding himself erect.

When Ginny saw this she jumped up from her seat and helped him sit down before he collapsed. Luna scooted over, which caused a chain reaction in one direction and Orville Burns, the Slytherin Quidditch Captain who was sitting on Ginny's other side and whose dueling partner was a fifth year

Gryffindor girl, started a chain reaction in the other direction.

When Harry was safely seated between Ginny and Luna he leaned forward, almost collapsing onto the table.

"Where have you been, mate?" Ron asked earnestly.

Harry looked up and across the table at his friend and sighed listlessly. "I had a meeting with Ethrindell in the castle's room of requirement last night. Then I had a brief conversation with Moaning Myrtle. And then I've spent the last ten or so hours dissecting a basilisk, milking it of its venom, preserving its usable parts and vanishing the unusable parts."

Ginny paled. "You went back down into the chamber?"

Harry nodded. "Yea," he said tiredly. You know I need the venom." At Ginny's nod he said, "A friend guided me through the dissection because parts of the thing can be used in a variety of potions."

"A friend?" Ron asked.

Harry closed his eyes and let out an exhausted sigh. He had known that this question would be asked and was not looking forward to the reactions he would get when he gave them an honest answer. "Hogwarts."

Chapter 9. The Horcruxes

Over the course of the next several days Harry spent his mornings working out with the rest of the students, his afternoons reviewing Tom Riddle's life, paying special attention to his horcruxes and the creation of the dark mark, and his evenings in the Chamber of Secrets, learning to work with the castle's energies. After revealing some of his findings, concerning the items Tom had chosen as his horcruxes to the castle, Hogwarts was understandably upset and everyone noticed a change. Whereas before the castle's atmosphere had been one of urgency, concentration and focus, after Harry's discoveries the indescribable elements of anger and outrage were added to the mix and even though only Harry and Hogwarts knew the true source and reason behind these additions almost everyone could sense that the school had somehow chosen to throw all of its energies behind their efforts. On one of her visits, Madam Bones had even commented that the atmosphere around Hogwarts was more intimidating than the ten most haunted castles in all of Europe combined.

After their Order meeting that Thursday Albus took Harry aside and asked him what had happened to bring about this change.

After everyone had left and Harry was sure they were alone he leaned forward, rested his elbows on his knees and wrung his hands together for several seconds, debating how much to tell his friend and mentor. "Hogwarts is upset," he said after a silent consultation with the castle. "The castle never really liked Tom because he was a bit too ambitious for its liking, but when Hogwarts discovered that Tom used Slytherin's locket, Hufflepuff's goblet and Ravenclaw's diadem as horcruxes, which means that they will have to be destroyed if we are to stop Tom ... Well, let's just say that the school is royally ticked. It will not submit to Tom's rule and what Tom has done has guaranteed the destruction of three priceless heirlooms that rightfully belong to the school."

Albus' eyebrows shot up at the mention of the founders' relics. "So Hogwarts is on our side, then?"

Harry nodded. "Yes, and he is very upset."

"He?"

Harry smiled. "I don't know how to explain this, Albus but Hogwarts' main voice is most definitely masculine – I would almost be tempted to say that it is the voice of Godric Gryffindor himself – but when it found out about those three horcruxes I could swear I heard at least two women's voices voicing their outrage.

Albus sat with his fingers quietly steepled for several seconds, watching Harry as he seemed to consider the possible ramifications of what he had just learned. "Tell me about your relationship with the castle, Harry," he requested. "When did it begin and how does it work?"

Harry massaged his temples for several seconds before responding. He would be walking a very thin line with what he was about to say and did not want to either insult or offend anyone. "The way Ethrindell explained to me," he began cautiously, "is that we ... humans are not native to this world." As Albus' eyes flew open wide Harry hastened to continue. "Neither are we aliens," he added quickly.

"We are unique to this planet in that our genetic core is native to this world. At the same time,

however, a number of genetic structures were added several hundred thousand years ago that were designed to provide an evolutionary component to our sensitivities to the forces and energies of creation. Over the years and through the centuries and millennia a number of highly advanced cultures have risen, only to fall because their spirituality was not able to keep up with their physical sensitivities and technological prowess.

"Every time this happened, some – those whose spiritual evolution had kept pace with their sensitivities – moved on while those for whom spirituality was never really much of a concern, no matter how outspoken they may have been on the subject, were devolved back to that level of development that was most in keeping with their spiritual maturity.

"Apparently our planet is approaching a critical mass of sorts and will soon be passing through the galactic plain. When this happens, those who have evolved, spiritually, will experience a genetic upgrade of sorts that will give them access to a whole new class of forces and energies – to use a muggle metaphor would be to say that it will be like going from the stone age to the computer age overnight – while those who have refused to grow, preferring their baser, more animalistic, instincts to will continue on as they were, gradually digressing, physically, to resemble the animals they are. From there they will begin the long, slow journey back.

"Apparently, before each major transition a number of children are born into each culture to help prepare the people for the coming transition. Ron, Hermione, Neville, Luna, Ginny and I are six of several dozen in the magical world. The turning point for me – the thing that triggered the activation of my abilities – was Sirius' death. I guess you could say that it was a bit of accidental magic except that it was internally directed."

Albus frowned. Apparently he had forgotten that this kind of accidental magic could go either way. It could either kill a person, destroying them from the inside out or, if the witch or wizard was fortunate enough, provide them with the tools they need to move forward.

"The training you provided Neville and me last summer helped me begin to harness and direct these new abilities. This somehow helped Neville begin to realize his true potential. My maturo auctus provided me with additional training as well as a great deal of perspective so that I could choose which path to follow. This past year you helped me learn how to use those abilities you could and helped guide me through the mental and emotional minefields that come with increased power. For this I am eternally grateful."

Albus' softened slightly and Harry was thankful that his words had somehow diffused a potentially crushing blow to Albus' ego. He was telling the truth but not the whole truth. If Albus knew how upset Ethrindell was about his treatment at the hands of the Dursleys it would have created an emotional wound Albus would not have easily overcome.

"The reason I am now being trained, by both Ethrindell and Hogwarts, is because I am going to need this training to defeat Tom and to defend the rights of the people.

"When I started working with the crystal ball last year I took the first steps towards making contact and working with Hogwarts. After we returned from the elven realm Hogwarts took the initiative. The castle initially contacted me when I was getting ready to contact Ethrindell because it felt I was ready. Since then Hogwarts has been teaching me things that have never been recorded in any book."

Albus was silent for several seconds as he seemed to absorb this information and frame his questions. "Where have you been keeping yourself?" he finally asked.

Harry blushed slightly. He had told his closest friends about the time he was spending in the Chamber of Secrets but had forgotten to tell Albus or any of the other members of The Order of the Phoenix. "At Ethrindell's urging, I have been spending a lot of time in the chamber of secrets. Hogwarts and I have been converting it into an underground emergency shelter of sorts. It has its own dormitories, potions lab, hospital wing, dining hall, common areas and storerooms for food, clothing and potions ingredients. It isn't fancy but it is functional. As soon as it is finished I will be using my own money to stock its shelves. This way, the next time we have to evacuate Hogsmeade we will have more room to work with."

"And what of the horcruxes," Albus asked. "You've mentioned a ring, Rowena Ravenclaw's diadem, Helga Hufflepuff's goblet and Salazar Slytherin's locket. With the diary that makes five. Do you know what the sixth one is; and do you know where they are?"

Harry sat back in his chair and closed his eyes. Pinching the bridge of his nose he let out a sigh. "Yes," he said. "I know where they are and I know what the sixth horcrux is."

"What is it? Are they going to be difficult to get to or ..."

Harry shook his head. "No. Two of them are not going to be hard to get to. One of those might be a bit tricky because we will be going into Tom's territory to get it but if we do it right that shouldn't be much of a problem. We are going to have to talk to Ragnok about breaking into a couple of vaults at Gringotts to get two of them and I am not looking forward to negotiating with the goblins. As for the sixth one, Tom seems to have taken the extraordinary measure, more out of desperation than anything else, of making his snake, Nagini, a horcrux and he is keeping her with him at all times. That is going to be the difficult one. I don't know how we are going to do it but Nagini is going to have to die in the final battle before I confront him."

Albus' twinkle dimmed at the news about Nagini. "This is not good," he said. Then, after glancing down at a sheet of paper on his desk, said, "We will deal with the issue of Nagini later, but what of the other four?"

"The ring," Harry said, "is located under a loose floorboard in the Gaunt's cabin in the woods outside of Little Hangleton. The difficulty with this one lies in the fact that Tom is currently using Riddle Manor as his base of operations. He is essentially standing guard over this one because he assumes the others are safe."

"Slytherin's locket was in a cave by the sea but Regulus Black discovered it and, with Kreacher's help, stole it. It was at Grimauld Place until about two years ago when we tried to throw it out. Fortunately, Dung stole it and later sold it to Dolores Umbridge. If he hadn't I don't know where it would be now. As it is, however, it is in Umbridge's vault, which could prove tricky because we are going to have to negotiate with the goblins to let us into the vault. Helga's goblet doesn't have as interesting a history as the locket, but it is in the Lestrangle vault, which could be slightly more problematic because it is in one of the high security vaults. Rowena's diadem should be fairly easy because it is here at Hogwarts."

Albus looked up, surprise evident on his face.

"It is in the room of requirement. I could have gotten it yesterday but I would kind of like to destroy them in the order they were created, which means ring, diadem, locket, goblet and then snake. Since I was an unintentional horcrux, and since I am the only one who can cast the purgatory charm on him, I am going to have to be the last ..."

Harry intentionally left that thought hanging because, even though he was working with both Ethrindell and Hogwarts to combine the modified rebounding charm and the purgatory charm into one 'superspell' and linking the power behind it to Hogwarts they had no idea if it would work or not. The spell was, by his own admission, one of the most complicated combinations Ethrindell had ever sculpted; and with complication came risk: The more complicated the spell the more could go wrong in its execution; and even if it worked as designed there was the possibility that the sheer amounts of energy Harry would be channeling could kill him.

To better their odds, Ethrindell and Harry had begun a course of subliminal programming so that, when the time came, his subconscious mind would perform the spell correctly no matter how nervous Harry was consciously. In addition, with Hogwarts' help, he was beginning to channel and work with increasingly large amounts of energy in the hope that, when the time came, his body would be able to tolerate the strain. To say that they – Harry, Hogwarts and Ethrindell – were nervous would be an understatement.

Apparently sensing at least some small portion of the uncertainties involved, Albus changed the subject. "What are your thoughts on next year's head boy and head girl?" he asked.

Startled out of his brooding Harry said, "Ron and Hermione? I think they will make excellent heads. They have already earned the respect of most of the students and with what Tom is planning the kinds of leadership they can provide is going to be crucial."

Albus frowned slightly. "Is there nothing I can do to get your mind off of the war for even a few minutes, Harry?" he asked.

Harry slumped forward in his seat. Shaking his head he said, "No, sir. I'm sorry but until Tom is utterly and completely defeated I really can't afford to think about much else."

"What would you like to do for your birthday, Harry?"

"My what?"

"Your birthday. You will be seventeen in a few days and will be coming of age in the wizarding world."

Harry sat back in his chair and thought for a moment. "I don't mean to be a party pooper, sir, but what I would really like to do is get started on the horcruxes and I would like to start with the ring."

Chapter 10. The Ring

Over the course of the next few days, despite Ginny's best efforts to get him to relax, Harry assembled an assault team. The team's objectives were to travel to Little Hangleton, retrieve the ring from beneath the floorboards of the Gaunt's cabin and return to Hogwarts. The goals were to do all of this without alerting any of the death eaters in the area to their presence and without alerting Tom to the fact that they even knew about the horcruxes. The problems lay in the fact Tom was using Riddle Manor as his headquarters; that several dozen death eaters, under strict orders not to bother the muggles, were living in the area, helping Tom plan their Halloween assault on the magical world; and that Tom had placed several wards both in and around Little Hangleton designed to detect magic. The most powerful of these wards were around the cabin itself.

As a result, Harry's team was extremely small. Ron, Hermione, Neville and Luna were going to be blending in with the locals as best they could to provide a cover story for the youngest member of their team. They would be dressed as muggles and would have their wands. They would not, however, be allowed to use their wands unless absolutely necessary. Ginny would be with Harry in a small copse of trees on the opposite side of the valley from Riddle Manor. She was in charge of the emergency portkeys back to Hogwarts and would be carrying a medical kit just in case. Harry would be using his remote viewing abilities to monitor all aspects of the situation. If things started going south he would initiate a communications charm, teleport directly to the cabin, find the ring, grab the seventh member of their team, teleport him to safety and then return to join the fight.

The seventh member of their team was Mark Evans. He was chosen because he was young, relatively small and could get away with the act of being a curious little boy from Greater Hangleton who was just out exploring the woods. He would not have his wand with him because they didn't want to take the chance that the wards Tom had placed on the cabin might be triggered by the presence of a wand. In addition, Mark would be wearing a pair of plain leather gloves to protect himself from any curses that might be on the ring. He was also being given a leather pouch to place the ring in for transport as soon as he retrieved it.

Even though it was something of a rush job Harry felt comfortable with their preparations. He had pulled these six out of their regular afternoon and evening classes and activities so that they could spend most of their time in the Room of Requirement working in a mockup of Little Hangleton and its environs. He also gave them daily briefings on the goings on in Little Hangleton so that they it would not be too difficult to blend in. True, they would be outsiders and the locals would know it but with all of the activity at Riddle Manner, and all of the strangers that had been passing through lately, they might get a few curious glances but it was unlikely anyone would question them too closely.

As a final precaution, two days before their mission they all went into Edinburgh for muggle haircuts. In addition to their haircuts Ron, Hermione, Neville, Luna and Mark all had their hair and eyebrows dyed.

Ron couldn't wait to get the mission over with because he didn't like the dark, chocolate brown color Hermione chose for him. Hermione, by contrast, was enjoying her bright blond hair. True, she knew that she would have to wash it out as soon as they got back to Hogwarts but she was enjoying it while she could. Neville and Mark wound up receiving the same color hair as Ron as the three of them would be posing as brothers. And Luna, going against type, became a brunette. With

Harry's help she even went so far as to purchase a pair of brown contact lenses to change her the color of her eyes. Their cover story was going to be that Ron and Neville, using the aliases of John and Brain, had been asked by their parents to take their little brother, Mark, exploring and that Mark had insisted upon walking over to Little Hangleton. Hermione and Luna, using the names Rachel and Joyce, were their girlfriends who had agreed to go along to keep them company.

And so it was that immediately after their run and breakfast on July 31st the seven members of this team left the castle grounds, walked into Hogsmeade and, with Harry's help, teleported to the little cops of trees Harry and Ginny would be using as their base of operations. The fact that it was just off the road to Greater Hangleton was a plus because it made their cover story more believable..

The air was cool and clear when they arrived. A misting rain was making its way down the valley but, if all went according to plan, they would be long gone before it arrived.

As the others made their way out to the road and down into Little Hangleton Harry and Ginny settled down to monitor the situation and wait. While Ginny, using as little magic as possible, lay out their medicinal supplies and prepared for an emergency evacuation Harry made himself comfortable in a nest of roots and dropped into the proper meditative state for remote viewing. It would take the others a few minutes to reach the village so he decided to do a little poking around to see what Tom was up to.

Tom was currently holding court on the manor's main gallery. Maps of Wizarding Britain were laid out on a long table and the remaining members of his inner circle, in addition to several of the recent escapees from Azkaban, including Draco Malfoy, were pouring over their plans. One thing Harry noticed about Draco was that, while he had been an evil spoiled brat before his stint in Azkaban, his stay in the wizarding prison, had changed him. He was now just plain evil. There was a wild, calculating glint in his eye that spoke volumes about the unhinged mind currently in possession of Draco Malfoy's body. As he watched his former classmate flit from map to map, unable to concentrate on anything for more than a few minutes at a time, he wondered how the purgatory charm would affect him.

Turning his attention back to his friends as they entered the village Harry watched as they played their roles as smoothly as an acting troop might after six weeks of rehearsal. Ron and Neville quickly grew tired of Mark's incessant demands to go explore, Ron preferring a visit to the local pub while Neville opted for a stroll through the village square to examine the plants. Leaving their boyfriends to their devices, "Rachel" only after extracting a promise from "John" that he would not drink too much, set out to explore the shops which left Mark free to explore the surrounding woods.

Given their time limit of two hours, to make their visit convincing, Mark began by walking in the general direction of the stand of trees where he knew the cabin to be located. Harry had coached him not to take a direct route because that would be too obvious. Instead, Mark was to begin by exploring the fringes of the forest nearest the village and gradually work his way in. When he was safely out of site of the village he would be able to take a more direct route to the cabin, but not too direct just in case there were any death eaters patrolling the forest. They wanted it to appear, for all intents and purposes, that he had stumbled upon it by accident.

Mark took his time, playing his part convincingly, and slowly worked his way into the woods, scaring up a few small game animals in the process. Forty-five minutes into their allotted time he

was within sight of the cabin and was, with the feigned curiosity of a child his age, making his way towards it with due speed. Harry could tell that Mark was being ever watchful for any signs of death eater activity because not only was he being careful in the placement of his feet, to make as little noise and leave as little sign as possible, but he was pausing every few seconds to listen for any signs of human activity in the area.

When he was within striking distance of the cabin Mark stopped and listened even more intently for several seconds before approaching one of the side windows. Peering through the dusty glass all he could see was a dimly lit room with a thick layering of dust on the floor. After checking all of the other windows, being careful not to touch any of them so as to leave as little evidence as possible, Mark put on his gloves and pulled out the small can of oil Hermione had insisted he bring and oiled the door's hinges as thoroughly as he dared. The goal was to relieve them of their squeak but not to leave any evidence of the fact that they had been oiled. So, using one of Harry's old socks as a rag, he oiled each hinge, catching the runoff with the sock, and waited for the oil to do its work.

At one hour into their allotted time – things were still going according to plan – Mark carefully opened the cabin's front door. It was stiff and groaned slightly but it was nothing too drastic. Once inside he closed the door, leaving it unlatched in case he need to make a run for it, and moved to the loose floorboard in the back right-hand corner of the front room. Working his fingers under the edge he carefully lifted the board out of the floor and set it aside.

After taking the leather pouch out of his pocket and laying it aside, Mark reached into the darkness and felt around for the ring. It was exactly where Harry had placed it in all of their drills. He wrapped his gloved fingers around and was about to withdraw his arm from the hole when a sudden noise coming from outside caused him to freeze in place.

Harry had been so focused on Mark's progress that had he had inadvertently blocked out everything else. Zooming out he checked the perimeter but couldn't sense anything amiss. Checking Tom's wards he was relieved to find that none of them had been activated. At the same time he was terrified that he had missed something and that something would happen to Mark and he would be powerless to stop it. He couldn't activate the communications charm because that would alert Tom to their presence and that was the last thing he wanted to do. So, all he could do was wait and pray.

He could tell that Mark was moving even more carefully than he had been. At the same time he could tell that Mark was determined to complete his part of the mission. As Harry returned his attention to Mark his cousin was tightening the pouch's drawstring, closing the ring inside. He tucked the pouch back into his pocket and carefully lifted the floorboard to put it back. He was in the process of returning the floorboard to its original location when he heard something skittering across the roof, which caused him to freeze again.

This time Harry was prepared and zoomed out in time to see a squirrel jumping from the roof to a low-hanging branch. Breathing a sigh of relief Harry returned his attention to Mark who was in the process of gently tapping the floorboard into place. Harry had no way of knowing what Mark was thinking but was relieved when his second-cousin stood up and began tip toeing across the room to the front door.

Mark waited, listening at the door for almost a minute before slowly, carefully and gently easing the door open. When he was through he closed the door again, this time making sure to secure the latch, and carefully made his way off the porch and back into the woods. Twenty minutes later, five

minutes behind schedule, Mark emerged from the forest and began walking back into the village where he was to meet up with Neville and Luna before going to the book store for Hermione and the pub for Ron. He seemed to know that he was running behind schedule but if there was one thing Harry had drilled into all of them it was not to do anything to draw too much attention to themselves.

When Mark walked into the village square Neville looked up, his concern evident in his eyes, and Harry could tell that he was struggling to remain calm as he walked over to his "little brother".

After a brief conversation, during which Luna asked if he was alright and Mark assured him that he was and surreptitiously let them know that he had been successful, the three of them made their way to the book store where they met "Rachel" who was in the process of buying a trilogy of fantasy novels. From there they went over to the pub to find "John" who was sitting in a darkened corner where he could safely observe the front door as well as most of the pub's patrons.

Ron breathed a sigh of relief when they walked through the door and almost leaped from his chair as they approached his table. When they were safely outside and walking along the road to Greater Hangleton Ron asked the question that was on all of their minds. "What happened?" he asked.

Mark let out his breath and ran his fingers through his hair in a show of relief. "Everything was going fine until I heard some noises," he said while rubbing his forehead, still anxious from the uncertainties he had endured less than an hour earlier. "I had to listen and wait until whatever it was had passed. That slowed me down. I'm not sure what made the noises but I think it was animals."

"Did anyone see you?" Hermione asked.

Mark shook his head. "I don't think so. I did what Harry told me and played it cool. That may have slowed me down a little bit as well, but if anyone was watching me I don't think they had any reason to suspect anything."

"Any problems finding the ring?" Neville asked.

Mark looked up the road and took a deep breath. After letting it out he said, "No. it was exactly where Harry said it would be. The only problems I had were with the noises and taking my time to make sure I was not being followed."

They walked along the road for a few minutes in silence when Luna asked, "Did the oil help? I know it was Hermione's idea but I've never oil before because everything at the Quibbler runs on magic and was wondering if it did what it was supposed to do."

Mark grinned at Luna's naiveté where muggles were concerned then smiled thankfully at Hermione. "Yes, it did," he said. "The door was still stiff and groaned a bit but at least it opened."

Hermione smiled at the others' recognition of her seemingly minor contribution to the success of the mission. She already knew that Harry appreciated her suggestion because he had taken her aside the night she had suggested it and thanked her for correcting his oversight but it still meant a lot to her that the others recognized her contribution. They were, after all, three pure bloods – Mark being the exception as he was, like herself, a muggle-born – who had very little experience with anything non-magical.

When they reached the cops of trees where Harry and Ginny were waiting for them Harry immediately took Mark aside and, shaking his head in wonder, said, "Mark, I'm glad you're on our side. I don't think anyone else could have done it. You have got nerves of steel and ..." Harry hesitated a moment then smiled and pulled Mark into a heartfelt hug. "Thank you!" he said.

Mark blushed at the praise. "You're welcome, Harry," he said. "I understand why you couldn't activate the communications charm so, when I heard those noises, all I could do was freeze and wait. I didn't think you would let yourself get captured so when you didn't come I had little choice but to complete my mission."

Harry shook his head and smiled. "Like I said, nerves of steel."

Reaching into his pocket Mark pulled out the leather pouch with the ring inside and handed it to Harry. "Do you mind if I ask why leather; why not dragon hide?"

Harry accepted the pouch and tied it even more securely before putting it in his own pocket. "It's the wards," he said. "I don't know how sensitive the wards around that cabin are and for all I know, the combination of dragon hide and your own magical energies might have set them off. We were taking a chance sending you in as it was; I just didn't want to push our luck."

Mark smiled and nodded his understanding. "Thanks."

Harry reached out and shook Mark's hand. "No," he said honestly. "Thank you, Mark. You don't know how proud I am of you and I know that your parents and sister would be proud if they knew what you have done."

When they returned to Hogwarts the rest of the students were still running through their morning drills. To the seven, however, the stress of the morning's activities was more than enough to make up for the two-and-a-half hours they had missed. Even Hermione didn't protest when Harry suggested they take the rest of the morning off and join him in the Chamber of Secrets to witness the destruction of the ring.

After reporting in to Albus, who asked to look at the ring and subsequently studied it for several second before handing it back, they made their way to Moaning Myrtle's bathroom and, from there, down into the Chamber of Secrets. With Hogwarts' help Harry had removed the parseltongue requirements and replaced the chute with a rickety lift that would hold up to ten adults. It wasn't a final solution to the problem of accessing the chamber but it was a start.

When the lift opened at the end of its downward journey Ron let out a low whistle. "I like what you've done to the place, Harry," he said.

Harry looked around the small antechamber. The floor was a polished sandstone. The walls were polished as well with a continuous bench running the length and breadth of the room, being interrupted only by the lift's doors and an archway leading into the depths of the secret chamber. The ceiling currently radiated natural sunlight. Harry's goal was to recreate the charms used in the Great Hall throughout the chamber so that if they ever had to use it as an evacuation center the people would not have to contend with stifling darkness but that would take time and, even with Hogwarts' help, would require at least three additional witches and wizards to sequentially cast a number of charms, many of which needed to be cast simultaneously. For now he was satisfied with the warm, glowing light he had been able to create with Ethrindell's coaching and Hogwarts' help.

After mumbling something about it being a work in progress Harry led his friends out of the antechamber and into the main cave. This part of the chamber was wider and higher than it had been in his first year. The walls and floor were not as polished as the antechamber but they were relatively smooth, with the occasional bump or indentation to mark the imperfections. A narrow stream of water wound its way along the length of the cave, occasionally wandering off into the shadows only to reemerge several yards later as it approached the chamber proper. Harry's goal for this part of the underground sanctuary was the creation of a large garden area where the people could relax and get away from each other for some alone time.

When they reached what had been the entrance to the chamber proper Harry reached out and took Ginny's hand. When she looked up into his eyes he smiled reassuringly and nodded his head towards the narrow opening. Where a circular, serpentine vault door had once stood there was now a roughly hewn set of stone steps leading down into the subject of many of Ginny's nightmares.

A small waterfall tumbled down a depression in the steps, pooling at the bottom before the stream continued a winding course toward the small lake at the far end of the chamber. All of the serpentine pillars had been permanently transfigured and replaced with simple support columns. The statue at the far end of the chamber had been destroyed and replaced with a simple arched entrance. To get to this entrance, however, they had to cross a narrow footbridge that arched over the moat.

The chambers beyond this archway were filled with the bottled, jarred and packaged remains of the basilisk. Harry led his friends to small room at the end of the long corridor. In this room, on a raised dais along the back wall of the room were five large mason jars filled with the basilisk's venom. Picking up one of the jars he moved it over to an empty workbench and took the lid off. As he removed the leather pouch and ring from his pocket he said, "I've only destroyed one horcrux before and it was not a pretty sight so you might want to stand back because I have no idea what is going to happen when I drop it in the venom."

When everyone else was a safe distance away Harry opened the jar, loosened the pouches leather ties and, upending the pouch, resigned its contents to the venom of the king of snakes. At first nothing happened. Then, slowly, the venom began to boil and steam. Moments later an almighty scream filled the room, echoing from one end of the chamber to the other, causing all present to clap their hands over their ears.

When the scream had faded away and the ringing in his ears had stopped Harry walked over to the workbench and examined the contents of the jar. Apparently the venom had worked as an acid. There was nothing left of the ring save a thin, smoldering film on the surface of the liquid that was rapidly being eaten away by the venom's magical properties. When even this film had completely vanished Harry put the lid back on the jar, sealed it, labeled it as having been used to destroy a horcrux and locked it in a cupboard on the other side of the room. He didn't want anybody using it ever again. At the same time, however, he didn't want to destroy it because there was always the possibility that some day someone might need it to destroy another horcrux. His plan was to use four of the jars to destroy the smaller horcruxes. He still didn't know how he was going to deal with Nagini but the fifth jar would somehow be used in her death and destruction.

Chapter 11. A Confession

It hadn't been much of a birthday as parties go, especially for someone' who had come of age in the Wizarding world, but the destruction of Tom's second horcrux was a gift Harry would not soon forget. It meant that they were beginning the processes that would ensure Tom's demise when the final confrontation finally came.

That evening, while eating dinner in the Great Hall with his friends, a single owl flew in through the opening in the roof and began circling the room in search of its quarry. It was a strange owl in that it was not one of the school's owls but Harry could not pick up any particularly malevolent energies as he scanned the parchment tied to its leg so, like everyone else, he watched and waited for it to find the letter's intended recipient.

After three orbits the owl began a long, slow dive and came in for a graceful landing on Harry's shoulder. As most of the students returned to their conversations and meals Harry reached up with his left hand and lifted the owl off of his right shoulder. He noticed, as he lowered the owl to the table's surface, that it was wearing a finely crafted coat of arm on its breast. Upon closer inspection he recognized it as the Gringotts crest. Harry offered the owl a piece of meat, which it greedily devoured while he loosed the string relieving it of its burden.

As the owl flew off Harry glanced up at the head table for some reason and noticed that Remus, Tonks and Albus were all watching him with curious expressions on their faces. Glancing around the table at his friends he noticed that Ron, Hermione, Neville, Luna, Ginny and Mark were all watching him expectantly. Turning his attention to the parchment he broke the simple wax seal, unrolled the tightly wound tube and began to read:

From the desk of Ragnok
Manager and Head Goblin
Gringotts Bank
Diagon Alley
London, England

Dear Mr. Potter,

It has come to our attention that at 00:01:56 this morning you reached the age of seventeen, which, according to Wizarding tradition, means that you have reached the age of majority. Under the circumstances it also means that you are now able to lay claim to your full inheritance. Our records show that this inheritance includes the two Potter Family vaults as well as several Black Family vaults, which have been being managed, on your behalf, by two of our account managers and, as of last year, by one Mr. Remus John Lupin. Since your account is so large, we, my associates and I, respectfully request a meeting at your earliest convenience.

Sincerely,

Ragnok,
Manager and Head Goblin
Gringotts Bank
Diagon Alley
London, England

Beneath this was a more personal note that had clearly been hand written.

Mr. Potter,

Due to your foresight in protecting the few rogue goblins who participated in last December's battle you have earned our respect and support in this war. We are fully aware of what is at stake and support you in your efforts. Our laws prohibit active participation in Wizarding affairs. If, however, there is anything we at Gringotts can do to further your cause please let me know.

Ragnok

As Harry rolled the parchment back up, oblivious to his friends' questioning gazes, he wondered if he could somehow use this information to gain access to the Lestrange and Umbridge vaults. He didn't want to be arrogant in pressing this advantage but at the same time he needed to get the

horcruxes out of those vaults so that they could be destroyed.

And then there was the complication Bill had warned him about after their victory in December: No matter how grateful a goblin might be it was unlikely they would be willing to help a human unless they could see some form of profit in it for themselves. Bill had told him that, while he had earned the goblins' respect by protecting the renegades, he should not ask anything of the goblin nation unless he had something of value to offer in return.

Ethrindell had told him that Gryffindor's sword was goblin made and that, as such, was viewed as a priceless antique in the goblin world but he didn't want to use that as a bargaining chip. After the war, yes, he would gladly give it to them if they would help him get his hands on Slytherin's locket and Hufflepuff's goblet but not until Tom had been defeated.

As he put the rolled up parchment in his pocket he knew he would have to prepare an effective presentation, proving beyond all doubt that Tom had used the locket and goblet to create horcruxes, and that he would most likely have to take a blood oath – something frowned upon in the Wizarding world – promising that no matter the outcome of the war Gryffindor's sword would become the exclusive property of the London branch of Gringotts at some point in the future.

Looking up Harry saw Ron's curious expression and faintly smiled. "Gringotts," he said. "Now that I'm seventeen they want to meet with me to discuss my holdings."

That seemed to satisfy his friend because Ron nodded his head and returned to his meal.

Later that evening, after almost everyone else had gone to bed Harry was sitting in Albus' office playing with his Wizarding model of the Hungarian horntail he had purchased in Hogsmeade the previous Halloween, practicing channeling the castle's energies into his spells. He was flying the model gracefully around the office, occasionally spouting small streams of flame and/or diving down to irritate Fawks who was seated on his perch watching the dragon's antics. As magical feats went it was something only a very few could ever hope to achieve but something was bothering Harry and it showed in the model's performance.

"What's wrong, Harry?" Albus asked after the dragon narrowly missed colliding with an open cupboard door for the third time that evening.

For a moment it almost seemed as though Harry had not heard him but then the dragon banked its wings and came gliding in from across the room for a perfect five-point landing at Harry's feet. After it had assumed a neutral position Harry opened his eyes and looked over at his mentor. "Where would you like to start?" he asked softly. "A lot of things are bothering me, Albus, and I don't know what to do about any of them."

Albus leaned forward in his chair and studied Harry for several seconds before responding. "Why don't we start with those thoughts that are foremost in your mind," he said gently, giving Harry the opportunity to organize his thoughts in a relatively stress free environment.

Harry glanced up at Albus and then lowered his gaze to study the model of the Hungarian Horntail at his feet. Starting at the head he said, "My biggest concern is the horcruxes. I destroyed the diary in my second year. With a lot of help, Mark and I destroyed the ring this morning. I don't know if you heard it or not but my ears were still ringing after almost five minutes."

Albus nodded. "Yes, I heard it," he confirmed.

Harry smirked slightly at Albus' tone. "I am going to give it a few days before retrieving and destroying the diadem because I don't know how if Tom can sense them anymore or not and I'm afraid that if we destroy too many of them too quickly it might tip our hand and he might figure out that we know about the horcruxes."

Pulling the letter from Gringotts out of his pocket he unrolled it and levitated it over to Albus' desk. "Ragnok has said that they are willing to help but, as Bill said, their help does not come without a price. I am going to need their help to get Slytherin's locket and Hufflepuff's goblet but the only thing I have to offer that they might be interested in is Gryffindor's sword." When Albus' eyebrows rose Harry held his hand up to forestall any argument. "According to Ethrindell, Gryffindor's sword is goblin made and, according to goblin tradition, rightfully belongs to the goblin nation. He also said that it would be viewed as a priceless antique in their world. I don't want to just give it to them in exchange for their help in retrieving the locket and goblet because I have a feeling we are going to need it when it comes time to deal with Nagini but I am willing to take a blood oath to ensure that they receive it after the war, no matter the outcome."

Albus looked up and frowned. "You do realize that if we do not win this war, by taking a blood oath you would be condemning yourself to haunt whomever is in possession of the sword until the oath is fulfilled."

Harry nodded. "Yes, I do. But it is a risk I am willing to take if it will give me a chance at destroying those two horcruxes."

Moving down to the dragon's neck Harry said, "I saw Draco Malfoy today. I was viewing Riddle Manor while the others were walking into Little Hangleton and Malfoy was there. I'm worried, Albus. If I thought he was bad before but, he is absolutely deranged now. This modified purgatory charm Ethrindell and I are working on has got to work because if it doesn't the aftermath will be an unthinkable mess."

Albus frowned but nodded his understanding. "What are your thoughts?"

"Harry was silent for almost a minute, thinking over through their options. "I am going to do everything in my power to make sure it works because if it does anyone who has voluntarily taken the dark mark will be subjected to the charm's affects. If it doesn't, we have got to be ready to act and to act fast because who knows how many of them will go on the war path."

Moving down to the dragon's body and back Harry sighed then said, "My next concern, Albus, is my relationship with Ginny." Rubbing his eyes he said, "I have been so focused on the war since our return from the elven realm that I feel like I'm neglecting her. I know she knows that I love her and she has been a real trooper but ... I don't know what to do, Albus!"

Albus watched the helpless feeling flit across Harry's face for several seconds before responding. "All I can suggest, Harry," he said gently, "is that you and Ginny take tomorrow afternoon off for some alone time. There is a quiet little clearing on the other side of the lake. I suggest you pack a picnic lunch and make an afternoon of it."

Harry smiled and nodded his head. "Thank you, Albus. I think we will."

Moving down to the dragon's tail Harry said, "My final concern, Albus, is the amount of power that is going to be going into the charm. More than likely Tom will be drawing energy from most, if not all, of his followers when he tries to kill me. I've been watching him over the past few days and remote viewing his reasons behind turning the dark mark into an energy sink. He seems to think that with sufficient power he will be able to overcome the rebounding charm. I'm really not all that worried about that. What does concern me is the amount of power I am going to be channeling from Hogwarts and, by extension, the planet to hold the energy structures of the spell together and make it work." Looking into Albus' eyes he finally voiced his chief concern. "I ... I ... I don't even know if I will survive it, Albus," he choked out, tears welling up in his eyes. "If ... if Ethrindell is correct, I will be channeling more power through my body in one second than ... than all of the students at Hogwarts combined use in any given year. I'm going to do everything in my power to make it work but ... but I honestly don't know if I will survive."

Albus was silent. What could he say? Harry had just told him that he was willing to take a blood oath to gain access to two of Tom's horcruxes and that he was willing to give his life to put an end to the darkest wizard the world had ever known.

The two men, for in Albus' eyes Harry truly was a man among men, sat in companionable silence for so long that both of them lost track of time. Around midnight Albus put the model dragon back in its cupboard and went up to his rooms, leaving Harry in the company of Fawkes who was probably the best company Harry could ask for at this time.

On his way up the stairs he turned around and started to say something but held his peace. Life was not supposed to get so complicated so soon. Most young men Harry's age were still thinking about girls, homework and socializing with their friends, but the cares and concerns Harry was dealing with were not supposed to be a part of anyone's life. His heart went out to the young man sitting alone in his office with a radiant phoenix perched on his knee. He wanted to help but this was so much more than even he had ever had to deal with that he honestly didn't know what to say.

Turning away, Albus Dumbledore quietly made his way up to his rooms and gently closed the door. As he got himself ready for bed he prayed to whatever god had created this world and asked it to help Harry survive this war so that he could find some true happiness in his life.

Chapter 12. Gringotts

Harry spent the whole of the next afternoon with Ginny, Dobby and Winky just playing and relaxing in a secluded clearing not far from the lake's opposite shore. It was a break they had all needed and Dobby went out of his way to make sure they made the most of it. They climbed trees, played hide and seek and tag and Harry and Ginny even transformed into their animagus forms and gave their 'children' rides around the clearing and through the surrounding trees. The only down side of the day was that it ended too quickly for all of them. It had been a blissful day of fun and games they had all needed and would not soon forget.

The next morning, on the second of August, Harry and Albus apparated to the Ministry of Magic where Harry took his apparation test and passed with flying colors. The examiner's only comment was about the fact that Harry's disappearance pop was almost silent. Her comment had been that it usually took years for even the most experienced witch or wizard to accomplish near-silent apparation.

Their next stop was Gringotts. After silently apparating into the back of Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes they quickly walked down the street and into the bank. Albus was dressed in a subdued greyish blue robe and Harry was once again wearing the faded red baseball cap that Tonks had given him the summer after his fifth year. What only Harry and Albus knew was that Harry's traveling cloak was hiding the sword of Gryffindor. They had brought it along as a bargaining chip.

As they entered the lobby a well dressed goblin wearing the red and black silks of Ragnok's clan stepped out of the shadows and approached them at a fast walk. "Albus Dumbledore, Harry Potter?" the goblin asked, an unpleasant sneer on his face. When Harry and Albus nodded the unknown goblin growled softly then snapped, "Follow me! Quickly!"

As they hurried across the floor the gold and silver threads woven into the fabric of the goblin's cape created a rippling effect as the light was reflected off their pigments. The goblin silently led them through one door, along several corridors and both up and down several flights of steps before stopping in front of a large, ornately decorated wooden door with the Gringotts crest dominating its upper half. A golden plaque with Ragnok's name and many titles, in both English and Gobbeldygook, was fastened to the door just below the crest. With a single, sharp rap the as yet unnamed goblin turned on his heel and left, leaving Harry and Albus alone in the corridor.

Moments later they heard the sounds of someone approaching the door from the other side. When the door opened an older goblin who looked to have survived multiple attacks stood before them. So far as Harry could tell, Ragnok was not overly large as goblins went but his aura was that of a warrior and his eyes held a wisdom that told Harry all he needed to know. Ragnok was a fair and just goblin, fairer and more just than many humans, but at the same time he was a shrewd businessman who could drive a hard bargain. This was a goblin Harry knew he could trust to do the right thing.

Opening the door wide Ragnok invited Harry and Albus into his private office. Once they were all comfortably seated Ragnok looked between Harry and Albus, apparently uncertain as to which of them he should address first. Albus ended the impasse by clearing his throat. "Ragnok," he began gently, "we are honored by your presence and thank you for taking the time to meet with us on such short notice."

Ragnok curtly nodded his grizzled head. "The honor is returned, Albus Dumbledore." Turning to Harry he said, "Mr. Potter, your headmaster informs me that you wish to discuss a topic of some importance. He would not tell me what it was but he did tell me that it is much more important your coming into your inheritance."

Harry smiled at Ragnok's use of Albus' title. He hadn't referred to Albus as 'headmaster' in quite some time and it was almost humorous to be reminded of Albus' official title. Reaching into one of the inside pockets of his traveling cloak he withdrew several small vials of a silvery gaseous liquid and a small wooden box. With the flick of his wrist his wand suddenly appeared in his right hand, having been launched into position from one of the wrist holsters Tonks and Kingsley had given him for his sixteenth birthday.

With a muttered charm the box grew to fill the center of Ragnok's desk. Glancing up Harry asked, "Is your office secure?"

"As secure as any office can be," Ragnok said gruffly.

Harry quirked a questioning eyebrow. "Do you mind if I add a few privacy charms of my own? What I am about to share can go no further than this room and, if you will forgive my paranoia, I just want to be sure."

Ragnok glared at Harry for several seconds. Harry knew he was taking a risk by even suggesting that Gringotts security was substandard by any measure but experience, especially in light of his own abilities, had taught him not to take any chances when secrecy and security were concerned. Harry was afraid he had overstepped his bounds and that Ragnok would refuse his request when the goblin nodded his head. "How good are you?" Ragnok demanded.

Harry was taken aback and knew that his expression showed his surprise, curiosity and shock. "'Remote viewing is not unheard of in goblin lore," Ragnok growled. "How good are you?"

Harry had the courtesy to blush. "I'm good enough to penetrate Gringotts' wards," he said modestly.

Ragnok's brows rose slightly as he growled softly in the back of his throat. "Can you block yourself?"

Harry nodded. "Yes," he said. "It takes a complex series of spells but I can do it."

Ragnok glanced at Albus who nodded. "Do it!" He commanded.

For the next five minutes Harry wielded his wand more deftly than any orchestral conductor could ever hope to wave their favorite baton as he composed layer upon layer of energy whose sole purpose was to block any remote viewers from gaining access to Ragnok's office.

When he was finished Harry returned to the desk and opened the small wooden crate. Reaching in he carefully lifted his pensieve out of the box's padded depths and gently lowered it to rest beside its container. After placing the box on the floor Harry picked up one of the vials and swirled it around, studying its contents with a practiced eye. "What I have here," he began, "are pensieve memories of a few of the remote viewing sessions I conducted last week. I feel I can trust you to keep what you are about to see to yourself."

Ragnok curtly nodded his acceptance of the unspoken conditions Harry was placing on the revelations to come.

"I don't know if you know this or not, sir, but Voldemort's real name is Tom Marvolo Riddle." When Ragnok did not respond Harry nodded and moved on to his next revelation. "Tom is a half-blood." Apparently this revelation got the goblin leader's attention because he raised his eyes to look more closely at Harry and leaned back in his seat with a thoughtful expression on his face. "From everything I have been able to learn about Tom, his primary motives seem to lie in to consolidation of power, within himself, and the use of that power to shape the world in his own image, free will be damned. He doesn't care about anyone but himself.

"What makes Tom a particularly menacing creature is that he has taken the unholy step of voluntarily and intentionally splitting his soul into seven pieces and creating seven horcruxes to ensure his survival, even after death."

The thoughtful expression on Ragnok's face intensified.

"I have already destroyed two of his horcruxes and know both what and where the other four are. The problem is that two of them are here, in Gringotts."

This really got Ragnok's attention. Pushing his chair back from his desk the bank manager stood up and began pacing along a well-worn path near the back wall. Several silent minutes later he returned to his desk and, placing his clawed hands on the edge of his desk, glared up at Harry. "You have evidence of this I presume." His voice was cold and threatening and Harry knew that few goblins, and even fewer humans, could stand up to Ragnok's penetrating glare for long.

Bowing his head slightly in deference to Ragnok's position and status in the goblin and Wizarding worlds. "Yes."

"And what do you have to offer in exchange for my assistance?" Ragnok's voice was a deep, threatening growl and Harry noticed that the nails on Ragnok's fingers were beginning to tear at the desk's varnished surface.

This was it: the coup de gras. He had asked the most powerful goblin in the United Kingdom to break his own laws to help him defeat one of the darkest wizards of all time and Ragnok had tentatively agreed, pending the perceived and actual value of what he had to offer. What he did next could easily decide the outcome of the war and the fate of the Wizarding world.

Loosening the clasp on his traveling cloak Harry said, "What I have to offer is a part of my inheritance. It is a goblin-made artifact that is more than a thousand years old." By this time Harry had removed his traveling cloak and was in the process of loosening the buckles holding the sword's scabbard in place on his back.

Ragnok was watching his moves carefully, an interested and slightly curious expression on his face.

"I have need of this artifact through the end of the war but after that, once the war is over no matter the outcome, I am willing to gift it to you and the entire goblin nation."

As Harry laid the scabbard on Ragnok's desk the goblin reached out to take possession of it. Harry let him but continued speaking. "As a form of insurance policy I am willing to take a blood oath to make sure you receive it."

Ragnok suddenly looked up from his inspection of the scabbard, belt and chains, a startled

expression on his face. "Mr. Potter," he said, "You do realize what you are asking."

Harry nodded.

"A blood oath is the binding of two souls to a business transaction. They are very rare in your world and, to my knowledge, a blood oath has never been sworn between a goblin and a human."

Harry nodded again. "I know what I am asking, sir. I am asking you to bind your soul to me to ensure that you will deliver these two horcruxes to me within the next few weeks. In return I am asking to be allowed to bind my soul to you, as a form of insurance policy, to ensure that Godric Gryffindor's sword is delivered into your hands at war's end." With this Harry drew the sword out of the scabbard and laid it crosswise on Ragnok's desk.

Ragnok's eyes bulged slightly at the sight of the sword and gasp escaped his lips as he lifted it from the desk for inspection. "M ... m ... mister Potter," he breathed. "This is a priceless antique! In our world it is worth more than all of the gold in Gringotts World Wide! If you are willing to part with this in exchange for two horcruxes, which you wish to destroy I might add, then ... then who am I to refuse?"

Harry breathed an internal sigh of relief. The hard part, convincing Ragnok of his sincerity, was finished. All they had to do now was perform the blood oath to seal the deal.

Picking up his traveling cloak he withdrew a silver dagger from one of its inside pockets and pricked the index finger of his left hand. After handing the dagger to Ragnok, who pricked the index finger on his left hand as well before laying the dagger on the desk beside the sword, he placed several drops of his own blood in the palm of his right hand.

When Ragnok was ready Harry reached out, they clasped hands and locked eyes. Albus drew his wand and began waving it over their clasped hands, muttering a complex spell while Ragnok and Harry stated their oaths.

"I, Ragnok," Ragnok began, "swear a blood oath to Harry Potter. I swear that I will deliver the two horcruxes he requires of me, into his hands, by no later than August sixteenth of this year."

Before he could lose his nerve Harry said, "I, Harry Potter, swear a blood oath to Ragnok, Head goblin of Gringotts Bank in London, England. I swear that I will deliver the sword that once belonged to Godric Gryffindor into his hands at war's end, no matter the outcome."

As Ragnok and Harry began reciting their oaths the drops of blood in the palms of their hands mingled and grew warm. As they continued their recitations a ball of energy formed within their clasped hands that threatened to push their hands apart. When they were finished, when Harry said the last word in his oath, the ball of energy swelled and was absorbed into their hands.

When the spell was complete and the blood bond sealed Harry and Ragnok released each other's hand. "You have courage, Mr. Potter," Ragnok said. "I will live up to my end of the bargain and I have no doubt that you will live up to your end of the bargain as well."

Harry closed his eyes and bowed his head. "I fully intend to, sir," he sighed. "If it is the last thing I do in this world I will see to it that this sword is delivered into your hands at the conclusion of this war."

"Now," Ragnok said, returning their attention to the business at hand, "let's see what I have just agreed to deliver into your hands in exchange for this most generous gift."

After re-sheathing the sword and securing the scabbard's straps around his torso Harry emptied the contents of the vials he had brought with him into his pensieve. For the next three hours Harry, Ragnok and Albus reviewed the evolution of Tom Riddle from bullying orphan to one of the most powerful dark wizards their world had ever known. When it came to the creation of his first horcrux Ragnok frowned. A diary was a simple item that could easily be overlooked. The ring, however, was a trophy.

At one point Ragnok asked Harry to pause the memory so that he could get a better look at the ring. After studying it for several minutes he stepped back, apparently satisfied with what he had learned, and glanced curiously up at Albus who nodded his head as if confirming Ragnok's suspicions.

Ragnok watched the creation of the next three horcruxes and their histories with interest. He hissed at Ravenclaw's diadem. It was an elven creation and goblins had never really gotten along with the high elves. His reactions to Slytherin's locket, a dwarfish creation, and Hufflepuff's goblet, a gift from the faeries, were less severe. When he saw their histories, however, he groaned, claiming that he would have to wear gloves to keep himself clean when handling them.

When it came to Voldemort's use of Nagini as his sixth horcrux Ragnok once again looked to Dumbledore. Albus shrugged his shoulders. "He must have been desperate. Under normal circumstances, however, that snake would most likely outlive us all."

"And this is why you need the sword?" Ragnok asked.

Harry nodded solemnly. "Yes. Before the final battle I am going to treat the length of its blade with basilisk venom. The only way we can kill that snake and destroy the horcrux is to cut its head off. I haven't figured out how I'm going to do it yet but rest assured, before the final spell is cast Tom Riddle will be out of horcruxes."

When they emerged from the pensieve Ragnok looked across at Harry and then over at Albus. "Your world could not have asked for a better hero, Albus Dumbledore." Then, turning back to Harry, asked, "Is there anything else we can do for you today, Mr. Potter?"

Harry closed his eyes, bowed his head and sighed. As his shoulders slumped slightly forward he said, "Yes. I need a will."

Albus turned his head and looked over at his student, a slightly surprised expression on his face but a look of understanding in his eyes. Ragnok, however, sat back in his chair and tilted his head slightly to one side. "You do not expect to survive?" he asked.

Harry shook his head. "No," he whispered, "I don't." Then, opening his eyes and looking across the desk at the goblin with whom he shared an uncertain fate, he said, "Oh, the possibility does exist that I will survive but right now I am not very hopeful."

After several seconds of stunned silence Ragnok stood up. "Very well," he said and walked over to a large cupboard. "I keep a small supply of crystals on hand for situations like this. I haven't had occasion to use one in many, long years but I think this qualifies."

Once he had set the crystal ball in the center of his desk Ragnok glanced over at Harry. "Are you ready?" he asked.

Harry swallowed nervously and then nodded his head.

Albus stood up from his chair and walked over to stand beside the door, out of the crystal's recording range. Ragnok tapped the crystal and hurried over to stand beside Albus. "When it begins to glow, in about five seconds, Mr. Potter, you can begin."

Harry nodded and stood up, nervously rubbing his fingers together as he watched and waited for the crystal to begin glowing.

Several seconds later, when the crystal sphere began to glow, Harry let out the breath he hadn't known he was holding in a gushing sigh then closed his eyes, bowed his head, opened his eyes, raised his head again and looked squarely at the crystal ball on the desk in front of him. "Ladies and gentlemen," he began, "if you are viewing this then I did not survive the final battle. My only hope is that the spell Ethrindell and I have been working on since early in July worked and that Tom Riddle is no more. If this is the case then it is my wish that everyone involved in the destruction of the horcruxes and the execution of my final spell, including Hogwarts, receive some form of recognition for their efforts." Grinning slightly he said, "I think chocolate frog cards would be in order for Mark Evans, Ron Weasley, Hermione Granger, Neville Longbottom, Luna Lovegood, Ginevra Weasley and Ethrindell Zhazrine."

Reaching up and across with his right arm and hand Harry drew Gryffindor's sword and gazed lovingly along its length. "This," he said, looking back at the crystal, "is a priceless heirloom in the Wizarding world and it is mine to dispose of as I see fit. Under magical contract it is to be delivered into the hands of Ragnok, the head goblin at Gringotts bank in Diagon Alley, London, England. Ragnok, what we have done is unusual to say the least. It is my hope that our actions will, in some small way, pave the way for a more open cultural exchange between our two races."

After carefully returning the sword to its scabbard Harry looked down and studied his hands briefly before looking back at the crystal. As a thought occurred to him he smiled. "As you can tell," he said, "I am not the showman my godfather was. Sirius Black both was and is a class act. If you are viewing this then it is my hope that I will be with him shortly, pranking my father into submission."

Turning serious he said, "I am a very wealthy man and I have far too many possessions for any one man to deal with in a dozen lifetimes, let alone one single lifetime, and so I ... I pray that those of you who are named in this will ... will accept these gifts without question or protest.

"To Remus and Dora Lupin I leave the sum of two hundred thousand galleons and the title to number twelve Grimauld Place. To their first-born child I leave, in trust, the sum of fifty thousand galleons. This money is to be used for his or her educational needs. If you should have twins or triplets, Dora, fifty thousand galleons is to be set aside for each of them.

"Remus, you have been investing my money wisely over the last year. I would like you to continue on in this capacity for Ginny. I would also like you to continue your work with The Marauders' Wolfsbane Potion Fund. Last year I said that this fund would remain in place as long as it is needed. I meant it, Remus. I want you to manage the monies that have been set aside for this fund in such a way that this fund will outlive the marauders.

"To Ronald Weasley I leave the sum of one hundred thousand galleons and his choice of any one of my castles and estates either here or on the continent. I leave the same to Hermione Granger. If the two of you should get married, which I have a feeling may be happening in the not too distant future, then I will suggest that you choose one estate as your main residence and another as your vacation home.

"To Neville Longbottom I leave the sum of one hundred thousand galleons in personal funds as well as an additional one hundred thousand galleons that is to be used to build the climate-controlled greenhouse of your dreams. I am leaving the sum of one hundred thousand galleons and her choice of any one of my estates to Luna Lovegood as well. If the promissory ring you gave her last Christmas means anything, Neville, which I am assuming it still does, then I will suggest that the two of you select one of the larger estates so that you can build the greenhouse of your dreams and still have room for your children to run free and play like there is no tomorrow.

"To Mr. And Mrs. Weasley I leave the sum of five hundred thousand galleons." Harry paused, overcome with grief, and took several deep breaths before continuing. "I didn't know my parents while I was growing up but I do know that they appreciate everything you have done for me over the years. I want you to know that the love and support you have shown me over the years means more to me than all of the money in the world. I thank you.

"To Dobby and Winky I leave my seven-chambered trunk. The two of you have played major roles on making my humble house a home worth living in. I know that the two of you are free elves and I cannot tell you what to do; but I would greatly appreciate it if you would continue helping Ginny."

Sitting down, Harry took several more deep breaths before making his final bequest. "Ginny," he said, "please know that I love you. Everything else is yours to do with as you see fit. If you could, could you go to Godric's Hollow after your graduation and see about fixing up my parents' old house. I know that it was a very loving home at one time and I would like it to be a loving home once more. You can live there if you like. If not then all I can do is ask that you give it to someone who will give it as much love and attention as your parents have given the Burrow."

Before ending the recording session Harry made two more statements. In the first he asked that an orphanage be established for all of the magical children orphaned because of the war. In this statement he stipulated that every effort should be made to keep families together no matter their magical abilities. In his second statement he requested that, if he had not had time to complete them himself, the renovations he had begun in the Chamber of Secrets should be completed by Ethrindell, Joseph and Eileen.

Chapter 13. Summer's End

The next two weeks passed quickly. On the eleventh Harry, Ginny, Ron, Hermione, Neville, Luna, Joseph, Eileen, Dobby, Winky, Remus, Tonks and Mark all celebrated Ginny's birthday. Harry tried to relax and enjoy himself but it wasn't easy. Oh he smiled and laughed and played and joked around like everyone else but always, in the back of his mind, was the war.

That night, as he and Ginny lay in bed, Ginny cuddled into his chest, his right arm draped loosely across her back, his left hand massaging circles in the small of her back, Harry closed his eyes and began to cry. There was no whimpering or sobbing, just tears.

His tears were small but salty as they leaked from the corners of his eyes. He wanted to reach up and brush them away but dismissed that thought just as quickly because Ginny was breathing comfortably and he didn't want to disturb her. Besides, this had been her day and he didn't want to ruin it by crying on her shoulder.

The rest of the students would be going home tomorrow and they would be spending the day after that in Hogsmeade in celebration of Mark's birthday. Harry had talked to Madam Rosmerta two days ago and arranged a small surprise party for Mark that would include his parents and sister. They would be portkeying directly into the Three Broomsticks with an armed escort of five hit wizards that Harry knew could be trusted.

The day after that Harry would be visiting with the Grey Lady, the Ravenclaw house ghost, and retrieving and destroying her mother's tiara. He needed to explain to her that the tiara had been used to create a horcrux and that it had been returned to Hogwarts, from the forests of Albania, more than twenty years ago. He needed the ghost of Helena Ravenclaw to know that with the diadem's destruction she would be free of that burden; that she could choose to either remain at Hogwarts as the Grey Lady or move on and be reunited with her mother on the other side of the veil.

And then, on the fifteenth, they would all be going into London, to Diagon Alley, where they would buy their school supplies and Harry would meet with Ragnok to receive the other two horcruxes.

And two days after that, on the seventeenth, the one-year anniversary of the Dursley's deaths, Bill and Fleur would be getting married at the Burrow. Arrangements had been made for several of the school's best dueling teams to attend, as ushers, and Bill and Fleur had spent most of July strengthening the wards around the Burrow so that they would be relatively safe; but there was always the possibility that some death eaters might get through. Harry would be using his limited metamorphagus abilities to go as a fictitious cousin, Robert Weasley, from up Surrey way. He would not be ushering any of the Weasley's relatives, but friends and guests of honor would be fair game. Just in case, he and Neville were to stay close to each other so that, if the wedding was attacked, they could team up. They were, of course, hoping for the best but every precaution was being taken just in case.

After Harry had reviewed his plans for the rest of summer he tightened his arms around Ginny's waist. She responded by cuddling even closer into his chest. Smiling softly to himself he wondered what he had done to deserve such a wonderful girlfriend and soulmate. Breathing in her scent, a smell of wild flowers and daisies, Harry closed his eyes and slowly drifted off to sleep.

The next morning, after one final run around the grounds and a sumptuous breakfast, almost everyone boarded the train for the trip back to King's Cross Station in London. The surviving members of all four quidditch teams, except Harry who would be returning to the castle that evening, stowed their luggage in various compartments and mounted their brooms to fly escort. Hermione and Luna, who would be staying at the Burrow with Ron, Neville, Bill, Charlie and Mr. And Mrs. Weasley, were stationed at opposite ends of the train and would be in constant contact with the flyers. If they were attacked it was their job to alert the rest of the students and manage the train's defense while the flyers did battle with their adversaries.

Stationed in compartments all along both sides of the train were at least three-dozen relief flyers. If the train was attacked they would be joining the battle. In addition, each car had a designated medical compartment that was staffed by no less than three student healers. Harry didn't expect anything to happen but so far as he was concerned this was a dress rehearsal and they could not be too careful.

Somehow Mark had slipped into the role of Harry's little brother without either of them noticing it. The trouble was that Mark didn't want to ride on the train. He was determined to fly with Harry. Harry had tried to talk him out of it, even going so far as to ask Ginny not to fly and to stay with Mark on the train, but Mark would not be dissuaded. And since Hermione and Luna would have their hands full organizing the train's defenses and there was really no one else, as Joseph and Eileen had returned to the Elven Realm the night before, Harry gave in on the condition that if any fighting broke out he would not protest when Harry landed on the caboose and handed him off to Luna who would put him to work keeping the student healers supplied.

When this was agreed to, all of the flyers and their brooms were disillusioned and, with Mark riding in front of Harry on Harry's Electra 5000 Battle Broom, the Hogwarts Express pulled out of the station with nineteen students flying escort. Almost as soon as they were in the air the communications charm was activated and warming charms cast. While it was relatively warm, being the twelfth of August, the cold created by the persistent Scottish mists in concert with flying at altitude and speed in the open air was not something any of the flyers were looking forward to.

Whenever they passed near any settlements most of the flyers would go high while a few of the more experienced flyers would fly so close to the carriages that an errant gust of wind could easily push them into the side of the train resulting in instant death. The first time Harry did this Mark was so nervous that Harry had to pull out and cast a calming charm on his cousin to settle his nerves. From that point on, being as Harry did not want to embarrass his cousin by landing on the caboose and making him ride the train the rest of the way to London, he cast a calming charm on Mark every time they approached any of the villages along their route. And even then he alternated flying flank with Orville Burns, the Slytherin Keeper.

As they approached London and King's Cross Station all of the flyers flew flank, one in front and nine down each side while Luna stood guard at the back of the caboose. When they reached their destination all of the flyers dismounted and removed their disillusionment charms. Mark was as white as a sheet.

Quickly casting a series of drying and warming charms on his cousin Harry led him over to a bench and sat him down. "Are you going to be okay, Mark," he asked gently.

Mark looked up, his face pale and his eyes wide. Tears were beginning to fill his eyes as Ginny sat

down next to Mark and pulled him into a hug. Holding his and Ginny's brooms Harry sat down on Mark's other side and listened while Ginny comforted the smaller boy. When Mark's hiccups had subsided Harry reached out and reassuringly gripped his cousin's leg. You did good, Mark," he said. "It takes guts and a lot of courage to do what you've done."

Mark smiled timidly. "Yeah, but if it hadn't been for you and those calming charms I never would have made it."

Harry shrugged modestly. "Maybe so, but you didn't need any calming charms in Little Hangleton. You have the courage to do and become anything you want, Mark. All it takes is a little training and practice."

Mark looked up and smiled. "Thanks," he said, "but I think I'll leave the flying to you guys from now on."

Harry chuckled and patted Mark on the back. "Alright, then! We'll apparate back to Hogsmeade in a couple of hours and on September first you can guard the back of the train with Luna while we fly escort."

Mark smiled and nodded his head. "I like that idea."

While Harry and Mark were helping the others unload their luggage Ginny pulled Harry aside and soundly kissed him. "What was that for?" Harry asked.

"That," Ginny said, her arms loosely wrapped around his neck, "was for what you did for Mark today." When Harry hesitated she continued, "Most guys would have chastised him, balled him out or forced him to ride on the train. You let him have the experience despite your reservations, Harry, and you went out of your way not to do anything to embarrass him. It takes a real man to do something like that, Harry, and I have a feeling that you are going to be a wonderful father."

Getting lost in the moment Harry smiled and said, "Erm ... thanks."

Ginny kissed him again. This time, however, Harry returned it. In that moment he knew that if it was at all possible he was going to survive the final battle and, with Ginny's help, bring their two children into the world and give them a happy childhood and loving home.

The next morning, more out of habit than necessity, Harry and Mark were up by four and running laps by four-thirty. It was strangely quiet and lonely without the other students, especially given the fact that they were the only students at Hogwarts, and the castle grounds felt somehow deserted. The Forbidden Forest even felt somehow darker, colder and lonelier than it had twenty-four hours earlier.

At breakfast their only company consisted of the ghosts, the headmaster, a few teachers and one or two healers from Saint Mungo's who were helping Madam Pomfrey restock her potions supplies.

As they walked into the Great Hall for breakfast Francis Stone, Harry's friend and 'personal' healer, looked up from his position at the head table and motioned them over. When they were seated, and were filling their plates, Francis said, "Harry, I'm impressed. I know most of them have been working out since late last year but what you people have done is absolutely amazing. Not only have you united the houses, but you have given these kids a purpose and helped them discover

talents and abilities they might never have realized on their own."

Harry looked thoughtfully down at his plate as he thought about what Francis had said then turned to look at his friend. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"At the beginning of the summer," Francis began, "some of those kids were lost. All they knew was that they wanted to fight. With what you and the rest of the teachers have done some of those lost souls – take that Millicent Bulstrode for instance – have found a purpose in life. I had my doubts when we first began but, if she applied herself and spent a little time working on her bedside manner, Millicent would make an excellent healer."

Harry grinned and shook his head slightly. If there was one thing he had not expected to hear it was the Millicent Bulstrode would make an excellent healer. Her personality, in his mind at least, was far too coarse for that to happen; but then, as he thought about it, he had to admit that she had shown signs of improvement where her social skills were concerned. "Does she know?" he asked.

Francis smiled. "Oh, yes. She knows. I have even gone so far as to offer her an apprenticeship after the war is over."

This time Harry smiled. "Good," he said with a nod of satisfaction.

"And I've been watching some of the other students as well. Why that Ernie MacMillan chap would make an excellent engineer. He made several suggestions during the reconstruction efforts that saved a lot of time and energy and, from what the architects were saying, actually improved their designs."

Francis gushed about the students and their new outlooks on life for another fifteen minutes. By the time he was finished Harry wasn't really all that amazed that he had missed these changes in his fellow students – he had, after all, been spending most of his afternoons and evenings training for the final battle in the Chamber of Secrets with Ethrindell and Hogwarts – but he was glad that something good had come of their experiences.

After breakfast Harry and Mark went down to visit Hagrid who was in the process of weeding his garden, occasionally evicting a lost bowtuckle or two. Once, while they were helping Hagrid pull the weeds around his tomato plants, Mark looked up and gasped, "What's that?"

When he pointed out a small, dark green creature that looked something like a cross between a monkey and a frog that was scampering along a low-hanging branch near the forest's edge Hagrid stood up and, shading his eyes with one of his massive hands to get a better look, said, "Tha' would be a clabbert." Walking slowly over to the tree, so as not to frighten the tiny creature, Hagrid held his hand out in invitation. The clabbert looked at Hagrid's massive hand, looked up into his face and then back at his hand. The pustule on its forehead was greenish brown in color.

Tentatively at first the tiny creature reached out and touched one of Hagrid's fingers as if testing its stability. Slowly, the clabbert made its way out onto Hagrid's hand where it sat down in the palm of his hand and smiled up at the half-giant. The transition from branch to hand had taken almost five minutes to complete. Hagrid didn't appear to be inclined to frighten or intimidate the creature in any way so Harry and Mark stopped what they were doing and watched as the gentle giant of a man slowly, carefully and very methodically turned around and walked towards them while the clabbert scampered around his hand, looking first off one side and then the other.

When he had reached the edge of the garden Hagrid softly said, "This is a firs'. I've never gotten a clabbert to come to me b'fore. They're gentle, timid creatures, really. They usually stay inside the forest. They don' venture anywhere close to the edges very often."

Looking up, breaking eye contact with the clabbert, he said, "They eat insects, mosses an' leaves. An' tha' brown spot on its forehead will turn red if it senses danger." Looking over at Mark he said, "Why don' you gather up a few o' them leaves – be gentle, now – and see if its hungry."

Following Hagrid's advice and example, Mark established eye contact with the tiny creature and slowly began to gather a few of the leaves they had cast aside together. Harry could sense a mental connection forming between Mark and the clabbert. It was almost as if the clabbert was using some form of telepathy to determine Mark's intent.

Mark slowly lifted a few of the leaves he had gathered up so that the clabbert could sniff them, which it did. Then, almost without warning, the tiny creature grabbed the leaves out of Mark's hand and scampered back to the far side of Hagrid's hand where it greedily munched the leaves, spitting out those parts it found distasteful, until they were gone. Then, again almost without warning, it jumped off of Hagrid's outstretched hand and, after landing on all fours, scampered off into the forest.

"Well!" Hagrid laughed. "Tha' was somethin'. I never expected a clabbert to take food from anyone."

Several hours later, after they had helped Hagrid weed the rest of his garden and feed the various animals he was taking care of, Harry and Mark made their way into Hogsmeade. While they were wandering through the streets, doing a little window-shopping, Harry would occasionally catch a glimpse of red hair and knew that preparations were well underway for Mark's surprise party.

At 11:30, to kill some time, as Mark's family was not scheduled to arrive until noon, they stopped in at the Boar's Head for a light lunch and to visit with Aberforth. Throughout their conversation Harry noticed that Aberforth seemed to be avoiding talking about the war at all costs. Every time the conversation drifted into 'dangerous' territory Aberforth would skillfully change the subject to local events or quidditch or just about anything that didn't have to do with the war. Harry suspected that Aberforth suspected that there might be a spy somewhere in town. This was not good because Aberforth was known for his underworld contacts. If there was a spy in Hogsmeade it could mean any number of things, none of which were good.

At 12:05 Harry and Mark left the Boar's Head and slowly made their way down to the Three Broomsticks. Harry could tell that, while he was trying to hide it, Mark was beginning to feel slightly despondent that no one had wished him a happy birthday yet. As they approached Madam Rosmerta's establishment Mark asked, "Why are we going in here?"

His best poker face in place, Harry shrugged and said, "I just want to check in with some friends to see how things are going."

Mark grinned halfheartedly. "Oh, okay."

Mark's head was down as they entered the pub. As soon as the door closed behind them a little girl's voice rang out from behind them. "If you don't look up, Mark, you are going to miss the whole party."

Mark stopped in his tracks, his eyes flying open wide. Spinning around, a hopeful look of shock and surprise on his face, he stopped and stumbled slightly when he saw the familiar face of his little sister. "Chrissy!?" he asked.

His little sister nodded her head and smiled then ran into his arms. "Happy birthday, big brother!" she happily greeted.

From across the room, at the same time, a thundering chorus of "SURPRIZE!" was heard from all of the Weasleys, Hermione, Luna, Neville, Harry, Remus, Tonks, Hagrid, Albus, five hit wizards and, most importantly, Mark's parents.

Moments later the door opened and Joseph and Eileen walked in. "We're not too late, I hope," Joseph said as he stepped through the door.

The party went off without a hitch. Chrissy was slightly envious of Mark in that he was on a first-name basis with four elves – Dobby and Winky were helping Madam Rosmerta with the food and drink – but that soon ended when Eileen presented her with an autographed copy of *A History of the Elven Realm* by Ethrindell Zhazrine.

On their way back up to the castle that afternoon Mark was all smiles. "You knew about that didn't you?" he asked.

Harry nodded and shrugged as he levitated Mark's presents in front of them. "Well, yeah. It was actually Eileen's idea but I did most of the planning."

Mark smiled. "You're the best, Harry. You know that? You are the best."

In that moment Harry wondered what his life would have been like without Voldemort. Would he have brothers and sisters; and what kind of older brother would he have been?

Casting those thoughts aside Harry smiled and marked Mark's friendship down as another reason he wanted to survive this war. Oh, sure, he had other friends but somehow this was different, special in a way, because Mark was family.

The next morning Harry and Mark did their exercises in the garden area in Harry's trunk. If his interpretation of Aberforth's hesitancy from the day before was correct and there was a spy lurking around Hogsmeade Harry didn't want to run the risk of being overheard. While they were jogging through the small forest Harry explained that he wanted Mark to spend the morning with Hagrid because there were some things he needed to do might not be pleasant. When Mark asked him what he was going to be doing Harry hesitated a moment then said, "It's not that I don't think I can trust you, Mark, but Aberforth was acting awfully strange yesterday, like he was trying to tell me that there is a spy in our midst; and if there is one thing I have learned over the past six years it is that, even though Hagrid is a wonderful man and has a good heart, he can't keep a secret. I'm not saying that he doesn't try but things just have a way of slipping out and he has no control over it."

"So why are you telling me this?"

"I'm telling you that I can't tell you what I will be doing this morning because if there is anyone I would trust with your safety this morning, while I am working on this project, it is Hagrid. I would like you to spend the morning with him, helping him in his garden and helping him take care of the

animals. I just don't want to run the risk, no matter how slight, of anything accidentally slipping out."

They jogged along in silence for a few minutes before Mark asked, "So what should I tell him if he asks where you are?"

As they emerged from the forest Harry looked over and saw Dobby and Winky working in their garden in the distance. "Tell him ..." Harry chuckled, "tell him I gave Dobby and Winky the day off and that I am cleaning the trunk."

Mark laughed. "Are you sure you want be to tell him that?"

Harry shrugged. "Sure. Why not? He knows Ginny and I give them the weekends off. Just tell him that since they have been working so hard over the summer I'm giving them a three-day weekend."

Mark smiled. "Alright, then."

After breakfast Mark went off to spend the morning with Hagrid while Harry went up to the seventh floor and began pacing in front of the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy and his dancing trolls. This time, as he paced, he kept thinking about wanting to find someplace to hide something.

When the door appeared he stopped pacing and walked over and opened it. The room before him was a cavernous expanse filled with row upon row of clutter. The room was easily ten times as large as the large Great Hall and the clutter looked to have haphazardly organized into a small city.

Following his instincts Harry walked through the narrow streets, past stacks of cracked cauldrons; through neighborhoods filled with nothing but old desks and broken bits of furniture, undoubtedly the unintended results of spells gone wrong. He walked cautiously past one skyscraper of dusty old books, wondering briefly what kinds of information they contained, and eased down an alley formed by towering shelves filled with dusty, chipped, and sometimes cracked, potions bottles. Many of the bottles were still corked and full. He wondered what was in those bottles but dared not stop to investigate.

As he made his way into the depths of this metropolis of magical junk he vowed that if he did survive the final battle he would spend some time in this room – a room filled with so much magic that he could almost taste it – investigating Hogwarts' magical history. He might even write a book about what he discovered. Besides, given the age of the school and the amount of dust on some of the stacks of books, there had to be at least one book that was out of print.

Smiling at this thought he wondered if Hermione was starting to rub off on him.

Slowly working his way towards the back of the room, his instincts leading him along a precise path of discovery, Harry made his way past more intriguing, magical artifacts than he had ever thought could exist; and they were all here, in Hogwarts' Room of Requirement. Of course, some of the items, such as the pile of recently used empty sherry bottles, were not magical in the least but those could be dispensed with and possibly sent in for recycling.

With a heavy sigh of resignation Harry turned the last corner and walked down a narrow passage. Halfway down this passage he stopped and looked down at the chipped and cracked bust of a particularly ugly wizard wearing an old, worn out wig and a tarnished tiara. Gingerly lifting the

tiara from its perch he could feel the darkness it contained and knew that to place it on his head would invite death.

Turning it around he read the phrase the raised letters spelled out. "Wit Without Measure is Man's Greatest Treasure." Nodding to himself Harry confirmed that this was Rowena Ravenclaws "lost" tiara. It was shame, he thought, that Rowena's daughter had stolen this tiara from her mother, fled to Albania and paid the ultimate price, at the hands of the Bloody Baron, for refusing to return her mother's side when Rowena lay upon her deathbed.

Placing the diadem in the simple cloth bag he had brought with him for this purpose Harry began the long journey back to the entrance to this most magical of rooms. While he could simply take it down to the Chamber of Secrets and destroy it he felt an obligation to at least try to talk to the ghost of Rowena's daughter.

When he had finally reached the entrance Harry put his hand on the doorknob and stopped. Turning around he looked back at the city of clutter and, while admiring the founders' ingenuity, shook his head at Tom's craftiness for hiding one of his horcruxes in a room at Hogwarts so filled with clutter that, under normal circumstances, the only way anyone would be able to find it would be if they stumbled upon it by accident; and even then it was unlikely they would recognize it for what it was and even less likely that they would realize what it had been turned into.

Reaching out to the castle Harry asked, "My friend, do you know where Helena Ravenclaw's ghost is?"

The castle responded, "Helena usually spends her summers in her mother's classroom on the fifth floor. It hasn't been used in years because it has more or less become Helena's sanctuary but it is at the end of the north hall." Hanging his head Harry sighed, closed his eyes, nodded and, with an almost resigned determination, set off for the fifth floor north hall.

The halls were cold and drafty as Harry made his way down to the fifth floor. Without the students the castle was extremely quiet. It seemed to Harry, as he made his way along the corridors, that the walls were whispering to each other as he passed. Briefly, he wondered if there were more ghosts in the castle than those everyone knew about and could see.

As he approached the door at the north end of the fifth floor Harry could feel an unnatural chill in the air that was mingled with a sense of haughtiness and remorse. He already knew Helena's story from the time he had spent with Rowena during his maturo auctus, his conversations with the castle and his remote viewing of the tiara's history and so was not overly surprised at the emotions radiating from Helena's sanctuary. What surprised him, however, was their intensity. They were almost overwhelming and he had to fight to keep from becoming depressed himself.

When Harry reached the door he hesitated, sensing that Helena did not wish to be disturbed, and then knocked softly to let her know that someone was about to enter. He waited a few seconds to give her time to compose herself then lifted the latch and opened the door.

The room was icy cold. The windows, tall, narrow panes of leaded glass set deep into the stone walls, were dusty and let only a small amount of filtered light into the room. The torches, in their brackets, had long since been extinguished and provided neither light nor heat, not that the room's occupant desired either of these.

Stepping into the room Harry looked around at the rows of dusty desk and wondered if, through their centuries of disuse, they had become ghosts as well. Closing the door softly behind himself Harry turned around and scanned the room for any sign of the Ravenclaw specter. He found her floating near one of the dusty windows in the back of the room. She was floating several feet above the floor with her back to him, gazing mournfully out the window. "How many times must I tell you, Baron," she said haughtily without turning around, "that I am not interested. I wasn't interested then and I am not interested now."

"Erm ... I'm not Hugo," Harry said gently. "I know we've never met, Helena, but my name is Harry Potter and I need to talk to you."

The Grey Lady spun around, facing Harry for the first time, and Harry noticed that she was really quite beautiful, for a ghost. Her long, silky hair flowed down around her shoulders framing her face in a way that reminded him of Ginny. Her clothes, although shimmering and translucent, were of the finest quality and cut for her day. It was apparent that she had been a young woman of some standing when she had died and she had carried that haughtiness with her into death.

Floating gracefully down and across the room the ghost of Helena Ravenclaw approached Harry, stopping several feet in front of him, her ghostly body protruding up from the center of a desk. She smiled sadly at Harry then, taking note of her awkward position, floated the rest of the way through the desk and stood before him her head held high. "How do you know my name?" she asked indignantly. "And how dare you enter my sanctuary?"

Harry chewed his lower lip for a moment, thinking about how to broach the subject, then, walking over to what he could only assume had been Rowena's desk, placed the cloth bag on the desk. "I've come to talk to you about this," he said as he opened the pouch and withdrew Rowena's diadem.

Helena gasped. "How ... Where ... I left that in Albania! How did you find it?" she asked in a rush.

The room quickly grew several degrees cooler and Harry could tell that Helena was upset. "Do you remember a student, about fifty years ago, named Tom Riddle?"

Helena drifted around the desk, eyeing the diadem with uncertain curiosity. After circling the desk twice, closely examining at the tarnished tiara from every angle, she stopped and looked at Harry from across the desk. A small smile played across her lips as her cheeks grew slightly more opaque. "Yes," she said. "He was a very charming boy."

Harry nodded knowingly. In his day, Tom Riddle could be very charming if he wanted to be. "Do you remember telling him about this diadem?"

Helena nodded, eyeing Harry curiously.

"After he left Hogwarts," Harry said, trying to break the news to her as gently as he could but not wishing to spend any more time in her sanctuary than absolutely necessary, "Tom Riddle traveled to the remote forests of Albania and spent several years searching for this tiara while finalizing his plans."

"Plans?" Helena asked. "I told him about it because he wanted to help set me free."

Pinching the bridge of his nose Harry nodded then sighed, his warm breath becoming visible in the

frigid room. This was not going to be easy. "He lied to you, Helena," he said softly. "I know what he said and I know what he did. He went to Albania to find your mother's diadem because he wanted to turn it into a horcrux."

If a ghost had blood and if that blood could have drained from Helena's face it would have described Helena's reaction perfectly. Her face drained of color until it was perfectly white and almost completely transparent. The room grew colder still and Harry had to start rubbing his arms to keep warm. "But ... but what happened? He was so charming and seemed so sincere."

"By the time you met Tom Riddle," Harry said through chattering teeth, "he had begun calling himself Lord Voldemort. This is one of six horcruxes he created. I'm destroying them in order in the hope that he will not notice their destruction until it is too late. I've already destroyed the first two. This one is next."

Helena's eyes grew wide with shock then sad with understanding. To Harry's relief the room, while not warming up exactly, grew less cold. "I suppose you must," she said.

"What I would like to know," Harry began tentatively, "is if its destruction would release you of your debt. I know your mother would like to see you again."

When Helena looked curiously over at him he added, "I had a near-death experience last summer and met your mother."

Helena smiled. "How is she?"

Harry smiled at the memory of the time he had spent with Rowena. "She's doing well, actually. But she misses you terribly."

Helena smiled wistfully for a moment and then frowned. "No," she said sadly. "As much as I would like to see her again I am still paying for my crime. Knowing that it has been destroyed, especially given what it has become, will lift a heavy burden from my heart but there are others..."

Harry watched as Helena turned and drifted back to the window she had been gazing through when he entered then put the tiara back inside the bag. When he opened the door to leave Helena said, "Thank you, Harry Potter. You are a good man."

Fifteen minutes later, after visiting briefly with Moaning Myrtle, Harry was in his workroom in the Chamber of Secrets. The diadem was lying on the workbench, a jar of basilisk venom standing beside it. Rummaging through one of his cupboards, after exhausting his desk drawers and most of the other cupboards Harry was searching for his earmuffs. He didn't know what would happen with the destruction of this horcrux but he really didn't want to take any chances where his ears were concerned.

Feeling around in the back of the top shelf Harry felt the fuzzy earpieces of his earmuffs. Wrapping his hand around the fuzzy coverings he pulled them out and, just in case, cast an additional sound repelling charm on each muff.

Securing the earmuffs over his ears he cautiously approached the workbench, fully prepared to run if something went wrong. Opening the jar he carefully laid the lid aside and turned his attention to the diadem. It was sad, really, he thought. It was too bad that Tom had to be so ... determined that

he would priceless relics for his horcruxes. Most people would be hesitant to destroy such treasures but Tom was forcing his hand. If he didn't destroy them Tom could not be stopped. Oh, sure, he could be slowed down but Harry knew that so long as even one of Tom's horcruxes was in existence he would find a way to come back and resume his reign of terror. Harry could only hope that they could find a way to destroy Nagini before the final confrontation. If they didn't, and Nagini was destroyed after the fact, Tom would survive as a dark, malevolent presence, less that a ghost but more than a shade, that would be impossible to kill. They simply had to destroy Nagini first.

Dropping the tiara into the jar of venom Harry quickly stepped back and watched and waited by the entrance, ready to duck out of site at the first sign of trouble. Even through the earmuffs he could hear the screaming. He could tell that it was not as loud as it had been with the ring but it was still loud enough to echo up and down the length of the chamber. This time, as the tiara was ultimately and finally destroyed, the venom boiled and smoked, shooting the occasional spark into the air. When it was finished he walked over and looked down at the swirling mixture.

"So that's it, then," a voice said from the entryway.

Harry jumped slightly at the unexpected intrusion then turned around. "Breathing a sigh of relief he nodded his head. "Yes, Helena," he said. "That's it. I'm sorry it had to come to this but ..."

Helena glided across the workroom, staying close to the floor so she was closer to the actual height she had been in life, reached up and planted an icy kiss on his cheek. "Thank you," she said.

At ten o'clock the next morning, Harry apparated Mark and himself to a dark alley across Charing Cross Road from The Leakey Cauldron where they were met by Ron, Hermione, Neville, Luna, Ginny and Mr. And Mrs. Weasley. "I don't like apparating," Mark said as he bent over, hands on knees, to catch his breath.

Neville sniffed. "Me neither, Mark," he said, "but the main floo network is too dangerous and unless you have been granted special permission," he said, quickly glancing over at Harry, "the ministry is really cracking down on portkeys."

After catching his breath Mark nodded his head. "Yeah, I know. I just wish there was an easier way."

Luna suddenly gasped. "Don't look now but I think we are being watched."

Almost immediately, everyone drew their wands and assumed fighting stance. Quickly scanning the alley, searching for anything that seemed out of place. There were a few rubbish bins scattered up and down the length of the alley. The fire escapes in the narrow alley were all empty but a few of the clothes lines crisscrossing the alley were occupied, some by clothing that had been hung out to dry and others by the occasional bird. For a moment he wondered if Luna was referring to some of the birds who had definitely noticed their presence or, perhaps, the pair of long underwear hanging from a line at the far end of the alley. He couldn't sense anything himself but that didn't mean that Luna was imagining it. She had become less ... unpredictable since the end of her fourth year but she still did have her moments. "Where?" he whispered.

Luna, who had not even drawn her wand, pointed up towards the roofline at the Charing Cross Road end of the alley. Following he direction of her finger's indication Harry spotted a tiny camera mounted on a bracket near the roofline of the building on the right. A tiny pinprick of red light near the camera's lens indicated that the camera was operational.

"That's a CCTV camera," Mark said.

"The muggle police use them to monitor the streets of every major city in Great Britain," Hermione added.

Neville chuckled nervously. "Oh, yeah. I almost forgot about those," he said. "When I was working on security for Diagon Alley last December, when we were preparing for the possible evacuation of the castle, one of our contacts in the Prime Minister's Office provided us with a list of all CCTV cameras in the area. There are actually ten of them in the immediate area around Charing Cross Road. Our contact assured me that their feeds are being monitored by a squib."

Breathing a sigh of relief Harry relaxed his stance and let his wand arm drop to his side. After re-holstering his wand he looked up at the camera and offered a twisted smile, uncertain as to whether he was glad that the feeds were being monitored by a squib or upset that the cameras existed at all.

Three minutes later, after Harry had donned his signature faded red baseball cap, they entered The Leakey Cauldron and passed through the dingy pub without drawing too much attention to themselves. It helped, of course, that Remus, who had been sent ahead to clear the way, was keeping Tom occupied at the bar.

Bill and Charley and Fleur met them in the back alley. When he saw them Harry could not help but groan and shake his head. "You do realize that I can take care of myself don't you?" he asked.

Charlie laughed. "It's not you we're worried about, Harry," he said. "It's Ron, Hermione and Ginny we're worried about." At Ron's look of indignation and Ginny's glare he said, "Perhaps I should rephrase that."

Ginny growled, "Too right you had better rephrase that, buster."

"We know that you can all take care of yourselves in a fight," Charlie said, "but it has been less than a month since the were injured on the battle for Hogsmeade and, from what we hear, they all went down far too easily in your little demonstration duel earlier this month..."

"We also know zat each of zem could probably take on all three of us and win wizout much effort," Fleur added.

"The thing is," Bill concluded, "is that we will feel better if we are able to help keep an eye on things while you are getting your school supplies."

"I don't think you will have to worry about that," Remus said as he entered the alley from the pub. "We worked out a shopping schedule with all of the students before they left," he explained. "If you guys knew how much fire power is walking through Diagon Alley right now, most of which is disguised as returning fifth-, sixth- and seventh-year students, the only thing you would be worrying about is the fate of any death eaters stupid enough to show their faces in public."

When they stepped into Diagon Alley moments later the first thing Harry noticed was an increased awareness, on the part of most of the shoppers, of what was happening around them. Their first stop was, of course, Gringotts where Harry took Mark with him up the wild ride to his trust vault. When Griphook opened the vault's door Mark's eyes bulged in their sockets. "Wow!" he said when

he saw the mountains of gold, silver and bronze. "Is this all yours?"

Harry grinned despite himself. "Yeah," he said sheepishly, "It's all mine."

After filling two pouches with galleons, sickles and knuts – one for Harry and the other for Mark – they rode the cart back up to the lobby where Remus and Tonks were waiting for them. "How'd it go?" Remus asked, a mischievous grin planted firmly on his face.

Harry scowled. "Alright, Remus, what's up? Why is my trust vault so full?"

Remus burst out laughing. "Harry, my friend," he said, "please don't tell me that you didn't know my father was an investment banker in Kent. I seem to have inherited a fair amount of his financial instinct as well as my mother's magical abilities. When your main cash vault grew too full I asked the goblins to put the interest in your trust vault until we can arrange for a second cash vault. I believe the contents of your trust vault has grown by two hundred percent in the past three months."

Harry's mouth fell open. "The past three months," he gasped. "What am I going to do with that kind of money?"

Remus shrugged. "Beats me," he said nonchalantly. "If I was you, though, I would think about adopting a family." As Remus said this his eyes quickly darted to Mark and back. The suggestion was not lost on Harry.

Shaking his head and smiling softly to himself Harry said, "I have some more business here so would it be alright if Mark went with you for a time?"

Tonks smiled cheerfully and ruffled Mark's hair. "Sure!" she chirped. Then, turning towards Mark, asked, "You don't mind being seen with your teachers do you, Mark?"

This time it was Mark's turn to shake his head and laugh. He had gotten to know Remus and Tonks quite well over the summer and seemed to thoroughly enjoy their company. "On one condition," he said.

Looking mildly surprised Tonks said, "Oh; and what's that?"

Grinning mischievously Mark said, "No green hair."

Harry and Remus burst out laughing as Tonks pouted. She had jumped out from behind a desk with frazzled dark green hair several weeks earlier and Mark, to put it mildly, had not been amused and Tonks had learned not to startle Mark, especially so soon after returning from a rescue mission to Little Hangleton.

Several minutes later Harry was once more sitting in Ragnok's office. Two small parcels wrapped in dragon hide and tied with treated dragon leather strings were resting on the worn inkblot. The smaller of the two was definitely Slythein's locket and the other, by shape and size, had to be Hufflepuff's goblet.

Reaching out with his senses Harry could feel the severed portions of Tom's soul contained within each. The part of Tom's soul contained within his own body was trying to reach out to them but it was too weak to do much more than recognize them as two portions of the greater whole of which

it had once been a part.

Ragnok, who was sitting behind his desk, looked over at Harry and said, "My part of the oath has been fulfilled, Mr. Potter. I have faith in you, sir, and feel certain that you will fulfill your part as well."

Harry took a deep breath and left it out slowly. "I will do my best, sir."

Ragnok smiled his awkward, toothy smile and nodded his head. "I believe you."

After Harry had carefully placed the horcruxes in two of the inner pockets of his traveling cloak and magically sealed the pockets he turned to Ragnok and said, "I would like to set up two trust funds."

Ragnok looked up curiously. "I don't usually handle trust funds, Mr. Potter, but I understand your reasons. Whom would these trust funds be for?"

Harry smiled his relief and thanks. "I would like to set up two fifty thousand galleon trust funds. The first is for my second cousin, Mark Evans. The second is for his sister, my second cousin, Crystal Evans. Mark will be entering his second year next month and Crystal will be starting her first year next September."

Half an hour later, after all of the paperwork had been filled out and the funds transferred, Harry left Gringotts and went directly to Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes. Fred looked up as he entered but Harry shook his head, indicating his desire to pass silently through their shop without notice. Fred nodded and returned to the customer he had been helping.

When he reached the back room Harry moved to the darkest corner and, in the twinkling of an eye, wrapped himself in a blanket of energy and mentally transported himself, his clothes and the horcruxes and their wrappings to his workroom in the Chamber of Secrets.

It had been decided that, since Harry had his apparation license, it would be best if he only used teleportation, which was untraceable, when he was on covert operations or when he did not want anyone to know of his activities. Transporting the horcruxes from Diagon Alley to the Chamber of Secrets, in his mind, qualified as one of those times when he did not want anyone to know what he had been doing.

After carefully placing the horcruxes inside a cabinet and locking it with a locking charm Severus Snape would have been proud of Harry teleported back to Fred and George's workroom. Taking a moment to straighten his traveling cloak, so that it didn't look as though he had left anything behind, Harry stepped out of the back room and did his best to blend in with the rest of the customers.

An hour later Harry met Remus, Tonks, Mark, Ron, Hermione, Ginny and the others at The Leaky Cauldron for lunch. An hour after that they returned to Diagon Alley where they finished their shopping without any problems or confrontations and received instructions for the next day. Harry was to teleport Mark and himself to the Burrow by no later than eight o'clock in the morning where he would become Robert Weasley. Even though it was known that Harry was a friend of the Weasleys they didn't want anyone to know that he was there.

Chapter 14. Bill and Fleur's Wedding

At 7:45 on Thursday morning, the 17th of August 1997, Harry and Mark appeared in Ron's room. Mark tripped over one of Ron's trainers and fell heavily on the edge of Ron's bed. Ron grumbled, sleepily opened one eye then groaned. "Is it that time already," he moaned.

Harry grinned knowingly. "Sorry, Ron. Your room was my safest bet. I didn't want to appear in the middle of any rush and I figured it was probably a safe bet that you would still be in bed when we arrived."

Ron scowled up at Harry. "You know me too well, you know that."

Harry shook his head and laughed. "Oh, I don't know, Ron," he said. "I know you about as well as you know me." Then, hesitating a moment, said, "Come to think of it, that is really rather frightening isn't it."

Ron flipped over in bed and buried his head under his pillow. "Go 'way!" he growled. "I'm on vacation!"

As Harry led Mark out of Ron's room he said, "That may be, Ron, but the wedding is in two hours. Besides, I don't see what you are complaining about. You've been getting up at four o'clock every morning since last September."

As Harry closed the door Mark said, "Interesting wallpaper. If I had bright orange quidditch posters hanging all over my room I'd want to stay in bed too."

"Arrrrrrgh!" Ron screamed as Harry and Mark hurried down the steps, "I heard that, Evans!"

When they reached the landing Neville stuck his head out of the twins' room as Charlie poked his head out of his and Bill's room. "Morning, Harry, Mark," Neville said. It looked as though Neville had been the first one up at the Burrow that morning. He was suitably dressed for the wedding but Harry noticed that his clothes, while clean and fashionable, were not so stiff that they would get in the way of any of his tumbling moves if needs be.

"Morning, Neville," Harry said. "Have you been out for your run?"

Neville smiled an easy, relaxed and confident smile – one of the few changes in attitude that Harry was pleased to see taking place in his friends – and said, "Yes, as a matter of fact I have. Four o'clock in the morning as usual. You?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah. Mark and I did three laps this morning as well as a few flexibility exercises."

"How'd you do that?" Charlie asked from across the narrow hall.

Harry turned and was about to ask a question when Ron came stomping down the steps in his dressing gown with a towel thrown over his shoulder and a scowl on his face. "Oh, that?" Harry coughed in an attempt to stifle his laughter. "I think it was a combination of things, really; but I think Mark deserves most of the credit."

Ron glowered at Harry and Mark as he squeezed past on his way to the bathroom for a shower.

Harry couldn't be sure but he thought Ron was grumbling something about two weeks off, crazy drill instructors and noisy friends who couldn't appreciate a good poster when they saw it.

When the door to the bathroom slammed shut moment's later Harry and Mark burst out laughing. Moment's later Fred was pushing past Neville to shake Mark's hand, congratulating him on a job well done. From the look on his face, however, Harry could tell that Mark was uncertain as to whether or not he should be pleased at waking Ron up in time for the wedding or worried that he had upset a friend. Harry knew, from his many years worth of experience in dealing with Ron that he would get over it but since Mark did not have the benefit of that experience he felt an obligation to explain Ron's moods to his 'little brother.' He would have to make time for that soon, preferably before Ron got out of the shower, because if Mark didn't know what to expect Harry knew that Ron could be mildly intimidating; and for someone as young as Mark, Ron could be flat out frightening.

Ron was still scowling at breakfast but, fortunately, Harry had taken Mark for a quick walk around the grounds and explained some of Ron's eccentricities to him in a way that had alleviated some of his fears. Harry could tell that Mark was still unsure of himself around Ron but was pleased to see that he was at least laughing and enjoying himself.

Two of Fleur's friends from France were due to arrive at 8:30 to help her get ready so Harry at a quick, light breakfast and retreated up to Ron's room with pictures of various Weasley relations to begin working on his transformation. The goal was to make himself look enough like a Weasley so that he could not be mistaken for anything else but not so much like any of the Weasleys to cause confusion.

Fifteen minutes later, after apparating in for the wedding, Tonks joined him and began talking him through the transformations. Half an hour, and one glamour charm, later Robert Weasley was introduced to the inhabitants of the Burrow. As a testament to their work and Harry's acting abilities, all of his closest friends, even though they had known that he would be disguising himself as an unknown relative, were wondering where he was even after being introduced to Robert Weasley.

The only person Harry let in on the secret was Neville and even then it was done in an off-handed sort of way. A few minutes before the guests were scheduled to begin arriving he walked over to the small knot of ushers who were gathered beneath the large tent that was being used as the pavilion and tapping Neville on the shoulder, said, "Er, Neville?" When Neville turned towards him he said, "Could we talk ... in private?"

Neville smiled. "Sure, Robert. What's up?"

When they were several feet away Harry cast a quick, wandless privacy charm, which startled Neville. "I just want you to know that if any death eaters show up I am as good as your regular dueling partner."

Neville's jaw fell slightly open. "Harry?" he asked.

Harry gave a quick nod. "Yeah. You and Tonks are the only two who know my true identity. If we get attacked the others will figure it out but for now I would rather keep it quiet."

Neville nodded then, momentarily chewing the inside of his cheek, asked, "Any news? What's the death eater situation?"

Harry frowned slightly. "I really don't know, Neville," he admitted. "I've been so focused on training that I haven't been monitoring his activities all that much. I do, however, know that he has started sending them out on training missions."

Neville's expression turned grim. "So it's possible they could attack."

A twisted smile played across Harry's face. "Yes," he nodded. "You and Ron have mapped out a defensive strategy for the Burrow haven't you?"

"Yeah. We have people stationed at strategic points all around the Burrow, some inside the wards and some out. We also have a contingency plan for the defense of Ottery St. Catchpole if it comes to it."

Harry nodded grimly and, with a sigh, looked down at his hands. "I hope we don't need them, Neville, but thanks."

After lifting the privacy charm Harry and Neville rejoined the rest of the ushers as they prepared for the arrival of the guests.

As the guests arrived Harry did his best to remain inconspicuous. On the few times he was asked to escort a family member or someone who knew the family quite well his cover story had been that he was the teenage son of distant relative from Surry who was being home schooled. When it came time for the wedding procession Harry stood in a back corner nervously rolling his wand between his fingers. Something didn't feel right. The problem was that he couldn't put his finger on just exactly what it was.

As Bill and Charlie made their way to the front of the tent, Charlie serving as Bill's best man, Harry scanned the audience. Fred and George aside, everything seemed to be in place and the twins had been forced to take unbreakable vows not to do anything to disrupt the wedding. Glancing around he saw that Neville was stationed in the opposite corner and that five of their best fighters, not counting Ron, Hermione and Luna who were seated with the groom's family, were scattered throughout the audience.

When Aunt Muriel began playing the traditional wedding march on her old piano Harry mentally blocked out the music and tried with all his might to focus all of his attention upon the bride and her court. Ginny was dazzling in her golden robes and the sight of her nearly took his breath away. He noticed Gabrielle and Fleur as well but so far as he was concerned Ginny was the most beautiful woman there. And yet there was still that nagging, niggling something in the back of his mind that would not let him completely relax and enjoy himself.

The ceremony passed without incident and, with a little wand waving, the pavilion was transformed into a reception hall, complete with dance floor and band. He allowed himself to relax a little and even shared a few dances with Ginny, Hermione and Luna. He couldn't give himself away, even to them, which bothered him to no end because he could tell that Ginny was not having a good time no matter how good an actress she was.

They were dancing a slow waltz and Harry was about to lean in and revel himself to Ginny when the first sounds of spell fire could be heard coming from the forest behind the lake. Harry suddenly froze and drew his wand. "Ginny!" he said, a little more sharply than he had intended, "find Hermione and get Tonks and the rest of the wedding party out of here!"

Ginny's eyes flew open as she recognized Harry's commanding tone. "Smiling briefly she hugged him tightly and whispered a quick, heartfelt "I love you!" before releasing him, kicking off her shoes, and sprinting over to where Ron and Hermione were dancing in a secluded corner.

Glancing out towards the nearby hills Harry was dismayed when he saw the familiar silvery flash that indicated the collapse of the wards. Activating a sonorous charm on himself he said, "Ladies and gentlemen, may I have your attention please. Please remain calm. Twenty of our best fighters are in the hills and valley's surrounding the Burrow and there are an additional ten here, within the tent but the wards have collapsed and we are under attack. Those of you who are able please partner with someone who is not and apparate home." As an after thought he added, "Oh and Bill, Fleur? Congratulations."

The evacuation took less than five minutes. By the time the first of the death eaters made it through the forest the only people remaining at the Burrow Harry, Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Neville, Luna, Orville Burns, Daphne Greengrass, Terry Boot, one of Ginny's roommates, Fred, George, Charlie, Remus and Mad-eye Moody. Tonks had apparated herself and Mark to Hogsmeade where, Harry hoped, they would be safe. At first Tonks had protested her evacuation order but when both Harry and Remus had explained the risks of mixing spells with pregnancy, Remus for the fifth time that summer, she had acquiesced. Victor had apparated to Hogsmeade and returned with his broom. He was currently circling overhead, under the effects of a disillusionment charm, relaying information to the forces on the ground.

Three of their fighters had been wounded but were being attended to by their team medics. The team in the forest was involved in a horrendous firefight. The situation there was extremely fluid and it was anyone's call. After Ron and Hermione had dispatched the few death eaters who had snuck around the forest's main defenses Harry sent them off to join that battle, with chest belts loaded with Fred and George's special fireworks and portable swamps.

The second major hot spot was just over the hill to the north and east. That team was holding its own but could use a little help. One of their fighters was down but not seriously injured. After setting the others to guard the Burrow and prepare the sitting room for triage he teleported Neville and himself to the scene of this battle.

One thing about it, these death eaters were not going to go down without a fight. Their spells were so over charged that a simple "Reducto!" would reduce a boulder to little more than a few small bits of rubble and dust. The ground was pockmarked with craters and Harry could not help but wonder how this team had held out for so long. Turning to Neville he said, "I know its risky, Nev, but what do you say to disillusionment charms and teleporting inside their ranks?"

Neville paled slightly at the thought then, as his resolve returned, nodded. "Hostages?" he asked.

Harry thought for a moment then said, "We'll worry about hostages later. Right now I just want to stop them. If a few of them die from their injuries ..."

The look of determination in Neville's eyes told Harry all he needed to know and as soon as they were both disillusioned to their satisfaction he teleported both of them into the middle of the death eaters' ranks.

The fighting was fast and furious. At first the death eaters were confused. Then, as a few of them seemed to figure out what had happened they started firing a number of rather viscous spells in

Harry and Neville's direction. Fortunately, as soon as they had appeared, they had split up. The other thing working in their favor was that they were used to fighting on the run, which made them extremely hard to hit. That. Not to say that they were not hit, however, because, even though he was able to ignore the pain, Harry knew that he had been hit by at least three burning hexes and a slicing curse or two.

Fifteen minutes later, after the fighting was over and all of the death eaters had been either temporarily or permanently disarmed, Harry softly called out, "Neville?"

"Yeah?" Harry heard Neville say from a few feet away.

"Are you alright?"

"I don't know," Neville's voice said tiredly. "I think so, but I don't know?"

Harry grinned.

"You want to sent the signal or should I?" Neville asked.

Harry thought he knew Neville's voice but at the same time his senses were telling to be cautions. Rather than giving away his position to a possible foe he decided to play it safe. Even though he knew could defend himself against most comers and had the energy to cast the charm he said, "Go ahead, Neville, you can do it."

A whispered incantation later Neville's bulldog patronus was racing up the hill towards their comrades in arms. When Harry saw the familiar bulldog he relaxed and lifted his disillusionment charm. Moments later Neville lifted his as well.

Looking over at his friend and dueling partner Harry said, "Er ... Neville, I hate to tell you this but I thing your robes have seen better days."

Neville looked down at himself and then cast a critical eye towards Harry. "Yeah, I agree," he said. "But your robes didn't fare too well either."

Harry looked down at himself and then back at Neville and before either of them knew what had caused it they were both uncontrollably laughing at themselves and each other.

"And what exactly are you two laughing at?" Pansy Parkinson asked several seconds later as she approached the two from the knoll behind which her team had been deployed.

Before Harry could say anything that would blow his cover Ginny and Luna flew over the hill, medical bags in hand. "ROBERT WEASLEY!" Ginny screamed, "What do you think you're doing? You haven't been training like the rest of us! You're just lucky Neville was here to save your skin!"

Harry knew she was acting to maintain his cover but as she landed and dismounted her broom he could tell she was more than just a little angry. For a moment he thought back to Charlie's comment Ginny's temper at the dragon camp the previous September and was secretly glad he had not been awake to experience it.

Ginny ran over and slapped him soundly across the cheek then, almost immediately, pulled him into a bone-crushing hug and started crying. Harry looked over and saw that Luna was tending to

Neville's wounds. Somehow he got the feeling that Luna's professionalism and silence were masking a seething inferno and that Neville would get an earful as soon as they were alone. Glancing over at Pansy and Millicent Harry, as Robert, shrugged his shoulders. The two Slytherins shrugged their shoulders in response and turned back to their duties of securing those death eaters who had survived the onslaught.

When they were out of earshot Ginny tilted her head back and looked Harry in the eye. "I was so worried, Harry. When Victor started reporting the carnage that was going on over here it made Hogsmeade sound like a walk in the park. Do you know how many death eaters you two were up against?"

Harry shook his head. "I really don't think I want to know," he said honestly.

Ginny nodded into his chest then stepped back to get a better look at him. "Are you hurt?" she asked softly.

Pocketing his wand Harry tiredly rubbed his eye. "I don't suppose Francis is available?" he asked.

Ginny's pupils briefly dilated. ""That bad?" she asked fearfully.

Harry nodded, wincing slightly at the pain in his side. "I'm afraid so," he said. "Can you help me with these robes? I'd really rather stop most of the bleeding before I see him, if you don't mind that is."

Ginny grinned. Sure. Just a second." Turing around she cast a Messenger Patronus. As her lion galloped over the hill she turned around and smiled up at him. "Healer Stone should be waiting for us when we arrive,"

Chapter 15. The Delayed Feast

In the days leading up to the first of September Harry, Mark, Dobby and Winky moved Mark into the Gryffindor Second-year boy's dormitory. He still slept in Harry's trunk but most of his clothes and all of his school supplies were transferred to his dormitory. As they were eating dinner in the Great Hall on the thirty-first of August Harry wondered how hard it would be for Mark when regular classes started up again. After all, he would be at least two years ahead of most of his classmates in Defense Against the Dark Arts and with Hermione's encouragement he had already read through most of his second-year books. It would be interesting to watch and see how things developed.

That night Harry went down into the Chamber of secrets and, using the third jar of basilisk venom, destroyed the fourth horcrux. As he did so he felt a slight twinge in his scar, almost as if Tom had felt its destruction. When he remote viewed Tom's activities he found him asleep. Apparently Tom's relaxed state of mind had somehow opened the connection between the bit of his soul that resided within his body and his remaining horcruxes and he had felt it. Harry realized that he would have to be more careful with the last of the original five.

One other thing Harry had begun noticing was that Tom had been growing increasingly weaker, increasingly more dependent upon the energies he was drawing through the dark mark, with the destruction of each horcrux. He wondered if this was tied to destruction of Tom's horcruxes and, if it was, if Tom would make the connection and discover what he had been doing this summer.

With that thought came another: When Harry had first met Tom, at the end of his first year, he was little more than a parasite, living off of the life energies of others. And this, it seemed was what he was, again, becoming. As he made his way out of the Chamber of Secrets Harry could not help but hope and pray that all of the work that he and Ethrindell and Hogwarts were doing would be enough to destroy the parasite.

On September the first Harry and Mark did their usual run, using Hogwarts' Room of Requirement this time, and ate breakfast in the Great Hall with the teachers. At 8:30 Harry teleported Mark and himself – Mark with a small day-bag of coins and reading materials and himself with his Electra 5000 Battle Series broom – to Platform Nine-and-three-quarters. The plan was for the two of them prepare the caboose and designated medical compartments for any emergencies before the students began arriving. The prefects and Ron and Hermione, in their capacities as head boy and head girl, would be arriving at 10:00.

Ginny, Neville, Luna and a few others would be arriving at 10:00 as well but would not be entering the platform until 10:55. They would be patrolling King's Cross Station on the look out for any suspicious activity. One of the squibs on the London Police Force had been made aware of the situation and had gone out of her way to assign either squibs or parents of muggle-born witches and wizards to the station's security detail for the day. Rufus Scrimgeour, the head of the Auror Department, had personally briefed them on what was happening, and why, because, along with the students, a number of plainclothes aurors would be patrolling the station as well.

The new first-years would be met at the entrance to the station by the prefects and escorted through the barrier, a service Harry wished had been in place on his first day. While it was true that quite a number of this year's first-year students had been on the platform before, with their

older siblings, the muggle-born students would be lost; and those who had lost older brothers or sisters to the fighting last year might be hesitant. No one was going to force them to attend Hogwarts if the death of a sibling was haunting them but, with their parents' help, the prefects would do everything in their power to convince them that they really would be safer at Hogwarts than at home where, if they were to be attacked, their parents could easily be distracted by their presence.

And then there were those students who had not stayed for the summer training. Some of them would be envious of those who had while others would be haunted by the events of last year. To help alleviate these fears, Ron, Hermione, all of the prefects and anyone else who had been interested had spent the last two weeks of evenings during boot camp taking a crash course in Counseling and Sensitivity Training.

Harry and Mark were in the process of stocking the medical kit in the last designated compartment when Ron stuck his head through the door. "How's it going?" he asked.

Harry looked up and smiled after closing the kit. "Just finished," he said. Looking over at Mark, who was finishing up his spell work, which consisted of layering several additional shatterproof charms that Albus had taught him onto the compartment's walls and windows. He frowned slightly. Mark's spell work was impeccable so there was no problem there but Harry regretted the fact that Mark was being pressed into service while he was still so young. Sighing softly to himself Harry briefly closed his eyes and thought back the conversation he and Albus had shared at the end of his fifth year. Now he understood why Albus had not told him about the prophecy when he had first asked, at the end of his first year: It was sad that this part of Mark's childhood was being stolen from him by a war that he had no part in causing. It was almost as if the real world was determined to force its way into the lives of children who should be enjoying themselves, not reinforcing the shatterproof charms on designated medical compartments in preparation for the trip from London to Hogsmeade.

When Mark had finished casting the last spell his shoulders sagged slightly. Taking a deep breath he blew it out and looked out the window. "You alright, Mark?" Harry asked.

Mark nodded and turned around. The past ninety minutes had taken a toll on his second cousin and Harry could not help but worry. "Yeah," Mark said. "I'll be fine. I just need to rest for a bit."

Ron, being in a better position to help, quickly stepped forward and grabbed Mark under the arms as his knees gave way. "Easy there, Mark!" he said as he scooped the younger boy up into his arms. "You're in the caboose, right?" When Mark nodded Ron said, "Then you just relax. We've got a few minutes before the rest of the students start arriving so you just rest." With another nod Mark closed his eyes and went to sleep.

Harry followed Ron to the caboose, opening the doors for him along the way, and watched as Ron gently lay the sleeping boy out on one of the bunks, fluffed his pillow and covered him with a light blanket. After Harry and Ron had exited out through the caboose's rear entrance and were walking up the platform, alongside the train, Harry said, "Thanks."

Ron shrugged. "No problem, mate."

Harry said, "No, I really mean it, Ron. Thank you."

When Ron stopped and turned towards Harry with a curious expression on his face Harry told him about Mark's fears at the wedding and the discussion he had had with Mark while Ron was in the shower. When Ron tried to object Harry told him that it was a sign of maturity that he, Ron, was able to forgive so easily. He ended by telling Ron that Mark would know that he had been forgiven when he woke up and realized that it was Ron who Carried him to the caboose and tucked him in.

Ron looked at Harry, a curious expression on his face for a few moments, then, as understanding dawned within his mind, smiled and said, "You're Welcome."

As Ron walked away, a bemused expression on his face, Harry turned back and returned to the caboose. He was fairly certain that it was just a case of magical burnout and that all Mark needed was a little rest but his mind wouldn't let him rule out the possibility that something more serious might have happened. After hemming and hawing for almost five minutes he sent a Messenger Patronus to Madam Pomfrey, outlining Marks activities for the past two hours and asking her opinion as to what should be done.

At precisely eleven o'clock, just as the train was beginning to pull out of the station, a silvery white dove landed on the handle of Harry's broom as he flew alongside the third carriage from the back and turned to look at him. "Your diagnosis is most likely the correct one," Madam Pomfrey's voice said. "Let him rest and he should be able to sleep it off. When he wakes up give him a small vial of Pepperup Potion and have him come to the hospital wing as soon as he arrives."

Harry relayed the message to Luna, who told him that Mark was still sleeping soundly.

Once they were out of London and the suburbs were a distant memory Harry flew up and took the High Observer post that would be his for the next few hours. Only then did he allow his thoughts to return to his cousin's welfare. To his knowledge, Mark had only been in the Hospital Wing a few times over the past twelve months and could not imagine him enjoying a visit so early in his second year. He was just glad Mark was a second-year student and wasn't taking Divination because he was sure Sybill Trelawney would call it a bad omen and make the next ten months of his life a fearful mix of superstition and uncertainty just as she had tried to make his three years in her class.

When they passed through Grantham Harry flew Close Escort about mid train and then rotated out of the High Observer position with Terry Boot. At Darlington Orville Burns took the High Observer position. Half an hour past Newcastle he reported three unknown flyers briefly dropping out of the cloud cover, periodically. They appeared to be pacing the train. When Harry heard this he broke into the charmed communications link and said, "Wingmen, report!"

Ginny was the first to report in with, "I've got your back, Harry"

"Neville?" Ron asked.

"I'm here for you, Ron," Neville replied.

When all nineteen members of the regular escort team had reported in Harry switched charms and said, "Hermione? Luna?"

"Yes, Harry?"

"I'm here, Harry; and Mark has just woken up."

Harry smiled at Luna's still occasionally dreamy tone, something he hoped would survive the war intact, then said, "Alright. Where are the rest of the flyers?"

"They are scattered throughout the train," Hermione said, a degree of nervousness creeping into her voice. "Why?"

"Do it discretely, Hermione, because we don't want anyone to panic but have them get their brooms and report to the caboose. Luna, if Mark feels up to it have him notify the healers and tell them to start getting ready."

"Will do," Mark said.

"Are you feeling okay?" Harry asked.

"Yeah," Mark said. "I might not be up for this fight but I can run supplies."

Harry smiled. "That's all I ask, Mark. That's all I ask."

It was a long wait. Occasionally they would spot the unknown flyers as they dropped below the cloud cover but nothing more. Then, thirty minutes north of Dundee, as they entered the Scottish Highlands, when Ginny was flying the High Observer position, at least fifty death eaters dropped below the cloud cover and began diving on the Hogwarts Express. Orville actually saw them first because they were coming in from behind and he happened to glance over his shoulder at the right time. "We have death eaters," he said as calmly as he could, given the fact that his wingman was still on the train.

As soon as Harry heard this he tapped into the train's communications charm and commanded, "All flyers in the air! NOW!"

As the caboose's rear entrance burst open, emitting a stream of twenty-one more flyers, all of the members of the escort squadron dropped their disillusionment charms and joined the battle. The death eaters hesitated a moment, as the number of defenders was revealed, then resumed their dives with even more ferocity.

As the air battle raged Harry was glad that all of last year's seventh-year quidditch players had chosen to donate their time to serve as escorts for the Hogwarts Express. They would have been lost without them. As a matter of fact, it had been Cho Chang who, while chasing a death eater who was firing on her wingman, had been the first to summon a broom out from under a death eater. The death eater, whom they would later discover had been Marcus Flint, had been so surprised that he had actually lost his grip on his wand, which had tumbled out of the air and gotten buried in a particularly viscous looking bush. Marcus, however, had continued in his trajectory and smashed into the side of the train's engine, his limp and broken body bouncing off of the engine's length to land in a crumpled heap alongside the tracks.

Moments later Cho screamed, "STOP THE TRAIN!!"

As Harry pulled out of his dive, mere centimeters from the tops of a nearby stand of trees, he snapped, "What?!"

"AMBUSH!!" Cho screamed. "STOP THE TRAIN!!"

Harry glanced up as the sounds of an unfortunate death eater crashing into the trees behind him reached his ears. In a gorge a little more than a mile ahead he could see that the tracks had been blocked and that the air was swarming with death eaters. In his mind's eye it resembled a hornet's nest that had been swept into a frenzy by Dudley and his gang poking at it with sticks. "Hermione!" he barked, "Stop the train and send for help! I want the train defended but we need anyone who can fly and fight in the air immediately!"

Moments later the train's emergency brakes were engaged and the Hogwarts Express began slowing. Less than a second later Hermione's otter patronus was rocketing along the rails towards Hogwarts and Luna's dove was flying south, towards London, faster than any dove he had ever seen. The next thing he heard was Hermione's amplified voice barking orders up and down the length of the train. As the train slowed the doors flew open and one hundred more flyers joined the fray.

The train screeched to a halt half a mile from the entrance to the gorge, which gave the defenders a slight advantage in that they would be fighting out in the open as opposed to being boxed up in a narrow canyon. On the other hand, the death eaters held the advantage in numbers, a willingness to use the dark arts and the increased power that came from their use of the dark mark. Harry was not hopeful; but at the same time he knew that he had to give it everything he had. He didn't have time to even begin to consider what losing might mean because a death eater was closing in on his wingman, Ginny, and another was rocketing up towards him from below.

Pushing his broom to the limit Harry flew up on Ginny's pursuer and, wrapping his left arm around the man's neck, twisted his broom around and away, snapping the man's neck in the process. Without taking the time to even think about the fact that he had just killed a man with his bare hands Harry spun around and flung the body down at his pursuer. The man seemed to be so stunned by what he had just witnessed that his reaction time was slowed enough for the body to hit its target. The death eater lost his grip on his broom and, together, he and the body of his wingman, one dead and one about to die, plunged earthward at terminal velocity.

It was a hollow victory though because at that moment the death eaters who had been waiting in ambush joined the fight. Fortunately, at the same moment, several hundred cracks and pops could be heard as aurors, hit wizards and former students arrived from London and teachers and shop keepers arrived from Hogwarts and Hogsmeade. To say that Harry was thankful would have been an understatement but, unfortunately, he didn't even have time to smile because he was engaged in a particularly viscous firefight with a death eater who just sent a fourth-year Ravenclaw – Harry thought it might have been their reserve seeker – spiraling out of control towards an exposed cliff face.

The battle raged for hours, finally winding down as dusk approached darkness and the few remaining death eaters retreated into the hills with irate escorts close behind. The ground was littered with broken brooms and mangled bodies. Harry looked down as some of the younger students began to emerge from the train, escorted by the teachers who had arrived in response to Hermione's summons. Glancing over at Ginny, who was sporting a fresh scar on her left cheek, he asked, ""You alright, Gin?"

Ginny nodded but flinched as Harry brushed her cheek with the backs of his fingers. "I guess I had better get that looked at, hadn't I."

Harry softly smiled then nodded his head in the failing light. "Yes, I think you should."

As they began their descent towards the now lighted train, they could see several points of light gliding slowly over the battlefield as healers, aurors and hit wizards searched for survivors. As tired as he was, Harry knew that it was his job to begin the check in process. Activating the communications charm they had used the previous Christmas Harry said, "This is Harry Potter. All flyers please check in."

Apparently recognizing the need for this formality Ginny said, "This is Ginny Weasley, present and accounted for."

Ron and Neville checked in moments later.

As the flyers continued to check in Harry was amazed at how many had survived. He didn't know how many were wounded but it sounded like most of the student flyers had pulled through.

As midnight approached a few of aurors flew into the gorge to remove the blockade. While removing the boulders and trees one of the aurors discovered that the rails at the far end of the gorge had been intentionally split. Further investigation revealed that several booby traps had been set that would activate as the front wheels of the engine passed over spikes that had been cursed to activate the traps. It was decided that, as uncomfortable as it would be, everyone would spend the night on the train so that the tracks could be checked and cleared of all curses and traps. There were many groans, of course, but, ultimately, even those who could have apparated to Hogsmeade and walked understood the reasoning and stayed to protect the younger students.

The Hogwarts house elves arrived around 1:00 AM with picnic baskets filled with food. It wasn't the usual Start of Term feast – that had been postponed a day to give the students time to arrive, settle in and calm down – but it was a sumptuous meal nonetheless. Several of the younger students were too frightened or nervous to eat and a few of the younger flyers became physically ill, throwing up what they had eaten, as full realization dawned upon them as to what had just happened and what they had done. It was not a pretty sight and it was not something any of them would soon forget.

After slowly drinking a goblet of pumpkin juice, Harry was simply too tired to eat, he collapsed on the bunk Mark had been sleeping on earlier. As his mind relaxed he wondered how he had missed the warning signs. Nothing he had seen in any of his sessions throughout the summer had even hinted at an attack on The Hogwarts Express. They had been flying escort as a precaution but he had honestly not expected anything to happen.

Rising out of his physical body as it slipped into slumber Harry went in search of one Tom Marvolo Riddle. Locking onto the energy signature he had been studying for the past several weeks he followed the scent south, to the ballroom in Riddle Manor on the hill to the north and east of Little Hangleton. Tom was, to put it mildly, incensed. Several companies of renegade fighters had taken it upon themselves to attack the Hogwarts Express to test their abilities and had suffered a devastating loss. After screaming at and torturing the survivors for several hours he had them unceremoniously thrown into prison cells and chained to the walls.

Harry withdrew from the scene and returned to his body as the first jolts signified that the tracks had been cleared and the Hogwarts Express once again on its way to Hogsmeade. Half an hour later they pulled into Hogsmeade station where they were met by Hagrid as well as professors McGonagall, Flitwick, Sprout and Slughorn, Madam Pomfrey and several counselors from Saint

Mungo's. The prefects and quidditch players, some of whom were sporting the sighs of recent injuries, escorted the first-years to the docks and flew alongside the boats as they crossed the lake. This was done more to reassure the first-years that they would be safe at Hogwarts than as any form of precaution but the possibility that something might happen still lingered in the air.

When Harry walked into the Great Hall for lunch Remus stood up from his position at the Head Table, walked around the end of the table and made his way down to where Harry was sitting with his friends. Taking the vacant seat next to Harry Remus cast a privacy charm and leaned heavily on the table, tiredly running his fingers through his graying hair.

Harry turned to look at him, a light of expectancy in his eyes. When he saw the expression on Remus' face, however, he knew what his friend had come to talk about. "How bad?" he asked softly.

Remus took a deep breath and looked up at the ceiling, which was displaying a bright blue cloud-free sky, and then let it out as he lowered his head and turned towards Harry. "Five dead, twelve in the hospital wing and seven more in Saint Mungo's."

Harry's entire body sagged in defeat. Taking his glasses off he laid them on the table and tiredly rubbed his eyes. "Why?" he whispered softly then looked over at Remus, a pleading look in his eyes.

Remus shook his head. "I honestly don't know, Harry," he said. "We all know he's a madman but what he represents seems to appeal to a certain segment of society."

Harry harrumphed, a twisted half smile half frown appearing on his face. Pinching the bridge of his nose, almost as if fighting down an oncoming headache, Harry changed the subject. "What are the rest of the numbers?"

Remus hung his head and chewed his lower lip for several seconds before answering. "They lost two hundred fifty: Two hundred dead and fifty critically injured. Civilians and volunteers lost three to death with fifteen injured."

Harry looked up, eyebrows raised, a curious expression on his face.

"From what I saw, Harry," Remus confided, "the death eaters were disorganized and fighting for personal glory. None of them had wingmen. If I were to hazard a guess I think I would have to say that our training made all the difference. I know you were in the thick of it so you weren't able to observe but to be honest with you, most of the late arrivals from London and Hogsmeade hung back and let you guys do most of the fighting." When Harry scowled Remus chuckled. "Do you know how good you guys are? Even though you were outnumbered two-to-one we had to hang back because if we had tried to join the fight all we would have done was get in the way. We essentially played mop up for you students."

Harry smiled wryly. "You know it's a sad day when your students are equated with your military."

Remus was silent for several seconds as he thought Harry's comment over then nodded sadly. "Yes, it is, Harry; but I'll tell you what: I'm glad you're on our side."

Harry thought this over then closed his eyes and nodded. "Me too."

That evening, even though they had been at Hogwarts for several hours and had been given relatively complete tours of the campus, the first-years were led into the Great Hall to be sorted.

The sorting took longer than usual because, even though the counselors and a few of the older students had tried to allay their fears, many of them were so frightened and nervous that the hat had to wait for them to calm down and relax so that they could be sorted properly. After the last student had been sorted and was seated at the Ravenclaw table Albus stood up. He looked more ancient than Harry thought possible. In Harry's opinion he looked to be carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders. When he had everyone's attention Albus said, "In all humility and from the bottom of my heart, ladies and gentlemen, I say thank you. You are all heroes and heroines. Without you and your efforts this meal would not have been possible. I will have a few more announcements after dinner but for now, please tuck in."

The conversations at the tables that evening were subdued and, even though the house elves had prepared their usual fare, large portions of food were going untouched. Even Ron, who was known for his voracious appetite, stopped after only a few bites. When Hermione had asked if he was feeling alright he had looked down at his plate, which was still three-quarters full, and sighed several times before responding, "I don't know, Hermione. I guess I'm just not hungry tonight."

Harry would have laughed at the thought of Ron turning down a chance for food but he understood the sentiment. It was a feeling that was shared by many. It had been the same after their trip to Romania last year. The difference between then and now, however, was that then it had only been the eight of them. Now it was the entire student body.

After dinner and after pudding Albus stood once more. "To those of you who are new I say welcome. To those of you who have returned to continue your education I say welcome back. You all have my heartfelt condolences for what you have thus far endured. Please know, however, that you are, indeed, safer here than you would be anywhere else on Earth. On the other hand," he said in an offhanded sort of way that Harry was sure was meant to raise their spirits, "the Forbidden Forest is still off limits. Its inhabitants have agreed to protect the forest and, by extension, defend Hogwarts' flanks but that does not mean you have the right to invade their territory. The centaurs are very territorial in their traditions and none of us should set foot within their domain without having first gained their permission and I can tell you, from many long years of experience, that gaining this kind of permission is not an easy task."

A few chuckles, mostly from the Gryffindor table, rang out across the hall.

Albus smiled over at Harry's close-knit circle of friends and nodded and Harry noticed that the twinkle was starting to return to the aged headmaster's eyes. "On a lighter note," Albus said, returning to his more relaxed posture, "Mister Filch has asked me to remind you that no magic is allowed in the corridors." Turning towards Remus he added, "That reminder goes for you as well, Professor Lupin."

Several students laughed at this as Remus blushed several shades of red.

"Mister Filch has assembled a list of seven hundred and forty-nine banned items, most of which can be found at Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes."

This brought several more chuckles and a few groans of "Awe heck!" from some of the first-years, which added to the laughter.

"And finally," Albus continued, once the laughter died down, "I would like to welcome back an old friend who has agreed to fill the recently vacated posts of Potions Master and head of Slytherin

House. Could you all please welcome my old friend, Professor Horace Slughorn."

As the round little man sitting to Albus' immediate left stood several students, including Harry and most of those he had worked with over the summer, applauded politely. But then something seemed to take over and the polite applause gradually grew and morphed into a standing ovation. Slughorn looked dumbfounded. Albus looked pleasantly surprised. For Harry it was a demonstration of the magic of words when employed by a master. In a few short phrases Albus Dumbledore, using words and subtle humor, had transformed a sad, somewhat solemn occasion into a reason to celebrate. The students would heal and, when the time came, they would be ready to fight again. For now, however, it was time for school, relationships, fun, games and training.

Chapter 16. Potions and Planning

As they left the Great Hall after dinner that night Harry was smiling, almost stupidly, all the way to the entrance to the Gryffindor Tower. "What's wrong with you?" Ron asked in a tone straddling the border between curiosity and skepticism.

Harry glanced over at his friend and grinned even more broadly. "Didn't you hear what he said?"

Ron furrowed his eyebrows. "We all heard what he said, Harry, but why are you smiling?"

Harry chuckled as he reached out to muss up Mark's hair. As Mark swatted his hand away and scowled up at his second cousin Harry said, "We're all heroes, Ron; heroes and heroines. It's not just me anymore. I just one man, Ron, but it is going to take an army of heroes to beat Tom and I think we are just the army to do it."

Ron shook his head and muttered something about Harry being mental.

When the boys and girls separated to go to their rooms a few minutes later Ginny earned a few curious glances from the first-years as she climbed the steps to the seventh-year boys' dormitory but they were advised not to worry about it because special arrangements had been made the previous Easter and that nothing untoward was happening. What they didn't know was that ever since witnessing Severus' death on Good Friday Harry had not been able to actually sleep without her. He could rest and, if he was utterly and completely exhausted, get a few minutes of nightmare-filled slumber but he could not actually rest comfortably and sleep peacefully without her.

On the few occasions when she had gotten up before him it had taken less than a minute for his mind to be filled images of memories he had used his pensieve to mitigate. It wasn't that he was weak; but when he was asleep his subconscious mind would strive to force him to deal with those memories before he was consciously ready to face them. Ginny was his security blanket, in a manner of speaking, and for some reason he knew that he would not be able to get much sleep without her, at least until the war was over.

As he crawled into bed next to her that night he wondered if Albus had had the same problem during the war with Grindelwald.

The next morning Mark was all smiles has he entered the Great Hall and sat down next to Harry. "Alright, Mark," Harry asked suspiciously, "what'd you do? Who'd you prank this time?"

Ron looked up and scowled. Mark's last prank had been to sprinkle a few grains of Blair's Sudden Death chili powder on Ron's pudding when he wasn't looking. It hadn't been enough to actually hurt him but it had put him off his desserts for almost a week.

Mark smiled innocently. "I didn't prank anyone," he said cheerfully.

"I'll bet," Ron grumbled.

Ignoring Ron's barbed comment Mark said, "No, really. My roommates just think its cool that I spent the whole summer here with you guys."

Harry looked skeptical. "No pranks?" he asked.

Mark smiled and vigorously shook his head. "Nope. No pranks." Then he softly added, "This time."

Ron groaned as Harry shook his head while softly chuckling to himself. "I just hope you remember the first law of pranking," Harry admonished.

"Oh, yeah. I memorized it. 'Never prank a prankster.'"

"Good," Harry said. It looked like things were shaping up quite nicely for Mark. When they had first met last year Mark had felt isolated and alone. Over the course of the year he had made a few friends but now he had done something none of his roommates had been able to do, even though a few of them had tried, and was enjoying the notoriety.

About halfway through breakfast Professor McGonagall came down from the Head Table and began passing out timetables to her students. Her expression was as stern as ever but Harry thought he could sense a certain softness in her eyes that he could only assume was something akin to an expression of grief for the loss of innocence in the hearts and minds of the children she had been charged with guiding through the next ten months of life. As she made her way down the table she paused to speak with each of her charges, sometimes individually but usually in groups of five or six. When she reached Harry's group she said, "I just wanted to let you know how thankful we all are that you were flying escort, Mr. Potter, Miss Weasley, Mr. Weasley, Mr. Longbottom. According to Remus, the four of you flew in formations, and used tactics, that he had not seen since Romania. We are going to have to study your memories of this battle in a pensieve because apparently you were acting on reflex. We need to teach those tactics to all of our flyers so that they can use them just as effectively.

"I think it is safe to say that our enemy will be studying the memories of their survivors to learn our tactics. We need to continually improve and change if we are going to win this war and, as our strategists, Mr. Weasley, Miss Granger and Mr. Longbottom we are counting on you to lead the way."

Turning towards Mark she said, "And I especially want to thank you, Mr. Evans. Your shatterproofing charms performed admirably. All of the compartments you charmed came through without a scratch."

Mark sat up a little straighter in his seat and his smile was even brighter than it had been when he sat down. Ron even looked over and smiled. "Pranks aside, Mark," he said, "I guess you're an alright kind of bloke."

Mark burst out laughing. "Thanks, Ron," he laughed. "Just for that you have earned a week's reprieve from my pranks."

Harry snickered; Ginny giggled; Ron groaned; and Hermione shook her head. Professor McGonagall smiled thinly as she handed them their timetables. "Just keep them under control, Mr. Evans," she said before moving further down the table.

Mark swallowed. "Oops!" he said. "I forgot she was there."

Ginny leaned across Harry and whispered, "I think she has given you her blessing, Mark. Just keep them safe and don't prank any of the teachers."

Mark nodded. "Don't worry. I will and I won't."

After studying his timetable for several seconds Ron muttered, "Oh, bloody hell. Same as last year only worse."

"Worse?" Harry asked.

Ron nodded. "NEWT Potions, NEWT Charms, NEWT, Transfiguration, NEWT Divination, two Defense against the Dark Arts classes, Military Tactics and Strategies, Early Morning Dueling Practice, Mandatory Aerial Combat Training on Saturdays, our presentations," he said indicating Neville and himself, "every second and fourth Saturday evening and meetings with Dumbledore every Sunday afternoon."

Harry raised an eyebrow at the mention of the meetings with Dumbledore but then remembered that Ron and Hermione were Head Boy and Head Girl and that they had agreed to the Sunday afternoon meetings because it was the only time both of them had free.

Looking down at his own timetable he saw that the only real differences between this year's schedule and last year's were the addition of the Saturday morning Aerial Combat Training, the inclusion of his and Remus' classes on the first and third Saturday evenings of each month and the fact that his Thursday evening classes with Albus had been moved. With a wry grin he murmured, "It looks like Ethrindell has been talking to Albus."

Ron looked up from his schedule. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"My Thursday evening classes have been moved," he said tiredly. "They used to be held in Albus' office but now they are being held in the Chamber of Secrets."

At Ginny's involuntary shudder he wrapped an arm around her shoulders and pulled her towards himself. "It's alright, Gin," he whispered encouragingly, "I've been working on it most of the summer and I'm trying to remove all traces of the chamber you knew."

Ginny nodded into his chest then, pulling away, smiled up at him. "I know you are and I thank you for that but that period of my life still haunts me."

After going over Ginny's and Mark's timetables, and promising to help Mark with his revising, the six of them stood up and made their way out into the Entrance Hall.

Luna joined them in the Entrance Hall and compared her timetable with Neville's and then Ginny's. As it turned out, Luna would be taking NEWT Defense against the Dark Arts, NEWT Potions and NEWT level Ancient Runes with Ginny and working with Neville in NEWT level Herbology. Her specialty course, however, was Advanced Healing Techniques, which was being taught by Madam Pomfrey as well as any number of healers from Saint Mungo's.

Mark's first class was Charms so he headed up the stairs to Professor Flitwick's classroom. Ginny and Luna had Defense Against the Dark Arts first period so they left to join their classmates. Harry, Ron, Hermione and Neville all had Potions first hour. As they turned towards the dungeons Harry thought back to his first meeting with Professor Slughorn and Albus' vague warnings about his modus operandi. He had been too busy over the summer to even think about the funny little man and wondered what kind of teacher he would be.

When they entered the potions classroom minutes later it was already filled with vapors and odd

smells. Professor Slughorn, his massive, round belly preceding his every step, was bouncing from station to station peering into the cauldrons he had placed on tables around the room. "Ah! Good morning, class!" he greeted with a bit more enthusiasm than the situation warranted. "Before we begin we are going to have a little impromptu quiz. So, if you could please look into each of the cauldrons you see at the various stations around the room before taking your seats we can begin."

The first potion, Harry knew, was the Wolfsbane Potion. He had been brewing it for Remus since April and, while it was a little thicker than ideal, he would recognize the potion anywhere. The second potion he had only seen twice before, once in his second year when Hermione had successfully brewed it in Moaning Myrtle's bathroom and again last year, when they had brewed it in class for Severus. The Polyjuice Potion. The next potion was a colorless, odorless potion that Harry knew to be Veritaserum. When cooled it was indistinguishable from water. When warm or boiling, however, as this potion was, the steam rose in a characteristic swirling pattern that plain water could never duplicate.

The potion at the fourth station was on a gold plated cauldron. It had a mother-of-pearl sheen; its vapors rose in a distinctive swirling pattern, resembling Veritaserum's pattern in many respects; and, when he sniffed at it, he was reminded of his favorite desert – treacle tart – his favorite sport – quidditch – and Ginny. He couldn't be sure but somehow he got the impression that this was one of the more potent love potions.

The fifth potion was contained within a much smaller, silver cauldron. It was the color and consistency of molten gold and it was bubbling merrily about its container. As Harry studied this potion he recognized its properties and knew that he had brewed it at least once while working with Salazar. He also recalled that Salazar had cautioned him against its use in all but the most desperate of times; and even then it was only to be used as a last resort. He knew that it had something to do with luck but couldn't remember what.

When everyone had taken their seats Professor Slughorn, smiling jovially behind his massive walrus mustache, bounded over to the first station. "Alright then," Slughorn chirped gleefully, "Who can tell me about this potion?"

Hermione's hand was the first up but Harry, Ron and Neville weren't far behind. Slughorn hesitated a moment then said, "Ah, Mister Potter. What can you tell me about this potion?"

Harry got the uneasy feeling that Professor Slughorn was trying to curry his favor by calling on him first. "That would be Wolfsbane Potion, sir," he said politely. "It has, however, passed its prime brewing period and is nearing its functional end. Since the full moon is not until the end of next week I'm afraid it will not be of any use to anyone."

A look of horror appeared in Slughorn's eyes as he looked into the cauldron. Muttering a mild curse to himself he extinguished the flame and vanished the cauldron's contents. "Well spotted, Mister Potter. I should have been more vigilant. It takes a week to brew that potion properly; now I'm afraid I will have to start over."

"If you are brewing it for Professor Lupin," Harry tried to console the rotund man, "I think I've got that covered. I've been brewing it for him ever since Professor Snape died."

Professor Slughorn looked up, interested. "Have you, now, Mister Potter? Well then, it would seem that you have inherited your mother's talent. She was a right dab at potions you know!"

Harry closed his eyes and bowed his head. Sighing softly he softly said, "No, sir. I didn't. I never knew my mother."

Professor Slughorn looked he had been kicked in the stomach but the damage had already been done and Harry, even though exceedingly mature for his age, was extremely sensitive where any mention of his parents was concerned. He didn't know how he had tolerated six years of Severus' abuse but, on looking back, realized that Severus had always attacked his father but never mentioned his mother. He wondered why this was and began to suspect that there was more to that story than he knew and now, with Severus' death, it was unlikely he would ever know the truth.

As the class continued around him Harry heard, but didn't hear, Ron describe the second and fifth potions; Hermione accurately describe the third potion; and smiled slightly when Neville critiqued the fourth. The rest of the class passed in a blur. Harry almost mechanically, but accurately, brewed the Draught of Living Death as he thought back on the time he had spent with his parents and Sirius during his near death experience, wondering why he had not taken the time to really get to know them. As the period ended Professor Slughorn asked Harry, Ron, Hermione and Neville to stay back for a few minutes.

As they approached his desk Professor Slughorn looked sincerely remorseful. "I really am sorry about my comments, Mister Potter," he began. "Sometimes I get so caught up in the excitement of the moment that I forget my position. Do you think you can forgive me?"

Harry looked up, his eyes dull and almost lifeless. "Yes, I ... I think so. I have some thinking to do but I think I can forgive you. You had no way of knowing how that would affect me so ..."

The portly professor breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank you," he said. "Now," he said with a fresh burst of enthusiasm, "I have a question for the four of you. I have been watching you, as well as the rest of your fellow students, since my return at the end of June and you four seem to be the unofficial leaders of the entire student body." Smiling up at Ron and Hermione he added, "I realize that you two are Head Boy and Head Girl but I honestly don't think it would matter if you were or not. You four are natural born leaders.

"I am in the process of forming a small, informal club of the future movers and shakers in the Wizarding World – something I did almost every year, with some success I might add, before I retired seventeen years ago – and would like to know if you would be interested in joining."

As Harry looked into the excited professor's eyes he saw a mixture of emotions. There was excitement and anticipation mixed with a certain amount of greed and a desire to be associated with the powerful, rich and famous. These qualities repulsed Harry more effectively than any shielding charm ever could. At the same time, however, he knew that he had been used as bait to get him to agree to return. But then again there was the war and his training. He knew he needed to get out more and relax but, in his heart of hearts, he could not justify it until he had done everything in his power to put an end to Tom's reign of terror. Breaking eye contact with Professor Slughorn he said, "I'll think about it, sir. Right now I've got a lot on my plate but I'll keep it in mind."

The others expressed similar sentiments, being careful not to mention any of their war related activities. Even though he had been there since the end of June and they had seen him at lunch and dinner almost every day he was still an unknown; and if Aberforth suspected a spy, even though that suspicion had yet to be confirmed, they were unwilling to take the chance.

As they left the Potions Lab something Sirius had said while at Grimmauld Place replayed itself in Harry's mind. "In the last war, no one knew who was trustworthy and who wasn't." An involuntary shudder shook his frame as he and Ron made their way up to the Gryffindor Tower. Neville had a special project he wanted to get started on in Herbology and Hermione headed for the library. Harry hoped Halloween would be the end of it because he didn't want to let either the war or Tom tear apart any friendships, as had happened in the first war. He wasn't going to kid himself into thinking that relationships would not be strained but he hoped that the most important relationships would stand the tests of time.

Two months, he thought as they approached the entrance to the tower, was not a long time but with everything that was happening it was more than enough time for things to go terribly wrong.

Harry and Ron walked through the Gryffindor Common Room and mounted the stairs to the boy's dormitories on their way to Harry's trunk. Ginny looked up from one of her Defense Against the Dark Arts texts, this being her free period for the day, and jumped up, joining them as they opened the door to the seventh-year boys dormitory. "What's up?" she asked.

Neither Harry nor Ron answered until they were all three safely inside, with the door closed and they were sure that neither Dean nor Seamus were in the room and even then it was a short two-word answer. "Planning session," Ron said succinctly.

When they were safely inside Harry's magical trunk and the lid had been closed and sealed and additional silencing charms had been added so that that could speak openly Harry said, "We know when and we know where, Gin. What we don't know is who and how many.

Ron glanced up. "We do?"

Harry nodded grimly. "Yes. I spent a lot of time studying his plans last week and again last night. The attack on the Hogwarts Express was not his doing. It was the brainchild of a few rogue death eaters who wanted to test their abilities in a combat situation. Tom was ... shall we say ... upset to say the least, but his plans have not changed. His four main targets in Great Britain are still Hogsmeade, Diagon Alley, the Ministry of Magic and Saint Mongo's and he plans on hitting all four of them, simultaneously, on Halloween.

"I also spent some time in my Room of Requirement last week, constructing models of all four of these targets. You are our chief strategist, Ron. My main target is going to be Tom. I am going to have to lure him onto the castle grounds, if not into the castle itself because everything depends upon me being able to draw as much energy as possible from Hogwarts. That is what I have spent most of the summer training for. The defense of his four main targets is in your hands. All I am going to ask is that Ginny and Neville stay here, with me. Ginny because I love her and because she is my wingman and Neville because he is my regular dueling partner."

Ron walked through Harry's office in silence, his head bowed, deep in thought. As they entered the library Harry glanced up and saw that Dobby and Winky were sitting at one of the study tables thoroughly engrossed in one of their favorite pastimes, reading. He shook his head when Dobby looked up, silently telling his friend that his services were not required.

Ron was muttering to himself as he walked along one wall, turned the corner and walked to the blank space in the middle of the adjoining wall. "Just walk back and forth thinking about the location you want."

Ron nodded and paced up and down the short expanse three times. When the door appeared he opened it and they entered a vacant replica of Diagon Alley. After taking several long strides along the empty street Ron stopped and turned towards Harry who was waiting near the entrance. "How detailed is it?" Ron asked.

"All of the buildings, their aisles and shelves are accurate down to the millimeter. The books, wands, potions ingredients and other merchandise are dummies. Everything else, however, is accurate."

"How much big is the board?"

"This model includes all of Diagon Alley, all of Knockturn Alley, the Leaky Cauldron and the city block surrounding that stretch of Charing Cross Road."

Ron nodded. "Good. Are all of the other models as detailed?"

"Yes."

Walking back to the entrance Ron smiled and said, "You know, it's probably a good thing I got attacked by those brain things at the end of fifth year." When Harry and Ginny both raised an eyebrow at this remark he said, "This is our NEWT year and we all know that they are going to be piling on the homework. I'm going to have to use those memories to do my homework because I'm going to be spending most of the next two months in here, planning their defense. And since you've taken three of my most valuable pieces off the board I am going to have to plan around that."

"Fortunately, with all of the information you have been able to provide, through your pensieve memories, I know most of their strengths as well as their weaknesses. Add to that everything I was able to learn about our own forces this summer and I think we might just have a chance. I'll want to meet with the shopkeepers in Diagon Alley a few times between now and the end of October because the alley is going to be the most difficult place to defend. I'll also want to meet with a Madam Bones and Rufus Scrimgeour a couple of times to outline the defenses for the ministry and Saint Mungo's. I think we can handle Hogsmeade. The residents have already been through two battles and they are used to working with us."

The glazed look of determination that had crept into Ron's while formulating his initial plans was similar to, but somehow more intense than, the look he got when concentrating on a particularly difficult chess configuration. He had never worn that expression when playing against Harry but they had all seen it several times whenever he was playing either Alastor or Neville. It was almost frightening when it happened because they knew that Ron was strategizing and that he would not give up until he had found a the most favorable move.

When Ron broke the trance he had been in it was almost as if a bluebell flame had exploded with a near-audible pop. Looking up he said, "Do you think you could recreate these models in the castle's Room of Requirement?"

Harry smiled. I'm already working on it. Winky and Dobby actually created a more flexible version of that room when they created this one but I think we can do it. If nothing else we can always use my trunk."

Ron frowned. "I'd rather not. I know its your trunk and all, but I would like to keep its capabilities a

secret as long as possible."

"I agree!" Ginny said. I don't want a bunch of strangers traipsing through my sitting room, no matter how noble the cause."

Harry laughed and pulled Ginny into a one-armed hug. "Yeas, dear," he laughed. "I'll ask Albus for his assistance this weekend."

Chapter 17. Closing Ranks

The next morning, being Thursday the fourth of September, Harry, Ron, Hermione and Neville had defense Against the Dark Arts after breakfast, which was after their early morning run and dueling practice. While Ginny and Luna joined them on their run and participated in the dueling drills, Mark only ran three laps around the castle grounds and practiced spells with Tonks while the others did battle in the quidditch pitch. Mark was actually progressing quite rapidly for someone his age. There was always the danger of pushing him beyond his limits and damaging his magical core, however, so it was a delicate balancing act they were playing, with Mark's knowledge and approval, by encouraging his magical growth without either asking or letting him do more than he was capable of. Harry had almost panicked when Mark had collapsed on the train in London but Mark seemed to be doing fine and Madam Pomfrey had assured him that she could not find anything wrong with Mark either physically or magically.

When they walked into Defense Against the Dark Arts after breakfast that morning the room, for all intents and purposes, seemed empty. After everyone was seated there was silence for several seconds as they waited for one of the professors to arrive. As the silence dragged on Harry grew suspicious and reached out with his ethereal abilities to get a sense of what was going on. As he scanned the room he discovered that all four professors were standing in the four corners of the room under disillusionment charms. Whispering softly, he said, "Ron, Hermione, Neville! They're in the corners. Disillusionment charms. NOW!"

As the four junior members of the Order of the Phoenix vanished and rolled out of their seat the rest of the students in the classroom threw up shields and assumed defensive postures. Moments later Alastor, then Kingsley then Remus and Tonks dropped their disillusionment charms. "Very good," Moody growled. "I don't know how you figured it out, Potter," he said, his magical eye pinned on Harry, who was crouching behind the teacher's desk, "but you were right. If it had gone on much longer we would have sprung our trap."

Pointing his wand at Harry he said, "You can drop your disillusionment charm and return to your seat, Potter." His electric blue eye darted from Harry to Neville then Ron and Hermione, who were standing back to back off to one side. "You too, Longbottom. Weasley, Granger."

When, after Ron, Hermione and Neville had dropped their disillusionment charms and returned to their seats, Harry hadn't moved Moody walked over and casually shot a stinging hex at his bum. When it passed through his body Moody's eyebrows shot up. Dropping into a fighting stance he began cautiously scanning the room with both eyes while slowly backing into a corner. It took him almost two minutes to find Harry and even then it was little more than a faint outline in the shadows behind Kingsley.

Without warning Alastor fired a stunner at Kingsley. Kingsley dropped and rolled to the side. Harry teleported to the other side of the room and dropped his disillusionment charm, suddenly appearing standing beside Susan Bones. Susan screamed and everyone turned in her direction,

"Very good, professor," Harry said. Then, grinning, looked over at Remus and said, "Never let it be said that Professor Moody is unprankable."

Moody scowled. "Alright, Potter. You got me. Now, how'd you do it?"

As calmly walked down towards the front of the room and then over to his seat he smiled apologetically and said, "How familiar are you with residual energies, Professor?"

Moody growled. "You are referring to the energies associated with residual hauntings as in haunted battlefields, I presume," Alastor bit out.

Harry nodded. "Exactly. What you shot that stinging hex at was a residual. I was there for a few seconds, long enough to establish the energy field, but after that I moved to the darkest corner of the room and reinforced my disillusionment charm." What Harry didn't tell them was that he had a lot of help from Hogwarts and that he had been training for situations like this since the middle of August.

Moody grumbled under his breath for several seconds while Remus snickered behind his hand. Kingsley looked bemused. Tonks, like Remus, looked on the verge of laughing out loud. "Alright, Potter. You've found a way around my magical eye. Just don't get used to it."

When Harry reached his desk he smiled softly. "Constant vigilance, sir."

As he sat down Remus and Tonks both lost it and bust out laughing. Moments later Kingsley's booming laughter joined theirs. Some of the students wanted to laugh but Moody's glare stopped them without much effort. Harry smiled innocently up at his fellow professor and shrugged his shoulders. Moody just scowled and stumped over to the teachers' desk grumbling something about flippant, arrogant show-offs.

When the commotion had died down Moody slammed the palms of both hands down on his desk with such force that many people's wands jumped off their desks and landed on the floor. He had everyone's attention. "Good," he said through a twisted smile. "Now that I've got your attention we can begin."

Stepping back from the desk he began pacing back and forth across the front of the room. "Each and every one of you," he began, "could probably pass portions of the Official Auror Examinations if you were to take them tomorrow. You are all seasoned warriors, more seasoned than most aurors. This past summer you attended Weasley and Longbottom's presentations on Battle Tactics and Procedures. Starting next week these nightly meetings will resume for everyone in fifth year and above. In here you are going to be tested so that we can determine your strengths as well as your weaknesses. In your laboratory classes you will be assigned to teams based upon your abilities. Next month the emphasis in your evening classes will change. You will still be learning your enemy's tactics and how to defend against them but you will also be learning how to defend an assigned position."

It had been decided in their last Order meeting before the end of Summer Training that the students would be trained to fight and defend their positions without telling them that they were training for an actual battle. Those defending Diagon Alley were to be trained to defend several positions so that they could change positions as needed or cover for a team that had been injured, killed or otherwise incapacitated.

It had been further decided that since Ron and Neville were in charge of designing the defenses for the Ministry of Magic, Saint Mungo's, Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade, and had a more complete understanding of the death eaters' capabilities than anyone else, the defense teachers would deposit their memories of the examinations in Albus' pensieve for Ron and Neville's review. In

other words, Ron and Neville would be forming the teams based on their understandings of the death eaters' capabilities and what it would take to defend against and, ultimately, defeat them. The adults were, in essence, serving as little more than advisors while letting a select few students – namely Harry, Ron, Neville, Hermione, Ginny and Luna – run the war.

Over the course of the next several weeks defensive teams were formed and reformed as personalities clashed and abilities were tested and retested under a variety of circumstances. By the end of September all of the fifth- sixth- and seventh-year students had been divided into twenty-one teams of five. Each team would have four designated fighters and one designated healer but they were all being trained to fight both defensive and offensive battles and basic first aide. Five teams were being trained to defend each of the four main targets while Harry's team, which consisted of himself, Neville, Ginny, Luna and Terry Boot, was training to defend Hogwarts itself. When all of the teams were solidified, Ron and Neville went through the first- through fourth-year students to determine which of them were skilled enough to stay and fight and which would be evacuated to the Chamber of Secrets. The heads of the four houses did their parts by determining which students would be in charge of the younger students during the battle. The weekly meetings of Professor Slughorn's Slug Club became the unofficial training ground for these future prefects.

As September turned to October the Wood Elves, High Elves, House Elves and Aurors started training with the students. It was at this point that many of the teams began to realize that they were being trained for an actual battle. Some of the students grew nervous at the thought but all of them applied themselves even more diligently to their studies as well as to their training. Some subjects, such as Ancient Runes, Astronomy, Divination, History of Magic and Muggle Studies suffered because of it but the teachers understood why and tried to tailor their lessons to their students' needs. Even Professor Binns, while not the most flexible teacher at Hogwarts, began lecturing on the battle tactics used in wars past. The teacher who had the hardest time adjusting to the new atmosphere was Professor Trelawney because no one wanted to hear her predictions of doom and gloom. Her students, even Lavender and Parvati, abandoned her in favor of Firenze who was teaching a much more practical form of divination, which included chess for the younger students.

At midnight on the first of October, after making sure Tom was asleep, Harry went down to his lab in the Chamber of Secrets and, after placing the most powerful silencing charms he could on the room, destroyed the last of the five original horcruxes. Tom was clinging to life now with less than half his soul remaining on the Earth plain, and that being divided into three parts, the part in Harry, the part in Tom and the part in Nagini. This time, however, Harry felt a twinge within himself, almost as if that part of Tom's soul that had attached itself to him had recognized the death of a part of itself.

When Harry checked in on the parasite the next morning Tom was ripping up the floorboards in the Gaunt cabin in a panic. When he couldn't find the ring he flew into a rage, storming into Little Hangleton and cursing anyone who couldn't tell him who had been up to the cabin since the end of June. Harry grimaced every time someone died because he had never wanted this to happen but, perhaps unfortunately, war was not pretty and civilian casualties, even in a war like this, were inevitable. Fortunately Mark had been discrete enough in his activities that no one had suspected him of going to the cabin and their presence in Little Hangleton had been so brief and so long ago that no one seemed to remember that they had even been there.

After either killing or seriously injuring fifteen innocent muggles, effectively blowing his cover, Tom stormed back up to Riddle Manor and brooded over the loss of his second horcrux. Lucius'

death served him right for getting his diary – his first horcrux – destroyed; but did they know about the others?

As he sat brooding, alone in what had once been the manor's library, he came to the conclusion that Dumbledore would have most likely come to the conclusion that he had created multiple horcruxes. And, given the old man's reasoning abilities, it was not at all hard for him to imagine that the old goat had figured out where the ring had been hidden. But what of the others, were they safe or had they been destroyed as well? He knew the Lestrangle brothers were loyal but there was still the possibility that someone had broken in their vault and stolen the goblet. He would have to have them check on its status. He didn't know what Black had done with the locket and he doubted and one would even think to look at Hogwarts, let alone in the Room of Requirement, for Ravenclaw's lost diadem so he still felt somewhat secure; but the loss of the ring was disturbing.

That afternoon Harry teleported directly into Ragnok's office, essentially blasting through all of Gringotts' wards without setting any of them off. Politely clearing his throat he said, "I don't mean to upset you, sir but this is kind of an emergency."

Ragnok looked up, startled. "Mr. Potter! How did you get in here?"

Harry shrugged his shoulders. He couldn't really explain it so he went with his standard answer. "Trade secret, I'm afraid, I only use it when I absolutely have to and I give you my word that I will not use it against you at any time."

Ragnok nodded. "Very well. Now is this emergency you speak of?"

Harry sighed and sat down across from Ragnok. "Tom knows that the ring is missing and I think he suspects that it may have been destroyed. He is going to ask one of the Lestrangle brothers to check their vault to make sure the goblet is still there. I thought you ought to know."

Ragnok nodded. "Thank you, Harry, but the goblet has already been replaced by a goblin-made replica. We made it after consulting with the queen of the faeries." Pausing briefly, he said, "You do know, Harry, that the events you have set into motion have done more to improve interspecies cooperation in the magical world than anything your ministry has done in the past five hundred years."

A quick grin flashed across Harry's face before he bowed his head. "I just hope it's worth it, sir."

Ragnok tried to smile reassuringly. "I wouldn't worry about that if I was you, Harry. You concentrate on getting rid of Tom Riddle, let the politicians and diplomats worry about the improving relations."

Rubbing his eyes tiredly Harry nodded his head and stood up. "Thank you, sir, I will. I've studied politics and diplomacy but I'm afraid it may have all fallen on deaf ears. I am a man of action, you see, and ..."

Ragnok laughed a deep, gravelly laugh and smiled up at Harry. "Don't worry about it Harry. You get yourself back to school and let me worry about the Lestrangle brothers."

Harry nodded. "Thanks," he said and was gone.

While quidditch tryouts had been held on the sixth of September and the primary and reserve

teams had been announced on the eighth there had been very few real practices because Victor and Madam Hooch were taking every opportunity to train anyone who could fly (including first-, second-, third- and fourth-year students) in the fine art of aerial combat. The younger students weren't being taught to fight but were being taught how to create distractions and how to out fly their opponents to get out of harm's way. While the younger students who showed promise were being provided Nimbus 2000 or 2001 racing brooms, all of the older students, especially those who had proven themselves in combat, were being outfitted with the new Electra 5000 Battle Series brooms. Fred and George offered to pay for the brooms but the broom companies refused. Even though a very few people outside of the death eater ranks actually knew about the planned attacks it almost seemed as though they were somehow subconsciously broadcasting the need to prepare to anyone willing to listen. It also seemed that just about everyone who had cowered in fear during the first war was either openly or quietly joining the cause.

Chapter 18. The Elder Wand

As breakfast wound down on the thirtieth of October Albus stood up from his seat at the Head Table and made his way towards Harry. As Harry watched his approach he noticed that there was something different about the way Albus was carrying himself. His head was still held as high as ever but there was a glint in his eye that conveyed a sense of anticipation and the set of his jaw told Harry that his old friend and mentor was determined to complete his mission. As Albus strode down the length of the Gryffindor House Table Harry noticed that the old wizard's gait conveyed a sense of power that Harry had only seen once before, when Dumbledore had stormed into the fake Moody's office after the third task of the Triwizard Tournament.

Harry looked up as Albus approached. "Come," Albus said simply as he passed.

Scrambling to his feet Harry jogged to catch up with the headmaster. When they reached his office Albus sat down behind his desk and, as Harry seated himself in his customary chair, withdrew and lovingly inspected his wand. "Tell me, Harry," Albus said as he laid his wand on his desk, "in all of our dueling sessions last spring, how many times did you disarm me?"

Harry looked up curiously. The twinkle in his mentor's eyes was particularly bright and Harry could tell that Albus was excited about something. Harry shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know, a couple dozen I guess, why?"

Leaning back in his chair, leaving his wand exposed and unattended on his desk, Albus asked, "Tell me, Harry, how much do you know about wand lore?"

"Wand lore?" Harry asked.

Sitting up again Albus smiled then stood up and began walking absentmindedly around his office, occasionally inspecting the odd trinket or reading the occasional book title. Harry could not help but notice that he had once again left his wand on his desk. "As Mr. Olivander is so fond of saying, the wand chooses the wizard, Harry. In an ideal world, a world free of our human weaknesses, that would most likely be the extent of it. In the real world where ego, greed and our many other failings drive us to distraction, however, there are such things as duels. Some, such as those between friends and students and their mentors, are friendly. Others, such as those between rival factions in any conflict can be quite deadly. One of the regularities in wand lore holds that whenever one witch or wizard disarms another the victor will have earned the right to use the vanquished witch or wizard's wand as their own."

For a moment Harry was shocked and couldn't believe what he was hearing. Then something occurred to him that Albus seemed to have overlooked. "But you have disarmed me just as many times as I have disarmed you ..."

Albus turned around and smiled. "Ah, yes. A most curious development if I may say so. In all of my reading, Harry, the only explanation I have been able to find is that our wands will work equally well for both of us. It is unusual for two people so far apart in age as we are to share wands but it is not unheard of. I would like you to take my wand into battle with you tomorrow, as a second wand if nothing else."

Harry's mouth fell slightly open. "You want me to use your wand, sir?"

Albus nodded, a warm smile spread across his face. I know you really don't even need a wand, Harry, but the magical properties within these wands will make it easier for you, helping you to conserve your energy for the final battle."

Harry thought about what Albus had said for some time before asking, "But won't that leave you defenseless?"

Albus laughed out loud, his eyes twinkling merrily. "Oh, I will be far from defenseless, Harry. Besides, I will be down in the chamber, with Mark and the other students, serving as chaperone."

Harry leaned back in his chair and laughed. Something about the way Albus had said it and the image of him in the newly furnished Chamber of Secrets chaperoning 160 students while the other teachers, the house elves, centaurs, a contingent of high elves, several companies of wood elves, a handful of students and the people of Hogsmeade defended the village and the school struck him as amusing. The thoughts of battle were not funny in the least but Albus' future predicament made him laugh.

Smiling softly Albus returned to his desk and sat down. "Before you accept this offer I think you should know something of its history."

Harry nodded and looked over at his friend and mentor, curious as to what could be so special about his wand that it required a recitation of its history. "Are you familiar with the story of The Three Brothers?" Albus asked.

When Harry shook his head Albus smiled knowingly. "The story of The Three Brothers is an old legend in the Wizarding world. While most are of the opinion that it is little more than a fanciful fairy tale there are a few, like myself, who believe that every legend holds a kernel of truth worthy investigation. The legend of The Three Brothers is one such story.

"As the story goes, one evening, along about dusk, three brothers came to a river they needed to cross to reach their destination. The problem was that the river was wide and swift and deep. While the brothers could swim they knew that they were no match for the river's raging currents. The brothers were also gifted in the magical arts so, after some discussion, conjured a bridge so that they could cross the river without further delay.

"When they were halfway across a specter, Death, rose up and confronted them. This river had claimed many lives and Death was upset that these three brothers had outwitted the river. For their ingenuity, however, Death decided to reward them for their efforts. In this way, he reasoned, he would get the true measure of the brothers who had beaten his river. When he approached the first and oldest brother and asked his desire the brother said that he would have an unbeatable wand so that no one could beat him in a duel. To fulfill this request Death went to the far shore and fashioned an unbeatable wand from the branch of a nearby tree. With his new wand in hand the oldest brother crossed to the far side of the bridge.

When Death approached the second, middle, brother and asked his desire this brother requested a means to bring those who had passed back from the dead. As before, Death went to the far shore. Picking up a small stone he transformed it into what has come to be known as The Resurrection Stone. Returning to the center of the bridge he presented it to the second brother explaining that all he had to do was turn it over in the palm of his hand three times and the ghosts of those who had passed would appear.

When Death asked the third, the youngest and most humble if the three brothers what he would have this brother requested an invisibility cloak so that he could hide from Death. Death was startled by this request but as he had promised one gift to each of the three brothers took off his invisibility cloak and handed it to the third brother."

Albus paused for a moment. "According to the legend, the oldest brother went to a neighboring village a few days later and challenged a wizard he had a grudge against to a duel. With an unbeatable wand he naturally won. The sad part is that he bragged about having an unbeatable wand. That night a rival snuck into his bedchamber and stole the wand. As a measure of his contempt for this brother, he slit the man's throat as he slept. Legend has it that the history of this wand, The Elder Wand, has been a particularly bloody one. According to legend, since the wand cannot be beaten it must pass from owner to owner through death. I know that part of the legend not to be true. It does, however, have a particularly bloody history.

"The second brother went home and used the stone to resurrect the ghost of the young woman he would have married had she not died an untimely death. He was sad, however, because they could visit but could not touch. In his grief he killed himself so that he could be with her.

"The third brother, the one with the invisibility cloak, lived a long, happy and prosperous life. When he was an old man he passed the cloak on to his son. When he died he went to meet Death and thanked him for the gift because it had give him the time he needed to enjoy a long and fruitful life."

When Albus finished his story he stood up and started pacing around the room again. "According to the legend surrounding the legend, if a person were to possess all three of these items they would be immune to death and would live forever. I do not know how accurate this second legend is because no one has been in possession of all three of these items at the same time. I can, however, say that both you and I have had all three of them in our possession at different times."

Harry looked up curiously and was about to say something when Albus held up his hand for silence and cut him off. "The charms on most invisibility cloaks, Harry, will last a few years at best. What is curious about your cloak, however, is that the charms have not worn off in at least a century. I knew your father, your father's father and his father and grandfather. Each of them has had that cloak and it has worked equally well for all of them. On the night of the attack I had it in my possession because I was studying it to see if I could discover its secrets. Alas, Harry, the charms seem to be permanent, woven into the fabric of the cloth itself if you will. And, therefore, unless I am very much mistaken, you are in possession of Death's invisibility cloak."

Harry's mouth fell slightly open but he didn't say anything.

"The Resurrection Stone has been lost and found several times throughout history, the most recent person to find it was a Mr. Peverell, the great grandfather of Marvolo Gaunt. Peverell believed the legend of The Three Brothers and scoured the country for the stone since it would be the hardest to find. When he did find it he had it mounted on a heavy golden ring."

Harry gasped, "You mean ..."

Albus nodded. "Yes, Harry. The stone in the ring you destroyed was The Resurrection Stone. Again, if I am not sadly mistaken, one of the reasons it made so much noise when you destroyed it was because, not only were you destroying a horcrux but you were destroying one of Death's three gifts

as well."

"What happened to the wand, sir?"

Albus took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "The Elder Wand is currently lying on my desk waiting to serve its next master."

Harry looked at the wand on Albus' desk, a look of disbelief in his eyes. "But ... but ... Albus, if it is an unbeatable wand how did you get it? And even more importantly, how was I able to disarm you?"

Albus closed and tiredly rubbed his eyes. With a sigh he returned to his desk and sat down. "This has been weighing on my mind for decades, Harry. What most people don't know is that Gellert Grindelwald and I were very good friends before the turn of the century. At the time he was the only one who could stimulate my imagination. I don't mean to brag, but I really was quite brilliant and Gellert was the first person I had ever met who could keep up with me."

Harry thought he saw a wistful look cross Albus' face and before he could stop himself asked, "Did you love him, sir?"

Albus looked over at Harry, a ferocious glint in his eyes, and for a moment Harry feared he may attack. But then, with a sigh, the look was gone and Albus sat back in his chair, his shoulders slumped in resignation. Moments later Albus looked up and nodded his head. "Yes, Harry, I did. I loved him and I thought he loved me; but then he went his way and I went mine. I was emotionally devastated for several years until Elizabeth found me and brought me back to life."

Glancing up at one of the portraits, all of whom were watching him with interest, Albus turned the subject back to the history of his wand. "Gellert and I both believed that the story of The Three Brothers held a kernel of truth within its tale so we set out to explore the world and do a little investigating.

"Gellert had heard that a wand maker who lived outside a small village in Bulgaria claimed to have The Elder Wand in his workshop. Of course no one believed the wandmaker because, at the time, it was a popular claim used to boost sales. Gellert, however, felt it worth investigating so, while the wandmaker was in town Gellert broke into his shop and began his search. As a wandmaker the old man's shop was littered with many fine wands. It took Gellert some time to find it but he did, indeed, find The Elder Wand.

"He found it as the old man was opening his shop after returning from the village. Gellert jumped out a window as the wandmaker opened the door to his shop. We met up a week later and began searching for the stone and cloak. As time went on Gellert became frustrated at our lack of progress. We got into an argument and a duel ensued. The participants in this duel were Gellert, Aberforth, myself and Ariana, Aberforth's and my younger sister. In the confusion ..." Albus paused as his voice broke and a tear leaked out of the corner of his eye. "No one really knows how it happened but in the confusion Ariana died.

"Gellert left. Despite his kindnesses, I fear that Aberforth has never really forgiven me for Ariana's death. After her funeral Aberforth broke my nose and I left. I needed to be alone. I needed some time to think.

"It was almost a year later that Elizabeth found me, hold up in a cave in the highlands. It took some time but she was able to nurse me back to emotional health. I started teaching a few years later and, except for the two years I spent fighting Gellert and his forces, this school has been my life."

Harry waited in polite silence for Albus to regain his composure then asked, "If Gellert had the wand, how did you get it?"

Albus was silent for several seconds before looking up and nodding his head as if telling himself that the time had come for the truth to come out. "That was Elizabeth's doing," he said. "The war in Europe had been raging for four, almost five, years when Elizabeth finally convinced me that if I truly loved Gellert I would stop him. It took me almost two years to reach him and when I did we dueled. No one was around to see it, but it was most definitely a duel. I still don't know how I disarmed him but I did.

"Gellert is now in a maximum security prison on the continent. I still visit him upon occasion because I still care about him but ..."

Harry nodded. "Thank you, Albus." Walking over to the desk he looked down at the wand. Extending his hand he silently summoned it and it leapt into his hand. The energies flowing from the wand felt old, almost ancient. Harry knew he could use the wand but it somehow felt wrong, almost as if he knew that if he used it too often the residual energies of its former masters would begin affecting his personal energies. He made up his mind, then and there, that he would use it to defend Hogwarts on Halloween but that after that, if he lived, he would return it to Albus and that he would never use it again.

After inspecting the wand with an unpracticed yet critical eye he looked up at Albus and, with a twisted grin, said, "I'll use it upon your request, Albus, because we are going to need every advantage tomorrow but I don't like leaving you without a wand and somehow the energies just don't feel right to me."

Albus steepled his fingers and gazed at Harry for several seconds before responding. "Perhaps the elder wand has finally met its match. Most witches and wizards would dearly wish to have an unbeatable wand, but you are apparently more sensitive to a wand's energies than most. All I ask is that you use it to defend the school. If you do not wish to use it after that then I will not ask you to touch it again."

Harry grinned. "Thank you," he said.

Pocketing the wand Harry turned and left the room. He, Ron, Neville, Hermione, Ginny and Luna had been given the day off so that they could make final preparations for tomorrow's confrontations. The rest of the students would be told of their plans at dinner tonight and the portkeys were set to activate at 9:00 P.M. They would have nine hours to get into position and prepare the defenses.

Chapter 19. Death

As the students entered the Great Hall that evening a gentle murmur of surprise and confusion filled the air. If the fact that Harry, Ron, Hermione, Neville, Luna, Ginny, Joseph, Eileen, Emric, Woodring, Onric, Rufus Scrimgeour and Madam Bones were sitting at the Head Table, essentially displacing all of the teachers who were sitting at the house tables, or the fact that the several large backpacks were lined up in front of the Head Table was not enough then the fact that walls were lined with several hundred elves, high elves and wood elves (all dressed in combat gear) mixing freely and equally with each other, was certainly enough to let everyone know that something was up.

As Orville Burs entered the dining hall Harry watched him glance around and heard him murmur a soft, "Uh oh."

When Mark entered a few minutes later he looked up at Harry, an expectant look on his face. Harry frowned slightly but nodded and motioned for Mark to come up to the Head Table.

As Mark approached Harry stood up from Albus' traditional place at the Head Table and walked around to meet Mark at the front of the stage. Picking up a small daypack from the collection of backpacks arrayed against the table he walked over and sat down on the top step and waited for Mark to reach him.

When Mark joined him on the steps Harry opened the pack and withdrew a small mirror set into an ornate wooden frame. "We finally got it to work. Your parents have the other one."

Mark reached out and gingerly accepted the gift, several tears of happiness rolling down his cheeks. "Thank you," he whispered.

Harry smiled and patted Mark on the shoulder. "No problem." Looking back into the pack Harry studied its contents for a few moments then pulled the drawstring tight. "The other mirror in here is a direct link to headquarters. If things go against us, even though Albus and Tonks will be with you, you are in charge of organizing the students and keeping them calm for the evacuation. You will have help from Albus, Tonks and a few house elves to help you but they will look to you for leadership because you are closer to their own age and will respond to you much more readily than they will anyone else."

Mark smiled.

"You have their respect, Mark" Harry cautioned, "but don't abuse your power because that is the fastest and easiest way to turn your friends into enemies."

Mark looked at the mirror in his hands, turning it over several times as if studying it from every angle, then, after an indeterminable amount of time, looked back up at Harry and said, "Alright then. I won't let you down, Harry."

Looking down at the floor in front of himself for several seconds, gradually becoming aware that that the room was filling up and that a few people were watching him, Harry reached up and brushed the unexplainable tears from his eyes. Standing up he handed the daypack to Mark and, his laden thick with the emotions of what was about to happen, said a heartfelt, "Thank you."

As Mark left to rejoin his classmates Harry began pacing the length of the apron. When Mark was sitting between Albus and Remus he stopped at center stage and looked out at his audience. In his heart he knew that this would be the last time he would see many of them alive and it was slowly killing him but at the same time he knew that they were expecting him to be strong, to be their shining light at the end of a long, dark tunnel. Planting his feet firmly on the stone dais Harry squared his shoulders and addressed his friends, colleagues and fellow students. "Ladies and gentlemen ..." he began, "for you truly are ladies and gentlemen, for the past several months we have been training to fight a battle that will decide the future of our world, if not the entire world as we know it. If Tom Riddle and his followers were to have their way there would be no freedom. Many of you, and many of your friends, would be killed because, according to their twisted doctrines, you are unworthy. Your blood is not pure enough to be allowed to survive." Pausing briefly, Harry relaxed his shoulders and began slowly exploring his stage. "What most of you don't know is that their leader, Tom Riddle, is a half-blood. His mother was a witch and his father was a muggle. His blood is even less pure than my own because while my father was a pure blooded wizard, at least my mother was a muggle-born witch. But that is not the issue. We are fighting to uphold your rights to study and learn magic because you have the desire and ability to do so while they are fighting to take away those rights because many of you do not meet the artificially induced standards they have set. Their goal is to dominate and control. Our goal is to secure the rights of the people to choose so that we, the people, and our children and our children's children can be free to make our own decisions."

A gentle murmur rippled through the Great Hall as the stark, black-and-white differences between the two positions became clear to everyone in the auditorium.

"Most of you know what our enemy is capable of, some more than others. At nine o'clock tonight those of you who have been training to defend positions in Diagon Alley, Saint Mungo's and the Ministry of Magic will be taking portkeys to your staging grounds and those of us who have been training to defend Hogwarts and Hogsmeade will begin our preparations because at dawn tomorrow morning Tom Riddle and his followers have scheduled simultaneous attack at all four locations." Harry made eye contact with Pansy Parkinson as a murmur of dismay rippled through the crowd. "All first- through fourth-year students will report to the evacuation center, the entrance to which is located in the girls bathroom on the second floor. Professors Dumbledore and Tonks and a few of Hogwarts' house elves will be joining you to keep order and to help you settle in. If things start to go against us, arrangements have been made to evacuate all of you to a secure location in London."

Turning and making eye contact with a sixth-year Huffelpuff boy he said, "There is a very real possibility that we may meet any number of former classmates in this battle. Disarm and bind if you can. If you are unable you accomplish this through conventional means do not be afraid to hurt them. Don't kill them. Just disable them. We'll let our friends from the Department of Magical Law Enforcement sort things out after the fighting is over."

Turning back to Pansy he said, "I had an opportunity to observe a few of my former classmates last summer and ..." he hesitated. "I don't know how else to say this, but if you thought Draco Malfoy was a dangerous bully before he is ten times worse now. He must be stopped. Not killed but stopped. If you meet him in battle disarm and bind first, ask questions later."

Stepping back he picked up one of the backpacks. "These packs have been loaded with chest belts similar to those used last Christmas and a variety of medical supplies. You all know the procedure:

Each will receive a belt. The egg-shaped objects are Fred and George's Weasley Whizbang Wetstart Fireworks. The red one's are for attacking and the green ones are for distraction. The boxes on the hip belts are specially modified Portable Swamps. Each of you will have four Distraction Grenades, four Attack Grenades and two Portable Swamps. Use them at your discretion but don't get carried away. The pouches on the hip belts are filled with Potter Charms. Each charm will last five minutes. Use them as a last resort, to protect yourself while changing positions or to assist in any evacuations. As before, each chest belt is fitted with a portkey for emergency evacuations. They will bring you straight here, to the Great Hall."

After setting the backpack back down Harry turned back to his audience and said, "Your Team Leader will be in charge of your team's backpack until you reach your assigned posts and get everything set up. After that your team's Medical Officer will be in charge of its contents. There are bandages, wraps, potions and a variety of creams and salves in each pack. Those of you who are healers-in-training, your objective is to treat, stabilize and evacuate. If you have any questions ask your team's house elves to transport your patients back to Hogwarts."

"Your Field Commanders will be: For Diagon Alley, Ronald Weasley and Joseph; for Saint Mungo's, Luna Lovegood and Hermione Granger; for the Ministry of Magic, Madam Bones and Rufus Scrimgeour; for Hogwarts and Hogsmeade, Neville Longbottom and myself. Ginny Weasley is in charge of defending the castle proper."

Harry was silent for several seconds as he screwed himself up for his final statements. If preparing his schoolmates for war had been hard, sending them into harms way was exponentially more difficult. He didn't like what he was about to say but he would not lie to them. Returning to center stage he closed his eyes and bowed his head, waiting for the whispering to die down. When it finally had he opened his eyes and looked up, making eye contact with Mt Filch who was standing beside one of the open doors. "I won't lie to you," he said softly. "Thus far we have been lucky, our casualties have been relatively light while those of our foes have been comparatively high. I know I really don't have to say this because most of you know the odds. Some of us may die tomorrow." A twisted grin flashed briefly across his face. "I ... My goal is to stop Tom Riddle. I haven't been training with the rest of you as much as I probably should have. The reason for this is that I have been training to face Tom Riddle one last time. I honestly don't know if I will survive the encounter but I do know that even if I do die, I will take him down and you will all know when it happens."

Looking around the room, making eye contact whenever possible, Harry smiled softly and said, "And now I leave you to your thoughts. Enjoy your dinners and think it over. No one will hold anything against you if you should back out." After taking a deep breath, letting it out slowly and chewing on his lower lip for several seconds he concluded by saying, "That is all. For those of you who wish to fight we will be meeting back in here at eight-thirty."

The Great Hall was unusually silent that evening as the students contemplated their futures. Everyone, even some of the most rambunctious first-years seemed to recognize the gravity of the situation. There were many whispered conversations during dinner that evening but few dared speak openly.

Several of the students who had been at Hogwarts over the summer holidays looked up at Harry from time to time, a cautiously optimistic glint in their eyes. Whenever Harry caught one of them looking at him he was glad that they did not look away, but the look in their eyes disturbed him. It was almost as if they were asking themselves if he was really willing to sacrifice himself for their

future.

As 8:30 approached Harry was both surprised and dismayed that everyone who had attended boot camp and survived the attack on the Hogwarts Express had returned to the Great Hall prepared to fight. Looking out at the sea of faces before him the unbidden tears returned and he found it hard to speak. Albus and Tonks were in the Chamber of Secrets with the first- through fourth-years. The house elves had moved all of the students' belongings into the storerooms in the chamber and most had reported to the Great Hall to accompany their assigned teams.

As the team leaders claimed their packs and the teams assembled Harry thanked each of them individually, shaking most of their hands in a heartfelt gesture and hugging a few. Millicent Bulstrode surprised him by pulling him into a gentle hug and whispering, "We talked it over, Harry, and if you are willing to die for us we are willing to die for you." As they parted he looked at her and she continued, "We are all going to fight like we are going to life to see our freedoms preserved; but if we die, we die with honor."

As Harry stepped back he had to blink back the tears. "Thank you," he whispered, his voice once again choked with emotion. As he looked around he noticed that almost everyone was smiling and giving him a thumbs up.

As nine o'clock approached and the students and elves assembled themselves along the long ropes that would serve as their portkeys Harry returned to the stage and looked out at this generation of heroes and heroines, many of whom would give their lives for the cause of freedom within the next 24 hours, and smiled, forcing his lips to convey a message of hope in spite of the grief that was already beginning to fill his heart. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "for most of the past year we have been training and fighting to defend our freedoms. Tonight we go on the offensive. In a few minutes your portkeys will activate and you will be met by your contacts in Diagon Alley, Saint Mungo's and the Ministry of Magic. You will have nine hours to prepare your battle stations."

After making eye contact with several members from each of the four houses as well as a number of high elves, wood elves and house elves he closed his eyes briefly, trying to memorize their faces so that he would not forget who he was fighting for, and then opened them again. Some of those standing closest to him stepped back slightly as a smoldering fire seemed to be reflected in his eyes. "From here on out you are fighting for your freedom, your childrens' freedom and your childrens' childrens' freedom. Good luck."

Moments before the portkeys activated a thundering cheer of "Remember Cedric!" filled the Great Hall.

As the echoes died away Harry looked around at the teachers, the remaining students and all of the elves who had volunteered to participate in the defense of Hogwarts and Hogsmeade and who were willing to give their lives to put an end to Tom Riddle's reign of terror. "Alright people," he said, more forcefully than he had thought possible even moments earlier. "We have nine hours. Up until now everything has been planning and rehearsal because we couldn't take any chances. So let's get to it." With that he shouldered his own pack and jumped off the stage, calling for teams 'H' one through five to follow him, as Neville shouldered his pack and called for teams 'H' six through ten.

When Ron, Joseph and their ten assault teams landed on the street outside of Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes a few stumbled but most remained on their feet, their knees slightly bent to absorb the impact. Moments later the store's lights came on and one of the twins opened the door. Ron

immediately drew his wand and pointed it at the intruder. They had devised an intricate system of passwords to ensure that they were dealing with friendly forces and this was to be their first test. "Where are you from?" Ron demanded.

The twin smiled easily. "I am from somewhere north of south, south of north, east of west and west of east. Why, have the Chudly Cannons won a game?"

"Ron scowled at this jab at his favorite quidditch team but responded nonetheless. "Yes, I believe they beat the Holyhead Harpies in 1938." Apparently changing the subject Ron said, "Have you seen any bats lately?"

The twin appeared to be enjoying this way too much. "Only a few. Mostly those in your belfry."

Ron grumbled something about stupid passwords and moronic brothers.

"So tell me," the twin said, "how many student bird watchers are at Hogwarts?"

"Six," Ron said. Five are in Gryffindor and one is in Ravenclaw. We do have one honorary bird watcher, though. He is in Gryffindor."

The twin stepped back into the light and opened the door wide. "Mr. Ollivander is in the back room."

Ron offered a quick nod. "Alright, then." Turning to Joseph he said, "Joseph, you have teams one through five. I suggest you secure Knockturn Alley first."

Joseph nodded.

"Good luck and be careful."

Joseph smiled softly, motioning for his assault teams to follow him down and across the narrow causeway.

As Mr. Ollivander appeared hurrying down an aisle in Fred and George's joke shop Ron turned to his assault teams. "Our first task is to transport all of Mr. Ollivander's stock to our safe house and replace his inventory with Fred and George's fake wands. We have three hours so let's go!"

For the next seven hours the ten Diagon Alley Assault Teams moved from shop to shop, securing irreplaceable and potentially dangerous merchandise, replacing it with a variety of Fred and George's prank items that had been disguised to look like the original products. The goal was to remove any products the death eaters might try to use as weapons while planting a few surprises for them in the process.

At five o'clock in the morning, with several Knockturn Alley lurkers stunned, bound, gagged, disarmed and in goblin custody, the 102 student and elf defenders sat down to a catered breakfast, courtesy of those house elves that had stayed behind to defend the castle and take care of its needs. At 5:30, after all of the chest and hip belts had been passed out, the assault teams secured their locations and settled in to wait. By 5:45 the street looked no different than it would any other morning before the shops opened. They were a little early but that was fine. It would give them a few extra minutes to settle their nerves and observe.

The plan was for the students to begin slowly blending in with the regular traffic beginning at around 7:00 and to be fully integrated into the local population by 8:30. Since they were expecting the most trouble to come from the residents of Knockturn Alley, Ron and Joseph and twenty of their best fighters would be patrolling that quarter, sticking to the shadows whenever possible. The death eaters were not supposed to begin their attack until 9:00, but if they could thin their numbers before the attack began then their three hours of waiting would have been well worth the effort.

When Hermione, Luna and their ten Assault teams arrived in the lobby of Saint Mungo's Francis Stone looked up from the reception desk and began the scripted conversation that would confirm their identities. This conversation, unlike the one used in Diagon Alley, had been scripted in such a way that, had anyone been in the waiting room when they arrived, it would not have sounded overly suspicious. Their sudden appearance and the fact that they were traveling with a number of elves might have raised a few eyebrows but that couldn't be helped. Fortunately, the waiting room had been empty when they arrived.

A sixth-year Huffelpuff boy coiled the rope while Hermione, Luna and Francis confirmed identities. When the confirmations were complete Francis stood up and walked around the desk. Looking around the rooms at the 102 people who were willing to put themselves in harms way to protect the healers and their patients Francis took in a long, slow and deep breath and let it out in a sigh. He had already worked on several of these students. He just hoped wouldn't be putting any of them together again tomorrow. But then again, he would rather work feverishly to heal a burn, broken bone or wound than prepare even one their bodies for burial at day's end.

For the past two months all of the Saint Mungo's team members had been studying pictures and biographies of all of the Saint Mungo's employees so that they would know who was and was not employed by the hospital. They had also been provided with pictures and personality sketches of all of their long-term care patients and their family members so that they would know what to expect on that front. The difficulty lay in the constantly changing short-term care and emergency room patient populations. There was no way of knowing who was and was not a legitimate patient or visitor.

The logistics involved with designing a defensive strategy for Saint Mungo's had been a nightmare. In the end it had been decided that most of the long-term spell damage patients, including Neville's parents and Gilderoy Lockhart, would be moved to the hospital wing Harry had included in his redesign of the Chamber of Secrets. These moves were being made, as in the cases of Frank and Alice Longbottom, to protect the patients. In the case of Gilderoy Lockhart, he was being moved to keep him out of the way.

Neville knew that his parents were being moved but he had not been told that they were being moved to Hogwarts. That would have been too much. Harry had no doubt that Neville could handle it but he didn't want him distracted by the thought that his parents were so close and that he would personally be defending their position. All Neville had been told was that they were being evacuated to an undisclosed location. Neville had not liked being kept in the dark about his parents' location but he had gradually accepted it.

The Hogwarts house elves would be transporting these patients to Hogwarts because they could apparate through the wards with minimal disturbance. These transfers would not begin until shortly after midnight because they wanted the patients to be asleep when they were moved. If all went well a few of the patients might notice a slight difference but would not be traumatized by the

experience and would be back at Saint Mungo's 24 hours later.

As the assault teams secured their positions, at least one team per floor and covering all possible entrances and exits, they transfigured their robes to blend, placing an emblem in the collars of their uniforms so that they could be identified as friendly if any of them should go down. At 2:00 A.M., after all of the preparations had been made, the assault teams posted sentries and tried to get some sleep. Of all of the teams arrayed against the death eaters their tasks would be the most difficult. Not only would it be close-quarters combat – sometimes room-to-room, hallway-to-hallway and floor-to-floor – but they would also be defending employees and patients while doing everything in their power to take down the death eaters who, according to their intelligence, were only being tasked with causing as much death and destruction as possible.

Ron, Neville and Hermione had specifically included most of Emric's best archers in the Saint Mungo's Assault Teams, as well as Joseph's most accomplished martial artists, because most of them could, figuratively speaking, thread a needle with either an arrow or a throwing star at fifty paces. Luna and Ginny had worked with the house elves to establish an emergency evacuation protocol for shuttling patients, healers and nurses between Saint Mungo's and Hogwarts as soon as the fighting began. This was in addition the evacuation protocols that had been established for transporting patients from Diagon Alley, the Ministry of Magic and Hogsmeade. For his part, Harry had created a hospital wing in the Chamber of Secrets that was double the size of the main Hogwarts Hospital Wing and spent a lot of time and money stocking it with everything he, Poppy and Victor thought they would need.

Arthur and Percy Weasley met Madam Bones and Rufus Scrimgeour and their assault teams in the Ministry's atrium. Their confirmation conversation was brief and to the point. As soon as their identities had been confirmed Arthur and Rufus shook hands as did Percy and Madam Bones. This was the final confirmation and a signal to the ministry's aurors that all was as it should be.

A few minutes later 100 students and elves were sitting in an auditorium with 250 aurors and hit wizards going over the joint operations plan that had been hammered out over the past several months. Some of the veteran aurors were eyeing the students and elves warily and shifting uncomfortably in their seats. They had met their Hogwarts and elven counterparts several times over the past year and knew that they were more than capable. What made them nervous was the fact that most of these teenagers and their friends were more battle hardened and better trained than most of them.

The plan was for the students and elves to do most of the fighting while the aurors and hit wizards defended the ministry's assets. Some had objected to the plan of including the students but after watching them in action, while defending the Hogwarts Express, had changed their minds. The aurors and hit wizards would defend the ministry's assets and stay out of the students' way. When it was over they would apparate to the various battlefields and take charge of any survivors, if there were survivors.

In times of war certain actions and deeds must be forgiven those fighting for the restoration of freedom. Under Amelia Bones' administration the ministry had passed a number of resolutions exonerating those fighting against Tom Riddle and his Death Eaters of a number of very specific crimes. These laws had been designed to forgive those fighting to defend the lives, liberties, rights, freedoms and physical possessions of those either directly or indirectly affected by the war of a number of very specific crimes. Death was an inevitable outcome of war. The use of any of the

unforgivable curses and intentionally injuring people so that they would die of their injuries, however, were not.

Many of the aurors and hit wizards who had observed the air battle at Wizard's Gulch had cringed at the brutality of some of the tactics used to defend the Hogwarts Express but could not, in all honesty, think of anything they would have done differently. These students were actually very frightening in combat situations. And if their elven fiends were even half as motivated as these teenagers then most of the aurors and hit wizards actually felt sorry for the death eaters because they knew that very few would survive; and those that did would need major medical attention if they were to live. The one thing a few of the most senior members of the Magical Law Enforcement Community were glad about was the fact that the Weasley brothers and the Granger girl had been separated for this battle. It had taken weeks to undo some of the combined curses they had used last Christmas and they were not looking forward to unlocking any more of those combinations any time soon.

When their briefing ended at 11:30 the assault teams and defenders left the auditorium to secure their positions and get some sleep. The goal was to keep as much of the fighting as possible confined to the atrium but the possibility did exist that they would be involved in quite a bit of close-quarters, room-to-room combat so they prepped their areas and took turns sleeping.

Bill, Charley, Mrs. Weasley and the other members of the Order of the Phoenix met Harry and Neville and the Hogsmeade Assault Teams at the edge of the school's apparation wards. After their brief confirmation conversation the non-student members of the Order of the Phoenix continued on to help Ginny and the teachers reestablish the school's defenses and assist in the evacuation of patients from Saint Mungo's.

The planning for Hogsmeade had actually begun as soon as they had decided to rebuild after the attack in June. All of the building materials had been charmed to withstand just about anything any witch or wizard or muggle could throw at them. They didn't know if it could withstand a nuclear attack but at least a few of the muggle-born students were of the opinion that there were enough layers of magical protection on both the buildings and their materials that it would be close.

The difficulties involved with defending Hogsmeade lay in the fact that it was a freestanding village with multiple entrances and exits. They had already reinforced all of the tunnels and warded them against anyone wearing the dark mark. This made the first project of the evening the rather arduous task of establishing anti-apparation wards around the entire village and linking them to Hogwarts' wards to make them stronger and to make it more difficult for anyone to sneak up on them. They wanted most of the fighting to take place in Hogsmeade, which would spare Hogwarts for the finale. The hard part, if everything went according to plan, would be luring Tom onto the castle grounds and, potentially, into at least the Entrance Hall.

As midnight approached, while Harry, Neville, Aberforth and a few others were still working on the anti-apparation wards, most of Hogsmeade, pets included, was evacuated to Hogwarts and the Chamber of Secrets. By 3:00 A.M. the wards were finished and most of the traps had been set. The wood elves, centaurs and acromantulas began patrolling the Forbidden Forest and surrounding woodlands at 4:00 A.M. and the high elves posted additional sentries at strategic locations on the hills surrounding Hogwarts and Hogsmeade. By 5:00 A.M. everything was set and the Hogsmeade Assault Teams settled in to wait.

After almost an hour of waiting Harry approached Neville and cast a privacy charm. When Neville looked up, a curious expression on his face, Harry took off his cloak and began unfastening the buckles holding Gryffindor's sword in place on his back. "Neville," he said, "I want you to wear this." Neville opened his mouth to protest but Harry cut him off. "The blade has been treated with basilisk venom because that is one of the few ways a horcrux can be destroyed." Neville's eyes widened. "Tom created six horcruxes. I've already destroyed five of them. The last one is his snake, Nagini. Tom is keeping Nagini with him at all times. As you know, we have some of our best archers stationed around both Hogsmeade and Hogwarts. They will, of course, be helping in the fighting but they have also been given the order to, if given the chance, separate Tom and Nagini. I'm going to be busy dueling Tom. I need you to kill that snake, cut its head off with the sword. It has to be done before I can cast the purgatory charm. If Nagini isn't destroyed before I cast the charm there is a very real possibility that he will escape death and haunt this world as a malevolent presence, capable of possessing the unsuspecting, for an eternity and more."

Neville took the sword and, drawing it from its scabbard, inspected the length of its blade. He had excelled in sword fighting over the summer and could hold his own (for a few minutes only) against some of Joseph's most capable warriors. He knew what a good blade looked and felt like and Gryffindor's sword was a work of art. After taking a few practice swipes Neville carefully slid the sword back into its scabbard. "Very nice," he said. "Who made this sword anyway?"

Harry smiled at Neville's interest in sword fighting. "It's goblin made" he said, "which brings me to my other request."

Neville finished buckling the shoulder strap then stopped and looked at Harry expectantly. "If I die, Neville," Harry said softly, "I need you to make sure Ragnok, the head goblin at Gringotts, get it."

Neville was silent as he buckled hip belt then looked up. "Why?"

Harry took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "This sword is worth a great deal in the goblin world and I took a blood oath to ensure it is delivered into Ragnok's hands after the war in exchange for his assistance in destroying two of the horcruxes."

Even though the sun was not yet up Harry could see the blood drain from Neville's face. "A blood oath?" Neville whispered, his voice a mixture of fear, uncertainty and disbelief. Then, as the first rays of light began to make their presence known in the upper reaches of the atmosphere a glint of determination came into Neville's eyes. "I won't let you down, Harry," he said with a resolute nod, "on either request."

Harry smiled. He and Neville really had bonded since the end of their fifth year and he knew that if there was anyone he could trust with these tasks it was Neville. Pulling Neville into a manly hug he said, "Thanks."

Neville, apparently not quite sure how he should respond, tentatively patted Harry on the back and said, "Sure, no problem."

Most of the Diagon Alley Team members had gotten less than two hours of sleep in the last 24 when the first silent alarms – charms designed to let the casters know when someone wearing the dark mark entered their territory – went off, but their training had conditioned them to be wide awake and alert at the first signs of danger. Even Ron, who normally enjoyed getting as much sleep as possible, was on his feet within seconds of the first alarms going off.

Over the course of the next hour The Diagon Alley Teams slowly blended in with shoppers and their spouses and children as they went about their business. They carefully observed everyone, both on the street and in the shops, mentally placing each of them into one of three categories based upon their mannerisms and activities. They were either innocent bystanders, unknowns or hostile forces.

The innocent bystanders were those who went about their business as if it was just another day. The unknowns were the window shoppers who did nothing but look. They went from store to store and browsed the shelves and racks but didn't buy anything. Those they identified as hostile forces were acting suspiciously. Some of them were continually checking their watches while others kept glancing at each other or were a little too obvious as they attempted to blend in.

While the students blended in as best they could on the streets and in the shops most of the elves kept their hoods up, for obvious reasons. Their slightly tapered ears would have given them away and the death eaters, as well as everyone else, would have known that something was not as it seemed. A few of the better archers were perched on rooftops, under disillusionment charms, poised to disarm or, if necessary, kill as many death eaters as possible.

By 8:59 the students and elves had established 25 definite targets with an additional 46 possible death eaters. The problems lay in protecting the civilians and the unknown numbers of enemy combatants that might still be lurking in Knockturn Alley.

At 8:59 and 30 seconds Ron opened the door to Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes and stepped out into Diagon Alley. Glancing casually first to his left and then to his right he checked his teams' positions and, through an intricate series of hand signals, nods and eye blinks learned the positions of the five closest death eaters. Thirty seconds later Ron, having intentionally walked to the center of the street in hopes of drawing fire away from any nearby pedestrians, dived and rolled as the first curses began flying and Diagon Alley exploded into a war zone. Fortunately no one was injured in that first volley but the unfortunate death eaters who cast those spells would never cast another spell as bolts and arrows plunged through the backs of their hands, shattering bones and severing nerves. As the civilians panicked and ran screaming towards any shelters they could find these unfortunate death eaters went down in screams of agony. The final battle had begun and Ron was not in the mood to take any prisoners. He would not intentionally kill anyone but if they died of their injuries - injuries incurred as a result stopping them from carrying out their plans - he would let them die.

The first few minutes of the Battle for Diagon Alley were the most confusing of the entire day. Not only were they fighting to defeat Tom's forces but they had to defend themselves while protecting the innocent bystanders and getting them to safety. The real problems, death eaters aside, came in the form of untrained witches and wizards whose egos would not let them back down from a fight, even if they were monumentally outclassed. A few of these wannabe heroes received life-threatening injuries and were immediately evacuated to Hogwarts. For the most part, however, they were stunned and unceremoniously dumped just inside the door of the nearest safe house - one of the seven shops in the alley that had been designated as on-site evacuation shelters - where the shop keepers and attendant elves would revive them, tend to their injuries, escort them each shop's back room where portkeys were waiting to whisk them away if the battle should go against the students and explain, as gently as possible, to these would-be defenders that they were untrained and would only get in the way, and possibly killed, if they attempted to rejoin the fight. Some people's feelings were hurt but when they peeked out at the carnage that was taking place just beyond the reinforced shop windows most were quick to agree that the fighting was best left to

the professionals.

As the battle moved into its second phase – after all of the non-combatants had been evacuated from the battlefield – Ron and Joseph and their troops could focus on the Death Eaters and their spell work. There was no doubt about it, their spells were much more powerful than they should have been. For example, it should have taken several dozen blasting curses to even crack the marble pillars supporting the portico in front of Gringotts but one of the Death Eaters had shattered both of them with a single curse. Several of the students' eyes had widened when this happened but then their training kicked in and they began using their brains to beat back the Death Eaters' brawn.

The street fighting went on for hours. There were several deaths on both sides and more than enough blood spilled to paint every store in the shopping district with several coats of the warm, crimson liquid. During a lull in the fighting a five-year-old little girl raced out of the store across from Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes to rescue the doll she had dropped when she had been evacuated from the street. One of Joseph's men was restraining her mother behind the closed door. Fred, who was stationed just inside the door of their shop with George to help any injured students or elves to safety threw the door open when he saw the little girl run into the street. His original intent had been to run out, scoop her up into his arms and continue on to reunite her with her mother. As he began running, however, a particularly evil looking Death Eater pointed his wand at the little girl and screamed, "Avada Kedavra!"

Fred, running on instinct alone, yelled, "Nooooooooo!" and dived in front of the curse.

Time slowed for George as Fred flew through the air. Fred passed in front of the girl just in time for the curse to strike his side. His lifeless body continued on in its trajectory, crashing to the ground just beyond the little girl.

When the day-shift healers, nurses and employees began arriving at Saint Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries at 6:00 A.M. they were met by an intense screening process which included several layers of identity verification. After they had successfully passed through the screening process each of them was escorted to their regular shift report where they were briefed on the reasons behind the heightened security and the procedures for the day. The Saint Mungo's Assault Teams would stay out of their way as much as possible so that they could go about their business as usual. When the fighting started they were told to find a room, close and lock the doors and protect the patients. Under no circumstances were they to venture out into any of the hallways or corridors until the fighting was over and someone had come to get them. The Long-term Spell Damage Ward nurses were evacuated to Hogwarts so that they could care for their patients in relative safety.

As the morning progressed Hermione, Luna, Pansy Parkinson, Daphne Greengrass and Orville Burns rotated through the waiting room to observe the day's patients and take notes. As they rotated out of the waiting room they passed their notes along to the various assault teams so that they would have a better idea as to which patients could pose a threat. Again, it was an exercise in profiling. Hermione and Luna were two of the best observers but Pansy and Daphne weren't far behind and, despite his best efforts to deny it, Orville really was a fairly adept profiler.

At 8:52 several suspicious looking witches and wizards entered the lobby from the street and Luna, who had just begun her most recent rotation, reached into her pocket and activated the silent alarm

that she and Hermoine had layered onto the fake galleons they had used two years earlier.

Hermione was on the fifth floor at the time and when she felt the galleon's alarm go off. Quickly pulling her galleon from one of the inside pockets of her robes she saw that Luna had activated the charm. A split second later she realized that Luna was in the lobby and, as defenders went, alone. Raising her wand she shot a stream of bright red sparks down the corridor. As the sparks split and turned down the different corridors Hermione turned and ran down the stairs. Pansy and Daphne joined her on the fourth floor landing, but they split up on the third floor as they ran towards their respective battle stations.

Hermione could hear doors slamming shut as she ran down the halls. She even heard a few scuffles as suspected Death Eaters were subdued. She stopped running when she reached the second floor landing because she didn't want to make too much noise, thus alerting any of the Death Eaters to her presence. When she reached the ground floor she glanced through opening and made eye contact with the receptionist who, in turn, made eye contact with Luna. Moments later the receptionist looked back at Hermione and gave a barely perceptible nod to indicate to her that Luna was aware of her presence.

At 8:58 Orville walked into the lobby from the street and approached the receptionist. "Could I help you, sir," she asked, visibly relieved that the fifth human member of the team that would be guarding the lobby had arrived.

"Yes," Orville said loudly enough for Hermione and Luna to hear his response but not so loudly as to be obvious that he was confirming his identity. "Healer McCartney worked on my knee last summer and asked me to come in for a checkup. He wants to see how I am progressing."

Hermione breathed a sigh of relief. Orville's job, at her signal, had been to check around the perimeter of Saint Mungo's to get an estimate of how many Death Eaters were waiting to attack the building from the outside. As the receptionist checked her schedule Orville used the tip of his wand to, using muggle mores code, tap out 60. Hermione's eyes widened slightly at this news but, with a glint of determination in her eyes, squared her shoulders and prepared herself for battle.

When the receptionist pretended to find Orville's name in her appointment book she said, "Ah, yes, here you are, Mr. Burns. You have a 9:15 appointment with Healer McCartney. If you will have a seat I will call you when she is ready for you."

Orville nodded and stood up. Suddenly spinning around he expertly disarmed two of the seven suspected Death Eaters that were already in the waiting room. Pansy, Hermione and Daphne quickly entered the fray while Luna shielded the legitimate patients. The receptionist ducked behind her desk as three high elves and two wood elves emerged from the shadows and joined the battle.

Again, the battle at Saint Mungo's raged for hours. The additional challenge that all of the Saint Mungo's Assault Teams had trained for, but consciously forgotten, was keeping as much of the fighting as possible contained within the walls of Saint Mungo's. Since it was located in the heart of London they did not want any spells leaving the building because the cleanup would have been a nightmare. This was why the teams had spent hours reinforcing all of the doors and windows. But with the new power-sharing properties of the Dark Mark no one knew how long they would hold.

Two hours into the fight Orville and Daphne, natural dueling partners, were holding three Death

Eaters at bay when one of them got a cutting hex through that hit him in the knee. The result was a particularly bloody traumatic amputation of his left leg at the knee. As he went down he sent a particularly powerful blasting hex at the man. The hex hit him square in the face. The resulting shower of blood, brains and bone was enough to repulse even the most determined Death Eater.

When Daphne saw Orville go down she ignored the repulsive rain and screamed, "LUNA! Orville, Now!"

Luna's head jerked up. When she saw Orville she yelled, "Cover Me!"

If the Death Eaters had thought the fighting was ferocious before, it was nothing compared to what they experienced for the next hour.

Luna dove out from behind the remains of a couch and vaulted then rolled to Orville's side. Orville was in shock. His eyes were glassy; the blood had drained from his face and he was drenched in a cold sweat.

Luna's first order of business was to stop the bleeding, which she did with a quick wave of her wand. The next order of business was to treat him for shock. This was a little more difficult given the situation but she accomplished it in a few minutes. After that she summoned his severed leg and quick-froze it so that the healers could reattach it if it was not too damaged. As soon as he was stable she summoned their team's house elves and had him transported directly to the Hogwarts Hospital Wing with instructions to push the fluids. After that she rejoined the battle and fought at least as ferociously as Daphne, Hermione, Pansy and their elven counterparts. If any of these Death Eaters survived it would pure chance. All of the teams had been training together for the past two months and what they were discovering was that each of them was fiercely protective of their teammates. If one member of any of the teams went down the others would pull out all the stops to avenge his or her death or injury.

The ministry employees began arriving at 6:30. Arthur and Percy Weasley, Rufus Scrimgeour, Madam Bones and most of the Aurors and Hit Wizards had spent the night in their offices so they were already there but for those who had not it was an intimidating scene that greeted them as they entered the atrium. For those who were accustomed to being among the first to arrive it was somewhat more than disconcerting to see several small knots of people using the atrium as a gymnasium. Some were running laps while others were performing a variety of stretches or running through their exercise routines. The most intimidating displays, however, were those pairs who were locked in what, for all intents and purposes, appeared to be duels to the death. Some were battling with traditional wands but others were doing battle with swords or staffs while still others were throwing each other around and delivering punishing kicks and blows that would stagger, if not incapacitate a normal man. What really set some of the early arrivals back were their weapons. Carefully arranged in two rows along the centerline of the atrium were a variety of weapons, ranging from longbows and quivers of arrows to broadswords and throwing stars with the occasional wand thrown in for good measure. It was a truly intimidating site.

By seven o'clock small crowds of employees had gathered around some of the more spectacular displays and were watching, slack jawed, as humans, wood elves and high elves sparred. Most had never seen either a wood elf or a high elf so were slightly confused by the tapered ears.

At 7:05 Madam Bones voice broke the trancelike states the new arrivals had slipped into. "Good morning, ladies and gentlemen," she said. "Today we have the honor of hosting a small

demonstration of both armed and unarmed combat that is being put on by a few of the students from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry as well as some of their elven friends – yes, ladies and gentlemen, those are high elves and wood elves. The formal demonstration will not take place until this afternoon but, at their request, I have granted them permission to familiarize themselves with the layout of our building so that they can provide us with a more meaningful overview of their abilities within a closed environment. Please do not let their presence distract you from your regular duties."

By 7:30 all of the Ministry of Magic Assault Teams had completed their morning exercises, gathered together their weapons of war and, for all intents and purposes, vanished into the woodwork. What the ministry employees didn't know was that each and every one of them, as well as every possible entrance or exit was being monitored by either a student, an elf, an auror or a hit wizard.

By 8:45 it was business as usual throughout the Ministry of Magic. Several potential Death Eaters had been identified and were being closely monitored. The problem was that they were scattered throughout the building. Neutralizing the threat they posed would not be difficult; the difficulty would, once again, lie in protecting the innocents and making sure none of the fighting spilled out into the streets. Even though the ministry was below ground the possibility did exist that one or two Death Eaters might escape and try to take the battle into the streets of London.

As expected, all of the fireplaces in the atrium as well as several of the offices flared green at precisely nine o'clock. The attackers were given time to exit the floo stations and make their way into the atrium proper, providing them with a false sense of security and allowing them to suffer under the delusion that their takeover of the ministry would go unopposed, before all hell broke loose. When the fireplaces grew silent the students and elves who had been patiently awaiting the Death Eaters' arrival lifted their disillusionment charms and stepped out of the shadows. A few of the more experienced duelers could fight while disillusioned but none of the Ministry Assault Team members had received that training. They were good but not that good.

For the next several hours the Battle for the Ministry of Magic raged on every floor and in almost every department. The fountain in the atrium was completely destroyed by the end of the second hour and the atrium resembled a small, corpse-ridden lake half an hour later.

At 11:47 Colin Creevey was dueling a Death Eater near the far end of the atrium when his foot caught on the floating arm of one of Emric's men. As he stumbled back the Death Eater he had been dueling took the opportunity to cast the killing curse. Moments later Colin's body was flying through the air. His head struck the lintel of one of the fireplaces which, to add insult to injury, crushed the back of his skull and broke his neck.

As the Death Eater took a moment to relish the thought that he had bested a sixteen-year-old boy the tip of a sword, followed by at least two feet of its shaft, erupted from his chest. It took him a moment to realize what had happened then, as blood started gurgling out of his mouth, he felt someone's foot pushing from the back.

When the Death Eater fell from his blade Parvati looked down at the man who had just killed her dueling partner and growled, "Don't. Mess. With. My. Family!"

To keep up appearances several of the Hogsmeade Teams had sent a few members back up to Hogwarts just before dawn so that they could walk into town after breakfast as though it was an ordinary Hogsmeade Weekend. When they had made these plans Mad-eye had insisted upon

escorting the students into town. Harry, Ron, Hermione and Neville had all tried to talk him out of it but nothing they said could dissuade him. He wanted to be in the thick of the fighting and nothing anyone said could change his mind. And so it was that after breakfast on 31 October, 1997 Alastor "Mad-eye" Moody and forty students and elves walked into Hogsmeade, arriving with less than 30 minutes to spare.

Harry sighed when he saw Mad-eye stumping along the village's main street. He knew that Moody was a fighter and that he really couldn't stand not being where the fighting was the heaviest, but Harry feared for his friend. He was not as nimble or as fast as he had been in his youth and no matter how good he was as a competition dueler he was no match for a young, frenzied Death Eater who was willing to kill for an insane master and who would count it a high honor to be the one to kill the legendary Mad-eye Moody.

Even though they were both under exceptionally powerful disillusionment charms Moody walked over to where Harry and Neville were lurking in the shadows and, smiling broadly, growled, "You ready for this boys?"

Harry wanted to stun the man for his own safety but held back. Instead Neville asked, "Are you sure you want to be here, sir?"

"Last chance to back out; is that it, Longottom?"

Neville nodded, his eyes lock on the far end of the street in front of him.

"That's what I thought. Save your breath, lad. If I'm going to die I'm going to go down fighting."

At 8:45 the anti-apparation wards began activating. "Where are they going?" Moody asked a few minutes later.

"The wards give us a quarter mile buffer zone around town," Harry said matter of factly. "They are being deposited at this zone's nearest edge."

"Do you think any of them have met Hagrid's pets yet?"

"Let's just say that I don't think either Aragog or his children will go hungry today."

Moments later the first screams could be heard coming from the Forbidden Forest."

"Yeah," Moody said, a satisfied smile playing across his deeply scarred face, "I don't suppose they will go hungry today will they."

Twenty minutes later, as the first Death Eaters – or at least those who had survived the initial onslaught – entered Hogsmeade, the battle began in earnest. Harry and Neville rolled out into the main street and began attacking with the goal of disarming their opponents but knew, from experience, that many would inadvertently die of their injuries.

For a time, Moody hung back, lurking in the shadows, and observed, getting a feel for what he would be up against when he finally joined his comrades in arms and added his voice to those of his students. Almost an hour into the fighting Moody cast a disillusionment charm on himself and stepped out into the street. Unlike most of his students who used violence as a last resort, Alastor held nothing back. If he was going to fight he was going to make sure he came out on top. His battle

strategy was simple: "Hurt them BEFORE they can hurt you."

And so it went. For the next hour and a half Alastor Moody defended his corner. He was so good, in fact, that he became the unofficial evacuation point for the injured. Then, as a high pitched, nails-on-glass, keening wail filled the air, he was distracted for the briefest of moments. Tom Riddle, in the flying persona of Lord Voldemort, had arrived.

Lavender Brown had been fighting next to him at the time, while her regular dueling partner was being stabilized and transported to Hogwarts. She, too, was momentarily distracted by Tom's arrival but, fortunately for her, she was not the Death Eaters' main target. In that moment of hesitation three cutting hexes and a blasting curse slipped through. With the additional power the Dark Mark provided Alastor didn't have a chance. The blasting curse hit him in the chests, crushing all of his ribs and reducing his heart and lungs to so much mush. One of the cutting hexes connected with his mouth, essentially decapitating him from the lower jaw up. The other two cutting hexes caught him in the wand arm, severing it from his body at a point just above the elbow, and in the abdomen, spilling all of his internal organs out onto the street.

It was a sight that would haunt Lavender for the rest of her life. Perhaps unfortunately, however, she did not have time to either dwell on it or grieve because she was too busy covering her partner and their team's medical officer to even think about what she had just witnessed. There would be time for that later. Right now all she wanted to do was live to see the tomorrow.

When Harry heard Tom's keening wail he quickly dispatched the five Death Eaters he and Neville were dueling and turned around to face his enemy. "Come to papa," he muttered under his breath then said, "You ready for this, Neville?"

Neville reached over his shoulder and drew Gryffindor's sword. Expertly balancing the sword in his right hand while skillfully wielding his left he said, "Let's do it."

Grabbing Neville's arm Harry teleported the two of them several hundred feet further up the road, closing the distance between themselves and Hogwarts. Tom followed. For the next several seconds Harry teleported Neville and himself and pulled Tom onto the Hogwarts grounds and into the Entrance Hall.

As they entered the castle several of the teachers gasped. "Stand back!" Harry commanded. "This is between me and Tom!"

"HOW DARE YOU USE THAT NAME!" Tom screeched. "I AM LORD VOLDEMORT!"

Harry pretended to roll his eyes. In actuality it was a signal to the archers hidden in the eaves to shoot the snake off of Tom's shoulders so that Neville could kill it. Moments later a dozen arrows pierced Nagini's hide. Writhing in pain the snake toppled from Tom's shoulders. Before she hit the floor Neville lashed out and beheaded the great snake. As Tom's sixth intentional horcrux was destroyed Harry could feel him reaching out to draw more energy from his servants.

Reaching out to the castle Harry asked it to begin building up his own energy levels. "Getting a little weak are we, Tom?" Harry tormented. "Let me guess, these feelings began sometime around July thirty-first. In fact, if I'm not mistaken – as a good friend of mine likes to say – these feelings have only been growing worse over the past few months. Would you like to know what has been causing feelings, Tom?"

Voldemort's eyes widened slightly as the two men began circling each other. Voldemort's eyes were glowing red and hot, almost as if two glowing embers from the fiery depths of hell had been placed in their sockets. Harry's eyes were glowing a bright green. Under different circumstances the spectators might have said that they were reminded of the dew-covered grasses of a peaceful meadow at dawn but today they resembled fiery green orbs that could bore a hole through six inches of casehardened steel.

"As you know, I destroyed the diary at the end of my second year, Tom. That's how I know your name: Tom Marvolo Riddle."

Voldemort seethed. "I am Lord Voldemort!"

"Yes, yes," Harry said calmly, pushing as many of Tom's buttons as he could while waiting for the connection between himself and the castle to solidify. Today his body would be the wand and his mind would be the caster. The power would come, through Hogwarts, from the planet and, ultimately, Creation itself. "I know all about your little anagram, Tom. If you rearrange the letters in your given name you get 'I am Lord Voldemort.' But I'm curious, Tom, why did you create a new name for yourself from the letters in your given name? It seems to me that it would serve as a constant reminder of who you really are."

Voldemort's eyes grew brighter and Harry could feel him drawing more and more energy from his followers.

"The Gaunt Family Ring was an interesting choice, Tom. While it was a part of the magical world, the stone was actual one of the gifts Death gave the three brothers, it had to be destroyed." From the amount of energy Tom was drawing Harry knew that the fighting was just about over. A few more minutes and the links between Tom and his followers and Harry and the castle would be complete.

"Helga's cup and Salazar's locket were a bit tricky but they, too, have been destroyed."

To Harry's amazement the ghost of Helena Ravenclaw was standing off to the side, watching this battle of wills between the forces of light and dark. "And then there was the lost diadem that once belonged to Rowena Ravenclaw. Unfortunately its destruction did not release Helena from this world because I know her mother would like to see her, but that was destroyed as well."

Out of the corner of his eye Harry thought he saw The Bloody Baron float over to stand beside Helena.

"And now Nagini, your last horcrux, has died."

The links were now complete and Harry knew that all fighting had stopped. As Tom raised up to cast the Killing Curse Harry felt an unworldly calm wash over him as the subliminal programming took over and the Purgatory Charm became active.

"Avada Kedavra!" Tom screamed, his wand pointing directly at Harry's heart.

As the curse struck his chest, with the amount of energy that was flowing through his system, it felt as if every cell in his body was on fire. Focusing on the Purgatory Charm Harry drove it into the two remaining fragments of Tom's soul. One fragment – the one that had been sharing Harry's body – was destroyed. The other experience a complete life review, from its birth at the orphanage to its

final act in the Entrance Hall at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. It seemed to take longer than it really did but, though it all, Harry was focused on the charm. In the end Tom chose death. He could not live with the knowledge that everything he had worked so hard to create was wrong. He had believed so fervently in what he had been doing that he could not accept the possibility that he had been mistaken in any of his judgments.

It pained Harry to think that there were people in his world who refused to consider the possibility that they might be wrong but there was nothing he could do about it. He watched as Tom went through the life review and, for the briefest of moments, felt the effects the charm were having on Tom. Then he felt Tom's choice. After that there was nothing, nothing more than darkness.

Chapter 20. Silence

George ran out into the street. The Death Eater who had cast the fatal curse had suddenly collapsed, as had all of the other Death Eaters in Diagon Alley. Bending over his twin he checked for any signs of life. Finding none, he began screaming. "Noooo! Noooo! Noooo! Not Fred! Noooo!" The pain and anguish in his voice was enough to attract the attention of everyone on the street.

Ron, who had been dueling a Death Eater at the far end of Diagon Alley when his opponent had suddenly collapsed, spun around at the sound of George's screams and, seeing one of his brothers cradling the other in his arm, ran the length of the shopping district, hurdling the dead and dying and pushing those who dared stand in his way aside. When he reached the twins he dropped to his knees and cast a quick diagnostic charm on Fred's body. The energy went transparent then vanished. Ron's heart sank. Fred was dead and there was nothing anyone could do to change it.

Looking up into George's eyes it pained him to see the hope that was there. Shaking his head he confirmed what he knew George already knew. "He's dead," he whispered.

George dropped Fred's body and broke down, his overwhelming sobs of grief filling the street for all to hear.

Joseph and Eileen approached from opposite sides, Eileen pulling George to his feet while Joseph helped Ron up. While Eileen led a still sobbing George away Joseph led Ron over to the little girl's mother who was hugging her daughter to her chest as if she feared she would disappear if she loosened her grip. "One of my men," Joseph began, "tells me that Mr. Weasley sacrificed his life so that your daughter could live."

Ron looked up at this, his mouth falling slightly open as if to say something but nothing came out.

The little girl's mother nodded. Her daughter was still trembling with fear. "Yes, he did," she said. "He was a very brave man. I've never been in their shop before ... I hope they don't close it down."

Joseph smiled softly. "His twin will need some time to grieve but I know a couple of elves who would be more than happy to keep their doors open until he is ready to return to work." Lifting the little girl's head from her mother's shoulder he looked into her eyes and said, "Fred Weasley loved you without ever having met you. I think it safe to say that you ..."

"Stacey," her mother supplied.

"Stacey," Joseph continued, "are a very special little girl. I also think it safe to say that, while most of us get three angels, you have just earned yourself a fourth."

Ron was still numb from having confirmed Fred's death but something Joseph had said about the little girl earning a fourth angel, insinuating that Fred was still alive in some other dimension and that he would be watching out for this little girl, made him smile. Raising his hand as a signal for the mother to wait for him to return he turned around and walked into Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes. Moments later he returned carrying a tiny, purple ball of fluff. Crouching down in front of the little girl, who was now standing, clinging to her mother's leg, he said, "Do you like to have fun, Stacey?" When the little girl nodded he asked, "Do you think you can take care of a pet?"

Stacey looked up at her mother who smiled and nodded her head. Looking back at Ron Stacey

nodded her head.

Opening his hands Ron revealed a tiny, purple pygmy puff. "His name is Fred," Ron said. "I'm sure George will be more than happy to donate a cage to the cause but I would be careful if I was you. Fred has a wicked sense of humor and loves to play practical jokes."

At that moment Ron felt something – an indescribable sense of ... Fred – that told him he had done the right thing. At the same time, however, he felt Fred grumbling about being compared to a purple pygmy puff.

After the little girl had received her gift Ron stepped back, looked down at Fred's rapidly cooling body and, raising his flattened hand to his brow, saluted a true war hero. As tears began to well up in his eyes he heard a number of doors opening up and down the street as the people ventured out to inspect the damage. Ron was tired and wanted nothing more than a good nap. He knew the horrors of war would catch up with him in a few hours, as they always did, but right now all he wanted to do was sleep.

Ron's knees were about to give way when Dobby suddenly appeared next to him. "You can't fall down, Master Weazey," the little elf squeaked. "Dobby has been sent to bring you, Master Joseph and Mistress Eileen to Hogwarts."

Ron looked down at Dobby, his mind still numb with the confusion of battle and said, "Huh?"

Joseph and Eileen ran up from wherever they had been and looked down at Dobby. "He did it, didn't he," Joseph said.

Dobby nodded.

"Is he dead?" Eileen asked breathlessly.

"Master Ethrindell says there is still a chance but it is very advanced magic and we must act quickly."

Joseph and Eileen each grabbed hold of one of Ron's arms and then reached down to take one of Dobby's hands. "Then let's go!" Joseph commanded.

Saint Mungo's would need a lot of work to repair all of the damage that had been done over the course of the last three hours. When the fighting suddenly stopped, as all of the Death Eaters collapsed to the ground, no one knew quite what to think. An eerie silence rang through the corridors for almost a minute before Luna turned towards Hermione and said, "I think he's done it."

Hermione looked over at her friend, her eyes filled with fatigue and confusion. "Harry," Luna explained calmly. "He said we would know when he had beaten Voldemort."

Hermione's eyes widened with understanding. Then, as she recalled his statements from the previous evening she raised her hand to her mouth and gasped. A look of terror came into her eyes as she imagined Harry's fate. Had he lived or had he died? Either way, no matter her appearance, she wanted ... no, needed to find out. Turning to Luna she said, "I've got to get to Hogwarts!"

Luna nodded grimly. "I think that's probably best. You go. I'll take care of things here."

No sooner had Luna said these words than Winky appeared next to Hermione and said, "Begging you's pardon, Mistress Hermione, but Mistress Ginny wants you at Hogwarts."

Hermione looked down at Winky and blinked a few times, trying to wrap her mind around what had just happened, then cautiously reached out to take Winky's hand.

Moments after re-sheathing her sword Parvati turned around and was about to engage a Death Eater in magical combat when her opponent collapsed, falling to the floor with a splash as the water swallowed her body. Quirking an eyebrow in confusion Parvati shot a stunner at the Death Eater then summoned her wand. Breaking her opponents wand over her knee Parvati bound the woman in a near cocoon of magical ropes. Still confused by this odd behavior Parvati levitated the Death Eater up out of the water and leaned her against the wall. Their orders had been to disarm, stun and bind if at all possible. She would deal with the consequences of driving her sword through her dueling partner's killer later but right now all she wanted to do was stop as many Death Eaters as possible.

After levitating her prisoner to a safe location she turned to look down the length of the atrium. What she saw both confused and dismayed her. Everywhere she looked Death Eaters were collapsing into the eighteen-inch-deep water. Rather than fighting to defeat the Death Eaters and their cause it had become a race to save as many of them from drowning as possible.

Several minutes later, as the last of the Death Eaters was being levitate to safety, Ernie MacMillan let out a cheer. "He did it!" he yelled. "Harry Potter actually did it! We won!! Harry Potter has defeated Voldemort!"

There was silence for a moment and then a spontaneous chorus of cheers went up around the atrium and throughout the Ministry of Magic. The unused fireworks were set off as students, elves and ministry employees celebrated their victory. It would be some time before any of them thought what this might mean for their hero and most would never know the lengths to which Harry had gone to vanquish the self-styled Dark Lord who had called himself Voldemort. Neither would they know that, for a time, Harry had paid the ultimate price so that they could enjoy their freedoms.

It was almost a good thing that the Death Eaters were more intent upon causing as much pain and suffering as possible as opposed to simply killing their victims. If they had wanted to kill there would have been very little anyone could have done to stop them. The Killing Curse was, after all, unstoppable unless you were fortunate enough to be able to keep your wits about you in the heat of battle so that you could activate The Potter Charm. But, as Arthur Weasley had learned the year previous, there wasn't always time to think clearly when you were fighting for your life and working to save the lives of those around you.

As Alastor Moody went down, his liquefied internal organs spilling out at Lavender Brown's feet, the four Death Eaters cheered their accomplishment and were in the process of congratulating each other when four, emotionally charged blasting hexes escaped Lavender's wand and connected with their heads. The resultant explosions momentarily stunned everyone within a ten-yard radius.

The next several minutes were a blur for Lavender. Afterwards she would swear that Moody himself had been guiding her actions because, as good as she was, she had never even heard of, let alone used, half of the spells that had escaped her wand between the time Moody went down and all fighting suddenly stopped. Indeed, during the cleanup, many of the aurors had commented that

some of the spells she had used in those closing minutes were signature Moody combinations. And when her wand had been analyzed days later, days during which she had refused to cast any spells, it had been determined that immediately after the four blasting hexes had been cast the energies had changed to resemble those of the legendary auror.

A blindingly bright white light exploded, filling the Entrance Hall with its radiance the moment the Purgatory Charm took effect. It overwhelmed the room's occupants for almost a minute then gradually faded. As soon as the levels of light in the Entrance Hall had returned to normal Ginny ran to Harry's side as he lay prostrate on the floor. Casting a diagnostic spell on his lifeless body she was horrified when the energies vanished, indicating death. "Nooooo!" she screamed. "This can't be! It isn't fair! Harry can't die! I love him too much." Breaking into heart wrenching sobs she clung to his body as if her life, her very existence, depended upon his survival.

Moments later there was a polite tapping at the castle doors. Without waiting to be answered the doors swung slowly open and Ethrindell entered Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Had the circumstances been different he might have looked calm, cool and collected. Under the current circumstances, however, his face held a grave, almost defeated, expression. His eyes, however, held a determined glint that told anyone who cared to study his soul that he was going to do everything in his power to bring Harry back.

Quickly crossing the room he knelt down across from Ginny and gently rubbed her back. "Ginny," he softly coaxed, "Ginny, we can bring him back but we must hurry. It is an ancient spell, more ancient than this solar system, and requires an emotional bond of love and friendship to work. I believe you and Harry have two house elves who can apparate through Hogwarts' wards. If you could summon them I think we still have enough time."

Ginny looked up, tears streaming down her face. It took her a few seconds to realize that Ethrindell was telling her that they could bring Harry back but when she did she was quick to respond. "Winky! Dobby!" she called out, "Could you come here please."

With simultaneous cracks Dobby and Winky appeared, standing mere inches from Harry's head. Before either of them could say anything Ginny said, "Winky, Dobby, this is Ethrindell. He is a good friend. He says we can bring Harry back from the dead; but we must act quickly. Do whatever he tells you to do."

Dobby and Winky quickly nodded and turned towards Ethrindell. "Winky," he commanded, "Hermione is in the lobby of Saint Mungo's. Could you fetch her here now."

Winky nodded and, with a crack, was gone to Saint Mungo's.

Dobby," he said, turning his attention to the elf wearing socks on his ears," Ron, Joseph and Eileen are on the street in front of Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes. We will need all three of them Do you think you could go and fetch them?"

With a nod and a resounding CRACK Dobby was off.

As soon as Harry realized that he was no longer in pain he knew that he had died. Turning around he looked for the telltale pinprick of light that he remembered from his experiences a little more than a year earlier. When he found it he began moving towards it when he became aware of three personalities that seemed to be hesitantly approaching the light from slightly different angles. The

first personality was most definitely that of Fred Weasley. The energies surrounding it personality were alive with mischief, mayhem and laughter. It was one-half of a twin soul. The other half was in grieving. The reason he knew that it was Fred was through the presence of a subtle twist in its energy signature that precluded anyone else.

The presence of the second personality almost made Harry groan. At its core it was an extremely excitable personality. Harry could not help but recognize its other eccentricities as belonging to Colin Creevey. Even though Harry was of the opinion that he could have lived without meeting Colin it pained him to think that Colin had died at such a young age. True, he could be a royal pain but... It just didn't seem fair that Colin should have had to die before he had even had a chance to make his mark in the world. Personality aside, Colin really was a very good photographer and Harry somehow knew that, given half a chance, Colin would have made a name for himself in the magical world.

The third personality could not be mistaken for anyone other than Alastor "Mad-eye" Moody. It was a crusty, paranoid old warhorse who would rather fight than breath. Beneath that crusty exterior, however, was an unerring sense right and wrong. He might make a few judgmental errors but he would always know the difference between what was right and what was most definitely wrong. The world, for Alastor Moody, was a thousand shades of grey but somehow he instinctively knew what was good and what was bad and he had dedicated his life to eradicating as much of the bad as he could in his role as one of the most feared aurors of all time. And yet, beneath it all, Harry could sense a razor-sharp wit and a sense of humor that would have put Padfoot and Prongs to shame.

As the four of them came together Colin smiled brightly. "Hi, Harry!" he chirped. "What are you doing here?"

Harry looked at Colin then turned to take in Fred Alastor's expressions. Fred looked slightly confused but Alastor's face, minus all of the scars and ravages of war, held a neutral, unreadable expression. Sighing softly, Harry said, "We're dead, Colin." Glancing quickly over at Moody he added, "I beat him so we won, but the four of us are dead."

Moody nodded his confirmation. "Aye, lad, that we are. I studied death as a part of my auror training and this is about what I was trained to expect."

Fred still looked somewhat confused. Turning towards his friend Harry asked, "What happened, Fred? I thought you were going to stay out of the fighting."

"I was," Fred said, a dazed expression on his face, "and I did. But the a little girl ran out into the street to retrieve her doll and ... and I had to do something. A Death Eater cast the Killing Curse at her. I couldn't let her die ..."

"So you dived in front of the curse," Moody finished for him.

Fred nodded, his eyes wide with the shock of realization. His voice was filled with awe at the realization that even he, consummate prankster extraordinaire, was capable of such acts of chivalry. "Yeah," he said, "I took the curse. I died so she could live."

"Really?" Colin asked, his voice filled with admiration. "Wow! You're a hero."

"Aye, and you'll be remembered for your act of bravery."

Fred grimaced. "Yeah, I'll be remembered alright, as a purple pygmy puff."

"What?" Harry asked, his voice filled with the confusion of the moment.

"After I died the little girl was pretty shaken up so Ron gave her a baby purple pygmy puff and named it Fred."

Harry, Mad-eye and Colin burst out laughing. "What's that saying," Harry laughed, "never prank a prankster? I believe Ron may have gotten one over on you this time, Fred."

Fred scowled then burst out laughing. "You may be right, Harry," he laughed, "but I think I'll let him get away with this one."

As they stepped into the light Alastor, Colin and Fred went one way while Harry was compelled to turn and follow a different path.

After bidding his friends good-bye Harry turned and began walking the familiar path to the Hogwarts-behind-the-veil he had visited just before the beginning of his sixth year. As he approached the gates he saw that his parents, Sirius, his children and the four founders were waiting for him. Smiling sadly he walked up and stood before his children. "I'm sorry, guys," he said. "I beat him but apparently my body couldn't take the strain and gave out."

Salizar walked over, smiling despite the apparent gravity of the situation, and said, "Harry, as much as it pains me to see my line come to an end, all hope is not lost."

Harry looked curiously over at the original Head of Slytherin House.

"Muggles," Godric interjected, "have an interesting concept of this place called Heaven. For them there is a place called Heaven for those who have performed any number of good works in their lives and a place call Hell for those who had dedicated themselves to evil. In the magical world there is neither Heaven nor Hell. For us, life is an evolutionary process. The purgatory charm you and your friends have developed is an integral part of our after-life experience.

"Our little school," he said, motioning towards their Hogwarts, occupies a special corner in our ... dimension. Our campus has been set aside for those who wish to get a head start on their magical education, before entering into their bodies, and for those who, like Albus and yourself, have a need to experience a *maturo auctus*. On rare occasions, such as this one, we play host to those whose bodies have expired but whose friends love them so much that they are willing to employ the Elven Resurrection Charm. It is extremely rare, Harry, but it does work."

Harry smiled softly at the thought of Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Joseph, Eileen and Neville invoking a kind of magic that was so old that Albus didn't even know of its existence. Nodding his head he looked down at his children and said, "I guess there's still a chance for you to be born after all." Turning back to Godric he asked, "So, what do I have to do?"

Salizar cleared his throat, reminding Harry that he had been the one to initiate the conversation. "Actually, you don't have to do much of anything," Salizar said. "All you have to do is rest for a while and wait for their arrival."

"I must warn you, however," Rowena cautioned, "that when you cast the Purgatory Charm, given the complications of Tom Riddle's dark mark as well as your own desire to put an end to his

influence in your world, the amounts of energy you were using essentially shattered your DNA. What this means is that the Resurrection Charm is going to have to rebuild your body from the ground up. Since it is an elven charm the possibility, however slight, does exist that your body may be rebuilt in the elven pattern."

Harry looked up. "What?"

Helga giggled. "I wouldn't worry about it overly much, Harry. You may notice a few changes over time but I honestly don't think you will have tapered ears."

"Whew!" Harry said. "I don't have anything against the elves, in fact I know several elves and most of them are good friends, but I can live quite peacefully without the pointy ears."

James and Sirius burst out laughing. "Awe, come on, Harry," James chided, "I think it would be cool. Just think, in a few years James could write a book: 'My Dad the Elf.'"

Harry and Lilly, his mother, groaned. "James, you are incorrigible," Lilly scolded.

As they walked up to the castle the conversation ranged from Harry asking how his children were doing to his mother asking how Remus was and Harry apologizing to three of the four founders for having to destroy their relics. They, of course, forgave him, citing the need to destroy all of Tom's horcruxes far outweighed any historical value the objects might have. When he told Godric about using his sword as a bargaining chip to get two of the horcruxes the fourth founder nodded his understanding. "You took an awful risk taking a blood oath," Godric said, ""but I really don't have any use for that sword any more and if the goblins want it then so be it."

As they waited on the steps of the castle James and Sirius grilled Harry on his duels. They howled with laughter at the idea of conjuring a snowball in a magical duel and were beside themselves when Harry described transfiguring Remus' robes into a straight jacket to end the demonstration duel at the start of his sixth year. His mother, who had warned him not to prank any students, actually smiled and occasionally laughed at what had come to be known as the Potter-Lupin Prank War of 1996. The mirth and mayhem had taken years off of Remus' appearance and given the man a reason to smile.

When Harry told them about Remus and Tonks, Sirius and James started chanting, "Lu-pin! Lu-pin! Lu-pin!" This, of course, earned them a disapproving look from Lilly and when they didn't stop she took out her wand and transfigured them onto a pair of pink miniature poodles. Harry, James and Lilly, Harry's children, all four founders and Merlin howled with laughter at the two pranksters' predicament. For their part, James and Sirius yapped for a time and then sulked until Lilly turned them back.

When Harry told them about the elder wand everyone was impressed that he had beaten the unbeatable wand. "I've heard of that wand," Merlin said. "I never had occasion to duel against it but I have heard of it. If it has peacefully chosen you as its next master, considering its other name is The Death Stick, then there must be something very special about you Harry. What are your plans for that wand?"

Harry thought for a moment then said, "Albus asked me to use it to defend Hogwarts and Hogsmeade. I'm going to give it back to him when I get back. After that I'm not sure. It would be nice to have a second wand as powerful as my own but, given the wand's reputation, I think I will

let it be buried with Albus when he dies."

Merlin nodded sagely. "All good thoughts, Harry," he said. "That wand does have a history and I think the time may have come for its history to end."

Chapter 21. Resurrection

When Dobby and Winky returned with Ron, Hermione, Joseph and Eileen Ethrindell looked around the Entrance Hall and, spotting Remus, said, "Mr. Lupin, if you will. Your assistance is required."

Remus stepped forward.

Turning towards Hagrid Ethrindell said, "Mr. Hagrid, I believe you were Harry's first friend in the wizarding world. Your assistance is required as well." Turning to Winky he said, "Winky, I need you to retrieve the headmaster and his phoenix if you could."

Winky, apparently sensing the need for speed, nodded quickly and was gone.

"What about Emric?" Ron asked as soon as Winky had disappeared.

"He did not make it," Ethrindell said matter-of-factly. "It would have been nice if he had survived but he is no longer in this world."

As soon as Winky arrived with Albus and Fawkes in tow Ethrindell took absolute control of the situation. "Alright, Everyone, he commanded, "gather 'round. We are going to form a circle with Harry's body in the center. Ginny, you are at his head. Dobby, Winky, you are on either side of Ginny. Ron and Hermione are next. Joseph, Eileen, you two are the compass points. Albus and I are next. Remus, you are next to Albus." Looking up he called out to the ghost of Helena Ravenclaw, "Helena, you are going to represent the ghosts." Helena floated over and stood next to Ethrindell. "Hagrid," Ethrindell continued in a commanding voice that brokered no argument, "You are the other cardinal point. You opposite Ginny."

When everyone was in position and holding hands Ethrindell said, "Joseph, Eileen, I spent the last two months teaching you the Resurrection Song. Now is the time." Looking over at Fawkes he said, "Fawkes, if you will, begin."

Fawkes bobbed his head and lifted off, rising on the air currents as he sang a hauntingly melodious song of hope, faith and healing. Moments later Joseph and Eileen began their duet, Joseph's rich baritone perfectly complimenting Eileen's sweet soprano.

As the song progressed the air in the Entrance Hall began to glow with an otherworldly sheen. It was the purest and brightest white that anyone in the room had ever seen and yet it was a soft light that was easy on they eyes. It didn't take long for the light to fill the chamber and overwhelm everything else. It was at this point that the members of the healing circle experienced something they would not soon forget.

Harry had just finished telling Merlin his plans for the Elder Wand when a blonde-haired little boy burst through the castle doors, a look of sheer panic on his fade. When he saw Godric and the others sitting on the front steps he ran over to them and, through his gasping breaths, said, "Sir! A group of people just appeared in the Entrance Hall!" Spotting Harry he added, indicating The-boy-who-lived, "They are in a circle around his body."

Merlin nodded and smiled warmly down at the lad. "Thank you, Joshua," he said. "There is nothing to fear. They are friends and have come for Harry."

"No matter what happens," Ethrindell yelled above the singing as the four founders, Merlin, Sirius, James, Lilly, Harry and Harry's children entered the castle, "the circle must not be broken! We are only partially in this dimension and cannot stay!"

Walking slowly around the circle, Harry's eyes filled with tears as the sheer enormity of the situation hit home. Not only were these people taking a terrible risk to repair his body and call his soul back through the veil but they were his family and loved him more than he could ever hope to imagine. When he spotted Helena, who looked very much alive, he glanced curiously at Ethrindell.

"Emric didn't make it," Ethrindell said in response to Harry's glance. "We needed twelve for the circle and it is important for her to know that she has been forgiven."

Harry nodded and, stepping under Hagrid's arm, walked over to Helena and said, "Thank you."

Helena smiled. "Any time, Harry. Any time. You may be in Gryffindor but you are an honorable man and I am proud to call you friend."

Rowena looked up at the sound of Helena's voice and quickly strode across the Entrance Hall, inadvertently passing through Joseph, thus demonstrating the reality of being a part of two dimensions at the same time, and cautiously approached her daughter. "Helena?" she asked.

Helena's eyes widened and her mouth fell slightly open at the sight of her mother. "Mother?"

Rowena nodded. "Yes, Helena. It is I. I know you have other issues you need to work through before you can join us but the locket has been destroyed and I want you to know that I forgive you."

Tears of happiness, sorrow and relief spilled down Helena's cheeks. Rather than allow her daughter to break the connection so that she could wipe them away herself, however, Rowena conjured a handkerchief and dried her daughter's face.

James and Lilly, Harry and Ginny's children stepped between Hagrid's legs, apparently not trusting the dimensional split that Rowena had demonstrated, and approached their mother. "Is this our mummy?" Lilly asked.

Harry nodded. "Yes, this is your mum." Turning to Ginny he said, 'Gin, I would like you to meet our children. This is James," he said, resting a hand on James' shoulder and, wrapping an arm around Lilly's shoulders said, "and this is Lilly."

Ginny smiled down at her children. "Hello," she said, her voice choked with emotion.

Harry could tell that she wanted to say more but he could sense that time was running out so moved on. Kneeling down in front of Ginny he turned towards Dobby and then Winky and said, "Guys, I want you to know that no matter what your former masters might have said, you really are wonderful people. You may be house elves on the outside but on the inside you are more human than a lot of the witches and wizards I've met."

Dobby's smile spread until Harry was sure it would split his face wide open if it got any bigger. Winky, on the other hand, began to cry softly. Harry scooted over to her and gently brushed her tears away with the backs of his fingers.

Ron and Hermione looked to be in shock. It was almost as if they couldn't believe what they were

seeing. Harry looked at each of them in turn and silently thanked them for everything they had done for him over the years. They were, spiritually speaking, his brother and sister and he vowed that he would always cherish their love, friendship and support.

Joseph and Eileen were singing their hearts out and Harry dared not disturb them. Any laps in concentration on their part could spell disaster for what they were trying to do. Looking up, Harry saw that Fawkes was slowly circling the group in a counterclockwise direction, adding his own brand of magic to the enchantment.

Albus, clearly confused by what was happening, this being a branch of magical endeavor he had never thought possible, still found it within himself to smile softly as Harry approached. "I know you don't have any children, Albus," Harry said, "but I want you to know that you are one heck of a great grandfather."

A tear began to trickle down Albus' cheek. When Harry moved to brush it away Albus shook his head. "No," he said. "Let it go. It is one of the few tears I have shed in great joy. Thank you, Harry."

Harry nodded then turned towards Remus who looked to be at a loss for words. On the one hand he had never expected to experience anything quite like this. On the other he was seeing three of the best friends a werewolf could ever hope to have again, after they had left their physical bodies behind. As his parents and Sirius stepped aside Harry looked into Remus' eyes. "Moony," he said, "Now that you know the truth, that we are spiritual beings who choose to inhabit physical bodies and not physical bodies that happen to be in possession of a spiritual presence I have a feeling that your life will get a lot easier."

Remus smiled then nodded.

"I want you to know that you and Tonks will always be welcome at our house. I plan on rebuilding the place at Godric's Hollow and you and yours will always be welcome. Besides, with Padfoot and Prongs having moved on I need an uncle, someone closer to my own age than Albus, I can turn to for advice from time to time and I was hoping that you might be willing to fill that role."

Remus smiled. "Sure."

Looking up at Hagrid Harry said, "Hagrid, I want you to know that you were my first real friend, not just in the wizarding world but in the whole world. Thank you for coming."

Hagrid smiled. "Tha's what frien's 're for, Harry"

Harry smiled brightly up at his friend then turned towards Ethrindell.

Ethrindell nodded. "It's time, Harry." Raising his voice he commanded, "Everyone who is not a part of the circle please exit." Then, locking eyes with Harry, said, "All you have to do, Harry, is lie down inside your body and let the magic do its work."

Harry nodded and turned towards the image of his body that lay in the center of the circle. Walking over he got down on all fours and then lay down, attempting to consciously align himself with its position. As he struggled with the details he heard Ethrindell's voice telling him to relax and let his soul do the work because it would remember the body's position. Before allowing himself to relax Harry called out, "Mum, Dad, James, Lilly, Sirius, I love you."

Moments later, as Harry allowed himself to relax into the magical processes, he felt the darkness that separated the two worlds approaching and, as Joseph, Eileen and Fakes sang, felt himself returning to his physical body and the people who loved him so much that they were unwilling to give up on him without a fight.

When Harry next opened his eyes he knew that his trunk's Room of Requirement. In its current configuration it resembled Madam Pomfrey's Hospital Wing with a few changes that he and Ginny had programmed in to make it feel more humane. He was lying in a bed with crisp, white sanitary sheets but the ceiling displayed a clear blue sky and the walls were wizarding windows that displayed the Hogwarts grounds. "Your body is still mending," Ethrindell said, but it shouldn't be long now. I think another day should do it."

Harry blinked. He could see without his glasses. His face felt somehow naked without them but he could see. "Another day?" he asked. "How long have I been here?"

"A week," Ron said, getting up from a chair in the corner of the room. "Welcome back, mate."

Harry looked over and smiled up at his friend. "Hey, Ron. Thanks for coming after me."

"No problem, mate. Like Hagrid said, that's what friends are for." Then grinning, Ron asked, "Are those really your children?"

Harry smiled fondly at the memory of his children. "Yeah. That was James and Lilly. I guess Ginny and I are going to be naming them after my parents."

Ron nodded his head, grinning stupidly. "Yeah. Ginny hasn't been the same since. None of us have been, really, but it's nice to know that it is possible. Extremely risky but possible."

"How is Ginny?" Harry asked.

"She's fine," Remus said from the opposite corner. "The people have been celebrating all week but Ginny has been keeping a low profile. I think meeting her children has had an affect on her. She is still Ginny but she is a little more introspective now."

"How about Hermione?"

Ethrindell, Remus and Ron spent the next twenty minutes catching Harry up on the events of the past week and how everyone was doing when Harry turned towards Remus and said, "Alright, Remus, I know I can count on you to be honest with me, what are the final numbers?"

Remus sighed and sat down on the edge of Harry's bed. "I knew you were going to ask that," he said. Taking a deep breath he looked into Harry's eyes. "You can see me, can't you."

Harry nodded. "Yes, I can. Now quit stalling and give me the numbers."

Remus smiled sadly. "150 Death Eater survived." Harry looked at him curiously. "It was easier to count the survivors than the dead," Remus explained."

"Alright, what about students and elves?"

Remus hesitated. "Seventy-five students died; fifty wood elves didn't make it; forty-three high elves

have crossed over; and sixteen house elves have gone home."

Harry was silent for almost a minute as he composed himself. That's more than half the students in the top three years."

Remus nodded sadly. "I know."

What about the other numbers?"

"The aurors and hit wizards lost fifty of their own. I guess the fighting was particularly brutal at the ministry. Saint Mungo's lost five employees and twenty-three civilians died in the fighting."

"Including Fred and Alastor ..." Harry finished for his friend.

Ron looked up. "How did you know?"

"I met them on the other side," Harry explained. "Fred died a hero – a hero who will be remembered as a purple pygmy puff, I might add – and Alastor went down fighting. Neither one of them would have had it any other way. Oh, and, Ron?"

"Yeah?"

"Fred said that he was going to let you have the last laugh."

Ron grinned then smiled then burst out laughing. "Good," he said after he had gotten his laughter under control, "it's about time."

"How's your family taking it?"

Ron hung his head in thought for several seconds. "George is devastated. It's like half of him is missing. Some of Joseph's friends are running the store and helping George recover but I honestly don't think he will ever be the same. Mum is taking it pretty hard as well but she is thankful that we only lost one member of the family; Dad has been given some paid vacation so that he can grieve; and Percy ... well, Percy has changed. I think he has begun to appreciate Fred's sense of humor and is spending a lot of time with George. Most of the time they just talk but occasionally they will pull a prank together."

Harry's mouth fell slightly open in disbelief.

"Yeah, I know," Ron said. "Who would have thought that Percy Weasley, Mr. Big Head Boy, had a sense of humor? You know, I hate to say this because it almost sounds disrespectful but I think Fred's death did Percy a world of good."

"The rest of us are coping. We knew it was unlikely that all of us would survive but it still hurts."

"Harry nodded his understanding. "What about Malfoy?" Harry didn't know why he had asked the question but for some reason it seemed important for him to know the fate of his rival.

Ron grimaced. "He survived," he said. "God only knows how because he is in pretty rough shape but he was one of the survivors. He's in Saint Mungo's. They don't expect him to come out of his coma for another week or so but he should make a full recovery."

Harry noticed the lack of malice in Ron's voice and was about to ask him about it when Ron interrupted his thoughts. "Even after all the stuff he's put us through, Harry, I can't find it in me to hate the git. I may not like him after everything we've been through I honestly don't think I have the energy to hate him anymore."

Again, Harry nodded his understanding.

"Ginny, Hermione, Luna and Neville will most likely be in to see you this afternoon," Ethrindell said. "Dobby and Winky have been helping the Hogwarts house elves pick up the slack but I am fairly certain they will be in as well. And tomorrow you have two meetings. The first is with Ragnok and the second is with Madam Bones. I believe she would like to introduce you to the Prime Minister."

Harry took a deep breath and blew it out in an explosive sigh. "How are they doing?"

Chapter 22. Looking to the Future

As teatime approached that afternoon several people began entering Harry's trunk and, subsequently, his trunk's room of requirement. Since Ginny was already living in the trunk there was nothing unusual about her presence. Since Ron and Neville were Harry's dorm mates and had been in and out of the trunk since the beginning of their sixth year their presence was not unexpected either. The same was true, in a round about way, for Luna and Hermione. Remus and Tonks had visited several times over the last 14 months so their presence, although unexpected, was not unusual. The two surprise guests were Kingsley Shacklebolt and Albus. Neither of them had been in Harry's trunk before and while Kingsley looked to be suitably impressed with the trunk's features Albus' eyes were alive with excitement and wonder.

If an old man could gaze in awe at the wonders of the world around him with the enthusiasm of a child of five or six the that old man would have been Albus Dumbledore. His blue eyes were sparkling with childish excitement as he looked around the room and took in his surroundings. In addition to the sparkle in his eyes, his mouth was hanging slightly open reminiscent of Harry's first experiences in Diagon Alley: experiences that seemed so long ago to Harry that he wondered if he would ever be able to go back and recapture the innocence of his youth.

In the intervening years he had faced his parents' killer numerous times, finally defeating him through the application of divine justice; seen a possessed man die by touching a boy whose very being was infused with the love his mother had gifted him as her dying act; rescued an innocent young girl from the clutches of a madman whose memory had been possessing her through the auspices of a magical diary; gained a godfather, only to lose him two years later; participated in the Triwizard Tournament, seeing a friend die and watching a madman return from the dead at the end of the third task; learned about a prophecy that, due to circumstances beyond his control, bound his fate to the fate of a self-styled dark lord who was, at best, a hypocrite; learned to fight; lost his aunt, uncle and cousin to a group of Death Eaters who had, moments later, tried to kill him; and, over the course of the past 15 months, been either directly or indirectly responsible for the deaths of hundreds, if not thousands, of said Death Eaters. How was he supposed to overcome that? How was he supposed to forget all of the pain and suffering and move on? He knew that a part of the answer, for him anyway, lay in his pensieve. After that it would come down to meditation and group counseling but what about everyone else? He knew that, no matter what, some way would have to be found to help the people heal so that they could move on and rebuild their lives.

"Amazing," Albus said as he sat down at the table Dobby and Winky had brought in for the occasion. "Simply amazing. And you say Dobby and Winky did all of this?"

Harry nodded. "Yes, sir. They did the main living quarters and the library by themselves; but as for the rest of it, we told them what we wanted and let them use their imaginations."

"Amazing. Never in all my years have I seen anything quite so magnificent."

Harry winked at Ginny. "Yes, well, what Ginny and I have discovered is that while house elves may be childlike in many ways they are more capable than most witches or wizards give them credit for."

Albus nodded thoughtfully. "Yes. Something I have suspected for years. Sadly, circumstances being what they were, I never really had a chance test my theory..."

Harry smiled. He knew that Albus gave the Hogwarts house elves more leeway than most and that he was genuinely curious about their capabilities but if he had truly wished to 'test his theory' he felt certain that a man with his reputation could have found a way. On the other hand, Albus was a busy man and may not have been able to find the time. Changing the subject Harry said, "I'm curious, Albus, ... I've been trying to figure it out months, now. Why do people start wars? Why do we fight so much? Why can't we all just get along?"

Kingsley snorted but didn't say anything.

"Ah, yes," Albus said. "The age-old question. Why are we so violent?"

"To be honest with you, Harry," he said, "I have been asking myself that question for years and have yet to find an answer. That said, however, there are many reasons people start and fight wars. Sometimes, as in our most recent confrontation, wars are fought to preserve the rights of the people when someone like Tom Riddle wishes to take them away. In our case it was a battle of brains versus brawn; and I am happy to say that brains won yet again. Sometimes wars are fought over money or possessions. More often than not, however, wars are started by any number of people who are insecure in one or more aspects of their lives. It would seem that in order to overcome these insecurities they choose to assert themselves. These assertions do not usually lead to all out war but when they do the results, as you have just experienced, can be catastrophic. And then there is Ethrindell's view. According to him, spiritually speaking we are a very young species and each generation must learn and/or relearn the lessons of war until we get it out of our systems.

"I must say, however, that The Potter-Lupin-Granger-Padfoot Defensive Charm and the Purgatory Charm, while not necessarily addressing the underlying causes of war, will go a long way towards teaching people that there are consequences to our actions. Perhaps these two charms will pave the way for a new, more humane, criminal justice system."

As the evening progressed Harry learned that Madam Pomfrey had thrown a fit when Ethrindell had insisted he be moved to his trunk. The standoff had only been resolved when she had been given a tour of his trunk, including his room of requirement, and been assured that someone would be with him at all times. Most of the time it had been Ginny and either Dobby or Winky but Ron, Neville, Luna, Hermione and Remus had taken their turns as well. He also learned that he was to be honored with an unprecedented second Order of Merlin, First Class for his defeat of Tom Riddle and his Death Eaters.

The conversations ranged from the mundane, of returning to a regular schedule of classes (with optional training for those who didn't want to let their earlier training go to waste), to some of the celebrations that were going on around the wizarding world. Dedalus Diggle was once again making a spectacle of himself by shooting stars up into the sky at every opportunity and the muggles had noticed quite a few odd happenings, like owls being seen flying in broad daylight. One veteran weather reporter had even commented that it reminded him of Halloween 1981 when similarly odd events had taken place.

Towards the end of the evening Neville left for a few minutes only to return carrying Gryffindor's sword. "Since you will be meeting with Ragnok tomorrow you might want to take this along," he said.

Everyone but Albus looked curiously between the two dueling partners. Harry smiled. "Yeah, you're

probably right. I did kind of promise him didn't I."

Neville nodded, grimacing slightly. "Yeah, you could say that."

When Harry entered the Great Hall for breakfast the next morning the students, many of whom were still recovering from their injuries, gave him a standing ovation. Those who could not stand loudly either whistled or cheered their approval. Orville Burns, hobbling unsteadily on crutches and sporting a muggle-made artificial leg, struggled to his feet even went so far as to hobble over and shake his hand, saying, "Potter, I never thought I would be saying this to a Gryffindor but you're alright."

Harry smiled his thanks then, looking down at Orville's prosthesis, said, "You're alright too, Orville. If you ever need any help please let me know."

After watching Orville return to his seat at the Slytherin House Table Harry turned back towards the Gryffindor House Table. He hadn't taken more than a few steps when the students began chanting, "Speech! Speech!"

The chanting grew more insistent as he approached his traditional set so, even though he prepared, turned and walked up to stand in front of the Head Table. When everyone had settled down he looked out at his audience and, making eye contact with Andromeda Babcock, said, "Ladies and gentlemen – for you truly are ladies and gentlemen in my mind – I am humbled by your presence and honored by the fact that you ... that you were willing to place so much of your faith in our joint cause that you were willing to place your lives on the line with the sure and certain knowledge that man of us could die, could make the ultimate sacrifice in the name of freedom. You are all heroes."

"In ages past our house rivalries have divided us. Over the past year we have we came together to defeat a common foe. I just want to thank you and say that the easy part – defeating Voldemort and his Death Eaters – is past. Now we have to rebuild our world. My hope, indeed my prayer, is that we will rebuild it in our own image: an image of friendship and cooperation."

As Harry left the stage he received a second standing ovation. This time. However, everyone, including all of the teachers, stood.

Three hours later, as Harry made his way down Diagon Alley, he could not help but notice the reconstruction efforts that were going on around him. Despite their best efforts some of the buildings, like Gringotts, had sustained heavy damage. Most of the stores were open for business but a few, like one of the apothecaries and a clothing shop or two had sustained so much damage that they were having to rebuild.

Harry noticed that George was helping in the reconstruction efforts at the apothecary. Even though he had met Fred on the other side and knew that he had safely crossed over it seemed odd to see one without the other. As he watched George would occasionally laugh at something someone said or crack a joke of his own. Harry knew that two of Joseph's friends from the elven realm were running the shop to give George the time he needed to adjust to life without his twin and was thankful for their assistance because, even though George seemed to be doing well, he knew that it would take time for him to recover fully.

As he walked towards Gringotts he noticed that several plaques had been mounted on the walls of various buildings to commemorate the dead. He also noticed that a space was being cleared for a

permanent war memorial.

Harry stopped in front of Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes and read the small plaque mounted on the wall beside the door. He was impressed by its simplicity. It was a simple bronze plaque with a moving picture of Fred laughing at some joke mounted in a sturdy frame at the top. Under the picture was an inscription which read, "Fred Weasley: Born 1 April 1978, Died 31 October 1997. He gave his life so that others may live. We honor him through our laughter."

As Harry reached his hand up to touch the plaque the door opened and a little blonde haired girl who looked to be around five stepped out onto the stoop. "He's my guardian angel, you know," she said, looking up at Harry.

Harry glanced up at the little girl's mother, who was trying to exit the store, and then, lowering his hood, knelt down in front of the little girl. "You must be Stacey," he said. "I've heard so much about you from Ron, Joseph and Eileen. You must be a very special little girl to have Fred as a guardian angel. I'd watch out if I was you, though, because Fred can be quite the prankster."

Stacey's eyes grew wide as she realized whom she was talking to. Before she could say anything, however, Harry touched his finger to her lips and quickly glanced up at her mother whose eyes grew wide as well. "Let's keep this meeting between you and me," he said softly. "I've got some business to attend to at Gringotts and I would really rather no one know I was even here."

Stacey nodded her understanding and Harry pulled her into a quick hug. "Thank you," he said.

As he stood up Stacey's mother reached out and shook his hand. "Thank you Mr. Potter," she whispered. "I don't know what you did but, whatever it was, the fighting just ... stopped."

Harry smiled softly. "A magician never reveals his secrets. Let's just hope I never have to do it again." With that he raised his hood, turned away and started walking towards Gringotts.

As he approached the bank he saw that several goblins were busy working on rebuilding the portico. The pillars were about half complete and he could see where they were getting ready to start working on the canopy. The construction side was roped off with a narrow path set aside for customers.

Carefully making his way into the bank so as to avoid upsetting any of the goblins working on the reconstruction effort Harry passed through both sets of doors and made his way into the lobby. Unfortunately, the only open teller was at the far end of the room. As he made his way down the length of the causeway he drew many curious glances from customers and goblins alike who seemed suspicious of anyone who would not lower their hood upon entering the bank. He also noticed that more than just a few wands were being drawn in case of trouble. Harry could understand their reaction and wanted to reassure them that everything was going to be all right but he had never liked the press and didn't want the fame.

When he reached the window the goblin glanced up briefly then returned to his scales, weighing some gem or ruby or other precious stone. Harry waited patiently for several minutes as the goblin essentially ignored him. When it became evident that the goblin was playing a waiting game, wishing he would go away and leave him alone, Harry cleared his throat. "You know," Harry began casually, "I honestly don't think Ragnok would appreciate you being the one to delay the fulfillment of a blood oath, do you?"

The goblin started, almost dropping his eyepiece. "Mr. Potter?" he asked, his voice a strange mixture of growl, wonder and awe.

Harry nodded. "Yes. I have come to fulfill my half of the bargain."

The goblin quickly jumped down from his stool and scurried past several of his fellow tellers on his way to the doorway that would lead him to the lobby. Many of his fellow employees glanced curiously down at him as he passed and then looked appraisingly over at Harry who stood waiting at the absent teller's window.

Moments later the goblin reappeared at a side entrance and motioned for Harry to follow him. Several twists and turns later Harry and the unnamed goblin were standing outside Ragnok's door. The goblin knocked and started to turn away when Harry stopped him. "I don't know your name, sir, but thank you."

The unnamed goblin stopped in his tracks and slowly turned around. "My name is Ironhand, Mr. Potter, and you are welcome."

Harry nodded in return and watched as Ironhand left to return to his work.

Moments later Ragnok opened his door. "Ah, Mr. Potter," he said as he turned and led Harry into his office. "I had heard rumors that you were dead."

Harry grinned mischievously. "I was," he said nonchalantly. "But I have some very powerful friends who were able to bring me back."

Ragnok turned towards Harry with an incredulous expression on his face.

"It is a very ancient piece of elven magic," Harry explained. "I believe they call it The Resurrection Song."

Even though he flinched at the mention of elven magic Ragnok nodded. "I have heard of it," he said. "Elves and goblins may not get along, Harry, but we do respect each other's magic."

"You must have some very powerful friends if they were able to invoke The Resurrection Song on your behalf."

Harry blushed slightly. "Well, I guess you could say that. Have you ever heard of man called Ethrindell?"

Ragnok nodded. "When you mentioned him in your will I took it upon myself to determine his identity. If he is the Ethrindell of legend then you do indeed have some very powerful friends, Harry. The Ethrindell of legend is an immortal. Legend has it that he came to this world shortly after it was capable of supporting and sustaining life. He is, in a manner of speaking, one of this planet's guiding spirits."

"That would be him," Harry said, blushing on Ethrindell's behalf. "But I have it on good authority that he is a very humble man. He cares deeply both for and about all souls and will, if needs be, intervene in our affairs but he prefers working behind the scenes."

Ragnok chuckled. "Yes, that is what the legends say."

Removing his cloak Harry laid over the back of the chair he had used in July and began unbuckling the straps holding Gryffindor's sword in place on his back. "If you don't mind me asking, sir, what are you going to be doing with it now that it is yours?"

"It will be mounted and put on display in the British Museum of Goblin History, why?"

"Well," Harry began hesitantly. "I was wondering as to whether or not you could include a line, about Neville Longbottom wielding the sword in the final battle against Voldemort to destroy the last of his horcruxes."

Ragnok laughed. "I don't think you have to worry about that, Harry. The sword's entire history will be included in the display, including your use of it to slay Slytherin's basilisk, your willingness to part with it in exchange for two of Tom Riddle's horcruxes, which you subsequently destroyed, and Neville Longbottom's use of it in the final battle."

Harry cringed slightly at Ragnok's casual mention of his encounter with the basilisk. He didn't know how Ragnok had found out about that episode but since he had Harry had no choice but to resign himself to a certain amount of notoriety in the goblin world to go along with his unwanted fame in the wizarding world.

After delivering the sword Harry raised his hood and left Gringotts and Diagon Alley. Tom gave him a cautious glance as he passed through The Leaky Cauldron but other than that no one paid much attention. Several of the patrons were still coming down from their high of realizing that Tom Riddle (a.k.a. Voldemort) was no longer a threat and would never come back. A few, like Stan Shunpike, were telling outlandishly exaggerated stories about their exploits during the war. Harry just shook his head at their antics because he knew that if any of them had been a part of the fighting the last thing they would want to do would be to talk about it. War, he knew, true war was a messy business that no civilized person enjoyed. They would fight in them with the goals of minimizing the bloodshed and securing people's freedoms but no sane man or woman would enjoy it.

From Charing Cross Road Harry made his way to the Ministry of Magic where he had a noon appointment with Madam Bones. When he reached the familiar, dilapidated phone box he glanced around to make sure no one was watching and stepped in, closing the door behind himself. Lifting the receiver he dialed 6-2-4-4-2 and waited. Moments later the familiar voice filled the booth with its greeting. "Welcome to the Ministry of Magic," the soft, feminine voice cooed. "Please state your name and business."

Harry sighed. As tedious as this process was, at least it was normal. "My name is Harry Potter and I am here to meet with the Acting Minister of Magic."

Seconds later a shiny gold badge tumbled out of the coin slot with the words "Harry Potter" and "Ministry Business" printed across its surfaces. As much as he disliked the attention this badge would draw Harry pinned it to his chest as the phone booth sank into the ground.

When the doors opened Harry stepped out, his confident stride betraying his desire to remain anonymous. Several people glanced his way as he entered the atrium but most were involved with other matters and took little notice. The three exceptions were Arthur and Percy Weasley and Madam Bones who were standing with a knot of people in the midst of the ruined fountain. Percy was the first to break away from the gathering and fairly nearly ran the length of the atrium to

greet Harry. "Harry!" Percy panted as he trotted to a stop.

"Hello, Percy. What's up?"

Percy involuntarily blushed from the exertion. "We are trying to come up with a design for the new fountain," he said while catching his breath. "A few liked the old fountain and want the same design but the vast majority are against it and want something new."

Harry nodded his head in understanding. "I've heard that the people are planning memorials at all of the major battle sites. Why don't you create a memorial to all humans, high elves, wood elves, house elves, centaurs, pixies, faeries and acromantulas who fought and died since Voldemort's return. If you do it you might want to make sure everyone is treated equally. You should also include the goblins because Ragnok and his fellows played a major role in his downfall.

Percy looked startled. "They did?"

"Yes," Harry said softly. "They did. It was behind the scenes and a part of our agreement states that I am not at liberty to disclose the nature of their assistance but I can say that without their help our victory would have been incomplete at best."

Percy looked disbelievingly at Harry but Harry shook his head. "Just accept the fact that extraordinary times call for extraordinary measures. According to Ragnok, if the opportunities are not wasted, what we did could go a long way towards normalizing relations between goblins and humans on the social front."

When Harry and Percy reached the remains of the fountain Madam Bones reached out and shook Harry's hand. "Harry," she said, "I honestly don't know how to thank you. For what you have done the wizarding world, indeed the entire world, owes you a debt of gratitude we will never be able to repay."

Harry smiled briefly but shook his head. "No, ma'am. You don't owe me anything. I had a lot of help. If you want to thank anyone it should be Professor Dumbledore, the four founders, Merlin and an immortal by the name of Ethrindell Zhazrine who lives in the realm of the high elves. If it weren't for them I would not have learned what I needed to know to defeat Tom Riddle. You should also thank all of those who stood by me and fought and died to preserve your right to choose. If it weren't for them the final battle would not have been possible. I'm just the guy who cast the last spell.

A broad smile appeared on Mr. Weasley's face. "Harry, my boy, you are too modest. Albus told me, in strictest confidence of course, the lengths to which you went to ensure our victory and I must say that I could not be prouder."

Harry blushed slightly and mumbled something about doing what you have to do to get the job done.

Madam Bones laughed. "That's what I like about you, Harry. No matter how famous you are you are still humble."

Changing subjects she said, "You do know that Rufus Scrimgeour died in the final battle at the ministry don't you?"

Harry nodded. "Yes. Kingsley mentioned it last night."

Madam Bones nodded. I have a proposition for you, Harry. I am going to be pulling Kingsley out of Hogwarts next week because I need him to take over the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. He has agreed on the condition we hire you and Mr. Longbottom, as aurors, as soon as you graduate from Hogwarts. He wants the two of you to spend the next two years working with Scotland Yard, studying and learning their investigative techniques. He wants you to start a detective division within the department."

Harry was shocked.

"I have had a number of private conversations with the Prime Minister over the course of the past several months. The topic of conversation, besides keeping him updated on the progress of the war, has been the formation of an elite squad, within Scotland Yard, that will be tasked with help us with our investigations. I guess you could say that this is an outgrowth of your request last year that we pull out all the stops to defeat Voldemort. We are pulling out all the stops to make sure something like that never happens again. Since you and Mr. Longbottom will be our primary contacts within Scotland Yard the Prime Minister would like to meet with you this afternoon and you and Mr. Longbottom next Saturday."

Harry was silent for several seconds as he thought about what this could mean to the wizarding world and its criminal justice system. The Potter Charm and the Purgatory Charm were most definitely tools that could be used in personal defense and the execution of sentences if a person was found guilty but the creation of a proper investigative unit would help insure that what happened to Sirius would not happen to anyone else. 'Innocent until proven guilty' would take a lot of the superstition and public opinion out of the current system and go a long way towards providing a fair trial for everyone accused of crimes within the magical community. The magical court system would most likely have to be overhauled as well but at least this was a start. Giving the courts the proper evidence would, he hoped, eventually force them to change their ways so that they could properly deal with that evidence. "I'll do it," He said.

Chapter 23. Epilogue

Christmas Eve found Harry, Ginny, Ron, Hermione, Neville, Luna, Mark, Remus, a very pregnant Tonks and Albus walking through the graveyard behind the small church in Godric's Hollow. They had arrived the day before and booked several rooms at one of the local inns. Harry had received curious glances from a few of the old timers who remembered his parents and, when asked, confirmed that he was James and Lilly Potter's son. After that they had visited the town square where the war muggle memorial transformed itself into a monument commemorating the night his parents had died. Then they had visited the ruins of the house they had lived in.

Harry had spent that night dreaming about and essentially relived the first fifteen months of his life. When it came to the night of his parents' deaths he realized that, unlike Tom Riddle's mother who had taken his love with her when she had died, his mother had magically gifted her love to him as her final act. In this way he and Tom Riddle had been diametrically opposed and Lilly's gift of love had won out. The gift of his mother's love had deflected a killing curse cast by a loveless soul, destroyed the body of a man who had been possessed by that same loveless soul when he had tried to strangle him and, ultimately, made it possible for him to offer that same loveless soul a choice between salvation and complete annihilation. Sadly, and for reasons he could not yet bring himself to fathom, that soul had chosen annihilation.

The snow in the graveyard was not deep but, as is typical of Great Britain, it was extremely wet. The gravel footpaths were a mixture of mud and slush underfoot and the air was cool and crisp as they wound their way through the maze. "This way," Remus said as they approached a low hill and led the group off the path and into the wizarding section of the graveyard. A few minutes later, after passing a number of graves, which included at least two Dumbledores, they entered and passed through a small stand of trees. In a small clearing in the center of this tiny forest, set apart from the rest of the graveyard, was a replica of the wizarding monument they had seen in the village square and two graves. As the entered the clearing Harry could feel the magic that had been established to protect the site from any who might wish to vandalize the site. "This clearing has been set aside as a memorial of sorts," Remus said softly, his voice starting to break with emotion. "I try to come here at least once a year to pay my respects and to thank them for being my friends."

Harry gazed at the monument for several seconds and then let his eyes trail down to the two graves at its base. Almost without realizing it he stumbled forward until he was standing directly in front of them. His father's grave was on the left and his mother's was on the right. His buckled a moment later and he began to cry. They were not tears of anguish, happiness, fear or dread that fell that day. They were the cleansing tears of a man who was releasing his past so that he could go forward and create a new future for himself and, with time, the whole of the wizarding world.

Ginny wanted to rush to his side and comfort him but Remus held her back. This was something Harry needed to do on his own.

Despite the cold, Harry knelt in the snow and wept for hours. As the hours passed a soft, almost angelic-white glow filled the clearing, keeping its occupants warm and all present could swear that they saw James and Lily comforting their son while an angelic choir sung innumerable hymns in the background.

At dusk the glow faded as Harry wiped his eyes and stood up. Ginny immediately ran to him and

pulled him into a warm embrace. They were all quiet as they returned to the village, each lost in their own thoughts. When they returned to Hogwarts the next day, Christmas Day, they were met by a delegation of centaurs and Ministry officials who escorted them to a large tent that had been set up at the interface between The Forbidden Forest, the lake and the castle grounds.

Over the next several days, throughout the Christmas Holidays, a number of meetings were held in that tent. Their focus: the future of the wizarding world. Representatives from all branches of the magical community were equally and fairly represented. A few of the representatives were a bit wary of the vampires and werewolves but no objections were made to their presence. With Hermione's help Dobby and Winky even made a fair showing for the house-elves. In the end an admirable start had been made in the creation of a roadmap for a fair and equitable future for all concerned. Not everyone was happy but most were at least satisfied that a good start had been made. The meetings closed the night before the students were to return and more meetings were scheduled for July and August with the promise of still more meeting to follow until everyone was satisfied with the result.

Tonks went into labor at 10:30 PM on the twelfth of April and Remus began pacing at 10:32. To say that he was anxious would have been an understatement. He was a nervous wreck. He was pulling at his hair while ranting and raving about everything that could go wrong but probably wouldn't. Chief among his concerns, however, was the very real possibility that their child might be a werewolf. He could handle another metamorphmagus in the family but he didn't know what he would do if their child turned out to be a werewolf.

Harry, as a good friend and the only descendent of the other three Marauders stayed with him throughout this ordeal and tried to joke with Remus a few times, mostly about the future of the Marauder's Map and the book Remus had given him on his sixteenth birthday. Remus had scowled at these attempts but did eventually sit down, after multiple doses of the most powerful calming draught Professor Slughorn could brew.

At 2:30 AM on Tuesday, the thirteenth of April 1998, Theodore Sirius Lupin took his first breath and, with a little encouragement from Madam Pomfrey, screamed loud enough to let his father know that all was well in the magical world. Moments later Luna, who had been assisting Madam Pomfrey, stepped out into the corridor and smiled. "Congratulations, Remus!" she beamed. "You are the proud father six pound, seven ounce baby boy! There are no indications of lycanthropy. He did, however come out with purple hair, which immediately turned pink the moment he saw his mother."

Remus immediately jumped up and hugged Luna. "Thank you, Luna!" he all but screamed. "You don't know how good that makes me feel!"

Luna looked to be shocked at Remus' reaction as he enthusiastically hugged her. Harry smiled at her startled expression and mouthed a "Thank you."

Five minutes later Remus and Harry were introduced to their son and godson, respectively. Tonks looked tired but extremely happy. For his part, Teddy turned his eyes from brown as he looked at Remus and from amber to green when he looked at Harry. A moment later his hair and eyes both matched Remus'. It was almost as if he was saying, "Hello, Daddy."

Tonks just smiled and cuddled her son. They visited for a few minutes, until Tonks and Teddy began to drift off to sleep. Remus was given the bed next to Tonks and Teddy was placed in a crib between

them. Harry helped Madam Pomfrey screen their beds off from the rest of the infirmary and then returned to the Gryffindor Tower and his trunk where Ginny murmured a sleepy, "Hello, Love," as he crawled into bed. Harry was tempted to wake her up and tell her about Teddy but decided against it because she had had a particularly rough day.

The second Great Potter-Lupin Prank War began on the first of June 1998 and lasted until the end of the Leaving Feast. The only rules Albus put in place when it became evident that a prank war had, indeed, begun, were that they could not destroy any school property, that they had to clean up any messes they made and that there were to be no food fights. These rules were put into place to protect the castle and students and to assist Mr. Filch in his duties as Caretaker. They did not, however, prevent either Harry or Remus from having a little fun at each other's expense.

One afternoon, after Remus had temporarily turned all of Harry's clothes a bright, glowing pink Harry retaliated by chasing Remus all over the castle with his magical Hungarian Horntail model. He was able to make it fly, swoop and dive like the real thing. It's fire was a harmless, magical illusion but Remus didn't find that out for at least fifteen minutes.

By the time dinner rolled around Remus had been fleeing from Harry's "pet" for almost three hours. When he staggered into the Great Hall, the dragon still in hot pursuit, Harry looked up from where he was sitting with his friends and smiled innocently over at his friend. "Bit out of shape, old man?" he asked.

Remus scowled.

"Let that be a lesson to you, Remus," Harry snickered. "Never, and I do mean never, turn my clothes pink. I do have a reputation to uphold and I would really rather not go the way of Gilderoy Lockheart."

Immediately upon disembarking from the Hogwarts Express in London Kingsley escorted Harry and Neville through the barrier and introduced them to Sean O'Mally, a solidly built man in his mid forties with sandy brown hair, polluted green eyes and a square jaw and an air of certainty about him, and Robert Lothian, a thin man who looked to be close to retirement age with sparkling, inquisitive blue eyes and thinning grey hair. At the same time, however, he had a vigor and zest for life that Harry equated with Dumbledore.

"Harry, Neville," Kingsley said after the introductions had been made and they had settled into the back seat of a Ministry limousine, "Sean and Robert have been specifically chosen and specially trained to serve as one half of the interface between Scotland Yard and the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. You two are the other half.

"Arrangements have already been made for them to accompany you to the meetings being held at Hogwarts this summer. They have been learning about our world for the past six months. It is hoped that their attendance at these meetings will provide them with first-hand experiences that no amount of study will ever be able to equal."

Harry glanced over at Sean and Robert and saw a look of open-minded determination in Sean's eyes and a look of excited curiosity in Robert's. Nodding his head in understanding Harry said, "Alright. But I must warn you that the centaurs can be a bit hostile at times. It took a major, magically induced electrical storm to break through their hostility towards anything human related so that they would even listen. And that wasn't quite two years ago so I don't know how they will

react to you. As long as you are with either Neville or myself, however, I think you should be safe."

Harry and Neville spent the next five years working with Sean and Robert developing protocols and selecting and training an elite group of aurors and investigators from Scotland Yard so that they could work together to solve those crimes that crossed the line between the muggle and magical worlds. In the process, and with Ron's help, they almost totally rewrote the Auror's Guide to Field Operations with an emphasis on the collection of forensic information.

Ron and Hermione joined the Department of Magical Law Enforcement as strategists and quickly gained the respect of their superiors by providing the kinds of logistical support that defused a number of hostage situations – mainly former Death Eaters who didn't want to be taken into custody – without anyone getting hurt and with the perpetrators being taken into custody.

During this time, Neville, as was his want, grew a wide variety of magical plants in his private greenhouses and occasionally traveled to Hogwarts to consult with Professor Sprout. When she decided to retire Neville applied for the position and, upon receiving her glowing recommendation, earned the title of Herbology Professor at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. He, of course, kept his Auror position but was rarely activated because there wasn't much Harry couldn't handle alone.

That same year, Harry and Ginny, Ron and Hermione and Neville and Luna were married in a joint ceremony, which was talked about for months afterward.

Albus Dumbledore peacefully passed away on Christmas Eve that year as well. His dying request was that Harry take his wand and use it as a spare. Harry chose to honor this wish but seldom used the "unbeatable wand" because the residual energies from all of its past owners made him uncomfortable.

Five years later Harry was appointed Head of the Auror Division within the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, making him the youngest head the department had had since its formation.

By this time Draco Malfoy had redeemed himself in the eyes of many by becoming an expert in the application of the Purgatory Charm. Its application was rarely forced upon anyone. It was, however, always offered as an alternative to the death penalty. The only circumstance in which it would be forced upon a convicted criminal was when they were proven to be repeat offenders; and even then it was used sparingly.