Harry Potter and the Crystalline Darkness

Katling

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Chapter 1

Harry lay flat on his back on the sun-warmed grass next to the lake, his Oversight disengaged, his cane beside him and one arm flung over his closed eyes. As he basked in the sun and relaxed, he let his senses tell him what was happening around him. The sun was shining warmly down on him and a light breeze was gently wafting over him. He could hear the soft slurry of the giant squid moving around in the water of the lake and he could hear the chirping of the birds in the Forest. He was feeling extremely peaceful; he did not have to go back to the Dursleys and Voldemort was apparently dead. He breathed in deeply and slowly let it back out. As he did he heard the sounds of footsteps in the grass approaching him. He listened to them for a moment and then grinned. Sirius and Remus; their treads were distinctive. As he listened the footsteps came closer and then he heard the two men sit down near him. There was a companionable silence for a while then Sirius spoke.

"Alright there, Harry?" he said, his voice full of humour.

"Mmmhmmm," Harry murmured lazily.

The two men chuckled.

"You look comfortable," Remus observed.

"Mmmhmmm," Harry repeated to more chuckles.

"You’re packed then?" Sirius asked, grinning.

"Mmmhmmm," was the reply.

"Looking forward to getting out of here?" Remus asked.

Harry lowered his arm and tucked both hands behind his head. "Yes and no."

"Ah, so you can say something other than Mmmhmmm," Sirius said laughing.

Harry laughed as well then Sirius asked, "So what’s with the yes and no?"

"Well, Hogwarts has always seemed more like home than anywhere else I’ve been but I think home will be wherever we are," Harry said.

"Yeah," Sirius said softly. "Hey, we popped over to Grimmauld Place yesterday. That Dobby’s pretty good. He managed to get my Mum’s portrait down though he’s being really evasive as to how. He’s got the place looking great."

Harry grinned. "That’s great! Dobby’s really good at all that stuff." He paused and laughed. "You just don’t want him trying to protect you."

Sirius gave Harry a curious look. "What do you mean by that?"

Harry laughed. "Well, in second year, Dobby was trying to protect me. At first, he was trying to stop me from going back to Hogwarts and then when I was at school he was trying to get me to leave."

Sirius looked outraged. "Why?"

"Because he worked for the Malfoy's at the time and he knew what Lucius Malfoy had done. He knew that the Chamber of Secrets was going to be opened again and he wanted to protect me. He thought the best way to do that was to not have me at Hogwarts."

"What did he do?" asked Remus; he hadn't heard this story in full either.

"Well," Harry began, "he stopped my mail from getting through to me and he nearly got me expelled by levitating a pudding when I was at the Dursleys. He stopped Ron and I from getting through the barrier at Platform 9 ¾ and we ended up having to use Mr Weasley's flying car to get to Hogwarts." He laughed. "Professor Snape wanted to expel us for that but Professor McGonagall only gave us a detention. Then Dobby charmed a bludger that broke my arm."

"Ouch!" Sirius said. "Did you lose the match?"

"Sirius!" Remus chided. "I hardly think that's the point."

"Nah," Harry said off-handedly, grinning at Remus. "That's how I got the arm broken. I took my attention off the bludger so I could catch the snitch. My arm got broken and I had to use the other one to catch it, then I fell off my broom because I wasn't able to hang on. I was only a few feet above the ground though so it didn't really hurt." He sighed. "That one only got so bad because Lockhart vanished all the bones in my arm trying to repair them."

"I remember Gilderoy Lockhart," Sirius said idly. "He was a couple of years ahead of us, wasn't he?"

"A couple of years below us, you mean," Remus said with amusement.

Sirius blinked. "Oh yeah. He was a Hufflepuff though, wasn't he?"

"Yes," Remus said. "Tried very hard but wasn't very good. Got average marks for pretty much everything. Was very good at charms though."

"I'll say," Harry said darkly. "He was a master at the Memory Charm. That's what he'd been doing. Taking credit for things other people had done and then wiping their memories. Git."

"I'll second the git comment," Remus said.

"So, is there anything you want to do over the holidays?" Sirius asked.

"Well, I've got my homework to do and I've got to keep up my training for Master Nhean," Harry said slowly.

"I mean, other than school work," Sirius said wryly.

"Oh, no not really," Harry said blushing. "Just, you know, spend time with you guys."

Remus and Sirius beamed at each other as Harry continued.

"This is going to be the best summer I've ever had," he said with a sideways grin. "No Dursleys, no Voldemort, what could be better." Harry stopped and flipped over, propping himself up on his elbows and facing Sirius. "Speaking of the Dursleys, you're not planning on…doing anything to

them, are you Sirius?"

Remus burst out laughing as Sirius grinned. "No, actually I'm not," he said wryly. "I must admit, I had planned on it when I had a bit of time on my hands but Moony brought me up pretty short. He told me about the trial and, well, as much I would like to have a little chat with your uncle, I don't think it's really necessary now."

Harry sighed with relief and then cocked his head slightly. "Why isn't it necessary?" He then quickly stammered. "Not that I want you to do anything!"

Sirius chuckled. "Your uncle has gone to a Muggle prison convicted of abusing a child." He ignored Harry's irritated snarl at being called a child. "Child abusers of any sort are at the bottom of the 'jungle' hierarchy of a prison." He smiled viciously. "Your uncle will not be having a good time in prison. I guess I can leave his misery to the other denizens of the prison."

Harry looked a little startled at the vindictive tone in his godfather's voice but was distracted by Remus' next question.

"Have you thought about contacting your Aunt and cousin?" Remus asked.

Harry turned to face him and gave a small smile. "You know, you're the second person to ask me that sort of question. Neville brought it up a couple of weeks ago. I'll give you the same answer I gave him. I don't know. I've…thought about it but I'm not really sure I want to at the moment."

"That's okay," Remus said. "I was just asking. I just remember your Aunt apologizing to you at the trial."

"Hmmm," Harry said noncommittally and the three lapsed back into silence.

The next morning, Harry sat on the couch and listened with amusement as Sirius and Remus packed up Sirius' room. They had only found out that morning that while both Remus and Harry had packed the day before, Sirius had somehow let that important detail slide.

"You had plenty of time to pack yesterday, Sirius, what on earth were you doing?" Remus demanded as he threw more of Sirius' clothes into a trunk.

"I was busy," Sirius said in a defensive tone. "I…was speaking with Hagrid."

Remus paused with an armful of t-shirts and stared at Sirius with growing alarm. "You were talking about that motor bike, weren't you?"

Sirius smiled at Remus, looking alarmingly like the Marauder he had been at school. "Now, why would you say that, Moony?"

Remus groaned and threw the t-shirts into the trunk. "You were, weren't you? You're planning on bringing that bloody bike to Grimmauld Place!"

"Moony, it is my bike," Sirius grinned. "And anyway, Hagrid's left it in terrible condition. It's covered in dust and probably won't work until I give it a good service." Sirius looked a little hurt. "Anyway, Moony, what's it matter? It's my bike, I want it back and it's not like I'm going to do anything that

irresponsible on it."

Remus sighed. "Sorry, Padfoot. I was overreacting a bit there, I suppose."

"That's okay, Moony," Sirius said with a grin and an expansive wave of his arms. "I suppose I did give you a bit of a fright the last time you were on it."

"And I'm not really a very good flyer," Remus admitted ruefully. "Now, is that everything?"

Sirius looked around the room. "Yeah, I think so. I can always come back if I've left something."

"Good," Remus said with relief as he banged the lid of the trunk shut and locked it. He quickly levitated it and moved it out into the living room to join his own and Harry's trunks. Sirius followed him out and grinned at his godson.

"Ready to go?" he asked.

"Been ready for ages," Harry replied with a grin. "How are we getting there?"

"We're going by floo," Remus replied. "Dobby and Winky are going to bring our things."

"I didn't know Grimmauld Place was connected to the floo network," Harry said.

"That was one of the things we organized this week," Sirius replied. "Now that we don't have to use it for Headquarters for the Order, we were able to take off the Fidelius Charm and some of the other wards as well as connect it to the floo network."

Remus pulled a bag out of his pocket. "Ready, everyone?"

Harry and Sirius nodded and Remus offered the bag to them. Sirius grabbed a handful of the powder within and threw it into the fire. He stepped into the green flames, saying "Number 12 Grimmauld Place!" and disappeared.

Remus offered the bag to Harry who repeated his godfather's actions and Remus followed them through.

The moment Harry stumbled out of the floo and into the kitchen of 12 Grimmauld Place, he was engulfed by Dobby.

"Harry Potter Sir," the little house-elf said, his large green eyes full of joy. "Dobby is so pleased to see you again."

"Hi Dobby," Harry said happily and Remus stepped out of the floo behind him. "I'm pleased to see you too. Sirius says you've got the place looking great."

"Oh yes, Harry Potter Sir," Dobby replied. "Dobby was very happy to come and work for Harry Potter and Sirius Black and Remus Lupin. Dobby had to tame the house first but then Dobby was able to get everything the way it should be."

Harry, Sirius and Remus froze in place. Sirius was the first to recover. "Tame the house?" he asked

hesitantly.

"Oh yes, Sirius Black Sir, the house was most wild," Dobby said in an authoritative tone. "The last house-elf had allowed things to get very bad. Dobby and Winky had much work to do."

Harry swallowed a grin. "Sirius said you managed to get the portrait in the hallway down. How did you manage that?"

Dobby's eyes widened. "Dobby cannot tell you, Harry Potter Sir. Dobby is most sorry."

Dobby eyes widened further and he turned towards the table in the middle of the room. Harry yelped and grabbed the back of Dobby's jumper just before he could start banging his head on the table.

"Don't do that, Dobby," Harry said hastily. "It's alright if you can't tell me. I just don't want you to go around banging your head or ironing your hands or anything else like that."

Dobby looked up at Harry with confusion. "Harry Potter Sir does not want Dobby to punish himself for doing the wrong thing?"

"No!" Harry said firmly. "Harry Potter Sir definitely does not want you punishing yourself."

Tears brimmed in Dobby's eyes. "Harry Potter Sir is truly a great wizard. Never has Dobby had a master who wouldn't let Dobby punish himself."

Harry looked over at Remus and Sirius a little helplessly and then scowled at the amused expressions he could see in the ghostly overlays of their faces. Finally Remus took pity on him.

"Erm, Dobby," he said with amusement. "We need to show Harry around the rest of the house."

Dobby gave a start and promptly shooed them out of the kitchen. "Dobby will go to Hogwarts to get your trunks," he said as they walked out into the hallway.

Harry turned around and glared at the two men. "Not a word," he said firmly. "Not one word."

Remus and Sirius chuckled and Sirius proceeded to lead them on a tour of the newly cleaned and refurbished house. Harry was amazed; though he could see little detail in the Oversight overlay, he could tell from the magic flowing through walls and the general feel of the place that there had been a major improvement over the last time he had stayed there.

When they got to the second floor, Sirius stopped. "All our rooms are here on the second floor," he said enthusiastically. "All of the family used to be on this level, well, they did when there was actually a lot of family. Anyway, I suppose you might call the rooms here suites rather than anything else. Each one has a small living room, a bedroom and a bathroom. I had Dobby and Winky set up each set of rooms pretty much the same. They've put a desk and bookshelves in as well as couches and chairs though I suppose we'll all end up in the library eventually."

Harry blinked as he remembered that both Remus and Sirius were now going to be teaching at Hogwarts; Remus breaking the curse on the Defence Against the Dark Arts position and Sirius taking over from Professor Sinistra, who had died in the attack on Hogwarts, in teaching Astronomy. Harry grinned; they were all going to have homework this summer.

"Have Dobby and Winky sorted out the library?" Remus asked with surprise. "It was a little difficult to use that room before."

"Yeah, they got that done pretty quickly," Sirius said as he led them down the corridor. "I asked them to make it a priority. I've got to sort that place out. I've got no idea what kind of books are in there but knowing my family, there probably a lot of Dark books. I may need to remove some of them to private storage." He stopped outside a door. "Harry, this'll be your room. My room and Remus' room are down the corridor a bit."

Harry opened the door and found that Dobby had already brought his trunk up to him. He looked around the living room. One wall had windows along its length and the desk was set up there. There were bookshelves set on the only free wall. A room in the wall opposite the bookshelf wall led into a large comfortable bedroom. A second door in the bedroom led into a large well-appointed bathroom.

Harry wandered back out to the living room where Sirius and Remus were waiting for him.

"This…this is great!" Harry stammered.

Sirius beamed, pleased that Harry was happy. "Come and have a look at our rooms," he said enthusiastically and dragged Harry and Remus down the corridor.

Draco paced the Basement Hall at Malfoy Manor, his steps hesitant due to the severe limp he now possessed. His ruined right eye was covered with a black silk eye patch and his expression was stormy. He had returned home from Durmstrang a week ago to find his mother absent, traveling the Continent according to the house-elves. He had also found Bellatrix Lestrange and Peter Pettigrew waiting for him. He grinned mirthlessly as he recalled their expressions of relief when he walked into the small parlour they were waiting in. It seemed that in the absence of his late unlamented father, they had turned to him.

He stumbled slightly and was forced to stop pacing as pain ripped through his leg and up his back. He scowled and swore violently under his breath. The mediwitch at Durmstrang had been unable to repair either his leg or his eye, claiming that the damage was just too severe. Rage boiled in Draco's mind and visions of what he intended to do to Potter and the Mudblood when he got his hands on them flooded through his mind. His defeat by Potter and his friends during the battle at Hogwarts still rankled. He had been forced to go to ground by Potter's tactic of dragging Snape close to the school walls. He had intended to attack by air but had found it too difficult to maneuver close to the castle. And when Potter and his friends had revealed themselves as animagi, he had been confident that he could defeat them no matter where he was.

He hadn't expected the tactics they had used though. That Longbottom, even as a horse, would have the effrontery to launch an all-out attack had amused him and he had used his fiery breath on him, expecting that challenge to finish quickly. That Longbottom would have the intelligence to act as a decoy was not something he had expected. It was the attacks of Potter and Granger that he still shuddered at though. Who would have expected Granger to have that inside her? An eagle? Draco snorted; maybe she should have been a Ravenclaw. Her attack had been unexpected. He had thought that she would merely try to distract him as Potter had done to the dragon in the First Task of the Triwizard Tournament in Fourth Year. That she would actually physically attack was

something he had not thought she was capable of. He grimaced; he supposed he shouldn't have been too surprised; the girl had hit him during Third Year after all.

He scowled again. Potter's attack had been a nasty surprise. He hadn't thought that even a wolf of the size of Potter's animagus form could have seriously hurt him. Merlin knows the two dogs, Weasley and Black, hadn't been anything more than irritants. When Potter's wolf had latched onto his leg and yanked a chunk of the muscle out like that, the pain had been indescribable. Draco could only assume that the sharp teeth and strong jaws of the large wolf had made up for the size differential between them.

Draco resumed his pacing now that his leg seemed to be behaving itself again. He had sent Bellatrix and Wormtail out to find out how many Death Eaters had survived the Battle. He specifically wanted to know how many were in Azkaban and how many were free. He had some hopes, from Bellatrix's and Wormtail's reactions, that the Death Eaters may accept him as their leader. And if they didn't…well, he would just have to make sure that they did. Wormtail had told him what had happened at the Battle after he had left. He had no idea if the Dark Lord had survived the blast in the same fashion as he had done after he had tried to kill Harry Potter the first time, nearly fifteen years ago, and he honestly did not care. He fully intended to make the Death Eaters his and his alone. He had already scoured his father's study and the rooms the Dark Lord had inhabited for all of the information regarding the odd crystal magic the Dark Lord had discovered. Unlike his former Master, Draco had no intention of wasting his time trying to resurrect anyone. He wanted to use it to destroy all who opposed him.

The door to the Hall swung open and Wormtail scuttled in. Draco turned carefully to face him.

"Well?" he asked imperiously.

Wormtail blanched and scuttled closer. "Very few of our fellows escaped from the Battle, Lord Draco," the little man cringed. "Many were killed and the rest are in Azkaban."

"I am aware that very few of our fellow Death Eaters escaped the Battle," Draco said impatiently. "What I want to know is who escaped, where they are and will they follow me!"

Wormtail squeaked nervously. "Y…Yes, Lord Draco. Avery, Nott, McNair and Crabbe were the only other senior Death Eaters to escape other than you, Bellatrix and myself. They were interested, if a little unsure, when I approached them on your behalf."

Draco snorted at the list. It wasn't much to work with, though he knew he could count on Pansy and her group within Hogwarts to help him. In fact, he had half a mind to pass his task from the Dark Lord onto Pansy. She was in far better position to carry out the assassination of Snape and Draco had decided that that was one task that really should be finished. He paced a bit more then turned to glare at Wormtail.

"Well, what are you still doing here?" he barked. "Go and find them. Bring them before me!"

Wormtail squeaked and jumped then scrambled out of the room as fast as he could. Draco watched him go with a sneer. The animagus was irritating and near useless. He couldn't imagine why the Dark Lord had kept him around so much. Just because the man had delivered the Potters so many years ago was no reason to continue to reward incompetence.

"You really shouldn't frighten the little rat so much," said Bellatrix airily as she sauntered through the door. "He can be useful in his own limited ways."

"He's a fool," Draco snarled. "And he's far too interested in protecting his own skin."

"Aren't we all?" Bella purred as she approached him. "A good Slytherin always looks out for his or her own interests first." She had reached him by this stage and she casually slid behind him and draped herself around him. She ran her hands slowly up and down his chest as she lightly nibbled on his ear.

Draco tilted his head slightly to allow her better access and a slow, sensual smile curved his lips. He found the older woman delightfully reprehensible and his interest in her had as much to do with that as her physical charms. Her burgeoning insanity was of little concern to him; he was stronger magically than she was and he made certain never to leave himself vulnerable to her. He tore himself away from her and slapped her face hard enough to knock her to the ground. She stared up at him with blood starting to ooze from a spilt lip and a lustful and slightly crazed look in her eyes. Draco sneered at her and lashed out with one booted foot. The kick caught her on the shoulder and she fell backwards.

"Get out, slut," he snarled, a look of rage growing in his eyes.

Bella slithered to her feet and bowed to him, a dark, sinful expression on her face. In a deliberate motion, she licked some of the blood away from her bottom lip. Draco's eyes narrowed and he smiled at her. He stepped forwards and ran a finger along the same lip. He slowly raised his finger to his mouth and, maintaining eye contact, he sucked the blood off his finger. Bella's eyes widened and her breath shortened. Snake-quick, Draco slapped her again.

"Get out," he said dangerously. Bella's eyes flashed. She slowly turned and with a sensual swing to her hips, left the Hall.

Draco watched her go and snarled, though this one was more at himself than Bellatrix. Bella's little submission and dominance games were amusing but he had more important things to concern him. He stalked as best as he could out of the Hall and back up to the main drawing room where he summoned a house-elf.

"Yes, Master Draco?" the little elf enquired politely.

"Have any owls arrived for me, Dibs?" Draco asked respectfully. He had learnt long ago about the various little annoyances that house-elves could manufacture if they were displeased with the manners of those they served. Something that idiot Dobby had never understood, Draco thought to himself.

"No, Master Draco," Dibs replied. "Are you expecting anything in particular? And what should we do with it when it arrives?"

Indecision rippled across Draco's face. "I'm not actually expecting anything, Dibs, but I am anticipating something." Dibs looked politely curious. "If any owls arrive for me, place their messages in my father's…my study and let me know."

Dibs bowed. "Yes, Master Draco." The little house-elf then disappeared with a small pop.

Draco stared at the spot where the house-elf had been then shook his head. The incident with Bella had distracted him and he did not have time for that. He had to have everything in place before the end of the holidays. Durmstrang, while content to look the other way and not ask questions, would like as not draw the line if known Death Eaters began parading in and out of the place. He left the drawing room and headed for his father's…his study.

Walking into the room drew a small smile. The things he had found in here had been remarkable. He hadn't known just how many pies his father had his fingers in. Draco had spent much of the first couple of days of his holidays responding to the messages that had built up on his father's desk. Mostly he had sent out various versions of 'keep the information coming' or 'my father may dead but I am not, what he knew, I know, so don't think you're off the hook'. He sat down at the desk and drew some parchment and ink towards him. He plucked a quill from the holder and began composing a letter to Miss Pansy Parkinson.

Chapter 2

"Sirius! I'm fine! Will you stop hovering over me!" Harry glared at his godfather then stalked out of the library leaving a stunned and hurt Sirius behind him.

Sirius turned and looked at Remus, who had been a reluctant observer to the outburst. "What? Moony, what did I do?" the animagus asked in bewilderment.

Remus sighed. He had to admit Harry had a point. Now that things had settled down, Sirius was getting a little overwhelming. The werewolf knew it was mostly due to the fact that his friend had missed so many years and in some ways blamed himself for everything that had happened to Harry.

"You are smothering him a bit, Padfoot," Remus said slowly. "He's not a child anymore. He's sixteen, nearly seventeen. He's almost of age. And I know he's blind but I think if the events of the last couple of months have proven anything, it's that Harry's anything but incapable of handling things on his own."

"But…but…" Sirius sputtered, a little bit of anger growing in his eyes.

"I know you love him but you've got to take a step or two back, Sirius," Remus continued. "You're hanging on too hard, like you're afraid he's going to disappear if you let go. He loves you, he's not going anywhere."

Sirius looked angry for a moment and then deflated suddenly. He slumped down into Harry's abandoned chair and sighed.

"I…Merlin! I…you're right. It's just…I missed so much, Moony!" The look on Sirius' face was anguished. "I should have been there! If I could go back and change anything, going after Peter like that would be it. Harry should have grown up with me…and with you. I was so damn stupid." He buried his face in his hands.

Remus looked at his oldest friend with sorrow and compassion. He dragged his chair over and sat down next to Sirius, placing a hand on his shoulder.

"What's done is done, Padfoot old friend, and it cannot be undone," the werewolf said sadly. "Might as well say that you shouldn't have trusted Peter. We all trusted him you know. Who'd have thought Peter of all people would have betrayed us. He idolized James and he frankly adored Lily."

Sirius drew in a breath and his shoulders began to shake. Remus threw an arm around his friend's shoulders and wasn't surprised when Sirius suddenly buried his face in his shoulder and wept. Remus was fairly sure this was the first time since Sirius had escaped from Azkaban that he had been able to fully comprehend what had happened on that awful night so many years ago. Remus himself had had plenty of time over the years to accept what had happened even if he had not known the whole truth but Sirius had first been surrounded by Dementors then had had his attention on staying free, finding Peter, protecting his godson and helping the Order. Even the time spent at Grimmauld Place a year or so ago hadn't been relaxing. Partly because coming back to the house had brought back so many unpleasant memories but also because of the ever-present threat to Harry.

As Remus silently held his best friend as he wept, his werewolf-enhanced hearing picked up a small sound from the doorway. He looked up to find Harry standing there, a look of stunned surprise on his face. He waved his free hand to attract the young man's attention and then used one of the Battle Guard hand signals Harry had taught him. The one for 'later'. Harry's gaze moved to his still-weeping godfather then he looked back at Remus and nodded before silently leaving the doorway. Remus watched him go and then turned his attention back to Sirius.

It took a long time for Sirius' weeping to tail off but Remus waited patiently. When the animagus finally lifted his head, Remus winced a little at the red-rimmed eyes that looked at him. Remus transfigured a piece of parchment into a handkerchief and handed it to Sirius.

"Feel any better?" he asked as Sirius scrubbed his face.

Sirius shrugged then shook his head. "Not really," he said a little hoarsely.

Remus chuckled softly. "Well, I expect you will eventually. It'll take time though." He patted Sirius on the shoulder. "Now, I suggest you go and wash your face while I go and talk to Harry."

Sirius started and then stood suddenly. "No, look I'll talk to him…"

"No, Padfoot," Remus said firmly. "Go and wash your face and…I don't know, work on your motorbike or something." He gave Sirius a small push and a significant look.

Sirius stood, looking uncertain for a moment then nodded. "Okay," he said quietly and walked out of the library. Remus watched him go. He ran a hand through his graying hair and went to look for Harry.

He found the young man sitting nervously in his room. Harry started to his feet when Remus walked in.

"Remus! What's going on? Why was Sirius crying?" he asked urgently.

Remus walked over and encouraged Harry to sit. "Harry, calm down. It's okay. Sirius is fine."

"He didn't look fine when I walked back into the library," Harry said stubbornly then his face blanched. "Was…was it what I said? I…Remus, I didn't mean to hurt him. I love Sirius but…but he's always there!"

Remus placed a calming hand on Harry's arm. "Calm down," he repeated. "No, it wasn't what you said…or at least, not really. I know Sirius has been a little…well, overwhelming lately. He doesn't mean to, Harry, it's just that he's a little…insecure at the moment. He adored you as a baby; I was always kidding James and Lily that you're first word was just as likely to be Siri or whatever you could manage of Padfoot instead of Mum or Dad. He even loved you more than that motor bike of his!"

Remus laughed and Harry joined in, albeit a little reluctantly. Then Remus became a little pensive.

"You know, that was one of the reasons I believed that Sirius had betrayed James and Lily all those years ago."

"What?" Harry said a little blankly. "The motor bike?"

"Yes! He wouldn't even let James ride his beloved bike; I couldn't imagine why he would suddenly give it to Hagrid unless he was trying to cut his ties with us or something like that." Remus smiled sadly. "In retrospect, I can see it was because of you. Hagrid must have said that Dumbledore wanted you kept safe. Sirius would have done anything to keep you safe, even give up his motor bike to get you to wherever Dumbledore wanted you."

Harry was silent for a while as he thought about this then he grimaced. "He thinks he's going to lose me again, doesn't he?"

"Yes," Remus replied. "That's why he's holding on so tight to you…and to me."

"But I'm not going anywhere," Harry said slightly baffled.

"So tell him that." Remus grinned. "The two of you are more alike than you realize. You both don't tell people things they need to know. Even things as simple as the fact that you care."

Harry grinned ruefully. "That was part of the deal, wasn't it? Telling people things."

"Well," Remus temporized. "It was part of the deal you made with me. Maybe you need to make the same deal with Sirius."

"Yeah, I guess I do," Harry said then something occurred to him. "Siri?" he said with a small grin.

Remus gave a choked laugh. "He decided you should call him that. He though it would be easier to say than Sirius or Padfoot. He was always encouraging you to say it before you started talking." Remus laughed. "He was always so thrilled when you actually called him that after you started talking."

Harry smiled. "What did he encourage me to call you?" he asked with a mischievous look. When Remus hesitated, Harry grinned. "You know I'll just ask Sirius anyway. He'll tell me."

"He would too, the bugger," Remus groaned. "Remy. He got you calling me Remy."

"You didn't like it?" Harry asked curiously.

"I…I…" Remus gave a wry grin. "No, I did like it actually."

"You just liked playing the sensible curmudgeon." Harry grinned.

"Well, someone had to do it!" Remus laughed then waved a hand at Harry. "Now, go on. Go and talk to Sirius. He should be down in the basement working on his bike."

Harry grinned and headed out of the room. Just as he was disappearing through the door his voice floated back to his guardian. "Okay, Remy!"

Harry slowly made his way down the stairs to the basement. He could hear the muted sounds of Sirius working on the motor bike. He slowed even further as he got to the door at the bottom of the stairs and carefully opened it. Sirius was seated on the floor in front of the large black bike, his back to the door, and was rather vigorously unscrewing something. Harry watched for a moment and then walked into the room.

"Hey, Siri," he said quietly.

Sirius froze at the greeting and then carefully put the spanner he was holding down before looking around with wide eyes.

Wh…what did you call me?" he asked in surprise.

Harry smiled uncertainly. "I called you Siri."

Tears welled in Sirius' eyes and he swallowed hard. Then he broke out into the biggest smile Harry had ever seen and leapt up, dragging Harry into a heartfelt embrace.

"You haven't called me that since…since before…" Sirius' voice was choked with emotion. "I didn't think you remembered…"

"I didn't," Harry said a little reluctantly. "Remy told me."

Sirius released Harry and placed his hands on his godson's shoulders. "Remy?" he chuckled a little weakly. "You got that out of him too?" He sighed. "Harry, I'm sorry. I guess I've been smothering you a bit lately, haven't I? I…I don't mean to. It's just…" His voice trailed off and he ran a hand through his hair.

"It's okay, Siri," Harry said, smiling at the grin that graced his godfather's face at the pet name. "Remus explained a few things and I kind of understand. I'm not going anywhere, you know. I mean, Voldemort's dead so there's no threat from him and Professor Dumbledore's keeping an eye on Draco. And I don't want to live anywhere unless it's with you and Remy. So it's okay, you can let go a little, I'll be here."

Sirius smiled again and thanked his good fortune in having Remus Lupin as a friend. He was fairly sure he would have bollixed things up with Harry if not for the patience and good sense of the werewolf. He pulled Harry into another hug then let him go.

"So, I guess it's going to be Siri and Remy from now on then?" Sirius said with a wistful smile.

"Yes, I think so," Harry replied with a laugh. "I think after going to so much effort to teach me that those were your names, it would be very silly of me not to use them!"

Sirius laughed and threw an arm around his godson's shoulders. "Nice to see all my hard work isn't going to go to waste. Come on then, let's go tell Remus that everything's okay."

The next few weeks passed fairly smoothly. Sirius seemed to relax a bit and both he and Remus enjoyed Harry's new, almost playful air. They particularly enjoyed the fact that he continued to call them by the pet names Sirius had come up with so long ago. Sirius joined Harry every morning before breakfast to work on the things that Master Nhean had taught them. They would then join Remus for breakfast in the now-cheerful kitchen. After breakfast, the three of them would either adjourn to the library to do homework or lesson preparation or they would just relax in the living room and talk about Harry's escapades at school or some of the mischief the Marauders had got up to. Both Sirius and Remus were eager to show Harry that his Dad hadn't always been such a great prat. They were careful to tell as many stories as they could remember of their last year at school;

partly because this was when James had really gotten himself under control but also because many of these stories also featured Lily. Harry had eaten these stories up.

They had also gone out a fair bit. Mostly it was just trips to the country for picnics. Trips to the zoo or other such places were a bit useless as Harry couldn't really see much but picnics in isolated places were always great fun. After the food had been eaten, it was inevitable that Padfoot and Blaze would come out to play. Remus often ended up being the bunny in the middle of those two but he never really complained too seriously.

Harry had initially had a few problems at Grimmauld Place. Master Nhean's prediction had come true; his Oversight was greatly restricted away from Hogwarts. Thankfully he now knew Sirius and Remus well enough that their faces were still clear in the overlay he saw but he found the greatly reduced detail in everything else a little disconcerting and it took a week or two to adjust to it.

Another constant in his life now were the almost daily letters from his friends. Ginny's came most often but every one of his Battle Guard sent letters regularly and he even received letters from many of the members of the DA. Despite this he was a little surprised when a handsome brown owl turned up one day about three weeks after school ended with a letter for him from Millicent Bulstrode. He was lounging around in the living room with his godfather and guardian, lazily watching while they played chess. It was always fun watching them because their games always seemed to degenerate into a battle of good-natured insults as well as chess strategy. Harry politely thanked the owl and opened the letter while reaching for the device Hermione had given him for his last birthday. He attached it to the letter and flicked the small switch that activated the spell that kept the speech audible to his ears only then listened while it read what was on the parchment.

Potter,

Yesterday I met with a mutual friend that I share with Pansy Parkinson. Pansy still trusts this friend of mine and she spoke pretty freely to her. Apparently Draco has been in contact with Pansy. He wanted her to meet with him and, as he put it, some interesting friends of his in a week or two. My friend asked her exactly what kind of friends these were and Pansy's reply makes me think that Draco's managed to get what remains of the Death Eaters to follow him. How the little twit managed it, I'll never know but I suppose some people are just born followers. Anyway, I think we now know where Bellatrix Lestrange and Petiigrew probably are.

I thought I'd better let you know about this. What you do with the information is up to you, just try not to get yourself killed.

Enjoy your holidays,

Millicent Bulstrode

His expression had obviously changed while he was listening to the letter because as soon as it finished, Sirius spoke to him.

"Everything alright there, Harry?" he said with concern. "You've got the oddest expression your face. Who's the letter from?"

"It's from Millicent Bulstrode," Harry said absently as he tried to process everything.

"Millicent Bulstrode," Sirius said musingly then snapped his fingers. "Oh yes, Slytherin, in the DA, bull patronus. So, what's she got to say?"

"Erm, she's got a mutual friend with Pansy Parkinson and she thinks that Pansy is up to something with Draco," Harry said slowly. "She also thinks that's where the Death Eaters who escaped probably are. With Draco at Malfoy Manor."

Remus nodded slowly. "I suppose that makes sense, doesn't it? We should probably tell Albus about this."

"Yeah, definitely," Harry said and handed the letter to Remus. "Here, show this to Professor Dumbledore. I think he should know who the information came from as much as the information itself."

Remus quickly glanced at the letter before handing it to Sirius. The black-haired animagus read the letter over before chuckling and handing it back to his friend.

"Try not to get yourself killed," he repeated as he grinned at his godson. "Guess she knows you fairly well."

Harry snorted and rolled his eyes. "Like you can talk, Siri."

Sirius laughed and looked down at the chessboard. "Come on, Moony. We can speak to Dumbledore later. We've got time before this meeting mentioned in the letter. Besides, it's your move."

Remus looked at the letter for a moment longer then placed it carefully on the table beside the couch before turning his attention back to the chessboard.

The next morning when Harry wandered downstairs for his morning exercises, he found Dobby waiting in the first floor room Sirius had set aside for him.

"Hi, Dobby," Harry said cheerfully.

"Hello, Harry Potter Sir," Dobby replied. "Dobby has a message for you from Sirius Black."

"Oh, what is it?"

"Sirius Black says to tell Harry Potter that he and Remus Lupin have gone to Hogwarts this morning to speak to Professor Dumbledore and that he did not know when they would be back." Dobby beamed with pleasure.

Harry grinned at him. "Thanks, Dobby."

The odd little house-elf bowed so low his nose brushed the ground and then he disappeared with a pop. Harry shook his head and leaned his cane against the table that stood in one corner. He moved into the middle of the room and began the first kata he had learnt.

After he finished his exercises, he wandered back upstairs and showered. He dressed and headed back down for breakfast. Afterwards he wandered around for a moment before sighing and heading for his room. He grabbed the last of the assignments he had to finish and headed for the library. He sat down at his usual table in the library, attached his reading device to the parchment

and had it read the assignment topic: "There are four different potions that can be used for the purposes of levitation. List all four, their ingredients and brewing methods and discuss the strengths and weaknesses of all four in comparison with each other." Harry sighed, slowly opened his potions textbook and reached for the reading device.

He was still buried in his potions essay when Sirius and Remus came into the library. Harry stopped talking and grabbed the dicta-quill, placing it down on the table. He had accidentally left it in position once and had ruined his Charms essay by recording the entire silly conversation he had had with Sirius and Remus. He looked over at the energy fields that indicated his guardian and godfather.

"Well?"

"Dumbledore said to thank you," Remus said as he collapsed in a chair. Sirius leaned against the wall and shook his head.

"Not that there's much he can do," the animagus said in a resigned tone.

"Why not?" Harry asked indignantly.

"Because if the meeting is to be held at Malfoy Manor then getting a spy in is going to be a little difficult," Remus replied calmly.

"Oh, good point," Harry said with chagrin. "Well, I'd better write back to Millicent and thank her for the information. I need to write to Ginny anyway."

Remus and Sirius nodded and the werewolf stood and stretched.

"We're going to head down to the kitchen," Sirius said. "We missed breakfast and lunch and I could just about eat a hippogriff."

"Better not let Buckbeak hear you say that," Remus said with amusement as the two men walked out of the library.

Harry watched then go and sighed. He couldn't think of anyway to eavesdrop on the meeting either. He shook his head and pulled a sheet of parchment towards him and he picked up his dictaquill.

That night Harry fell asleep and began to dream. At first the dreams were simple dreams; dreams of Ginny, of Sirius and Remus, of his friends. But after a while the dreams began to change in their atmosphere and their tenor. In his dreams the scene faded until it became black and there was an odd crystalline resonance to the air.

Harry shifted in his sleep and muttered a negative but the dreams still held him. After a while he became aware that he was not alone in this strange crystalline darkness, there was someone else with him. Harry's dream self turned and looked for this other awareness he had sensed. He wasn't upset or unnerved by the blackness, he had gotten used to living in perpetual dark, but he could sense that the other awareness wasn't quite so sanguine. As he kept looking around, he could feel the other presence becoming panicked and in its panic, the other began to grow angry. Harry tried to call out, to reassure the other but oddly enough, no words would come. He tried to move over to

the other, to touch the other, to reassure the other but he soon found that he could not move either. And the other's fear and anger continued to grow.

Harry turned over in his bed and muttered again. On the table in the corner of the room, his Runespoor, Orinda, lifted his three heads and looked at his friend. The snake's three heads hissed in unison and he swayed with indecision. Harry muttered again and his head jerked in his sleep. This seemed to cure Orinda of his hesitancy. The Runespoor slithered to the corner of the table and slowly wound his way down the leg. He slithered across the floor of the room and out of the slightly open door.

In his dream, Harry was beginning to feel the first edges of fear. He could not find any way of reaching the other, either through physical means or through thoughts or emotions. The other was caught in its fear and was beyond anything Harry could do. And now he was finding it increasingly difficult to fend off the waves of fear, of rage, of anger that were rolling off the other. The waves of emotion were buffeting Harry and slowly but surely they were breaking down his shields. When Harry realised this he was filled with alarm, his shields had held through everything that Voldemort had thrown at them but this rage, this anger was eroding them rapidly. Harry tried to pull himself away from the other and out of the crystalline darkness but quickly found that the same force that stopped him from aiding the other was now stopping him from leaving.

Harry's breathing rate began to increase and he started jerking around in his sleep; his body reflecting the urgency of his mind's attempts to escape. All of a sudden he convulsed violently as his shields collapsed and he began to scream. Just as the first scream began, the door to his bedroom was pushed completely open and Sirius barged in, Orinda wrapped around his arm and wrist and Remus hot on his heels. The two men stared at Harry in horror for a moment and then they threw themselves towards the bed. The moment Sirius lay his hand on the bed, Orinda slithered his way off, though Sirius was beyond caring about this. He grabbed his godson by the shoulders and gave him a small shake.

"Harry!" he yelled. "Harry! HARRY!"

His godson jerked around and continued to scream. Sirius looked up at his friend, fear growing in his eyes.

"Remus," he gasped. "Go to Hogwarts. Get Snape."

Remus nodded and left the room at a dead run. Sirius turned back to his godson and watched him with fear-filled eyes.

Remus burst out of the floo in the suite he, Harry and Sirius had used during the school year. He stumbled out of the door and pelted down to the dungeon. When he reached the portrait that guarded the Potion Master's private rooms, he began pounding on the frame and yelling. After a few minutes, a very irritated Snape flung the portrait door open.

"What in Merlin's name…" Snape said acidly before Remus cut him off.

"It's Harry!" Remus gasped. "He's caught in something, a dream, a vision, I don't know. We can't get him out of it. Orinda woke Sirius so I think it's more than just a nightmare. He's screaming…like he

used to when he got those visions of Voldemort."

Snape's face had gradually lost its irritation as Remus gasped out his explanation and by the end of it the tall, black-haired man was frowning. He stalked back into his bedroom and emerged a couple of minutes later dressed and pulling on his over-robe. He gestured impatiently towards his fireplace and the container of floo powder on the mantle. Remus strode over and grabbed a handful of the powder.

"12 Grimmauld Place," he said and stepped into the green flames. He stepped away from the fireplace in the kitchen of Grimmauld Place and winced as he heard Harry scream again. Snape stepped out shortly afterwards and his head jerked up as he heard the screams. Remus grabbed his arm and began pulling him out of the kitchen.

"Come on, it's up here," the werewolf said in a distracted tone as he led the Potions Master up the stairs to the second floor.

The two men walked into Harry's bedroom to find Sirius sitting on the edge of the bed watching his godson with a frantic air about him. He looked up when he heard them come in.

"Nothing's changed," he said, running a distracted hand through his hair. "Nothing I do seems to get through to him."

Snape walked over to the bed and frowned at the young man writhing and screaming on the bed. He was still for a moment then he shook his head.

"I tried the subtler method of legilimency," he said, "but it does not appear to be working. His shields are gone but I cannot get into his mind." The Potions Master looked around until he found Orinda curled up on the bed.

"Can you take me to Harry like you did before?" he hissed in Parseltongue to the Runespoor.

The snake seemed to consider this for a moment and then went very still. A moment later the snake began to move again. "No, Black Snape," the right head hissed. "We cannot reach our Harry. He ventures somewhere we cannot go."

"Do you know where?" Snape hissed.

"No," Orinda replied. "It is dark and we cannot follow. But we do know he is not alone there."

Snape started and turned back to the two men. "Orinda cannot reach him and cannot take me to him," he said bluntly. "There is nothing I can do."

Sirius' face became bleak and Remus drew in a sharp breath.

Snape looked back at Harry. "I will return to Hogwarts and retrieve some potions," he said. "I think Mr Potter will need them."

The tall black-clad man nodded to Sirius and Remus and swept out of the room. The two men left in the room exchanged glances and settled on either side of Harry's bed.

Wave after wave of pain washed over Harry. He felt like a small twig lost in a flood, being thrown around at will. He desperately grasped at the shreds and tatters of his shield and tried to weave them back together. At first it seemed like a lost cause. He kept getting washed away by the waves of pain-inducing rage and fear coming from the other. But then he slowly, slowly began to make some headway. It was an agonising process; weaving the shield piece by tiny piece but gradually he began to succeed. Finally he managed to complete the process and then began to push the shield at the waves of rage from the other while looking for a way out.

Distantly he could hear someone calling his name. He turned towards the voice and was relieved to find that he could move. He made his way towards the voice as fast as he could and very shortly he was jerking upright in his bed, sweat dripping from his body. He stared blankly into the blackness and gasped. He winced and brought a hand up to his throat; it was sore and he frowned. It was then that he realised that the voice that he had heard in his dream was still speaking to him and there were hands clutching at his shoulders. He shook his head and concentrated on what was going on around him.

"Harry!" It was Sirius talking to him. "Harry! Are you alright?"

"Siri," Harry rasped and broke off in a fit of coughing, his throat reacting badly to the attempt to speak.

"Drink this, Mr Potter," came the silky voice of the Potions Master.

Harry nodded and groped for the vial he knew Snape was offering. There was a small silence around him then he felt the vial being pressed into his hand. He uncorked it and quickly swallowed it down, grimacing at the taste.

"Thank you, sir," he said, his voice still raspy but his throat now behaving.

"Are you alright, Harry?" asked Sirius again.

Harry nodded. "Yeah, Siri. I'm okay. It was just a dream…I think"

"What kind of dream?" Remus asked with concern. "Harry, you were screaming and convulsing."

Harry's mouth dropped open. He hadn't realised his reaction in his dream had spilled over into real life, though he supposed he should have from the state of his throat. He shook his head and answered Remus' question.

"I…I was somewhere black and…kind of, I don't know, crystalline. Then I realised there was someone or something else there with me. I didn't mind the blackness but the other…presence did. It was starting to panic and then it got angry and afraid. It was projecting its rage and fear and it managed to destroy my shields." Harry frowned and shivered. Sirius saw this and moved over next to his godson, drawing him close to try and warm him up. Harry smiled and snuggled closer to his godfather before continuing. "It took me ages to rebuild my shields; I kept getting blown away by the other presence's emotion. When I did I started looking for a way out. I…think I heard you calling me, Siri, and somehow I was able to pull myself out."

"Do you have any idea who the other presence was?" Remus asked as he shifted over slightly and took one of Harry's hands. "And why is your Oversight not working?"

Harry gave Remus' hand a squeeze. "I don’t know who it was, Remy, but think about it. A crystalline darkness and rage. Surely it’s got to be Voldemort." He grimaced. "Typical. Just when I think I’ve got it pretty good, life comes and whips the rug out from under my feet."

The three men exchanged concerned and curious glances before Remus looked back at Harry.

"And your Oversight?" the werewolf asked.

"Oh, my head hurts too much and I’m too damn tired to put it back up," Harry said wearily, leaning into Sirius a bit more.

Sirius bit back a curse and reached for the other potions Snape had brought with him. The Potions Master handed him two of the vials.

"Here drink these," Sirius ordered, pressing the vials into Harry’s hand one by one and watching him drink them down. "We can talk about this tomorrow when you wake up. We’ll have to get Albus to come around for this, I think."

Harry nodded slowly and allowed himself to succumb to the potions.

Chapter 3

When Harry woke the next morning, he opened his eyes to utter blackness. He blinked for a moment in surprise then the events of the previous night came back to him. Somewhere in the events of the dream, his Oversight had failed. He swore quietly under his breath and initiated it again. He breathed a small sigh of relief when the energy fields surrounding him sprang into life.

"How are you feeling, Mr Potter?"

Harry jumped and turned to look at the owner of the voice. Professor Snape was sitting in a chair next to his bed.

"Professor Snape!" Harry said in surprise. "Er, what are you doing here?"

Snape cocked his head and eyed the young man before him with interest. "I came here last night. Lupin and Black asked me to come and see if I could reach you."

Harry blinked. Oh yes, he remembered hearing Snape's voice now. He also remembered something about potions. "Oh! Er, thank you, sir."

Before Snape could reply, the door to the bedroom opened and Sirius walked in. He broke out into a broad smile when he saw that Harry was awake and rushed over to his godson.

"Harry! How are you feeling?"

Harry smiled. "I'm okay, Siri. I…feel a little embarrassed though."

"Embarrassed?" Sirius said with surprise. "Why embarrassed?"

"Well, I didn't mean to make a fuss." Harry gave a one-shouldered shrug.

Sirius was struck speechless for a moment. "Harry…it wasn't a fuss. You have nothing to be embarrassed about." He grabbed Harry gently by the shoulders and gave him a small shake. "You were having some kind of terrible vision. Of course we were worried." He let his godson go and ran a hand through his hair. "Harry, you mean everything to me and to Remus. Looking after you is not a fuss or a burden or a chore or anything like that. You are my godson, you are my family. Harry…" Sirius swallowed and seemed unable to articulate anything more.

Harry had been listening to Sirius' outburst with growing shock. In his experience, causing a fuss got you yelled at and locked up in a cupboard. While the yelled at part was still true, it wasn't quite what he was used to. This was yelled at in a good way, in a way that made Harry's heart swell and his throat close up.

"Siri…" Harry rasped and threw himself into his godfather's arms, his eyes tightly closed to stop the tears. He was still, even now, having trouble with the concept of people caring for him.

Sirius buried his face in his godson's hair and held him tightly. He heard a small scraping noise and looked up. He saw Snape's back disappearing out of the room and smiled; apparently even Snivellus had a sense of decorum.

After a few minutes, there was a small knock on the door and Remus stuck his head in. He smiled at

the two sitting on the bed. Sirius looked up and smiled back at his friend. Harry pulled out of the hug and rubbed his eyes with one hand then crawled out of bed and walked over to the werewolf. When he threw himself into Remus' arms, the werewolf hugged him reflexively and gave Sirius a curious look.

"What's this all about then?" he said gently.

"Harry seemed to think last night was embarrassing and that he shouldn't make a fuss," Sirius said dryly.

Remus looked startled then turned a kind but amused gaze on the youth in his arms. "Harry," he chided gently. "You're supposed to make a fuss if something like that happens. That kind of dream is worth making a fuss about." He paused and grinned. "I think it falls into the telling people about things category."

Harry gave a muffled snort of laughter and Remus guided him back to his bed. Sirius looked at the two of them curiously.

"You two have a telling people about things category?" he asked. "How do I get in on this?"

Both Harry and Remus gave snorts of laughter as Harry settled back into bed.

"I made that promise to Remy ages ago," Harry said. "He was a bit upset that I hadn't told anyone about some of the things that had happened to me."

Remus frowned. "I thought you were going to make the same promise with Sirius?"

"Oh yeah! I was!" Harry said. "I guess we just got a bit distracted by other things."

"Well?" Sirius said, looking archly at his godson.

Harry sighed melodramatically and Remus and Sirius grinned at his antics. "Alright! Sirius, I promise I won't keep things from you any more." He paused. "As long as you promise to do the same!"

Sirius chuckled. "I think that's a pretty good deal. Done!"

The three of them smiled at each other then Remus shook his head. "Arrgh! Harry, I actually came up here to see if you were ready to speak to Albus. You two have managed to distract me yet again."

Sirius and Harry gave mischievous grins. "Yeah, I'm okay," Harry said. "And I guess I'd better do this now, while things are still fresh in my mind."

Remus nodded and left the room. He came back shortly afterwards with Dumbledore and Snape. The Headmaster conjured a comfortable chair next to Harry's bed and sat down while Snape stood over by the windows.

"Now Harry," the Headmaster said kindly. "How are you feeling this morning?"

"I'm fine," Harry said with a roll of his eyes. "Everyone keeps asking me that!"

"Harry!" Sirius said with a twitch of his lips.

Harry sighed. "Sorry, Professor. It's just, well, everyone has asked me that this morning."

Dumbledore chuckled. "Not to worry, my boy. Now tell me what happened last night from your point of view. I already have the tale from Sirius, Remus and Severus; I'd like to hear what happened to you."

Harry was silent for a moment as he marshaled his thoughts. "I was dreaming. Nothing important, just normal stuff, when the dreams changed. They got darker and there was this odd crystalline feel to them. Then finally everything just went completely black. That's when I realized that there was something or someone else in the dream with me and that they were afraid."

"But you weren't?" Dumbledore asked gently.

"No," Harry said matter-of-factly. "I mean I can usually see in my dreams, which is kind of good but well, the whole total blackness thing wasn't going to bother me. I mean, if I don't use my Oversight that's my life. It didn't faze me at all but it was getting to this other…presence."

"Then what happened?" the Headmaster prompted.

"Well, then this other presence started to…panic, I guess. And it reacted by becoming angry. I tried to reach it. I don't know, to reassure it that it was just a dream I guess but I couldn't move. And it started radiating these waves of anger and rage and fear. All that emotion just seemed to destroy my shield and when it hit me without the shield it really hurt." Harry winced at the remembered pain. "It took me a while to rebuild my shields but when I did I was finally able to get out of there."

"Remus, Sirius and Severus have all reported that you said you thought that the other presence was Voldemort," Dumbledore said a very intent expression. "Why did you think that? To all intents and purposes, he is dead."

Harry paused and thought about what happened. "I don't know why I think it was Voldemort but I'm pretty sure I'm right. I guess it was the crystalline feel to whole thing that first made me think of it but the pain and anger felt pretty familiar as well." He paused and frowned. "I guess if anything, I'm just a little surprised that he was so afraid. I mean it was just a dream, wasn't it?"

Dumbledore was silent for a time. "Possibly not," he said finally. "We never really explained much about the crystal magic that Voldemort was using, did we?"

Harry shook his head and Dumbledore continued. "I believe that Voldemort was using the crystals to enhance his magic. It seems he found a way to use the crystals to focus his magic and was therefore able to augment his own power with them. The memories that you and Severus found in his mind seem to confirm this. There is very little literature available about the use of crystals in our magic so what could actually be done with it is pure speculation on my part."

"But you do have a speculation?" Remus asked.

"Yes, it came to me after I heard your stories and Harry's tale has only increased my liking for my speculation," Dumbledore replied.

"What is it?" Harry asked bluntly.

"I believe that somehow Voldemort was able to tie part or all of his spirit and magic into one of

these crystals," Dumbledore said musingly. "If I am right and remember I have very little of substance to base this on. If I am right, when you destroyed him at Hogwarts, you again only destroyed his physical body. I believe his spirit, magic and…personality, if you like, are trapped in one of his own crystals."

The others in the room stared at him, dumbfounded, and then Harry frowned. "Wouldn't that mean that Draco now has access to them?" he asked.

"Possibly," Dumbledore said. "Though whether he realizes what has happened is another matter entirely. However, the word I have received from my sources indicates that Draco has no interest in resurrecting Voldemort. It appears that he is attempting to take over the Death Eaters for his own purposes."

Harry and Snape snorted in unison.

"Is he completely insane?" Harry said with contempt.

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow. "That, Harry, is a question which may be up for some debate."

Harry's mouth dropped open slightly. "What?" he gasped.

"It appears young Mr Malfoy took his setback during the battle at Hogwarts rather to heart," the Headmaster said. "His words when he returned to Durmstrang were rather intemperate and the source who repeated them to me indicated he wasn't sure whether they were said in rage or incipient madness."

"Who was your source?" Harry asked warily.

"Mr Victor Krum," Dumbledore said calmly. "He agreed to stay on as Durmstrang's Flying teacher. Apparently it gives him more time to devote to his Quidditch career."

Harry nodded slowly; he was prepared to trust the word of the young Bulgarian Seeker.

"Is there any way of obtaining that crystal?" Snape asked acidly. "I, for one, would take great pleasure in crushing it underfoot."

Sirius and Remus gaped at the Potions Master while Harry nodded his head. When he and Snape had first meshed their minds they had had to open up to each other so that they would trust one another. During that process, Harry had learnt more than he really cared to about what Snape had had to do and had had done to him as a Death Eater. He had also become aware of the Potion Master's deep loathing for Voldemort.

The twinkle glinted in Dumbledore's eyes as he viewed his Potions Master. "I currently cannot see any way of doing that, Severus. It is something to keep in mind however."

Harry grinned then he frowned again. "What I don't understand is why he was so afraid. It doesn't really make much sense. I mean, he's Voldemort. He managed to resurrect himself, terrorize Merlin only knows how many people, kill, maim and mutilate, why was he so afraid of being in the dark?"

"Perhaps because he knows something you do not?" Snape said archly. "Not that that would be too difficult."

Remus and Sirius bridled and glared at Snape but were startled when Harry chuckled softly. "Not bad, sir," he said with a cheeky grin. "But I don't think you should get any credit for that one; it was too obvious."

As Remus and Sirius watched in surprise, the Potions Master's lips twitched in what was almost a smile. Dumbledore chuckled as well.

"I don't suppose you could explain that a bit better, sir?" Harry asked.

Snape raised an eyebrow then relented. "I meant, Mr Potter, that the Dark Lord undoubtedly knew where he was but it was not the darkness that he was afraid of. He has obviously been experimenting with this crystal magic. Clearly he is stuck where he is and will be unable to free himself. He must rely on others to do so. From previous events, he knows that his Death Eaters will not fall over themselves to free him. It was only due to Pettigrew's reluctant aid that he was able to manage last time. Particularly after his attempt at the Philosopher's Stone failed."

Harry nodded in understanding. "So his fear of being trapped in there forever showed itself in the rage, anger and fear I felt?"

"Correct, Mr Potter," Snape said.

Harry thought about this for a moment then smiled. "You know, I think I can view Voldemort's predicament with a certain amount of satisfaction."

The others chuckled.

"We shouldn't get too complacent though," Remus said with a small frown. "We certainly wouldn't want Draco to release Voldemort. I think we should definitely try to get our hands on whatever crystal Voldemort is currently residing in."

"An excellent idea," Dumbledore said and rose to his feet. "But I currently cannot think of a way to achieve it. Well, I shall return to Hogwarts to bend my mind to the idea. Look after yourself, Harry."

Harry nodded to the Headmaster and watched as the old man left the room. He then turned to his godfather and guardian. "Can I get up? Or are you two going to make me stay here?"

The two men exchanged glances. Finally Remus temporized, "Er, well, how do you feel?"

"I feel fine, Remy," Harry said firmly. "I've got a bit of a headache, that's all."

Severus rose to his feet, a small smirk on his face. "I think you should allow Mr Potter to decide what he wants to do. He is almost of age after all. If he falls on his face, he will only have himself to blame."

The Potions Master swept out of the room, the outraged glares of Remus and Sirius following him.

"Can't he leave it alone for once," Sirius growled.

"Siri, it's alright," Harry said rolling his eyes. He climbed out of bed and rummaged in his wardrobe. His voice when he continued was a little muffled. "It's just what he does. I think it's a defense mechanism."

Harry stepped back from the wardrobe with some clothes in his arms to find his godfather and guardian looking at him strangely.

"What?" he said defensively. "We had to get to know each other a whole lot better because of that mind meshing thing we did. Besides, in this case, he had a good point."

The two men shook their heads and Harry rolled his eyes again. "Fine! Don't believe me. I'm going to have a shower and then I'm going to write to Ginny. If I don't and she finds out what happened and it's not from me, I'm a dead man." With that he stalked into his bathroom, closing the door firmly behind him.

Draco sat in the study he had inherited from his father and gazed moodily out of the window. The remaining free Death Eaters were not falling into line with him as he thought they would. Pansy seemed eager and she had assured him that her little cohort would follow him without hesitation but it was the adult Death Eaters he really needed. He picked up the small wooden box he had found in the Dark Lord's chambers. There had been two of them, one larger than the other. This was the smaller one of the two. Both had contained crystals; the larger box had contained about a dozen small clear crystals, this smaller chest contained a single large black crystal.

He absently flipped open the lid of the box and looked at the crystal. While there were great sheafs of notes on the Dark Lord's experiments using the smaller crystals, there was absolutely no information on what the Dark Lord had used the larger crystal for. He casually reached out to touch the crystal but drew his fingers away at the last minute. He was no idiot Gryffindor, to go around touching strange and unusual things. While he doubted the crystal was a portkey, he had no intention of finding out what it was the hard way.

He put the box back down on the desk and got out of his chair. He limped over to the windows and thought about the reluctant Death Eaters. The problem seemed to be that they thought he was his father. Merlin knows Lucius hadn't exactly covered himself with glory in his tasks for the Dark Lord, culminating in getting himself killed by Potter's Runespoor in the battle at Hogwarts. Draco snarled soundlessly; he had managed to convince them for the moment that he was not his father but he knew that he could not afford even a single failure. If that happened the remaining Death Eaters would slink back into the woodwork and he would be left on his own. Now while he could probably manage if that happened it would be a major setback. He would then have to build up his own group and that would take more time than he really wanted. Gaining the support of the Death Eaters would give him a ready made force.

Draco snarled and limped back over to the desk, throwing himself gracelessly into the chair. He tapped his fingers on the box in front of him then flipped the lid open again. He stared moodily at the crystal and once again his fingers inched towards it. He halted them a bare fraction of an inch from the crystal and snatched them back. He stared at the crystal intently and for the first time noticed that it wasn't actually a black crystal. It was a clear crystal that held some kind of black, swirling substance. Draco's eyes narrowed and he leaned closer to the crystal as though that would force it to give up its secrets. Then he began to slowly reach out towards it again. His fingers were just about to touch it when there was a knocking at the door.

Draco snatched back his fingers and blinked rapidly. Then he shook his head and got up. The sudden movement pulled sharply on his ravaged hamstring and sent a bolt of pain up his spine. He

stopped and swore then limped over to the door and wrenched it open.

"What is it?" he snarled. He started with surprise then modulated his tone of voice into something polite. "Oh, Dibs, my apologies. My…leg was quite painful when I got up. There was no reason for me to be rude to you."

The little house-elf bowed his acknowledgement of the apology. "You are quite welcome, Master Draco," Dibs said respectfully. "Are you sure we cannot fetch a Healer for you?"

"Quite sure, Dibs," Draco said calmly. "The Durmstrang Healer has looked at it and done all that she could."

"Very well, Master Draco," Dibs said a little dubiously. "There is a young lady waiting for you in the parlour. She says her name is Miss Pansy Parkinson. She doesn't have an appointment but she said you would be willingly to talk to her."

A smile curved Draco's lips. "Yes, it's quite alright, Dibs. Miss Parkinson is an old friend of mine from Hogwarts. Could you please arrange for some tea to be sent to the parlour?"

"Certainly, Master Draco," Dibs said with a bow then disappeared with a small pop.

Draco limped down the corridor to the parlour and opened the door.

"Ah, Pansy," he said with a pleased smile. "How delightful to see you."

"Hello, Draco," the pug-nosed Slytherin girl said coquettishly. "Did you know that your floo is being monitored?"

Draco blinked and then frowned. "And just how do you know this, Pansy?" he said firmly.

"Because my father dislikes flooing into monitored fireplaces," she simpered. "He developed a charm to let him know whether or not a floo is monitored when the words of the destination are spoken. When I said Malfoy Manor, well, you should have seen the charm light up! There's more than one monitoring charm involved, Draco dear."

Draco scowled and tried to pace. "One of them was probably put there by those ungrateful bastards at the Ministry," he muttered to himself. "The other probably belongs to that old fool at Hogwarts."

He snarled then shook his head slightly before looking back at his former school mate and smiling handsomely. "I'm sorry to go off like that, my dear," he said smoothly. "Terribly rude of me."

Pansy swept over to him and laid a delicate hand on his arm. "Oh, that's quite alright, Draco. It was frightfully rude of me to just spring that news on you like that. My mother would have such words with me over my manners."

Draco raised an eyebrow. It was highly unlikely Pansy's mother would have anything to say at all, let alone a rebuke for poor manners. The woman was a dribbling wreck that was kept in a locked room in the Parkinson's Manor. She had tried to break away from her husband when she found out about his allegiances. In the ensuing fight, Tybalt Parkinson had been forced to destroy much of his errant wife's formidable intellect. Clumsy of him, Draco thought to himself, there are better ways of ensuring obedience.

"Well anyway," Pansy said, coming to the point of her visit. "My father is getting quite put out by your refusal to give him an answer." She lowered her eyes and looked up at the blond-haired young man standing in front of her through her eyelashes. She allowed her lips to tremble slightly as she continued. "Oh Draco dear, you seemed quite eager last year. Please don't tell me you've changed your mind." She allowed a single tear to fall.

Draco watched this with some amusement. Pansy really was quite skilled in her little manipulative tactics; it would probably work wonderfully well on the unprepared. He placed a hand under her chin and tilted her head up.

"I'm so dreadfully sorry, Pansy. I've been so busy seeing to my father's affairs that I just haven't have time to respond to your father's offer," he said gently. "You have my profoundest apologies for that terrible insult. Of course I haven't changed my mind, my petal. I shall send my response to your father immediately." Quick as lightning, his face hardened and his hand tightened painfully on her chin. "But Pansy, my petal," he said harshly, "if you ever try those tactics on me again, I shall be most displeased. I do not like to be manipulated. Ask or don't ask. Don't manipulate me."

The tears in Pansy's eyes now were genuine and she nodded as best she could. Draco's grip gentled and his eyes became tender. He brought his other hand up and gently caressed her face before sliding it through her hair.

"But you won't do that to me again, will you my little petal?" he said softly and seductively. "You're too clever to try a failed tactic twice, aren't you?" Again Pansy nodded, this time with a small, smug smile, and Draco continued. "Yes, I'm right. You will gain a great deal as my wife, Pansy, far more than you ever could on your own. Do what is right and you will never suffer by my hand. Do what is right and you shall be honoured before all."

He gently caressed her face again and leaned in to kiss her. She responded eagerly and he deepened the kiss. He kept one hand buried in her hair and slowly traced the other one down her side. She moaned eagerly into his mouth and he brought his hand around to cup her breast. He pulled away from the kiss and from her body, smirking at the small moan of protest she gave. He stretched out a hand and caressed her face again.

"Go home, little petal," he said softly. "Go home and wait for my message."

Pansy nodded, her eyes still slightly glazed from the kiss, and she turned towards the fireplace. Just as she was reaching for the floo powder, Draco spoke again.

"Oh and Pansy?" The girl turned to face him, a smiling, curious look on her face. "When you go back to Hogwarts for the new school year, kill Snape for me?"

Pansy smiled winsomely at him. "Of course, Draco dear. Anything for you." She turned back to the fire, threw in the floo powder and disappeared.

Draco watched her go impassively then smiled in a way that would have sent shivers down the spine of any sane witch or wizard watching. It was the smile of a mind that was slowing slipping from its anchoring. Draco returned to his study and drew a piece of parchment to him. He picked up his quill and began to compose a positive response to Tybalt Parkinson's offer of his daughter's hand in marriage.

Harry, too, was in the midst of writing a letter, though in his case speaking a letter would be more appropriate.

> Dear Ginny,
>
> I thought I'd better write and tell you about what has happened. As I said to Siri and Remy, if I don't and you find out from someone else, I daresay my days would be numbered! Now don't blush, Ginny, I happen to rather like your temper, especially when it's directed at someone other than me!
>
> So, on to what happened. I had a strange dream. Or I suppose in light of what it was about, it was a strange vision. I was dreaming normally when it suddenly changed into something dark and crystalline. That's when I realised that there was someone or something else in there with me. That someone else was afraid and began to panic. They got really angry in their panic and they managed to batter down my shields. It took a while but I managed to get my shields back up and get out of the dream or vision.
>
> I've already spoken to Professor Dumbledore about this. I think it was Voldemort, Ginny. The anger and pain felt the same as what I used to get from him through those visions. The Headmaster agrees with me but unfortunately there not much we can do about it right now. Everything that might tell us whether we are right or not is in Malfoy Manor and we can't exactly get into there at the moment.
>
> I know I haven't exactly explained this too well. I'll try to do a better job when we come to the Burrow in a couple of weeks. I'm looking forward to that a lot! Not that I'm not enjoying being here with Siri and Remy. It's great. I don't think I've got the words to describe what it's like finally having a family.
>
> In answer to your question, yes, Siri's loosened his grip a little now that's he's becoming more used to the idea that Remy and I aren't going anywhere. Actually, I was a little embarrassed about the fuss I made last night and Siri kind of yelled at me. Not bad yelling but good yelling. He told me that it wasn't making a fuss to react to what happened to me. It felt strange being yelled at in that way but I suspect you know about that already. Your Mum yells like that sometimes too.
>
> Anyway, I'd better finish this up. Siri and Remy aren't sure if I should be up and about at the moment. I think I'll go into the living room and be

> conspicuously resting. With any luck, they'll come and play chess. That's always fun to watch and listen to.
>
> I miss you a lot, Ginny.
>
> Love,
>
> Harry

He put down the quill and picked up his reading device. He attached it to the letter and listened to what had been written. Feeling satisfied, he reached for his cane and made his way up to the tiny owlery on the top floor. There were three owls there, owned by Sirius and Remus, and he selected one and gave it to the letter.

"Take that to Ginny Weasley at the Burrow, please," he said to the large owl and gave it a boost off his arm. He watched as the owl flew gracefully out of the window, a little pang rushing through his heart as he remembered his beautiful Hedwig.

Chapter 4

Mrs Weasley was busy preparing lunch for her children when the large brown owl flew in through the window. Recognising it as one of Sirius' owls she poked her head out through the door.

"Ginny!" she yelled. "There's an owl here from Harry!"

The young red-haired witch looked up from her homework in surprise. She was sitting under a tree in the backyard while Ron, Fred, George and Bill played a pick-up game of quidditch. She put her books and parchment down and ran into the house with a smile. She took the letter from the owl with a soft word of thanks and went back outside to read it.

She sat back down under the tree and opened the letter. Very soon a frown graced her face and then a small look of alarm as she worked her way through the letter. Finally she smiled and a soft look replaced the expression of alarm.

"Everything okay with Harry?"

Ginny looked up in surprise. While she was reading, the game had obviously finished and her brothers were standing in front of her.

She looked back down at the letter in her hand then back up at Ron. "Um, I'm not sure."

A look of alarm crossed Ron's face. "What's going on? Is it bloody Malfoy?"

Ginny shook her head. "No, no. He…had a vision. He thinks it was Voldemort."

"What?" Ron gasped. "But Voldemort's dead, isn't he? Wasn't that what that explosion was all about at the Battle?"

"That's what I thought too," Ginny said frowning. "But Harry seems pretty sure and apparently Professor Dumbledore agrees with him."

This pronouncement brought frowns to the faces of all the Weasley boys.

"Does he know where Voldemort is?" Bill asked with concern.

Ginny quickly read through the letter again. "He doesn't say."

Bill tapped his foot on the ground as he considered the matter then he looked down at his sister. "I don't suppose you'd like to make a floo call to Harry and find out?"

Ginny rolled her eyes. "Well, actually Bill," she said sweetly, "I was planning on doing one better. I was just thinking about flooing in to see him."

The Weasley boys grinned and Bill bowed floridly. "I bow to the wisdom of my most dearest sister," he said with a grin.

Ginny collected her things and stood up. She raised an eyebrow at her oldest brother. "I'm not sure how much that means really. I happen to be your only sister." With that she walked into the house.

She ran upstairs to her room and dumped her school things then skipped back downstairs to the kitchen.

"Mum? Do you mind if I floo to Grimmauld Place and see Harry?" she asked.

Molly looked over at her and frowned. "No, dear, but I'm almost finished with lunch, do you want to wait until after that?"

Ginny paused. "Umm, no, I think I'll go now. I can always get lunch there. I'm sure Sirius and Remus won't mind," she said.

Molly began to look worried. "Is anything wrong with Harry?"

Ginny smiled. "I'm not sure, Mum. He had a strange dream last night and he wasn't exactly forthcoming with the details in his letter."

"Alright, dear," Molly said firmly. "Off you go."

Ginny grinned and waved to her mother. Harry was still one of her mother's major concerns, it didn't matter that he had his godfather and guardian, to her Mum he would always be one of the family. She knew that was why she had had no problems getting permission to visit. She walked into the living room and flooed to Grimmauld Place.

She emerged in the kitchen and was immediately set upon by the two house-elves. They quickly dusted her off and asked her if she was staying for lunch then shooed her out of the kitchen with the news that Harry was in the living room. Ginny chuckled as she walked down the corridor and she paused outside the living room door to watch for a moment.

Remus and Sirius were busy playing chess to the obvious amusement of Harry, who was lying on the couch. From the gist of Sirius' comments, Remus had just made something of a surprise move that had put Sirius in an awkward position and he was none too pleased about it. Remus didn't seem too worried about the amiable threats coming his way from the grin he was wearing.

"Wow, Sirius," she said from the doorway, "I hope you don't plan on saying things like that when you play chess with Ron. Mum'll have you in the bathroom, washing your mouth out with soap before you know what's happening."

The three men in the room looked up with surprise.

"Ginny!" Harry said with a wide smile. "What are you doing here?" He stopped and blushed. "Er, not that I'm not happy you're here. I mean, I'm really happy you're here."

Sirius and Remus had started chuckling. "I think I'd stop while you're ahead, Harry," Sirius said with a grin. "I think Ginny knew what you meant."

Ginny laughed as she walked over and sat down at the end of the couch, pushing Harry's feet off. Harry grinned and scooted over until he was sitting right next to her and put an arm around her shoulders.

"So why are you here?" he asked.

Ginny waved the letter at him. "This!" she said archly. "It was rather thin on details, Harry, and I want to know what's going on."

Harry rolled his eyes. "I told you I was going to explain more when I got to the Burrow in a few weeks."

"I know," Ginny said, "but I want to know now. And besides, you've got Bill worried as well. He wanted to know if you knew where Voldemort is."

Much to Ginny's surprise, Harry started laughing. "Tell Bill not to worry," he said. "You know how I said there was a crystalline feel to the vision, well, Professor Dumbledore thinks it's because Voldemort's managed to trap himself in one of his own crystals."

Ginny's eyes widened at this news. "And where exactly is this crystal?"

Harry sobered. "Well, that's the bad news. Most likely its in Malfoy Manor where we can't get to it."

Ginny raised an eyebrow and a challenging look entered her eyes. "Why not? We've gone there before to get something we needed."

Sirius grinned at her as Harry sighed. "Yeah, true Ginny," he said patiently. "But we knew where we were going that time. I don't think Draco's going to let Professor Snape in to snoop around and find the crystals."

Ginny grimaced. "Good point," she said. "There's no way we can find out?"

"Not that I can think of," Harry said.

"Dumbledore's considering the idea," Remus said. "You never know, he might come up with something."

"Ah, Remus Lupin, ever the optimist," Sirius said dryly. "I somehow think Draco Malfoy's going to be even more suspicious now. He's being monitored constantly, you know. By the Ministry and by Dumbledore."

Harry frowned. "How come he hasn't been arrested? He's a Death Eater after all. He was at the Battle at Hogwarts."

"Yeah, we know that," Sirius said. "But there's no proof. Draco hasn't registered his animagus form and he never actually appeared in his human form at any point during the battle so there's actually nothing the Ministry can do."

"But he's got the Dark Mark on his arm!" Harry said indignantly. "Surely that's proof enough?"

"It's disappeared," Remus said abruptly. "Or I assume it has. Severus' Mark certainly has and your scar's been getting fainter since the Battle."

Both Harry and Ginny's mouths dropped open at this news. "Really?" he said incredulously.

Remus looked startled. "Yes. Hadn't you noticed your scar was fainter?"

Harry blinked then blushed. "Er, I don't really look at it that much to be honest. I…don't really like

it."

Ginny placed one hand on his knee while Sirius and Remus gave him understanding looks.

"Well, anyway," Remus continued. "Draco probably doesn't have a Mark to show anyone anymore. When you add the fact that he's now inherited a great deal of wealth from his father, well, the Ministry would need a good reason to accuse him of being a Death Eater now."

Harry grumbled some uncomplimentary things about the Ministry under his breath. Ginny laughed as she listened to the litany.

"So are you staying for lunch?" Remus asked her in an attempt to change the subject.

The day of their move to the Burrow came quicker than any of them thought it would and they spent the morning running around trying to organize themselves. Finally they were all standing in front of the fireplace in the kitchen while Remus shrank their trunks. They would be staying with the Weasleys for the rest of the summer and going to Hogwarts from there. Remus stuck the last of the shrunken trunks into his pocket and looked around.

"Everyone ready?" he asked.

Harry and Sirius nodded and Remus reached for the floo powder. He offered it to Harry who took a handful and threw it into the flames yelling "The Burrow" then he stepped into the green flames with his cane tucked in tight to his body. When he stopped spinning, he stumbled out into the kitchen of the Burrow where the Weasleys were waiting. They quickly picked him up and brushed him off as his godfather and guardian came through as well. Molly bustled forwards and brushed to two men off as well.

"It's so wonderful to see you all," she said smiling. "Now, Ron, Fred, George, help Harry with his things. We've put you in Ron's room again, dear." She smiled at Harry as Remus pulled their trunks out of his pocket and enlarged them again. Molly then turned to look at Sirius and Remus. "I've put you two in Fred and George's room. They've got a flat above their store in Diagon Alley and they moved out at the start of the holidays. I think they've removed everything from their room."

There were several moments of organized chaos as they all went upstairs to get settled. Fred, George and Ron were just putting Harry's trunk down when a stream of curses from the twins' old room made them laugh.

"Ooops!" Fred said with a grin "We may have left a few things in there."

As they listened the curses turned to laughter.

"Not that it seems to be a problem," George said.

Harry spluttered with laughter. "I think you two are in trouble now," he said merrily.

Fred and George gave him identical looks of curiosity. "Now why would you say that, ickle Harrykins?" Fred said.

Harry laughed again. "What would you say if I told you that the recipients of the left over pranks in

your room were Mr Moony and Mr Padfoot?"

Fred and George stared at him with disbelief for a moment then realization dawned on their faces.

"Mr Moony. A werewolf. Of course!" said Fred.

"And a large dog. Padfoot," George said right after his twin.

They exchanged glances and dashed out of the room. Harry and Ron followed them and started laughing as they saw the twins on their knees in the door of their old room, kowtowing to the two men, their hands slapping on the floor with each bow.

"Oh great Marauders!" Fred was saying. "We are not worthy to be in your presence!"

"We bow to your greatness and humbly beg for further instruction!" George begged.

Harry and Ron walked down the corridor so they could see Remus and Sirius' reactions, laughing so hard they had to hold onto their ribs. The two men in question were staring at the twins with a surprise that was rapidly turning into laughter.

Remus turned to look wryly at his friend. "Well, I think I know who Harry got the Marauder's Map from."

"You know, nice as this is, it's not going to save you from our retaliation," Sirius said to the twins with a decidedly evil grin.

Ron looked into the room and started laughing even harder. "There's this pink goo all over the room," he said to Harry between sputters of laughter. "It wouldn't be so bad except their trunks were open. That's stuff's everywhere!"

The raucous laughter had brought Molly up the stairs and she looked at the spectacle in front of her with amused exasperation before shaking her head and going back downstairs. In her opinion, Remus and Sirius were old enough to deal with this themselves.

Remus turned around to look at the very pink and very gooey room. He shook his head and pulled out his wand. With a quick "Evanesco", the pink goo disappeared. He then walked over to stand beside Sirius and looked at the twins who were now standing and grinning at them.

"You know, I think you're right, Padfoot," Remus said with a mischievous grin. "I definitely think this calls for a bit of Marauder action. Of course, when we do it is a whole other matter."

He grinned at the twins who started to just a bit nervous. They exchanged glances then suddenly disappeared downstairs. Remus and Sirius watched them go then burst out laughing again.

Harry and Ron moved forwards and leant against the doorway.

"So, what are you going to do to them?" Harry asked.

Sirius raised an eyebrow at Remus. "We'll have to think about that. It'll have to be good and I think we'll just let them wait for it."

"Anticipation is always the best part of a prank," Remus agreed.

Ron snorted with laughter. "Yeah, they know that too. They'll be falling apart with nerves in a few days wondering what on earth you're going to do to them."

Sirius grinned quite evilly at Ron and the two boys went back to Ron's room to unpack Harry's trunk.

"Is Hermione coming to stay this summer?" Harry asked as he flopped down onto his bed.

Ron copied his action on his own bed. "Yeah, she's coming tomorrow. Mum thought it would be best not to have everyone arrive at once."

"Everyone?" Harry said suspiciously.

Ron groaned and knocked his head against the wall. "Arrggh! Mum's going to kill me. I wasn't meant to tell you that. Mind you, I don't know why we're bothering to keep it that secret. After all, it is your birthday tomorrow and who do you think we'd have coming here?"

Harry laughed. "Don't worry. I'll act suitably surprised when I see them all tomorrow. Exactly how many are coming?"

"All the Battle Guard, most of the DA and a few of the teachers and Order members," Ron said casually.

"Wow! Really?" Harry said, little surprised at the number of people coming.

"Yeah and Neville and Luna are going to stay for the rest of the holidays as well as Hermione."

Harry smiled broadly. "That's great. I've had plenty of letters from them. They seem to be getting along pretty well."

Ron snorted with laughter. "Yeah, that's the impression I got from their letters. I wonder how he deals with it when she goes all weird on him." He laughed at that mental image and stood suddenly. "Come on, let's get our brooms and go outside. From your letters it doesn't sound like you've had a chance to practice at all this summer. You know you've still got that standing offer of joining in the Weasley Quidditch match."

Harry leaned over and grabbed his broom from his still-open trunk. "Sounds good to me!"

Ron hauled his broom from under his bed and the two boys made their way downstairs.

The next morning Harry woke and lay in his bed, listening to Ron snore. He stared up into the darkness that was a constant in his life and sighed. It had been over a year since he had been blinded by his uncle and he freely admitted to himself that he still hated being blind…a lot. He hated only being able to see with the Oversight and he hated that he could only see everyone's expression really dimly through the overlay. All he'd ever wanted to be was normal. He'd never wanted to be a hero or a beacon of light or whatever else it was that people called him. He'd never wanted to be the Boy-Who-Lived. All he had ever really wanted was a normal life, with parents, like everyone else had.

Harry rolled onto his side and sighed again. He knew he shouldn't let himself get into moods like

this; wallowing in self-pity never really helped anything but he was still a little upset about the vision he had had. It had been the only one so far, much to his relief, but the idea that once again Voldemort had survived just made him feel very, very tired. He had really, really hoped that Voldemort had indeed died during the Battle at Hogwarts but then, his life had never been that easy.

He snorted to himself and Ron snuffled and rolled over, his eyes slowly opening.

"Hey, Harry," the red-head said sleepily.

"Hey, Ron," Harry answered automatically.

Ron blinked and took a deep breath to wake himself up a bit more. "Alright," he said with a trace of irritation, "what's wrong?"

Harry looked surprised. "Er, what do you mean?"

"You're moping, Harry. I've spent the better part of six years sharing a room with you. I know when you're moping."

Harry was forced into a chuckle. "Good point." He sighed. "I...was just wallowing a little. I was really hoping that Voldemort was dead, you know. That just for once my life would go according to plan."

"You mean your life has a plan?" Ron said with a grin. "I thought it was just a bunch of random chaotic events that were thrown together and called Harry's Life."

"Ha bloody ha," Harry said sourly.

"You know what I mean, mate," Ron said. "Besides Ginny said that Dumbledore thought Voldemort was trapped in one of his own crystals and it's not like there much in the way of Death Eaters left free and alive to do anything about it." He paused and rolled his eyes. "And as much as it pains me to say this, I agree with Snape. None of the Death Eaters rushed to help him after you got rid of him as a baby; why would they do it now?"

"Wow Ron," Harry said with mock-admiration. "Did you hurt yourself by saying Snape was right?"

"Prat!" Ron growled with amusement. He pulled his pillow out from under his head and used it to whack his friend over the head.

"Hey!" Harry said, starting to laugh. "No attacking the blind guy! It's unfair."

Ron snorted with laughter. "Yeah, right! We both know you could single-handedly wipe the floor with my backside."

He then proceeded to whack Harry again with his pillow. Harry quickly instigated his Oversight and pulled his pillow out from behind his head to retaliate. In very short order the two boys were involved in a fully-fledged pillow fight amid raucous laughter.

After a few minutes the door flew open just at the point when Ron's pillow gave up the ghost and burst at the seams causing feathers to literally fly. The two boys stopped right where they were and

slowly turned towards the door to see how much trouble they were in. Standing in the doorway was Sirius. He was battling very hard to try to keep his expression solemn but was losing ground rapidly. Behind him was Remus who was in much the same state. The four stared at each other for a long moment then Harry stood and took a few quick paces towards the door. As soon as he was in range of his godfather he promptly began belting him with his pillow. Sirius froze for a second and then gave a barking laugh and transformed into Padfoot. He launched himself at the laughing Harry and knocked him to the ground before sitting firmly on his chest. That brought the large dog into range of Ron who began to whack Padfoot with his rapidly diminishing pillow.

Remus burst out laughing and stepped into the room, closing the door behind him. He picked up a pencil from the floor, pulled out his wand and transfigured it into another pillow. Another quick spell refilled and repaired Ron's pillow. He then put his wand away and launched himself at Ron. His momentum knocked them both off Ron's bed and into Padfoot, knocking him off Harry. The young Guild Warrior took the opportunity the change into Blaze and the two canines came to the defense of their respective best friends.

The four were so busy with their impromptu and very fun battle that they didn't see the door open. Molly Weasley stood in the doorway unnoticed for a second before she worked out what was going on then, swallowing the small smile that had crept onto her face, she took a deep breath and put her hands on her hips.

"Sirius! Remus! Ron! Harry!" she bellowed and the action in the room came to a sudden halt as the four combatants froze in place. They were suddenly of the opinion that they were all in big trouble.

Molly eyed them with apparent displeasure. "Sirius! Harry! Change back right now!" she ordered.

The two in question quickly changed back into their human forms and stood looking rather hangdog.

Molly glared at the four of them. "What is the meaning of this?" she said sternly, reminding herself that laughing right now would not be appropriate. "Sirius, Remus, you two are supposed to be adults." The two men swallowed grins and hung their heads. Molly turned her ire towards the two boys. "And you two are of age. You are supposed to be adults as well. Honestly the lot of you are worse than Fred and George. I don't want any repeat of this. Now get dressed, it's time for breakfast."

She glared at them once more for good measure then stormed back down the stairs, letting her smile break free now that she couldn't be seen by any of the four. She was glad to see such light-heartedness from all of them; Merlin knows Harry deserved to have a bit of fun. The four left in the room snuck quick looks at each other and finally broke out into laughter.

"Why don't you two get dressed," Remus suggested. "Who knows what Molly would do to us if we disobeyed her now."

Sirius grinned and flung an arm around Remus shoulders. "Besides we have some twins to terrorise."

Remus snorted with laughter and the two Marauders walked out of the room. Harry and Ron grinned at each other and threw picked up the pillows that had been left and put them back on their beds. As they began to get dressed, Harry had to admit to himself that he certainly didn't feel

like wallowing in self-pity anymore.

Ron pulled on his t-shirt and looked over at his friend. "Hey, Harry. Happy birthday!"

Chapter 5

The guests for Harry's birthday party arrived promptly just before lunch. Arthur and Percy were the first to arrive, flooing home from work, along with Penelope Clearwater who was now Percy's fiancée. They were closely followed by Charlie, who flooed in from the dragon preserve in Romania. Bill arrived next accompanied by Fleur Delacour much to the surprise of everyone there and the amusement of Fred, George, Ron and Harry. Hermione arrived next, followed by Neville and Luna.

The teachers from Hogwarts arrived together. Professors Dumbledore, McGonagall and Snape made up that group. The members of the DA flooed or apparated in during all of this, adding to the cheerful chaos. Harry was in the middle of greeting Millicent Bulstrode and Blaise Zabini when Hermione delighted shout of "Master Nhean!" caught his attention. Harry whirled around and saw the energy colours of his diminutive Master next to the fireplace. He quickly excused himself from Millicent and Blaise and ran into the kitchen.

"Master Nhean!" he said happily. "I didn't know you were coming today!"

Nhean chuckled. "A Master cannot miss his Apprentice's birthday, Harry. It's very bad form."

Harry laughed and then, with sudden realization, bowed formally to his Master. Nhean returned the bow and then his cane flickered out towards his student. Those people in the kitchen gasped at the sudden move from the Night Master but Harry didn't budge and the tip of the cane came to a stop a hairs breadth from his chest. Nhean's eyes twinkled as he lowered his cane to the floor.

"Very good, Harry. Very good indeed."

Harry laughed and drew his Master out into the main room where the rest of Harry's Battle Guard greeted their instructor with delight.

The party soon moved outside where several tables had been set up and the entire group sat down for lunch. As soon as the food had been demolished, Harry was dragged back into the house and made to sit down. Presents were then handed to him to be opened. Once he finished that duty, Fred and George pounced on him and announced that for the rest of the afternoon he was an honorary Weasley and as such now had to join in the Weasley Quidditch game. This announcement was greeted with interest and delight from the other party-goers and everyone quickly adjourned to the backyard.

Harry and the Weasleys disappeared to various corners of the house to grab their brooms and then gathered around the kitchen table to decide on teams. Bill claimed the right of seniority to make a few decisions.

"Well, obviously we can't have full teams," Bill said. "We don't have the numbers so we'll split it like this. Charlie and Harry are the Seekers. Fred and George will split up and each team will have one Beater. Ron and I will play as Keepers and Ginny and Percy will be Chasers. In the interests of fairness, which ever team gets Ron as Keeper gets Percy as Chaser while the other team gets Ginny and me."

Everyone nodded; that was a fair division. Ron was the better Keeper out of the two and Ginny was

the better Chaser; it would be decidedly unfair to have them both on the same team.

"Okay," Bill continued. "Does anyone have any objection if we mix up the ages here a little and spilt it up as Charlie, Fred, Ron and Percy on one team and Harry, George, myself and Ginny on the other team."

Everyone agreed to the team division and the eight players left the kitchen. Bill announced the teams to the rest of the party-goers while Arthur, Sirius and Remus set up the temporary goal hoops. They would only be playing with one hoop at each end to make it easier for the reduced teams. Arthur had already brought out the box containing the balls and as soon as everyone was ready he hurried over and released one of the bludgers. As they only had one Beater per team, only one bludger would be used. He released the snitch, threw the quaffle in the air to start the game and then rushed over to stand next to his wife and watch the game.

The game was quick and fierce. It was obvious to all watching that Bill and Percy were not anywhere near the standard of the others but they did work hard. Harry watched with pride as Ginny darted past Percy and threw the quaffle through the goal. Molly was keeping score for the game and had set up a large score board that everyone, including the players, could see. Ginny's score had put their team up by ten points. Harry scanned the air again for the snitch and kept an eye on Charlie. It seems the second oldest of the Weasleys knew exactly how to play the game as Seeker; not surprising considering what Harry had heard about him. The best way to win as a Seeker was to concentrate on the snitch; shadowing the other Seeker was just a recipe to lose.

There was a great deal of interest in the game from the spectators and more than one subtle bet going on about the result. Minerva McGonagall was standing with the other Hogwarts teachers, looking visibly torn. Remus and Sirius sidled up beside her.

"Having a problem there, Minerva?" Sirius asked with a smile.

Minerva jumped then looked at her two former students. "Oh yes," she said with a weak smile. "I can't pick sides here. Particularly between Charlie and Harry."

Remus chuckled. "Then I think you need to take a leaf out of Molly and Arthur's book; just cheer them all on."

Minerva glared half-heartedly at him. "I'm trying. Believe me, I'm trying," she responded tartly then turned her attention back to the game.

Harry slowly circled above the game; it was very even. One team would get an advantage then the other team would wrest that advantage back. It was clear to everyone that this was going to come down to a battle between the Seekers. He and Charlie continued to circle above the game, searching for the snitch and keeping an eye on each other. Finally they both caught a flash, gold for Charlie and purple for Harry, and they dashed off in pursuit.

The noise from the watchers below picked up as they realised that Harry and Charlie had seen the snitch. The two Seekers chased after the tiny gold ball side by side. Harry had the better broom but Charlie was the more experienced. They kept pace with each other as they got closer and closer to the snitch then, just as they were close enough to reach it, Charlie suddenly bumped Harry and put of a spurt of speed. He reached out and grabbed the snitch out of the air as Harry tried to recover from the unexpected bump. He got his broom under control and looked over to see a grinning

Charlie holding onto the snitch. He shook his head ruefully as Molly Weasley called them all down.

The eight players landed and Harry walked over to shake Charlie's hand.

"Good catch, Charlie," he said with a grin.

"Thanks, Harry!" Charlie said. "It's an old move, that bump and snatch, but a good one."

Harry shook his head. "I'll have to remember that one," he said wryly.

Ron walked over and slapped Harry on the back. "Bad luck, mate. I think Charlie got you on experience there."

Harry laughed. "Yeah, definitely."

He then got distracted as the rest of the guests began to gather around the eight players and comment on the game.

Draco leaned back in his chair and perused the marriage contract in his hand. The study was full of sunlight, light that sparkled oddly off the large black crystal sitting on the open box on the desk. Draco reread a section of the contract and frowned then he nodded to himself and continued reading. When he was finished he pulled a piece of parchment towards him and scrawled a few sentences. He folded the piece of parchment and set it aside.

He glanced down at the black crystal and was once again caught by its swirling blackness. He leaned forward and stared into its depths. What was it? What purpose had the Dark Lord used it for? Why was it black where the others were clear?

Draco stretched out his fingers towards the crystal. Just before they touched it, he hesitated. Thoughts ran around in circles in his mind. He had had the crystal for weeks now and nothing had happened. He stretched out his fingers and lightly brushed the surface of the crystal…

Harry was sitting with the rest of the 'children' under some trees in the Weasleys' backyard. The party had calmed down somewhat by now, though no one had yet left. The adults were all sitting at a table near the house while the kids sprawled on the grass in the yard. Neville and Luna got up from where they had been sitting and picked their way through the crowd until they got to their fellow Battle Guard members. There was a bit of shuffling then they sat down and Neville leaned over to speak to Harry.

"Ginny told us about the vision you had and what Dumbledore said," he said quietly so as to not draw attention. "Do you think it's true? That he's not dead?"

"I don't know, Nev," Harry replied. "But I think he may be right. It felt familiar."

Neville grunted and was silent for a moment. Harry watched him then made a decision.

"Come on, Neville, we're not going to think about that right now," he said with a grin. "It's my birthday and I say we're going to forget about it and just enjoy ourselves. And by the way, happy

birthday."

Neville burst out laughing. "Okay, whatever the birthday boy wants, the birthday boy gets. And thanks, Harry."

The others had heard Neville's last comments and Ron seized on them.

"Hey, Neville's right! Harry's the birthday boy," he leaned over to Harry and waggled his eyebrows at him. "So what exactly does the birthday boy want?"

"And does it involve our sister?" Bill asked with a lazy grin.

Both Harry and Ginny blushed and Harry stammered for a moment. He looked over at Ginny and grinned suddenly. He got to his knees and made his way over to her.

"Does the birthday boy get a birthday kiss from his girlfriend?" he asked with a wicked grin.

Before Ginny could reply, Fred and George draped their arms around the two.

"Come now, Ginevra," Fred said in a wickedly accurate impression of Percy that had everyone, including Percy, laughing. "The birthday boy has asked for something."

"And you know the rules," George continued. "What the birthday boy wants, the birthday boy gets!"

Ginny raised an eyebrow and affected a prim expression. "Oh well, I suppose so, if it's a rule."

She leaned forward and gently pressed her lips to Harry's. They stayed like that for a moment then Harry deepened the kiss and brought one hand up to bury in Ginny's hair. It was the laughter and wolf-whistling of the others that brought them back to themselves and they both blushed as they broke the kiss. Harry crawled over and settled in next to Ginny, grinning sheepishly.

Charlie slapped Harry on the back. "Good on you, Harry. Nice to know you actually do have an exhibitionist streak in you."

"Thanks, Charlie," Harry said dryly. He was just about to continue when his scar exploded with pain and then all he could do was scream…

"Well, I daresay this is an improvement on most of Harry's previous birthdays," Molly said in satisfaction. While she and Arthur were no longer Harry's legal guardians, having given that up in favour of Sirius, nothing would change the fact that he was one of theirs.

"Yes," Remus said emphatically, remembering some of the things that Harry had told him.

Sorrow flickered across Sirius' face then he grinned. "I think a Weasley birthday party is what Harry should have every year. What do you say, Molly? Arthur?"

"Of course!" Molly said immediately. Arthur smiled and nodded. "We'd love to do that," he said.

"Besides," Sirius said with a sly smile, "he's got to have at least one chance every year to try and beat Charlie."

There were chuckles from around the table.

"I would be worried about next year if I were Charlie," Minerva said with pride. "Harry learns new Quidditch moves very quickly. Charlie won't get him next year with that bump and snatch maneuver."

Sirius was just about to answer when they were interrupted by the sound of screaming. Every head at the table whipped around to see Harry lying on the grass, writhing and screaming in absolute agony. They stared for an instant, frozen in shock, then Sirius and Remus were up and sprinting over to Harry with the others in close pursuit. When they got there, Molly and Arthur immediately began to round up the other children and usher them inside with the slow, reluctant help of their eldest sons.

Sirius and Remus fell to their knees beside Harry and tried to stop his thrashing. Snape quickly joined them though he knelt next to Harry's head. He placed his hands on Harry's temples and closed his eyes in concentration. Albus, Minerva and Nhean stood a small distance back, staying out of the way and watching with concern.

Severus reached out with his mind, trying to find Harry's. He wasn't sure what he could do but he hoped to at least help shore up the young man's shielding. He wasn't surprised to find himself joined in the whirling maelstrom of pain in Harry's mind by Orinda. He quickly found himself caught and anchored by the Runespoor's mental presence.

Our Harry is lost within the pain. Orinda hissed in his mind. **We cannot reach him. We cannot find him. All is blackness.**

Severus looked out into the maelstrom and was forced to agree. He could not even see Harry's presence; all he could see was the black swirling of pain and agony.

Can you anchor me if I go within? he demanded.

Yes, Black Snape Orinda said simply.

Severus nodded and he dived into the blackness. He quickly found that Orinda was right. It was impossible to see anything, the blackness was absolute. He could hear the thin sound of Harry's mental screams but the sound was diffused and Severus could not get a fix on it. A sharp stab of pain brought his attention to the fact that his own shields were also eroding and he mentally reared back in surprise. He reached for Orinda's presence and allowed the Runespoor to pull him out.

The blackness has him. Orinda observed. **And lingering within will only lose us and you as well.**

Severus grimaced; Orinda was right. There was nothing they could do.

Watch over him he said as he began to draw himself out of Harry's mind.

We will. he heard the Runespoor say.

Snape drew his hands back from Harry's head and would have fallen of not for the supporting hands of the Headmaster. He shook his head and reinforced his eroded shields.

"I cannot reach him," he said thinly. "He is lost in the pain and blackness and spending any amount of time within searching for him erodes your own shields. I was in there for mere seconds and my shields were eroded considerably. To stay would be to join Harry."

"Were you able to find him in there?" Albus asked.

"No," Severus replied with a shake of his head. "He is there but his screams were so diffused it was impossible to locate him."

"What can we do then?" Sirius asked desperately, tears standing in his eyes.

"We can do nothing more than wait…and hope," Albus said with concern and worry in his eyes.

Draco arched in his chair, his eyes wide and pain-filled and his fingers seemingly glued onto the crystal. The swirling blackness within the crystal was slowly fading, almost appearing to be drawn out of the crystal by Draco's fingers. Within Draco's mind, a battle was raging.

Ahhhh, a body!

Draco snarled as he heard the voice within his mind. He knew that voice and now, far too late, he knew what the crystal held.

No he growled to himself and to the Dark Lord. **This is my mind, my body. You shall not have it!**

The malevolent voice of Voldemort chuckled. **I shall have whatever I wish. Don't you know that by now, boy?**

Draco snarled a few filthy words and fought with the Dark Lord's presence. The longer they battled the weaker Draco became and he slowly began to panic. He was becoming aware that he was going to lose this fight and the idea scared him more than anything else. He drew back for a second and then threw himself at the Dark Lord's presence in one last desperate attempt to rid himself of the monster.

When he hit the ugly presence within his mind, he realized that once again he had miscalculated. Instead of being able to grasp the presence and expel it, they seemed to start merging into each other. Both of them reacted with surprise and fear.

NO! the Dark Lord yelled. **What have you done, foolish boy?**

Draco ignored the Dark Lord and desperately tried to pull himself free. Distantly he could hear someone screaming in agony but he ignored it in favour of his own desperate predicament. No matter how much he struggled, he could not free himself and slowly, slowly the two of them were drawn into one entity.

For a long time the Draco/Voldemort entity pulsed and throbbed until finally it went still. It stayed like that for a heartbeat then it started swirling and contracting. It drew itself into a small pinpoint and then seemed to explode in slow motion until there was nothing left but a single presence.

What had once been solely Draco Malfoy floated in his mind for a long time then he slowly settled back into himself. He opened his eyes and saw his father's study around himself, nothing out of

place. He looked over at the grandfather clock standing in the corner and saw that an hour had passed while he had been trapped within his own mind.

What happened? He thought to himself. Am I me? He drew in a deep breath and slowly stood. He walked out from behind the desk and began pacing. His limping strides were broken when he looked over at the desk. The large crystal was clear. The darkness it had held within it was gone. Draco scowled at the crystal and rubbed his forehead. Had he beaten the Dark Lord? Had he driven the bastard out of his mind? Draco couldn't tell. He stared down at the empty crystal and worried.

Sirius and Remus knelt beside Harry's still body. He had finally stopped screaming and convulsing and now lay silent and still, only his deep, gasping breaths giving any indication that he was alive. Sirius was the first one to move; he gently gathered his godson in his arms and stood. He swayed for a moment as he stood and Remus leapt to his feet to steady his friend. Sirius smiled tightly at Remus and began walking towards the house. When he got to the door, it was thrown open by Molly who quickly and efficiently cleared a path for the animagus. Sirius took Harry straight up to his and Ron's room and laid the young man on his bed. He drew the blankets over his godson and knelt down next to the bed. He ran a soft hand through Harry's hair and watched him with an expression of worry and fear.

Remus walked softly into the room and sat down on the edge of the bed. He seemed to be intent on keeping an eye on both Harry and Sirius. Molly stood in the doorway for a moment, a kind and worried look on her face as she watched the three. She quietly backed out and shut the door before going back downstairs. All of Harry's friends had gathered around the Headmaster and were politely but fiercely demanding answers.

"Children, children," the Headmaster said calmly. "Let me speak."

The Battle Guard and the members of the DA settled down.

"We aren't entirely sure what has happened," Dumbledore began. "But in light of what has happened already this summer, I must assume that this had something to do with Voldemort."

There were groans and curses from the students.

"Damn," Blaise said quietly to Millicent. "I was really hoping Harry had got rid of him for good."

"So was Harry probably," Millicent replied dryly.

"Now, Harry will need some peace and quiet," the Headmaster was saying. "So I think it would be best if you all head off to your homes now. And I would ask you not to discuss what has happened."

Everyone nodded seriously and they slowly began to trickle out of the house either through the floo or via apparition until only the adults and the Battle Guard remained. Dumbledore looked around the room.

"Minerva, will you please head back to Hogwarts and alert the Order. I think we will need to start looking into this. Tell them to concentrate on Draco Malfoy and try and find a way to find out what he is doing."

Minerva nodded and apparated away. Snape stepped forward at this point.

"I must go to Hogwarts for some supplies then I will return here," he said shortly.

Albus nodded. "Thank you, Severus. Harry will undoubtedly need your assistance when he wakes."

Snape nodded and then he too apparated out of the house.

"I must return to the Guild," Nhean said, wrapping his cloak around himself. "This is something they will need to know about. It may just affect a few decisions that have to be made."

The little man nodded to Albus and gave a calm, compassionate look to the Guard and he too disappeared. The five students and the Weasley sons looked at each other and then settled themselves in various chairs around the living room or on the floor on cushions. Dumbledore watched them for a moment then slowly walked out of the room and up the stairs with Molly and Arthur. Those left in the room were silent and they stared at the floor or the walls, trying not to make eye contact with anyone else. No one wanted to see their own fears reflected in the eyes of someone else. After about twenty minutes, they were startled by the sudden reappearance of Snape who had a large bag slung over one shoulder. The tall Potions Master didn't even spare a glance for them; he simply strode swiftly out of the room and up the stairs.

"Why is it always Harry?" Ginny said in a small voice.

Bill wrapped his arms around his sister. "I don't know, Gin," he said quietly.

Hermione was sitting quietly beside Ron, clutching his hand. "I hate this," she whispered.

"What?" Ron said with a frown.

"I hate waiting like this," she said. "I hate not knowing what to do!"

"If only we could find out what Malfoy is doing with that damn crystal!" Ron burst out.

Neville's eyes narrowed. "M…maybe we can," he said slowly.

Everyone turned and stared at him in surprise and the shy Gryffindor blushed.

"Neville? What do you mean?" Hermione asked.

Neville turned and looked at Luna then turned back to the others in the room. "Look, Luna managed to get her animagus transformation over the summer," he said in a low voice. He looked over at the blond girl. "Show them, Luna."

The enigmatic Ravenclaw raised an eyebrow then nodded. She frowned slightly for a moment then where she had been sitting was a small furry animal.

"Oh," Hermione said with surprise. "A mink! Luna, that's wonderful."

Luna changed back and smiled proudly.

"You see? Draco doesn't know about Luna's animagus form," Neville continued with an intense look on his face. "And she's small enough to hide easily. I know where Malfoy Manor is because Gran

knows Mrs Malfoy."

The others began to nod; they could definitely see the possibilities in the idea. Ron stared into space as he turned the idea over in his head.

"Is Malfoy Manor warded?" he asked.

"Probably," Neville conceded. "Most large wizarding homes are. But it is probably only warded against people, not animals."

"Hmmm," Ron said as he tried a few ideas on for size. The others watched and waited for him. They had gained a genuine respect for Ron's ability to plan a strategy.

"You lot aren't going anywhere," came a firm voice from the stairs.

Everyone in the room jumped and looked around to see Remus standing on the stairs, clearly torn between amusement and worry.

"What would you do when you got there?" he asked as he walked into the room. "Do you know anything about the crystal magic Voldemort was using? What would happen if something went wrong? How do you think Harry would feel when he wakes up if you got hurt?"

Neville and Ron blanched and the others all looked shame-faced. Remus relented a little.

"I'm not saying what you were planning was wrong. Just a little bit premature. Harry's alright. He's sleeping at the moment and we really don't know what happened to him." Remus eyed them all sternly. "What if what Harry felt was Voldemort being destroyed? What Draco decided to just chuck out all of Voldemort's things and destroyed the crystal?"

Ron sighed. "Yeah, okay, Remus. You've made your point."

Remus smiled slightly. "Sorry, Ron. I didn't mean to belabor the point. Just…we're not going to forbid you to do things if you've got solid information behind you. I thought you'd all realized that after the foray we made to Malfoy Manor and the Battle at Hogwarts. You're of age and you are all very well trained. We will listen to you."

The students in the room looked up at their teacher with surprise as Bill and Charlie started to smile. Remus grinned at the looks he was getting and winked at the two eldest Weasleys. Then he walked into the kitchen. When he emerged with a jug of water and a glass, he was amused to find that the stunned silence still reigned and he chuckled.

"Bill, maybe you should introduce them to the concept of being considered an adult?" he said with a laugh as he disappeared up the stairs again.

Chapter 6

Harry felt himself slowly rising towards consciousness and suppressed a moan. As he became more aware, his body was telling him that it hurt! He took in a deep shuddering breath.

"Harry?" he heard someone say softly and he slowly opened his eyes. He was very surprised to find that his Oversight had survived whatever had happened.

Sirius was sitting next to the bed, a look of worry and concern in his eyes. He smiled softly as he saw Harry's eyes open.

"How are you feeling?" he asked gently.

"Ter'ble," Harry mumbled. "Hurts."

Before Sirius could reply, Harry heard a low voice come from the other side of the room.

"Harry?" Remus said as rolled over and sat up on Ron's bed. He hadn't really been sleeping, just dozing lightly, and Sirius' voice had woken him. He stood up and leaned over Sirius' shoulder to smile at Harry. "It's good to see you awake."

Sirius reached over to the bedside table and picked up a couple of potion bottles. He handed them to Remus then sat on the edge of the bed and helped Harry to prop himself up.

"Drink these," Sirius said. "They'll help with the pain."

Harry nodded and Sirius gestured to Remus for the first one. After he had helped Harry drink both potions, he eased the young man back down into bed.

Harry grimaced as he lay back down. "Bleargh," he said blearily. "Tastes awful. Bet he does it on purpose."

Sirius and Remus chuckled.

"On the contrary, Mr Potter," came the dark, silky voice from the doorway, surprising them all. "Flavourings or sweetening of any kind simply render the potion ineffective."

"Mmph," Harry muttered in response as he succumbed to the demands of his body and the effects of the potions and slipped back into sleep.

When Harry woke again the room was dark but for the light of a small lamp on the bedside table. He slowly opened his eyes and looked around to see the energy colours of Snape sitting in the chair Sirius had been using the last time he woke. The Potions Master was reading a large, leather-bound book. As Harry watched he flicked his glance towards the bed and gave a start as he realized Harry was watching him.

"Good evening, Mr Potter," Severus said calmly. "How are you feeling?"

Harry drew in a deep breath and slowly pushed himself into a sitting position. "Okay, I think. My head still hurts a little and I feel pretty sore all over though."

Snape nodded and selected a potion vial from the number on the bedside table. "Drink this. It will help with the headache."

Harry nodded and accepted the vial, quickly drinking the potion down then screwing his face up at the taste. "Urgh, thanks, I think."

Snape's lips twitched. "The general soreness will go away fairly quickly I believe. It is a result of the convulsions you were having."

Harry stared at the Potions Master. "Convulsions?" he said in surprise.

Snape frowned. "How much do you…" He stopped and shook his head. "Never mind, the Headmaster does not want us asking you questions just yet and for once I agree with him."

Harry watched with growing surprise as Snape gave him a look that he could only interpret as compassion. He blinked a little to see such an expression from the Potions Master directed at him.

"I suggest you try to get back to sleep," Snape continued in a tone that was much closer to what Harry was used to hearing from the man.

Harry nodded and rolled onto his side and closed his eyes.

When he woke for the third time, he felt a lot better. He yawned and sat up, noticing that Professor Snape was correct. The soreness was mostly gone this morning and his head no longer hurt. He looked around and saw that he was alone in the room. He stretched and hauled himself out of bed, feeling a little guilty that Ron had been done out of his own bed because of him. He pulled some clothes out of his trunk and grabbed his towel. He hadn't really allowed himself to think about what had happened but he was aware that whatever it was it had left him smelling like he had just played a three hour Quidditch game and then gone on an extended romp with Fluffy. He padded down to hallway to the bathroom and stripped off the clothes he had been wearing the day before. He turned the shower on as hot as he could stand it and rather gratefully climbed in. He quickly washed himself down then stood for a few minutes under the stream of hot water before climbing out and drying himself off and getting dressed. He opened the bathroom door to find a smiling Sirius leaning against the opposite wall.

"Hey, Pronglet," the animagus said softly, using the pet name that he had used when Harry was a baby. Remus had let it slip during one of their mutual teasing sessions over chess and Harry had rather liked it. Sirius had taken to using it more and more often lately. "Good to see you up and about." His face fell a little. "You gave us a hell of a scare yesterday."

Harry swallowed and almost leapt into his godfather's open arms. He let himself be held for a while then pulled back a bit. Sirius let him go then seemed to see what Harry was wearing. He started grinning; the shirt was one Sirius had bought for him at a Muggle store at the start of the summer and had fiddled with until he found a charm that allowed Harry to see the writing on the front. It had a picture of a dragon on it and the writing said: "Meddle not in the affairs of dragons, for thou art crunchy and taste good with tomato sauce."

"Nice shirt," Sirius said blandly.

Harry looked down and grinned. He copied his godfather's bland look. "Yeah, Charlie's going to love

it."

Sirius snorted and gestured for Harry to put his things in his room. When he came back out Sirius threw an arm around his shoulders and they headed downstairs.

"Come on, Pronglet. You must be starving and Molly's been fussing around the kitchen since she got up this morning."

Harry laughed. "I think I could eat the whole house."

He said this as they walked into the kitchen where the whole family as well as Hermione, Neville, Luna, Remus and Professor Snape and Dumbledore were gathered. They all looked up as he walked into the room and Molly bustled over and fussed over him for a few minutes. When she finally let him sit down at the table, he deliberately sat down opposite Charlie. The elder Weasley was eyeing his t-shirt with amusement.

"Nice shirt, Harry," he said with a laugh. "Where can I get one like that?"

Harry laughed much to the relief of everyone else. "Ask Siri. He bought it for me."

There were chuckles from the other then Molly put a loaded plate in front of him and he attacked the food with relish. When he finished he looked up at the Headmaster.

"I…suppose you want to know what happened."

Dumbledore smiled gently. "Only if you are ready to tell us."

Harry thought for a moment. "Yeah, I guess so," he said with a sigh. "It's probably better to do it now so I don't forget anything."

Dumbledore nodded and gestured for him to begin. Sirius and Remus walked over and stood behind him, each placing a hand on one of his shoulders. He smiled weakly up at them then looked down at the table to marshal his thoughts.

"It was definitely Voldemort," he said bluntly, "but I'm not entirely sure what happened. At first all I got was pain and blackness then the blackness began to fade and became…something else. I could see a room. It…had a desk, so maybe a study or office of some kind. I think maybe Voldemort was in someone else's mind. Whoever it was tried to fight him." Harry paused and paled. "The next bit is really strange. It hurt so much that I'm not sure if I can accurately describe it. It kind of felt like Voldemort and the other person's mind became one then…I…I don't know. I heard Voldemort yell 'No! What have you done, foolish boy?' then it was like…something exploded inside my mind." Harry paused again. "I think that's when I passed out."

There was silence in the kitchen as everyone tried to process Harry description.

"Do you remember any more details of what the study looked like?' Snape asked in an odd tone.

Harry blinked and thought. He quickly described as much of the study that he could remember and Snape nodded.

"Lucius Malfoy's study," he said firmly. "I have been in there enough times to recognise it."

"So we're talking about Draco then," Remus mused.

"Yes," Snape replied. "Narcissa is travelling around Europe for the summer so it cannot be her."

"Without Draco?" Molly asked in surprise.

Snape froze for a moment. "Narcissa was…displeased with certain decisions that Draco made. While she has not precisely disowned him, she has been making her disgust quite plain."

Molly looked a little shocked then shook her head sadly.

"Do you think Malfoy managed to get rid of Voldemort?" Ron asked.

"No," Harry said firmly and everyone looked at him with surprise. He flushed then continued. "I…I don't even know how I know that but it's true. Voldemort isn't dead. I just don't know what happened to him. I don't think he died in there."

Dumbledore had been staring at the top of the table through all of this. Now he looked up at Harry. "You said it felt like the two minds, let's say they were Draco's and Voldemort's, become one. You heard Voldemort yell 'No! What have you done, foolish boy' and then there was some kind of explosion?"

Harry nodded, not quite sure where the Headmaster was going with this.

"And you are quite sure that Voldemort is not dead?"

Harry nodded again.

"Then I fear we must keep a very close eye on young Mr Malfoy," Dumbledore said sadly.

"Why? What's happened to him?" Remus asked.

"I can only speculate, Remus, and I am not willing to voice those speculations just yet." He shook his head sadly and stood up. "I must go. I need to start a few lines of inquiry." He stopped and looked kindly at Harry. "Get some rest. I do not believe this will happen again though I must ask you to keep your shielding up. You may still have some visions. If you do please let me know immediately."

Harry nodded and Dumbledore swiftly left the kitchen. A moment later they heard the sound of him apparating away. Professor Snape eyed Harry archly.

"I trust you do not need me to remind you how to shield," he said flatly.

"Er, no, sir," Harry said. He closed his eyes for a minute and put his shields up once more. He grimaced; the shields responded very sluggishly, a sign that his magic had been knocked around a bit.

Snape watched Harry with narrowed eyes. "Good," he said then his lips quirked as he glanced down at the shirt Harry was wearing. "Perhaps it would be wise not to give Draco ideas."

Harry blinked and looked down at his shirt, seeing the glowing letters with his Oversight. He looked up at the Potions Master and grinned. "Oh no, sir, it's alright. I'm crunchy but I don't really taste too good with tomato sauce."

Snape stared at him for a moment, his lips twitching and a looked of veiled amusement in his eyes, then his expression calmed into one of neutrality and he rose from the table. "I must return to Hogwarts. I trust my summer will be undisturbed from now on?"

"I'll try," Harry said quietly.

Snape nodded and apparated out of the kitchen.

Half an hour later, Harry and the rest of the 'younger set' were once again outside sitting under the trees in the Weasleys' yard. Harry was lying with his head in Ginny's lap and was half asleep, listening to the conversations of the others.

"Is it just me or did Snape act really weird during that whole thing?" Ron said idly.

"It was weird," Neville agreed. "But then again, maybe this is normal for Snape when he doesn't have to hide the fact that he's a spy and doesn't have to be a fake Death Eater anymore."

"Good point," Ginny said. "I mean, he wasn't what I would call nice but he was pretty neutral. Well, for him dealing with us anyway. And I really thought he was going to laugh at Harry's comment towards the end there."

The others chuckled.

"Yeah, he came pretty close," Bill said lazily. "Probably stopped because he thought we'd all die of shock if he actually did." Bill looked over at Harry. "You seem to get along pretty well with him," he observed.

"Um, yeah, I guess," Harry said a little uncomfortably. "We kind of had to get to know each other a bit better with the Occlumency work we did. I guess we kind of realised that a lot of the stuff we had thought about each other wasn't exactly right."

"Yeah, okay," Ron said with a bit of confusion. "But he was still a Death Eater. How can you actually trust him?"

Harry hesitated. "He told me why he became a Death Eater once. It…it made sense. You know, why he did what he did."

"So why did he become a Death Eater?" Hermione asked with interest.

Harry was silent for a moment. "I…I can't tell you, Hermione. He told me for a specific reason. I needed to know at that point." He hesitated. "It's not my place to tell it," he finished quietly.

Hermione scowled for a minute then her face cleared. "I guess you're right."

"So he had a good reason then?" Ron asked sarcastically.

"It's not like that, Ron!" Harry said harshly. "He…was young and he made a mistake. He wasn't that much older than we are now. How do you know you wouldn't have made the same mistake he did if you were in the same position? He's paid for that mistake too, don't forget."

Ron stared at Harry for a moment then nodded. "Sorry, mate. I guess you're right." He shuddered. "And I know you're right about paying for it. Having to work for that snaky bastard Voldemort, brrr!"

"I trust him, alright?" Harry said with an air of finality.

There were murmurs from the others and silence settled for a while. Harry found himself falling halfway asleep again as Ginny ran her hand gently through his hair.

"Harry?" she asked softly. "Why does Sirius call you Pronglet?"

Harry opened his eyes and looked up at her with a shy grin. "Siri said he used to tease my Dad by calling me that when I was a baby. I…kind of like it, makes me feel like I'm a bit closer to my Dad." He blushed. "I guess that sounds a little silly?"

Charlie chuckled. "Nah, Harry, sounds pretty good to me."

Fred and George, who had been plucking blades of grass and trying to throw them up everyone's noses, suddenly froze.

"Pronglet did you say, ickle Harrykins?" Fred said in surprise.

"As in little Prongs, son of Prongs?" George continued in disbelief.

"As in Mr Prongs of Messrs Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot and Prongs?" Fred finished.

"Okay, Harry, spill! If Mr Moony is Remus and Mr Padfoot is Sirius, does that mean Mr Prongs was your Dad? And who is Mr Wormtail?" George said excitedly.

Harry laughed. "Yeah, Prongs was my Dad." He paused and his face darkened. "Wormtail was Peter Pettigrew, also known as Scabbers."

Hermione and Ron scowled at the mention of Wormtail and Bill and Charlie watched the change of expression with surprise. Percy looked slightly dumbfounded.

"Scabbers?" he said frowning. "I know you came home after third year without him and with Pig instead, Ron. Mum and Dad said something about Scabbers dying but they wouldn't say anymore. What actually happened?"

Ron blinked. "Didn't we tell you?" he asked in surprise then comprehension dawned on his face. "Oh no, we wouldn't have. You didn't really know what was going on and we couldn't tell you about Sirius at that point anyway. And after that you were working at the Ministry and were always pretty busy." He settled himself more comfortably on the grass and proceeded to tell Percy who his rat had actually been and what Wormtail had done.

"You mean…he…the rat…betrayed…" Percy seemed almost inarticulate and Penelope was forced to lean over and whisper in his ear to get him to stop. Percy sat silent and white-faced for a moment then looked over at Harry. "I'm sorry," he blurted out.

Harry raised an eyebrow at Percy. "What for? You didn't know. How could you? Wormtail fooled a lot of people, including Dumbledore, so don't apologise. You have nothing to be sorry for."

Percy subsided into silence and leaned against his fiancée, still staring a little wild-eyed at the ground. Harry looked over at Ron.

"Speaking of apologies," he said a little sheepishly, "I'm sorry for doing you out of your bed last night, Ron."

Ron laughed. "Don't worry about it! We were more concerned about you. We all fell asleep in the living room anyway."

"After Remus had told us off," Neville said with a laugh.

"Remy told you off?" Harry said with surprise. "Why?"

Sheepish laughter came from the others.

"Er, we were sort of putting together a half-baked plan to go and belt the living daylights out of Malfoy and he heard us," Ron said.

Harry sputtered with laughter. "I'm not surprised he told you off then! What exactly were you planning on doing?"

"Well, we hadn't really gotten too far when Remus stopped us, so nothing much," Ron explained.

"We did find out Luna's animagus form though," Ginny said with a grin.

Harry looked over at the Ravenclaw girl with delight. "Really, what is it?"

Luna smiled dreamily and where she had been sitting the white mink suddenly appeared.

"She's a mink," Hermione said eyeing the furry creature.

As Harry watched the mink disappeared and Luna reappeared in its place.

"Well done," he said and Luna smiled at him and waved airily.

There was short silence then Neville spoke. "What do you think he's done? Draco, that is."

Harry sighed. "I think he tangled with Voldemort somehow. I'm just not sure if he won or lost."

"You could always ask him," Bill said with a grin.

"Yes, that would go down well," Ron said with amused sarcasm. "Let me see, you could send him a letter. Dear Draco, Has Voldemort come knocking on your brain? Did you win or lose? Love and kisses, Harry. I can see him answering that one!"

Everyone burst out laughing and agreed that the idea wasn't a very practical one.

"What about Millicent?" Ginny asked.

"What about her?" Harry said, slightly baffled.

"Didn't she say she had a mutual friend with Pansy Parkinson?" Ginny replied with exasperation. "Pansy was always pretty friendly with Draco. Maybe we could do something there?"

Harry thought about that for a while. "Hmm, it's a good idea," he said finally. "But how do we do it without tipping Pansy off? If it were Millicent and Pansy, I could see Millicent managing it but her friend might not be so obliging."

"Millicent couldn't do it herself?" Bill asked.

"Probably not," Harry replied. "She and Pansy kind of came down on different sides last year. Millicent sided with us, Pansy with Draco. I don't think Pansy's the forgiving type."

Ginny grimaced. "Hmm, good point. Well, I think I agree with Professor Dumbledore then. I don't see how we can find out what's happened."

Harry grumbled to himself for a moment. "Yeah, I know. It's just really annoying knowing that Voldemort's out there and we don't know what the hell he's doing." He paused and continued in a cranky tone. "And I'm really tired of being the one to find out the hard way. This was supposed to be a good summer."

"Isn't it?" Hermione said with surprise.

Harry paused. "Well, yeah, I suppose it is in comparison to my last few summers."

"Well, anything would better than last summer," Ron said with a shudder.

"True," Harry replied. "And at least I've got Siri and Remy this summer to help out when things get bad."

"That's right," Hermione said soothingly then she frowned slightly. "How's Sirius doing with his preparation for his Astronomy classes?"

"Pretty good, I think," Harry said then laughed. "He ran around in a complete panic at first but then Professor McGonagall sent over Professor Sinistra's lesson plans and syllabus and he calmed down a bit. I think he's planning on sticking pretty closely to what she taught, with the exception of making sure everyone knows where the Dog Star is."

Everyone laughed and Ron shook his head. "It's hard to think of Sirius being a teacher."

"Yeah, I know," Harry replied, smiling. "But I think he'll enjoy it. I don't think he'll be there for a long time though."

"He'll get too restless after a while," Ginny said calmly. "I think he only took the job because of you, Harry."

"Yeah, I know," Harry said softly. "And it's probably selfish but I'm glad. I want Siri to be there."

"It's not selfish," Ginny said firmly. "You deserve it. He deserves it." She grinned. "Besides I think it'll be fun having Sirius as a teacher. I know I'm going to enjoy Astronomy classes."

"You're going to take Astronomy at NEWT level then?" Hermione asked.

"Yeah," Ginny replied. "I've always liked it and I'm sure I got good marks in my OWL."

"Shouldn't you have gotten your results by now?" Harry asked.

Ginny scowled slightly. "They're delayed. There's been a bit of upheaval in the Ministry with the combination of Fudge disappearing and the battle with Voldemort and it's taking them longer than they thought to get all of the results processed. We should get them in the next couple of days."

"I wonder what happened to Fudge," Harry mused. "And if he really was a Death Eater."

"He wasn't," Percy said abruptly and everyone looked at him.

"Really?" Harry asked.

"He wasn't a Death Eater," Percy replied firmly. "He wasn't very bright and he was easily intimidated by Lucius Malfoy but he definitely wasn't a Death Eater."

"Well, I suppose that's one thing in his favour," Neville said dryly.

Harry rolled over onto his side. "Percy? Can I ask you a question?"

Percy looked at him with surprise. "Of course, Harry."

"Why didn't you believe me? Why did you side with Fudge?"

A thick silence descended and a few nervous looks were exchanged among the others. This was one question that hadn't yet been asked of Percy. No one among the Weasleys had wanted to rock the boat that much. Percy sighed and Penelope placed a hand on his knee and whispered in his ear. He turned and smiled at his fiancée then looked back at Harry.

"I…did believe you," he said heavily.

"What?" Ron exclaimed, appalled. "You believed him and then you and Fudge spend an entire year making his life miserable! What the hell did you think you were doing?"

Percy looked decidedly shame-faced. "I…I…" He broke off and sighed. "I know, it was stupid." He looked at Harry earnestly, as though trying to make Harry understand. "I did believe you, Harry; I just didn't want to believe you. I…I like my world neat and orderly and a neat and orderly world doesn't include Voldemort. And I…I wanted to succeed." He ran a hand through his hair. "I said some terrible things to Dad that year but the thing is at least some of them were true. Dad's obsession with Muggles has held him back; at least it did in Fudge's Ministry. It was the reason we were always so poor." He gave a small laugh. "Ron's always had it the worst but all of us wore hand-me-downs except for Bill."

Harry snorted. "You know the funny thing about that? I would have traded every galleon in my vault for what you have, Percy. I wore hand-me-downs all my life, at least until Hagrid came and got me. My school uniforms were the first new clothes I'd ever had. But I was always envious of Ron."

"You were?" Ron said in a baffled tone. "Why? You're the one with all the money."

"Yeah, but Ron, you're the one with the family," Harry said patiently. "Which is something I never had."

"Past tense," Hermione observed quietly as Ron looked startled.

Harry looked over at her and smiled. "Yeah, past tense. I have a family now. Siri and Remy." He laughed. "And the Weasleys. I know Mr and Mrs Weasley gave up my guardianship in favour of Siri but that was only officially. Unofficially they still consider me one of theirs."

"Do you ever wish you had your parents back?" Neville asked hesitantly.

Harry was silent for a while. "Yeah, of course, but it’s not going to happen." An odd expression crossed his face. "You know Voldemort offered me that in First Year."

"What? When?" came the exclamations from the others.

"When we went after the Philosopher’s Stone. Voldemort offered to bring my parents back if I joined him and gave him the Philosopher’s Stone."

"Were you tempted?" Percy asked.

"A little," Harry admitted. "But then I realised that he couldn’t do that. He couldn’t bring them back." He shook his head. "Anyway, that’s beside the point. Perce, will you do something for me?"

"Of course," Percy said, a little thrown by the sudden change in conversational tack.

"Next time I tell you something, will you believe me and say that you believe me until you can actually prove that I’m lying?" Harry asked dryly.

Percy hung his head, his expression a mix of shame and growing humour. "Yes, Harry. I think I can do that. And I am sorry. Sorry that I didn’t stand up for you and sorry that we made everything so difficult for you that year."

"Thanks, Perce," Harry said. "And your apology is accepted."

Chapter 7

Draco sat in the small parlour in his rooms, a glass of wine in his hand, and brooded. He still had no idea what effect that little argument he had had with the Dark Lord had done to him. The large crystal remained clear and certainly he had felt no ill effects from what had happened since he had recovered. He took a sip of wine and determinedly turned his thoughts elsewhere. He snorted as they settled on Bella and Pansy. The older woman was incensed when she heard about his impending betrothal. She had come storming into his study this afternoon, bellowing about how she was his lady. He had been forced to check her severely. He smirked as he recalled her expression when he said that she was entertaining and skilled but was in no way his lady. She had then proceeded to make all sorts of threats against Pansy and he had been less than amused. She had rather quickly learnt to temper her words when he had turned the Cruciatus on her. He leaned back in his seat and smiled as he remembered that. He had felt powerful using that curse on Bella and he definitely liked that feeling. He pondered whether to inform Pansy as to Bella's animosity.

Why? A voice in his head said with sly amusement. Wouldn't it be more fun to watch and see who wins?

Draco snorted; well, yes, it would but he couldn't afford to allow any harm to come to Pansy. Tybalt Parkinson would be a strong ally and might just bring the remaining Death Eaters into his camp. And he doted on his only child. Draco tossed the thought around his mind. Maybe if he made it clear to both women that there were to be no fatalities as a result of their skirmishing…and no permanent injuries as well. Yes, that would work and it would keep both of them out of his hair while he went about his business.

His thoughts now turned to the reluctant Death Eaters and he scowled. Damn them for being stubborn! Damn them for assuming he was just like his father! He had less than month before he had to return to Durmstrang and he wanted to get the bulk of his plans in place before then. The longer it took for those idiots to make up what passed for their minds, the less he would be able to do. Maybe he should plan something small, something that he could carry out on his own. He could then wave that success around in front of them with the idea that if he could succeed in such a thing by himself, imagine what they could all do together. But what to do?

Potter, the voice in his head said with malevolent glee.

Draco smirked. Potter, that misbegotten excuse for a wizard. Yes, wouldn't it be satisfying to do something to him.

Not him, his family, the voice suggested.

Draco raised an elegant eyebrow; Potter's family, oh yes, wouldn't it be delightful to see that Gryffindor idiot weep and wail over that. He considered his choices; his first thought was to go after the Mudblood or the Weasel but then another idea had him chuckling. Lupin; why not go after the werewolf? The poor tragic werewolf friend of Potter's father, Draco thought with a sarcastic snigger.

An excellent choice, the voice congratulated him. The full moon rises in four days. Can you manage it?

Hmm, yes, Draco thought, that was a consideration. He would need to find out where Lupin was staying this summer. His eyes narrowed and he clapped his hands sharply. Dibs appeared in the middle of the parlour and bowed respectfully.

"Yes, Master Draco?"

"Could you ask Pettigrew to come up here, please?"

Dibs bowed again. "Certainly, Master Draco."

The little elf disappeared and Draco swirled the dark red wine around in his glass as he waited for the arrival of Wormtail. An agreeably short period of time passed before the door to the parlour opened and Peter Pettigrew scuttled in.

"Y…you wanted to s…see me?" Wormtail stuttered.

"Yes," Draco replied lazily as he eyed the wine in his glass appreciatively. It really was an excellent vintage. "I have a task for you, Wormtail."

"Y…yes, of course," the older man squeaked.

"Find out where Potter, Black and Lupin are staying this summer," Draco said idly. "I would start with Hogwarts and that hovel the Weasleys call a home but I'm sure you would know them better than I." He flipped a negligent hand. "Off you go."

Wormtail stared hesitantly at Draco for a moment then headed towards the door. Just as he was opening it, Draco spoke again.

"You have two days, Wormtail. Don't disappoint me."

Pettigrew swallowed and quickly scuttled out of the room. Draco watched him go with a sneer then turned his mind to what he would actually do to the werewolf. He wanted something painful; not necessarily lethal though he wouldn't mourn if the creature died. Then he chuckled; silver of course would be needed. He mused a little longer then remembered a useful spell he could use.

Don't use a spell. They'll associate magic with you, the voice in his head said warningly.

Then what should I use? Draco thought irritably.

A bullet. A silver bullet from a muggle gun, the voice said calmly. No one would expect the scion of the Malfoy family to use something a mundane as a muggle weapon.

Draco tossed this thought around and then began to chuckle. Yes, what a very good idea. He knew how to use a gun, of course. His father, while despising muggles, wasn't foolish enough to ignore them. And Draco knew where he could get a silver bullet; there was shop in Knockturn Alley that would provide one without asking any awkward questions. It would definitely work. The only question that remained was whether to kill the werewolf. He eventually threw that thought out. He knew how to use a gun but he wasn't an expert with one. He would just have to aim for the largest body mass, the werewolf's torso, and whatever happened, happened. He drank deeply and sat planning the deed and chuckling madly.

Harry sat on his bed in Ron's room and stared moodily out of the window. It was getting close to moonrise and he would have to go down soon. The full moon was tonight and he would be running with Moony and Padfoot. He was a little disappointed that Ron wouldn't be able to join them; Mrs Weasley had expressly forbidden it. She had explained that it wasn't that she didn't trust the Wolfsbane potion, she was just worried. Ron had rolled his eyes but in the interests of peace had accepted his mother's restriction. He jumped slightly as Sirius stuck his head into the room.

"Ready?" he asked.

Harry nodded and stood. "How's Remy?"

"Irritable as usual," Sirius said with a quick grin.

Harry nodded and the two of them walked downstairs and out to Arthur Weasley's shed. He had removed all of the muggle rubbish he had collected to allow Remus to use the place for this night. They didn't intend to stay in the shed. Moony habitually reacted poorly to being confined, even with the Wolfsbane potion, and the Weasleys' house backed onto a reasonable-sized wooded area. As they left the house, Molly smiled at them and locked the door behind them. They walked into the shed to find a moody and slight irritated Remus waiting for them. The werewolf shuddered and stood.

"It's almost time," he said quietly as he began stripping his clothes off.

Sirius nodded and he nudged Harry. They quickly transformed themselves into Padfoot and Blaze and sat down to wait. When he was naked, Remus hunched over in the middle of the shed and stared miserably at the ground then, as the light of the moon shone through the window, he was taken by the transformation. Harry shuddered as he always did as he watched Remus transform into the werewolf. It was bad enough to watch, he didn't want to think about how it might feel to actually have to endure it.

Moony lay still for a moment after the change was complete then rose to his feet. He stared over at the two canines, a challenging look in his eyes when he got to Blaze. The large Dire Wolf stood and walked calmly over to Moony before giving him a nudge and swift lick to the face. Blaze didn't really feel like challenging Moony's status as alpha male tonight; he just wanted to run. Padfoot nudged the door of the shed open and the three of them bounded out into the night.

The three canines bounded through the woods, occasionally stopping to mock-wrestle with each other and enjoying the tremendous freedom that seemed to come over them at this time. It was a time when they forgot that they were wizards and had responsibilities and just allowed themselves to exist; to be. It seemed the night was too short as always and when the werewolf sensed that moonset was approaching they headed back towards the Burrow with reluctance. They were just leaving the shelter of the woods when there was a loud report and Moony suddenly howled and convulsed. Blaze and Padfoot whirled around and saw the werewolf lying on the ground, a small, red wound in his right side that was bleeding sluggishly. Moony snarled and whimpered as the pain of the wound shot through him. Blaze carefully approached the larger canine as Padfoot disappeared back into the woods to try to find out where the loud report they had heard had come from.

Blaze sniffed gently at the wound and yelped. Silver; the wound smelled of silver. The great Dire Wolf froze and whimpered then whipped around when he heard barking coming from the

direction of the house. Ron's Red Setter, whom he had taken to calling Rohan after Hermione had told him that the name meant red-haired, was running towards them. Mr and Mrs Weasley were standing in the doorway calling after him. Rohan quickly reached Blaze and Moony and Blaze nudged him towards the wound. Rohan sniffed at it and whimpered as well as he scented the silver. Blaze barked once and grabbed a mouthful of Moony's pelt. He started to drag the werewolf towards the shed. Rohan shook himself and quickly joined in. Both canines were often forced to let go of Moony and duck away as the werewolf snarled and thrashed in pain. They were helped when Padfoot returned from the forest and shortly had Moony back in the shed. Blaze pushed Rohan out of the shed and transformed. Rohan also changed back and Harry grabbed Ron's arm without bothering to re-establish his Oversight.

"Ron! Go back inside and get Madam Pomfrey, Professor Dumbledore and Professor Snape," Harry ordered, staring blindly at his friend. "Tell them Remy has been shot with a silver bullet!"

Ron swore then nodded and quickly changed back into Rohan; the dog could run much faster than he could. He darted back to the house and disappeared inside. Harry changed back into Blaze and slipped inside the shed. He nudged Padfoot who was watching Moony whimper and convulse with pain and the black dog turned and nuzzled him. It seemed an eternity before the change hit Moony though they suspected it was only a few minutes. The pain of the wound seemed to make the transformation worse though and Remus was pale and sweating by the time it finished. He was barely conscious and lay on the floor, moaning as blood continued to run from the wound.

Sirius and Harry had changed back the moment that the transformation had begun and Sirius quickly snatched up Remus' discarded shirt and used it to put pressure on the wound and stem the bleeding. Harry quickly instigated his Oversight then bundled up his guardian's cloak and gently lifted Remus' head to place the makeshift pillow underneath.

"I sent Ron to get Madam Pomfrey, Dumbledore and Snape," he said quickly. At Sirius' quick frown, he continued. "Snape'll know whether anything Madam Pomfrey wants to use will react badly to the Wolfsbane."

Sirius nodded and continued to place pressure on the wound in Remus' side. The werewolf had quickly passed out and both Harry and Ron watched him with worried eyes. They both looked up as the door to the shed banged open and the Hogwarts mediwitch came running in. She fell to her knees beside Remus and pushed the two of them aside. Harry and Sirius stood and moved away slightly as she gently pulled the shirt away from the wound. She turned and looked at them.

"Silver?" she said shortly and Harry and Sirius nodded.

Poppy grimaced and pulled out her wand. She held it over the wound and muttered a few words. Under the influence of her spell, the bullet slowly worked its way to the surface. As soon as it was out, she grabbed it and threw it aside. It was picked up by the Headmaster as he came into the shed, slightly behind Snape and Molly Weasley. Harry slid up next to Sirius and the older man threw his arms around his godson and drew him close.

Snape knelt down on the other side of Remus from Poppy as Molly placed a bowl of water and some towels next to the mediwitch. She glanced over at Harry with a worried expression then quietly slipped out of the shed. Poppy looked up at Severus.

"Silver poisoning. It's going to affect the way the wound heals," she said tersely. "Will the standard

remedies be affected by the Wolfsbane potion?"

Severus frowned in concentration for a moment then shook his head. "No, they should work as per normal."

"Good," Poppy replied and she held out her hand.

Severus opened the bag he had at his side and pulled out a small vial containing an orange potion. Poppy quickly uncorked it and poured it onto and into the wound. Remus howled in agony and convulsed, the action of the potion bringing him around though he seemed unaware of his surroundings. Severus and Poppy quickly grabbed him and tried to hold him down though the werewolf's strength soon began to overwhelm them. Poppy glanced over her shoulder.

"Don't just stand there," she yelled. "Help us!"

This spurred Harry and Sirius into action and they leapt forward and grabbed at Remus, trying to hold him as still as possible. Between the four of them they began to meet with some success. When Remus finally stopped convulsing, Poppy gestured for Harry to move around behind him and prop the man up. Harry swiftly obeyed and began murmuring quietly into Remus' ear as Poppy gestured impatiently to Severus for the next potion. He pulled a vial containing dark blue potion out of his bag and Poppy uncorked it and held it Remus' lips. Harry murmured a few words and Remus obediently swallowed the potion and shuddered. Harry tightened his grip on his guardian and Sirius moved around to help him. Poppy sat back on her heels and watched Remus intently.

Remus eyes slowly opened and they were filled with pain and confusion. When Harry saw this, he began talking again.

"It's alright, Remy," he said soothingly. "It's going to be alright. Just relax and do what Madam Pomfrey tells you to do." He stopped as his throat became tight and Sirius quickly leaned forward and ruffled his friend's hair.

"Come on, Moony," Sirius said quietly. "Just let us help you."

Remus closed his eyes and shivered then he slowly began to relax in Harry's embrace. Poppy looked gratefully at the two of them and grabbed the third vial out of Severus' hand. This one contained a sludgy-brown potion and Poppy again poured this one down Remus' throat. The werewolf grimaced and slowly succumbed to the effects of the potions and passed out again. Poppy watched this with a look of relief on her face. She gestured for Harry to let Remus rest on the ground and then waved her wand. The wound in the werewolf's side was quickly bandaged and he was swathed in blankets. A second wave of the mediwitch's wand had him floating in the air.

"He's past this crisis," she said softly to Harry and Sirius. "But we've got to keep him quiet and resting for at least a week. He'll need those potions twice a day until the wound is healed and the silver is out of his system. You must keep him relaxed and make sure he doesn't fight the potions. It's very important that he doesn't fight the potions. That will certainly make his recovery longer and could even kill him."

Harry swallowed and Sirius wrapped an arm around him comfortingly. Poppy gently directed the unconscious werewolf out of the shed and up to the house, Harry and Sirius following closely behind them. Severus picked up his bag and rose. He walked over to the Headmaster and plucked

the silver bullet out of his hand. He examined it carefully then snorted in disgust.

"No identifying marks," he said sourly. "It could have been made anywhere."

"Indeed," Dumbledore replied calmly. "But this attack had a clear target."

"Did it?" Severus said thoughtfully.

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow and Severus continued.

"If I were wishing to attack Potter without it looking like I was attacking Potter, who would I go after?" He arched an eyebrow at the Headmaster.

"His family," Dumbledore replied softly. "Those he loves."

"Precisely," Severus said archly. "Look to Draco, Albus. Or one of his lackeys. You will find your answer there."

The Potions Master placed the bullet back in Dumbledore's hand and stalked back up to the house. Albus stared down at the bullet for a long moment, his expression hard and his eyes steely. Then he turned and headed back to the house as well.

Percy sat next to the window in his old bedroom and looked out into the yard. He and Penelope had escaped up here as soon as they could. The atmosphere downstairs was rather grim and he wasn't sure he could handle it right now. It had been a hell of a shock when they had heard the loud bang from outside and Ron had gone tearing out…as a dog. Percy hadn't known that his youngest brother was an animagus though he found it somewhat amusing that Ron was a red setter. They had seen the werewolf that was Remus Lupin on the ground and the three canines drag him back into the shed but they hadn't been sure of what had happened until Ron had come pelting back into the house, heading straight for the floo.

Percy shuddered; Remus had been shot, with a silver bullet no less. He swallowed as he remembered the look on Harry's face as he and Sirius had followed Madam Pomfrey and the unconscious Remus up the stairs. The desperation and despair had been terrible to see and Percy hoped with all his heart that Remus was going to be alright. From his studies, he knew that his former teacher was undoubtedly suffering from silver poisoning; an affliction exclusive to werewolves. There were potions that could alleviate the symptoms but other than that they were just going to have to wait until the silver worked its way out of Remus' system. Either way the werewolf was in for a nasty week or two.

Percy felt a hand rest on his shoulder and looked up into the concerned face of his fiancée. He still thanked his lucky stars that Penelope had had the patience and understanding to stay with him during the last couple of years. The first of those years, when he was being what he now admitted was an unmitigated prat, must have been hard on her and the second had been hard on them both. He had told her about what he was doing for the Order. He knew he could trust her and he also knew he'd need her help and support.

"Percy, brooding about things isn't going to help," Penelope said softly.

"I know," Percy said with a sigh. "It's just that I feel so helpless. I…spent so long persecuting Harry that I'm not sure he'd accept my help now."

"Of course he would. He said he accepted your apology and that he understood why you did what you did," Penelope replied. "He's not petty, Percy."

Percy took one of his fiancée's hands in his. "I know, Penny. It's just…" He sighed and looked around the room in frustration. He was just about to turn back to Penelope when a small movement caught his eye. He stood up and slowly started pulling his wand out, keeping the action concealed behind Penelope.

"It's just…I've never been good at this sort of thing," he continued, trying to act as if nothing was wrong. Penelope looked at him oddly and he gestured with his head towards where the sound had come from. She looked over surreptitiously and her eyes widened. There scuttling along the wall, staying behind the furniture as much as possible, was a rat. She looked back at Percy with wide eyes.

"Scabbers?" she mouthed and Percy nodded. Penelope swallowed and tried to maintain the impression of normality. "It doesn't matter if you're good at it or not. In something like this, it's definitely the thought that counts."

Percy had his wand out by this time and, in a swift movement, he ducked out from behind Penelope, levelled his wand at his former pet and very firmly said, "Stupefy."

The spell caught the rat squarely and thumped him against the wall. Percy walked over warily and when he saw that the rat was indeed unconscious, he dashed over to his wardrobe. After a minute or so of rummaging, he pulled out his old rat cage and quickly stuffed the unconscious Wormtail inside. He cast an unbreakable charm on the cage and looked up at Penelope with a triumphant look. She returned the look with a proud smile.

"Well done, love," she said as she walked over and kissed him on the cheek.

Percy blushed. "Now I feel like I've done something for Harry," he said firmly.

He picked up the cage and ran downstairs with Penelope in tow. The first person he saw when he ran into the living room was Professor Dumbledore.

"Headmaster," he said slightly breathlessly. "I found him! I've got him!"

Dumbledore looked over at Percy in surprise. "Who do you have, Mr Weasley?"

"Scabbers!" Percy blurted and the room promptly erupted.

"Silence!" Dumbledore shouted and as always gained immediate obedience. He turned his full attention on the former Head Boy. "Are you sure?"

Percy nodded and held up the cage. "Yes, sir! I had Scabbers as my pet for years. I'd know him anywhere and Harry and Ron told me a little bit about…what happened in the cemetery. Look at his paw, sir!"

Dumbledore carefully examined the unconscious rat and saw that the little animal did indeed have

one silver front paw. He looked up at Percy again.

"Well done, Mr Weasley," he said and Percy puffed up his chest with pride, much to the amusement of his family. "Where did you find him?"

"He was creeping along the wall in my old room," Percy said. "I think he was heading towards the door."

"Probably trying to spy on Harry," Ron said belligerently. "Or see what's happened to Remus."

"No doubt," Dumbledore said absently as he eyed the unconscious rat. He gave himself a small shake and looked at Percy. "Well, that was some very excellent work, Mr Weasley. I couldn't have done better myself. If you would be willing to leave this small matter in my hands, I shall see that this…miscreant is delivered to the appropriate destination."

Percy smiled proudly and nodded. The Headmaster smiled at him again and raised an eyebrow at Severus. He then disappeared with a small crack. The Potions Master scowled at the spot where the Headmaster had been standing then looked over at the oldest of the Weasleys.

"Where are your parents?" he barked.

"Er, I think they're in the kitchen," Bill said with surprise.

Snape glared at him for a moment longer then swept out into the kitchen. The others watched him go then turned back to Percy.

"Well done, Perce," Bill said, clapping his younger brother on the back.

Percy grinned a little uncertainly but before he had a chance to answer Ron came up and shook his hand.

"Thanks, Percy," he said respectfully and Percy was once again forced to re-evaluate his opinion of his youngest brother. "I know Harry will appreciate what you did when we get a chance to tell him. So will Sirius and Remus for that matter."

"I just hope it will make up, at least in part, for what I did to him," Percy mumbled.

Ginny came over and gave her brother a hug. "He stopped blaming you a while ago, Percy. He was more angry that you'd turned your back on your family than because you'd turned your back on him."

Percy blinked. "Really?"

"Oh yes," Ginny said with a small laugh. "He considers family to be the most important thing in the world. Nothing should come before it. You heard him the other day, he was always terribly jealous of Ron because of us, our family."

"I still don't understand that," Ron said incredulously. "We should be jealous of him!"

"Why?" Ginny asked softly. "Because he has all that money? He doesn't care about it, Ron. And remember he grew up as poor as we did. He's only ever wanted a family and that's something all the money in his vault can't buy."

Both Ron and Percy looked incredibly ashamed at the quiet words from their sister.

"And Draco knows that," Neville said suddenly. Everyone turned to look at him and he blushed. "I mean it's obvious isn't it? Particularly after Percy found Wormtail. We know that Wormtail has been working for Draco so the attack on Remus must have originated from him." He paused and looked sad. "And Draco attacked where Harry's the most vulnerable. His family."

Scowls graced the faces of Harry's Battle Guard and the others looked angry.

"We're going to have to get that little ferret," Ron ground out between gritted teeth.

Before he could say anymore, Professor Snape walked out into the living room again accompanied by Mr and Mrs Weasley.

"Bill, Charlie, Percy, Penelope, Fred, George," Mr Weasley said. "We're going to start strengthening the wards on the house. Could you lot come and give us a hand?"

Those named jumped up and agreed eagerly. Snape gave them an impatient glare and led them all out of the house. Only Harry's Battle Guard remained in the room and they all looked at each other with frustration. Finally Hermione sprang to her feet.

"I'm going to help them," she said sharply. "I know most of what they're going to do anyway and they can teach me the rest."

Ron stood as well. "I'll join you," he said firmly. "You can tell me what to do."

Hermione smiled at him and the two of them followed the others outside. Neville also stood.

"I'm going to head down to where Remus was shot and see if there is anything there to be found," he said.

"I shall join you," Luna said calmly and the two of them headed out to the back yard.

Ginny sat where she was for a moment, a little torn. Then she made her mind up and headed upstairs. She was going where she could do the most good. She was going to stay with Harry.

Chapter 8

Draco sat in his study, chuckling quietly to himself. He turned the gun over and over in his hands, enjoying its metallic beauty. His shot had been perfect, right into the werewolf's side. He had been forced to apparate out fairly quickly when the black dog that he knew was Sirius Black had headed towards him in the forest. He had seen the black dog and the huge wolf running in front of the werewolf and had nearly taken a potshot at Potter. At the last moment he had gone back to the werewolf; after all, when he went after Potter he wanted the idiot to know who was killing him. He was now waiting for Wormtail to return with the information on how badly Lupin was injured. Pettigrew had assured him he could get into the Weasleys' hovel and move around it with ease.

He looked over at the grandfather clock and scowled; Wormtail should have been back a half-hour ago. He pulled open a drawer in the desk, tossed the gun inside and closed it again. He stood and stretched then limped out of the study. He made his way downstairs to the small workroom that the Dark Lord had once used and that he had appropriated. It was shielded heavily enough that the Ministry was not able to pick up when he was using magic. It was awkward to continually have to come downstairs but it was worth it to be able to use his magic. Before they had left that night, he had placed a small tracking spell on Wormtail. He didn't trust the older man not to make a run for it when presented with the opportunity and he wanted to be able to find him at all times.

He uncovered the large crystal globe on one of the tables in the room and activated the scrying spell that was focused onto the tracking spell. This was one of the few pieces of the Dark Lord's crystal magic that he had been able to decipher and use. The globe became cloudy and then cleared, showing Wormtail's surroundings. It took a moment for Draco to understand what he was seeing and when he did he broke out into a long burst of vicious swearing. He knew at least three of the faces in the globe; the Aurors Shacklebolt and Tonks and the Headmaster of Hogwarts. Damn that stupid rat! He had obviously been caught and by someone loyal to Dumbledore.

Draco ended the scrying spell with a sharp word and stalked around the room as best as he could. He knew he had hit the werewolf but now he had no idea how bad the injury was. He didn't think the wound itself was in a position that would have killed outright but he hadn't been able to stay long enough to confirm that. Silver poisoning would definitely occur but there was no guarantee that would kill Lupin. He paused and leaned against the table, drumming his fingers impatiently. How could he find out now?

Snape, the voice in his head suggested.

Snape won't speak with me, he snarled back mentally. The idiot is too indebted to that old fool at Hogwarts.

He doesn't need to, the voice said patiently.

Draco stilled his fingers and frowned. What do you mean? he asked curiously.

He works for the old fool. The old fool is a friend to Potter and the werewolf. He will undoubtedly ask Snape to brew the potions required to treat the silver poisoning. He will have a certain amount in stock. He likes to be prepared for all emergencies, the voice explained patiently. He will have to make more, not only for the treatment but also to replenish his stocks. Some of the ingredients for the potions used are rare and difficult to obtain. And he will have to go to Knockturn Alley to obtain

at least one of those ingredients. That means he must go to the Apothecary and Morcan Arsene is your man.

A slow smile spread across Draco's face. And Arsene will be delighted to tell me what Snape has bought, Draco thought to himself. Then the smile fell off his face and a look of panic took its place. Who are you? he thought to the voice in his head, finally coming to the realisation that he was not listening to his own internal voice.

A thick chuckle sounded throughout his head. Who do you think I am, boy?

Draco shut his eyes and desperate thoughts flitted across his mind.

Don't be so melodramatic, snarled the Dark Lord. I am hardly in a position to take over your mind, Draco. Your asinine act when I first entered your mind ensured that. You melded us together, idiot. We are permanently joined. There was a sense of grudging approval. It looks like it won't be a complete disaster though. You are certainly a damn sight more intelligent than your father. Your execution of the plan against the werewolf was…adequate.

It was perfect, Draco snarled.

He is still alive, the Dark Lord observed sardonically.

I didn't intend to kill him, Draco growled. At least not purposely. I wanted to put the wind up Potter. To let him know I can get to those he loves wherever and whenever I want.

The Dark Lord was silent for a while then he finally spoke again. Very well then, it was carried out well. What do you intend to do with Severus and Potter?

Draco froze for a second. I thought you were in my mind, he said carefully. Surely you can see my plans.

I can only hear what you are actively thinking, fool boy. The Dark Lord said irritably. And even that is only a recent development. Your idiot act in melding us together left me quite disorientated for a time.

Oh, Draco thought weakly. Well, I have left Snape to Pansy. He hardly leaves Hogwarts these days and she will be returning there for her Seventh Year. I'm sure she will be most…creative. Potter… Potter is mine. I owe him for what he and that mudblood did to me! Draco growled audibly at the memory.

The Dark Lord chuckled again. I didn't ask that, boy. I asked what you intended to do to him.

Draco scowled. I don't know yet, he admitted reluctantly. I need more people but the remaining Death Eaters are reluctant to accept me as their leader.

Ambitious, are you? The Dark Lord's mental voice dripped with malicious amusement.

Yes, Draco said with contemptuous superiority. Would you have me any other way?

The Dark Lord chuckled again. Good answer, boy. It seems you and I are well paired. I take it that was the reason for the foray against the werewolf; to prove your credentials?

Yes, Draco said then he scowled with irritation. But it doesn't do me much good if I don't know exactly what happened!

So seek out Arsene, the Dark Lord counselled. Find out what Snape has bought from him. That will give you some indication of the extent of the werewolf's injuries.

And if Snape hasn't been into Arsene's shop? Draco asked.

Then we know the werewolf is dead, the Dark Lord said simply then he chuckled again. I think I will help you rather than find a way to overcome your mind, Draco. I rather like your mind how it is; malevolent and evil. You are far more than just your father's son. We will do well together…that is, if you're willing?

Draco paused for a moment then asked suspiciously, What do I get out of it?

My knowledge, the Dark Lord replied promptly. I no longer have a body and in this form I cannot access my magic but you are a powerful wizard. You lack adequate training, of course. An unfortunate side effect of that old fool's thinking at Hogwarts but what training you lack, I have knowledge of. We could be great, you and I. So, what is your answer?

Draco thought hard for a moment then smiled maliciously. Very well, he said. I agree.

Excellent! the Dark Lord said. I suggest you get word to Arsene.

What a good idea, Draco said with a grin. He covered the globe again and limped out of the workroom, heading for the floo and from there, to Knockturn Alley.

Harry and Ginny sat on Sirius' bed and watched the unconscious Remus. Sirius was leaning against the wall, staring blindly out of a small crack in the curtains. The room was dark and silent. Madam Pomfrey had insisted on the silencing charms, stating that Remus could not afford to be startled or disturbed in any way. She had left just a few minutes ago after making sure that Remus was comfortably settled. She said that she needed to speak with Professor Snape regarding his supplies of the potions needed. She had been on the verge of shooing them all out of the room when Ginny had quietly snuck in. The two women had had a whispered conversation and whatever Ginny had said had been enough for Madam Pomfrey to leave the three of them to their vigil. All she had said was that if Remus woke, something she didn't think likely, they were to keep him calm and try and coax him back to sleep. Harry wrapped his arms around his girlfriend and buried his face in her hair. Ginny gently stroked his arms and then wrapped her arms around him in turn.

"If we do everything right, he will recover fully," she said softly.

"How do you know?" Harry whispered into her hair as Sirius turned worried eyes on the two of them.

"I've spent a lot of time with Madam Pomfrey, learning things for the Battle Guard. I made sure to learn everything I could about lycanthropy because I know how much you care about Remus," she said calmly. "I looked into silver poisoning because anyone who wanted to get at you would be likely to attack those you care about the most."

Harry flinched and Ginny stroked his back soothingly. "Don't you dare start feeling guilty about this, Harry Potter," she hissed angrily. "It was not your fault!"

Sirius walked over quietly and ran a hand through Harry's hair, ruffling it slightly. "She's right, Pronglet," he said quietly. "It's not your fault. Lay blame where it belongs, at the feet of whoever did this."

"It was Draco, wasn't it?" Harry burst out and was promptly hushed by both Ginny and Sirius. He flushed with embarrassment and looked over to where Remus lay. He sighed with relief to see that his outburst had not disturbed the older man.

"Yes, it was probably Draco," Sirius whispered grimly. "It's just the sort of cowardly thing he'd have done."

"Anyway," Ginny said quietly but firmly, trying her best to change the subject slightly, "the first potion Madam Pomfrey gave Remus helps to draw the silver out of his system. The other two are used to keep him quiet and sleepy. It's imperative that he not get worked up over anything, that'll just cause the silver to spread."

"Could he…die?" Harry whispered brokenly.

Ginny paused, not sure if she should answer that question. She drew in a deep breath and remembered that Harry didn't like things, even bad things, being kept from him. "Yes, if we don't do everything right," she said reluctantly. "If the silver spreads too far, it could overwhelm his system and cause his body to shut down. But I don't think will happen, Harry. Those potions will really improve his ability to fight this and you know Remus, he won't give up."

Harry nodded and swallowed. He turned his head slightly and let his eyes rest of Remus' form. The energy colours that he could see definitely indicated the werewolf's illness. Remus' normal colours of Dark Red, Scarlet, Light Brown and Light Green were heavily shot through with a roiling mix of Murky Yellow and Green-Yellow; both indicators of illness. The appearance of one was a normal indicator of illness; the appearance of both was a sign of very serious illness. Harry sighed and rested his cheek on the top of Ginny's head.

Silence reigned throughout the room for a long time then Ginny suddenly remembered something.

"Oh, Harry?" she whispered with a sudden grin. "I've got some good news for you and Sirius."

The two men looked at her with surprise. "What?" Harry asked, looking confused.

"Percy and Penelope went upstairs after you two came in with Remus and Madam Pomfrey," she began. "Percy's not very good at dealing with the sort of emotions that were prevalent downstairs and he still feels kind of guilty about the way he treated you. Anyway, while he was up there, he saw something moving near the wall of his room." She paused and shook her head. "You'll never believe it, but it was Scabbers! I mean, Wormtail." Both men started and Sirius stared at her with wide eyes. She grinned at him and continued. "Percy was able to stun him and shove him in one of his old rat cages. He brought him downstairs and turned him over to Dumbledore. He said he was going to turn Wormtail over the appropriate authorities."

Both Harry and Sirius were stunned into silence. Finally Harry managed to get his voice back.

"What? Really?" he stammered.

Ginny's grin widened. "Yes! He'll go to Azkaban, Harry."

They were both startled by the low, angry growl that came from the direction of Sirius and Harry tore himself out of Ginny's arms and leapt over to his godfather. He wrapped his arms around Sirius. "Don't!" he gasped quietly. "Please, Sirius! I know you hate him and what he did but, please, leave him to the Aurors."

Sirius closed his eyes and trembled in Harry's arms for a long moment then he slowly brought his arms up around Harry. "You don't want revenge?" he whispered shakily.

"Let him go to Azkaban," Harry replied quietly. "If anyone deserves it, it's him. Forget about him, Siri. Nothing's going to bring Mum and Dad back, not even killing Wormtail. The best revenge you can get is to just forget about him. Forget he even exists. Let him rot in Azkaban."

Sirius' arms tightened around Harry and he slowly, quietly began to weep. Harry buried his head in Sirius' shoulder and let his own tears fall. They stayed like that for a long time as Ginny watched on with a gentle smile. Eventually Sirius pulled back and placed his hands on Harry's shoulders, smiling proudly at his godson.

"When did you get so smart, Pronglet?" he whispered in a hoarse voice.

Harry smiled wryly. "Nah, Hermione's the smart one. I just figure the best way to get revenge is to do the same thing to him as what I've done to the Dursleys. Forget them. Don't think about them and move on. The Dursleys, Wormtail, they're just not important anymore."

Sirius ruffled Harry's hair and grinned a little weakly. "I guess you're right."

"Course I'm right," Harry said with a cocky grin. "I'm always right."

Both Sirius and Ginny snorted with laughter. All three fell suddenly silent as they heard a snuffling sound come from Remus' bed. They whipped around but the noise was just Remus curling up on his side. They exchanged glances and sighed with relief; Merlin only knows what Madam Pomfrey would have done to them if they had woken the werewolf up right now. Harry walked quietly over to sit back down next to Ginny and Sirius resumed his position next to the window and the three of them settled back down to wait.

Remus woke slowly early in the evening. Harry and Sirius were still in the room while Ginny had gone downstairs to organise for their dinner to be brought up to the room. As soon as he saw his friend's eyes opening, Sirius went and sat on the side of the bed.

"It's okay, Remus," he said softly. "You're going to be okay. Just relax and don't get upset."

"Shot?" Remus whispered with a small frown.

"Yes, you were shot" Sirius replied. "With a silver bullet. You've got silver poisoning, Remus. You can't afford to get worked up over anything. You just leave everything to us and concentrate on getting better, okay?"

"Mmmkay," Remus mumbled, his eyelids drooping. He drew in a breath and forced them open again. "Harry?"

Sirius smiled gently. "He's okay. I'm okay. You're the one who's not okay. Just rest, Moony. Go back to sleep."

"Mmm," Remus said in agreement and closed his eyes, succumbing to his body's needs.

Sirius looked over at Harry, tears in his eyes. Harry breathed a sigh of relief and sagged down where he was sitting.

"Why don't you go downstairs," Sirius said softly. "Now that we know he's aware of what's going on, it'll only need one of us here to sit with him. Go downstairs and get something to eat. I'm sure everyone wants to know what's going on anyway. Then you and Ginny can come back up and sit with him while I get something to eat and some rest. I'll relieve you a bit later."

"I'm sure we'll have plenty of takers to look after Remy," Harry said with a small grin as he stood. He knew Sirius was right. He was starving and he was absolutely sure that his friends were going mad with worry. He picked up his cane from where Ginny had left it and slowly made his way downstairs. The moment he walked into the kitchen, he was pounced on.

"Harry! Is everything alright?" Hermione asked anxiously.

Harry grinned. "Yeah, Remy just woke up. Siri told him about the silver poisoning so he knows not to get agitated and then he fell asleep again."

Everyone in the room relaxed and the relief was palpable. Molly bustled over and pushed him down into a seat at the table.

"Come now, you must be hungry," she said with relieved concern. "I'll send something up to Sirius in a minute."

"Um, Sirius said for me to come down and get something to eat then for Ginny and I to come up and relieve him. He'll come down, grab some food and get some rest then relieve us a bit later."

Molly nodded as she placed a laden plate in front of Harry that matched the one in front of Ginny. "Alright then but you know we're all willing to help."

Harry grinned. "I know, Mrs Weasley. We were kind of counting on that." With that he quickly dug into the dinner that was in front of him. When he was finished he looked up at the others. "Alright, what's going on?"

"What do you mean?" Ron asked innocently.

"Ron, I know something's going on. You're all too quiet," Harry said bluntly.

Ron sighed. "Neville and Luna went down to check where Remus had been shot. They found where the shooter had been waiting. They asked me to come down and check it out as Rohan." He paused for a long time. "It was Draco. I got a good sniff of his scent during the Battle. He might have been a dragon but a person's scent basically remains the same no matter what form they're in, it's just the edges that differ. Well, I'm sure you already know that being a wolf and all. Anyway, it was Draco.

He’s the one that shot Remus."

"You mean he actually did his own dirty work?" Harry asked incredulously.

"Looks like it," Ron replied. "We’ve told Dumbledore already. He didn’t seem too surprised though. Said something about a discussion he and Snape had about the bullet that Pomfrey pulled out of Remus."

The discussion was suddenly interrupted by the arrival of a number of official-looking owls in the kitchen. The owls flew around and, after a moment of chaos, dropped their letters in the appropriate hands. The students looked down at the pieces of parchment in their hands with surprise and certain amount of relief. They had needed something to break the dismal atmosphere pervading the house.

"They’re from the Hogwarts," Hermione said. "Oh, it’s probably the results of our exams and information about next year." She frowned. "They’re a bit late this year. Probably a result of the mess at the Ministry."

They all looked around and opened the letters. Harry opened his but waited while the others read theirs. He would need someone to read his to him. Then he felt something at the bottom of the envelope. He tipped it out into his hand just as Hermione gave a squeal.

"Oh, I’m Head Girl!" she said with delight.

The others smothered their laughter.

"Hermione, that’s not exactly a surprise," Ron said dryly.

Hermione scowled at him then looked around at the others. "I wonder who the Head Boy is?"

"At least we know it won’t be Malfoy," Ron chimed in.

Harry felt the little badge in his hand and identified the letters on it. "Erm," he said hesitantly as he held the badge up. "I…think I am."

There was silence for a moment then Ginny grabbed the badge to look at it and Hermione took the letter out of Harry’s hand. She quickly glanced over it.

"Oh, you are, Harry! Well done!" she congratulated him. "Listen to this!" She then proceeded to read the letter to him.

> Dear Mr Potter,
>
> In light of your excellent results on your exams and your outstanding example of courage and leadership during the last school year, I have the greatest honour in offering you the position of Head Boy. The badge indicating your position is enclosed and you will be required to meet with the prefects on the Hogwarts Express on the journey to school on September 1 and with the staff after your arrival.
>
> Congratulations,
>
> Minerva McGonagall
>
> Deputy Headmistress

Hermione quickly flipped through the letters. "Oh, you got Outstandings on all of your exams, Harry, both theory and practical. They've sent a list of books you are going to need for the upcoming school year and…Master Nhean has included the books he wants you to get for his lessons as well."

Hermione handed the letters back to Harry and Ginny handed him his new badge. Harry sat, a little stunned, for a moment then a slow smile spread across his face.

"Wow, Head Boy," he said quietly.

"Oh, well done, Harry," Mrs Weasley said proudly as she gave him a warm hug. "Your parents would be so proud of you."

Harry's smile widened. "Yeah, they would, wouldn't they?"

"Of course they would," Ginny said quietly.

"Harry, Harry, Harry," Fred said, shaking his head sadly.

"We're terribly disappointed in you," George chimed in.

"Head Boy," Fred continued.

"How sad," George finished.

Mrs Weasley whacked the two of them on the arm and scolded them as the others laughed. Harry gave the twins a grin.

"Fred, George," he said with amusement. "My parents were Head Boy and Girl in their Seventh Year. I don't think it's going to cramp my style that much."

That startled the twins into silence and Harry turned to Ginny. "How did you go in your OWLs, Ginny?"

"Really well," she said with quiet pride. "I got OWLs in Defence Against the Dark Arts, Astronomy, Transfiguration, Charms, Care of Magical Creatures, Potions and History of Magic."

"Congratulations, Ginny," Harry said as the rest of her family joined in with those sentiments. "So what are you going to do for your NEWTs."

"Umm, Defence, Transfiguration, Charms, Potions, Astronomy and Magical Healing, I think," she replied.

"That's a good selection," Hermione said authoritatively. "You'll plenty of options after you graduate with those choices."

"Um, Hermione," Harry said hesitantly. "What exactly are we supposed to do on the train? I mean, I wasn't a prefect the last couple of years."

"Oh, we just organise a roster of the prefects to walk up and down the train to keep an eye on things," she said airily. "It's nothing major. Nobody really gets into much trouble on the train to school. They're usually too busy catching up with their friends."

"Except us," Ron said dryly. "Because we used to end up having to deal with Malfoy every year."

"Well, that won't happen now," Hermione said matter-of-factly.

"Yeah, I hope he enjoys Durmstrang," Ron said expansively. "I'm sure he doesn't look good in fur."

The others laughed and Harry stood. "I guess I'd better get back upstairs," he said quietly. "Siri will be hungry." He looked down at Ginny. "Coming?"

"You bet," she said and the two of them walked out of the kitchen and back upstairs. Harry knocked quietly on the door then opened it and they walked into the dimly lit room. Sirius looked up at them from where he was sitting on the floor under the window and Harry tossed his badge at his godfather with a grin. Sirius caught the badge reflexively and looked down at it with surprise. That surprise quickly turned to delight and he leapt to his feet and rushed over to where Harry was standing. He grabbed Harry and hugged him tightly.

"Congratulations, Harry," he said in a proud and delighted voice. "Following in Prongs' footsteps, I see." He paused and looked at Harry gravely. "James and Lily would be very proud of you, you know."

Harry swallowed the sudden lump in his throat and nodded. "I know," he said in a choked voice.

"I damn well know I am," Sirius said and hugged Harry again. "Head Boy," he said with a grin. "You know it was actually easier to pull pranks after James was made Head Boy. He had that neat private study and common room that he shared with Lily that was perfect for sneaky planning sessions."

"What about Mum?" Harry asked quietly.

"Well, we had to plan them when she wasn't there, at least until she and James started dating and then we let her in on a lot of things," Sirius replied. "First thing we told her was about becoming animagi and why we did it. Turns out she didn't need us to tell her that Moony was a werewolf. She'd already figured it out; she just didn't think it was a big deal. She said something along the

lines of 'Well, it’s Remus after all. If it was Lucius Malfoy I’d be shouting it to the world but not Remus.'"

Harry smiled and Sirius ruffled his hair. "I’m going to head downstairs," the older man said. "I’ll grab something to eat and get a couple of hours sleep then come back and relieve you."

Harry and Ginny nodded and Sirius handed the badge back. He disappeared down the stairs and Harry carefully closed the door. The silence seemed almost repressive and Harry went and sat down on the side of Remus' bed. He looked down at his sleeping guardian with worry and concern. Ginny came up beside him and placed her hand on his shoulder.

"He’ll be alright, Harry," she said softly.

"Yeah, I know," Harry sighed. "I just wish I could tell him the good news, that’s all."

Ginny nodded and Harry stood. The two of them settled down on Sirius' bed and Harry weaved his fingers into his girlfriend’s.

"What do you think about what Draco did?" Ginny asked quietly.

"I’m trying not to," came Harry’s reply. "I get the feeling that getting angry wouldn’t exactly help Remy much at the moment."

"The little ferret will get his due," Ginny said with an angry glint in her eye. "You know, it’s a pity that fake Moody didn’t leave him that way."

That comment caused Harry to snort with laughter. He quickly covered his mouth, trying to stifle the noise, as Ginny stared at him with surprise.

"Harry?" she said quizzically.

"Sorry," he choked out. "It’s just that I once told Moody what his doppelganger did to Malfoy and he pretty much said the same thing as you. He thought it was an excellent punishment for what Malfoy did and said it was no wonder that Crouch was able to carry off the charade as long as he did. He said that was pretty much exactly what he would have done under the circumstances."

Ginny started giggling quietly and leaned into her boyfriend. Harry grinned and wrapped an arm around her shoulders and the two of them settled into their vigil.

Chapter 9

The first thing that Harry did when he woke the next morning was go and check on Remus. Sirius had returned the previous night just before midnight and had shooed he and Ginny out with orders for them to get some sleep. Harry had slept fitfully, tossing and turning in the dark until Ron had thrown a pillow at him and told him to stop being such a berk, that Remus would be alright and that he would be none too pleased if he found out that Harry hadn't been looking after himself. Harry had been forced to agree and, after throwing the pillow back, he had managed to settle down and get a small amount of decent sleep.

He crept quietly into the room and grinned to see Sirius sitting on the floor under the window again, though this time he was fast asleep. He looked over at the bed and was surprised to see Remus looking at him rather blearily.

"Harry?" Remus whispered.

Harry leaned his cane against the bedside table and sat down on the edge of the bed. "Hey, Remy. How are you feeling?" he asked quietly.

"Terrible," the werewolf replied with a quirk of his lips.

Harry grinned back. "I guess that's understandable."

"What happened? Who shot me?" Remus asked.

"Um, I don't really think I should tell you that," Harry said uncomfortably. "You're not supposed to get excited."

Remus stared at him for a moment then nodded. "You're right but you realise you've just told me that it's something worth getting excited about?"

Harry grinned wryly. "Um, yeah, but just don't think about it, will you?" His face fell. "I…you…" He paused and then said in a choked whisper, "I don't want to lose you. They said if you got too worked up, the silver would spread and you could die."

Remus groped after Harry's hand and gave it a squeeze. "I'll be fine," he said quietly. "I promise I'll be good. I'm not going anywhere, Harry."

Harry gulped back his tears and when Remus gave his hand a tug, he curled up on the bed next to his guardian. Remus wrapped an arm around him and they lay there quietly.

"I woke up for a bit last night," Remus said conversationally after a several minutes. "Padfoot said you had some good news. Want to tell me what it is? I promise I won't get over-excited."

Harry, who had been close to falling asleep, forced his eyes open. "Oh! Um, I got my results."

Remus frowned; that wasn't exactly what Sirius had been implying during their short conversation. "Really? How'd you go? I hope you did well in Defence Against the Dark Arts," Remus asked, mock-severely.

Harry gave a snort of laughter. "Of course I did. Got Outstandings for both the theory and practical.

Actually I got Outstandings for everything but considering I was only doing four subjects I suppose if I hadn't, there'd be something wrong with me."

"Nice to know you got Lily's brains," Remus said with a quiet laugh.

"What? Dad was dumb?" Harry asked with amusement.

"Well," Remus replied slowly. "That depends on your definition. He certainly did some dumb things. But, nah, he was pretty smart."

"I thought you were the brains of the outfit," Harry teased. "That's what Siri keeps saying."

"Well, we were all pretty smart. Even Peter in his own unique way," Remus temporised. "But I suppose I was a bit better at planning things than they were. James and Sirius were a bit…well, impulsive, shall we say? If they planned a prank, you could almost guarantee we'd get caught. I tended to put a bit more work into it; you know, how to avoid the teachers and such things."

That comment jogged Harry's memory. "Hey, what are you two going to do to Fred and George? They're getting a little twitchy, you know; wondering when the axe is going to fall."

Remus chuckled. "Yes, well, we do have something up our sleeve but I guess we'll have to put it on the backburner for the moment. I think it would class as getting worked up." He paused. "Don't worry; we'll make sure we play the prank before we all have to go back to school."

"Good," Harry said with a grin. "Um, I…kind of got more than just my results."

"I figured that," Remus said with quiet amusement. "Padfoot was pretty excited about something and I didn't think it was just your good results. Congratulations, by the way."

"Thanks," Harry said happily then he continued in a rush. "Um, I'm Head Boy."

Remus was silent for a moment then he wrapped Harry in a tight hug. "Congratulations, Pronglet!" he said in a choked voice, using Sirius' pet name for the first time. "James and Lily would be so proud of you!"

"That's what I said," came Sirius' sleep-filled voice.

"Well, we're both right," Remus said quietly as Sirius pushed himself to his feet and walked over to the bed.

"Yeah," Sirius said in reply as he grinned at his godson. "Comfy there, Harry?"

Harry looked up at him and grinned back. "Yeah, I am actually."

"Maybe I should join you two?" Sirius suggested mischievously.

"Uh-uh, Padfoot," Remus said with amusement. "No more room at the inn. Besides I believe I'm not supposed to be getting worked up over anything and you are a menace. You'll have us all in a pillow fight or some such nonsense and then Poppy will string you up from the ceiling by your privates."

Sirius pouted, though his eyes danced with laughter. "I'm hurt, Moony. Here you are impugning my good character in front of my godson. Have you no shame?"

"None at all," Remus said, his voice rippling with laughter. "Besides I think your godson is well aware of how much of a menace you are."

"Harry, you don't think I'm a menace, do you?" Sirius said in a wheedling tone.

Harry pretended to consider the matter. "Hmm, well, you've always told me that Remy is the more sensible of the two of you, so I think I'll have to agree with him."

Sirius pretended to look hurt. "Wounded! Betrayed! Stabbed in the heart by my closest friend and my godson," he denounced melodramatically. "I think I shall take my shattered heart downstairs."

With that he flounced out of the room leaving Remus and Harry laughing on the bed. Remus quickly calmed himself down; aware that 'getting worked up' meant any kind of excitement, even laughter. Once he was settled again, he tightened his arms around Harry.

"I'm so proud of you, Harry," he said quietly. "Being named Head Boy is a great honour."

"Thanks," Harry replied. "I'm a bit nervous though. I don't really know what I'm supposed to be doing. I mean I wasn't a prefect."

"You'll be fine," Remus reassured him. "Who's Head Girl? Surely she'll be able to help you?"

"Who do you think?" Harry said wryly and Remus chuckled.

"Hermione?" At Harry's nod, Remus continued. "You'll be fine then. She'll help you out."

"Yeah, I guess she will," Harry said quietly. He was beginning to feel a little sleepy now and he let his eyes close, promising himself it would just be for a minute. His body had different ideas and he quickly fell asleep.

"Of course she will," Remus replied bracingly. When he didn't get a response from the boy lying beside him, he carefully propped himself up on one elbow, hissing a little at the pain in his side. He smiled gently to see that Harry had fallen asleep and settled himself back down on the bed. He thought that Harry probably needed the sleep; they had been up all night because of the full moon and he was sure there had been a great deal of fussing around yesterday. Harry had been through quite a bit this summer and Remus was inclined to let things lie for the moment.

He was dozing himself when the door opened and he opened his eyes quickly, hoping to warn whoever was coming in to be quiet for Harry's sake. He relaxed when he saw that it was Poppy and Severus.

He gestured to Harry. "Can we do this without waking him up?" he whispered

Poppy eyed the sleeping boy kindly. "We can certainly try," she said softly. "Do you think you could get up and move over to the other bed without too much fuss?"

Remus nodded and slowly pushed himself into a sitting position. He grimaced at the pain from the wound and paused to let it fade. He then slowly crawled out of the bed and, with Poppy and Severus' help, staggered over to Sirius' bed where he promptly collapsed as gracefully as he could on it. Poppy helped him take of his pyjama top and he rolled on his side so that she could get to the wound. She gently took the bandage off and gently prodded at the small hole in his side.

"It’s healing well," she said absently. "It was a good thing that Mr Weasley came and got us so quickly. Time is of the essence with this kind of injury." She paused. "I didn’t know he was an animagus though."

Remus chuckled then winced as she prodded the wound again. "He managed it during the last school year. I’m surprised you didn’t hear about it after the battle. He runs faster as Rohan so he’s gotten into the habit of changing when he needs to get somewhere fast."

"Interesting," Poppy observed. "Severus, could I please have the first potion?"

The Potions Master nodded and handed her a vial containing an orange potion. Poppy opened the vial and held it over the wound.

"Brace yourself, dear," she said warningly. "This will hurt."

Remus nodded and closed his eyes. Poppy poured the orange liquid into the wound and Remus grimaced and fiercely bit down on his yelp of pain. The potion fizzed a little in the wound then settled and was absorbed. Remus clenched his hands in the blankets on the bed and tried desperately not to move then finally relaxed as the pain subsided. He dropped his head onto the bed and gasped a little.

Poppy handed the empty vial back to Severus and gestured for the other two potions. She quickly rebandaged Remus' wound and patted him on the shoulder.

"Come on, dear," she said kindly. "Get yourself back in your bed and then you can take these two potions."

Remus nodded and, with the help of the others, put his pyjama top back on and settled back in his bed beside the still-sleeping Harry. He quickly downed the two potions with a small grimace.

"Thank you, both of you," he said quietly.

"That’s alright, dear," Poppy said as Severus nodded in acknowledgement. The mediwitch looked down at the sleeping boy.

"Is he alright?" she asked with concern.

"Yes," Remus replied a little muzzily as the potions started to take effect. "Just tired. Last couple of days catching up with him." He smiled proudly. "Head Boy, you know."

Poppy patted him on the shoulder. "Yes, I know. You and Sirius must be very proud."

"Yeah," Remus slurred as he sank back into sleep. Just before oblivion claimed him he heard the Potions Master say, "At least they haven’t given the job to a complete incompetent this year."

Draco limped into his study and threw himself into his chair with a pleased grin. His little visit to Knockturn Alley had been quite a success. Morcan Arsene had fallen over himself, almost literally, to be helpful and had gladly provided Draco with everything he wanted to know. Snape had been in and had purchased the supplies he needed to make the potions for treating silver poisoning. That implied that Lupin was still alive though very ill. Draco rather thought he could count that mission

as a success. He had even gotten rid of that useless little rat in such a way that no one could admonish him for it. Admittedly that bit hadn't been planned but he counted it as an added bonus.

He leaned back in the chair and looked out of the window. He had just sent Bella off to speak with the hesitant Death Eaters and explain to them about his recent success and how he was not like his father. He would succeed where his father had failed. He was still smugly congratulating himself when the door to his office was thrown open with a loud bang. He looked over and was surprised and more than a little intimidated to see Professor Dumbledore standing there, looking stern. He watched speechless as the man strode into the room and closed the door. The Headmaster walked over and placed a small silver bullet in the middle of his desk.

"I believe this belongs to you, Mr Malfoy," Dumbledore said with ominous quietness.

Draco froze for a moment then sneered at his former Headmaster. "I'm sure I don't know what you are talking about," he said dismissively.

"Oh, I think you do," Dumbledore replied and sat down, without invitation, in a chair. "What's more, I can prove it."

Draco paled slightly then scowled. "If you could prove it, I'd already be up before the Aurors," he sneered.

"Now, Draco, do you really think I would be so gauche as to do that?" the Headmaster said, unleashing the twinkle in his eye.

Draco sat back and eyed the Headmaster of Hogwarts warily. "So why are you here?"

"To warn you to back off," Dumbledore said airily as though it were the most obvious thing in the world.

"Back off?" repeated Draco cautiously.

"Yes," Dumbledore said calmly. "It is a grave miscalculation to believe that harming those that Harry loves will do anything other than make that young man more determined to destroy you." He paused and eyed Draco with sly amusement. "And Tom."

Draco jerked and stared at the Headmaster wildly. "What?"

Dumbledore sobered and looked at Draco with an unreadable expression. "Do you think that I do not know what has happened?"

Draco scowled. "Nothing has happened, old man," he said forcefully.

"Indeed," Dumbledore replied blandly.

Draco folded his arms across his chest and glared at the Headmaster. Dumbledore laced his fingers together in front of him and stared back, the twinkle back in his eye. Draco was the first one to break.

"What do you want, old man?" he growled irritably.

"I believe I already told you that," Dumbledore replied, amused.

"Oh yes, to back off," Draco said sarcastically. "Why should I?"

Dumbledore stopped smiling and stood. He placed his hands on the desk and leaned over it, his face stern and unforgiving. "Because if you continue to harm those close to Harry, he will come after you." A contemplative look crossed the Headmaster's face. "Now, while I might be inclined to let you live, for I have always believed in giving people second chances, I do not think young Mr Potter will be so forgiving." Dumbledore's expression became glacial and Draco flinched backwards from it. "He already knows that you are responsible for the injury to Remus Lupin. I would not push your luck any further else you will find that a missing eye and a damaged hamstring are the least of your troubles."

The Headmaster stood and walked over to the door. He opened it and turned back to Draco. "Think about what I have said, Mr Malfoy. And do consult with Tom," he said dryly "I'm sure he will have much in the way of sage advice." With that, Dumbledore swept out of the room.

Draco sat back in his chair and swallowed. Well? he thought to the other presence in his head.

The old fool is getting bold, the Dark Lord said sourly. But, loathe as I am to admit it, he may have a point.

"Potter is mine!" Draco ground out through gritted teeth. "I want him dead!"

Fool boy! Voldemort said irritably. That is not up for debate. I am merely suggesting that we delay our plans temporarily. The action you took against the werewolf will have the effect of bringing the Death Eaters into our camp. Mind you, the best of them are dead but we can work with what is left. We can afford to delay our action against Potter until after the New Year. The old fool will undoubtedly be keeping an annoyingly close eye on you for now. We can wait, Draco. Be patient. The best plans are long term. Surely my successful restoration after the Triwizard Tournament showed you that. A long-term plan brought to successful fruition.

Draco grumbled and forbore from mentioning the Dark Lord's equally successful failure to destroy Harry Potter during that same time. Very well, he thought sulkily. But Pansy's task goes ahead.

Of course, the Dark Lord said with amusement. I shall be waiting to hear the results of that most eagerly. My disloyal potions master must pay for his betrayal.

Draco smiled smugly. My little petal will assuredly be most creative, he thought.

Harry felt someone shaking him gently and slowly surfaced. He opened his eyes and saw the energy colours of Sirius crouching beside him.

"Siri," he said sleepily. "What's up?"

"You, Pronglet," Sirius said with a smile. "Dumbledore's here and he's got something he wants to talk to you about."

Harry groaned and sat up then quickly glanced around to check on Remus. The werewolf was sleeping peacefully behind him.

"Shouldn’t he have had another lot of those potions?" Harry asked anxiously.

Sirius chuckled. "He has. That’s why he’s out like a light. Poppy was up here with Snape about two hours ago. She said you didn’t even twitch. I thought it would be best to let you sleep, you obviously needed it."

Harry grimaced. "I didn’t get a lot of sleep last night," he said reluctantly.

"Yeah, Ron told me," Sirius said easily. "That’s why I let you sleep. Come on, don’t want to keep the Headmaster waiting, Mr Head Boy."

Harry grinned and allowed Sirius to pull him to his feet. He grabbed his cane and, after a last check on Remus, the two of them ambled downstairs. As they walked through the kitchen, Harry looked around, a little confused.

"Er, where is everyone?" he asked.

"Outside," Sirius replied. "It’s a beautiful day and we were all out there anyway when Albus arrived. He just settled in with us and asked for you."

They walked out into the Weasleys' yard and Harry could see the varying energy colours of everyone underneath the trees. They walked over and sat down with the rest of the group. Ginny immediately scooted over and leaned into Harry and he responded by wrapping an arm around her.

"You look well-rested, Harry" Dumbledore said amiably.

Harry blushed. "Er, thanks, sir. Siri said you wanted to talk to me."

"Down to business then," the Headmaster continued cheerfully. "Well, I thought I’d better let you know that I paid a visit to young Mr Malfoy today."

Harry’s jaw dropped open, an expression that was echoed by the others. "Really?" Harry said, a little stunned. "Why?"

"I thought I’d see if some of my speculations were correct and I wanted to buy all of us some time," the Headmaster replied.

Harry thought that through. "Okay," he said slowly. "What speculations? And what do you mean by buying us some time?"

Dumbledore looked at Harry benignly. "I had certain speculations after that last little turn of yours and part of the reason I went there was to see if those speculations were correct or not."

"And were they?" Harry prompted.

"Yes, it appears they were," Dumbledore said quietly. "You were right in your estimation that Voldemort is not dead. Whatever happened in Draco’s mind between the two of them resulted in them melding in some way. I was able to make extended eye contact with Mr Malfoy and, with the use of Legilimancy, I could feel the presence of Voldemort within Draco’s mind while I was there. He didn’t confirm it when I confronted him but the feel was unmistakable."

"You mean they're permanently together?" Harry asked incredulously. "It's not just a temporary thing like what Professor Snape and I did?"

"Yes, so it appears," Dumbledore said sadly. "And it seems to be something that suits them both. Certainly I felt no signs of wanting to be free from either of them."

"Okay," Harry said slowly as the others sat, still speechless with horror. "But what about this buying time thing?"

"Ah yes," Dumbledore said with a small smile. "I dropped a few timely threats into Mr Malfoy's ear. He will act against you, Harry. That thought was uppermost in his mind. I did not need to delve very far with my Legilimancy to see his intentions regarding you and Miss Granger. All I have done is delay those actions to allow us time to prepare."

"Me?" Hermione squeaked. "Why is he after me?"

"You hurt him," Neville said suddenly.

"Yes," Luna agreed. "You and Harry were the ones who directly injured him. Clearly he blames you for this."

Ron scowled and wrapped his arms around Hermione. "He'll have to come through me first," he said aggressively.

Hermione smiled up at him and patted his arms. "Well, how about he'll have to come through us?" she said a little tartly.

Ron blushed then his face firmed and he kissed her cheek. "Yes, well, I'll think about it."

Hermione rolled her eyes and let the subject drop. She had learned it was be better to wait until Ron had calmed down a little before arguing with him about things like this. The others smothered their grins and Harry rolled his eyes.

"So what do we do now, sir?" he asked.

"We start making some preparations," Dumbledore replied. "The Weasleys have already increased the wards on the Burrow with the help of Professor Snape and I will be heading to Grimmauld Place with Sirius today to strengthen the wards there. I don't think it's necessary to put the place under the Fidelius charm again but it is something we will keep in reserve." Dumbledore's expression became kindly. "I would not worry too much about it just yet, Harry. You, Sirius and Remus will all be returning to Hogwarts for the school year and you will be safe there."

Harry sighed. "Yeah, I know. I just…I don't know, I just wish Voldemort would die already. Or at least decide to concentrate on someone other than me." He paused and flushed. "That sounds pretty bad, doesn't it?"

Dumbledore chuckled. "On the contrary, Harry, it sounds perfectly normal. He is almost annoyingly persistent, isn't he?"

The others paused for a moment then laughter rang out.

"You'd think after all this time, he'd realise that going after Harry is not exactly good for his health," Ginny said impishly. "I mean, let's see. First year, Voldemort spends the year stuck on the back of Quirrell's head then gets soundly defeated by an eleven year old boy simply using his bare hands. Second year, a…what, seventeen-year-old memory of Voldemort gets soundly defeated by a twelve year old boy using the tooth of the basilisk that he, Voldemort, released. Oh, don't forget, that happened after said twelve-year-old boy defeated said basilisk and saved the life of yours truly. My hero!" Ginny pretended to swoon and batted her eyelids at Harry while the others laughed. Harry grinned down at her, glad she seemed to have put most of that nasty little incident behind her at last. "Third year, hmm, well, third year didn't really have much to do with Voldemort. It was just that terrible, vicious murderer, Sirius Black, who wanted to find Harry, save his life and then hug him to bits." Everyone laughed again as Sirius stood up and took his bows. Ginny threw some grass at him and continued. "Okay, Fourth year, well, that was another Voldemort plot. After an initial terrible blow, a fourteen-year-old Harry manages to not only throw off the Imperius curse and shake off the effects of the Cruciatus but he also duels Voldemort and after a totally remarkable turn of events, escapes once again."

"You know, listening to this makes me wonder how on earth I actually managed to get to Seventh Year," Harry said in a dry aside to Ron.

"Yeah, it's making me wonder that too," the red-head replied with a grin.

Ginny glared good-naturedly at the two of them. "Shush," she said firmly. "Onto Fifth Year. Well, Fifth year started with a bang…or at least a good yell on the part of Harry." The young man in question blushed at that as the others laughed. "Then he proceeds to stand up to the Ministry and anyone else he can think of before we start heading into disaster. We all troop off to the Ministry where we put paid to a number of Death Eaters and Harry and Professor Dumbledore shock the hell out of Voldemort." A sad smile graced her face. "And we lose Sirius for good or so we all thought." Quiet settled on the group as they remembered the aftermath of their trip to the Ministry. Ginny grinned at Sirius and continued. "Then after a rather ghastly start to Sixth Year, Harry learns to kick some butt, we get Sirius back much to Voldemort's annoyance because he had some plans and then Harry banishes Voldemort in such a way that he no longer has a body and has to share living quarters with Draco's brain…which actually makes me feel a little sorry for him."

Ginny looked around the now very amused group sitting on the grass. "So looking at all of that, you've really got to wonder why Voldemort keeps trying. He obviously doesn't learn from his mistakes."

"Ginny," Mrs Weasley said, caught somewhere between being amused and horrified. "I'd scold you except that you've summed things up rather well."

"Why, thank you, Mum," Ginny said smugly. She lay down with her head in Harry's lap and looked up at him. "So, did I miss anything?"

"No, I think you hit all the high points there," Harry replied dryly to the chuckles of everyone else.

"Indeed she did," Dumbledore said as he stood up and brushed the grass off his robes. "Now I am afraid I must steal your godfather for a little while, Harry. I trust you will not worry yourself too much about this at the moment. We have time to make some plans and sort ourselves out."

Harry nodded and watched as the Headmaster and Sirius apparated away. He tapped Ginny on the

shoulder and gestured for her to sit up before pushing himself to his feet.

"I’m going to back and sit with Remus," he said quietly. "Don’t worry, I won’t tell him about this."

Ginny stood as did Ron and Hermione and Neville and Luna. "We’ll come with you," Hermione said. "We promise to be quiet but I think we should talk about this.

Harry nodded and the six of them headed inside with Mrs Weasley’s "Don’t wake him!" trailing after them

Chapter 10

Harry spent the next few days mostly in Sirius and Remus' room, sometimes on his own, most often with Sirius or Ginny but by the time Madam Pomfrey ruled that Remus could get up, everyone had taken their turn on wolf-watch as they had come to call it. This morning, Remus was making his first venture downstairs since the shooting. Madam Pomfrey had determined that all of the silver was out of his system. The fact that the bullet wound had fully healed was indicative of that. Both Harry and Sirius were hovering around the werewolf as he made his careful way down the stairs. He stopped about halfway and gave the two of them very patient looks.

"I'm fine, you know," Remus said dryly. "Now that the silver is gone, the werewolf healing is kicking in. I'll be perfectly alright by tomorrow."

The other two looked slightly abashed at their overprotective act and Remus laughed at them as he started back downstairs. The three of them walked into the kitchen where Molly immediately descended on them. She had spent the last few days worrying about all three of them; Remus because of his injury and Harry and Sirius because they were spending most of their time with Remus and neither were eating or sleeping well. In short order she had them seated at the table with loaded breakfast plates in front of them and had ushered the others out of the room, saying they could pester Remus later.

When they had finished, Molly shooed them outside, saying that they would all feel better after a day in the sun. They trooped over to where Harry's Battle Guard was sitting. The other Weasleys had all returned to their various jobs but had been checking in regularly for updates. As soon as they were seated, Remus cleared his throat.

"Alright, now that I'm clear of silver, I want to know exactly what happened," he said firmly. "Who shot me and why?"

Everyone exchanged glances and then looked pointedly at Harry and Sirius.

"It was Draco," Harry said, rolling his eyes at the others. "He did it himself. We don't exactly know why but I'd say he was trying to get to me through you." Harry's voice was grim by the end of the sentence.

"Don't start, Harry," Remus said warningly. "Do not blame yourself for what happened. It was not your fault. Blame Draco if you must blame anyone."

Ginny wiggled around until she was leaning into Harry. "We've been telling him that for the last few days," she said tartly. "I hope he listens to you because he hasn't been listening to us very well."

"Harry," Remus chided. "It. Was. Not. Your. Fault."

Harry slowly wrapped his arms around Ginny and rested his chin on her shoulder. "I…know," he said slowly. "It's just…"

"No," Remus said firmly. "No ifs, no buts, no 'it's just'. It was not your fault. You could not have predicted that Draco would do this."

Harry sighed. "Yeah, that's what Siri's been saying."

Remus looked approvingly at his friend and Sirius chuckled. "Yes, but he seems to believe you more than me, Moony."

"Well, I am the responsible one, Padfoot," Remus replied cheekily.

"Oy, I can be responsible," Sirius said indignantly. "I'm even a teacher now." He paused and chuckled. "Though I bet a few our old teachers are rolling in their graves to hear that, eh Moony?"

"No doubt," Remus replied dryly.

Sirius grinned. "We got some good news too, Moony. Percy proved himself a real Weasley."

"Oh?" Remus said as he lay back on the grass and basked in the sun. "What did he do?"

"He caught Wormtail."

Remus sat up and stared disbelievingly at Sirius. "What?"

"The little rat was here," Sirius growled. "Actually he was up in Percy's old room. The kid saw him and stunned him. Handed him over to Dumbledore and he handed the rat over to the Aurors."

"What's been done with him?" Remus asked fiercely.

"The Aurors questioned him under veritaserum," Sirius said smugly. "Albus was there as a representative of the Wizangamot, the cagey old bugger. They got a massive amount of information out of him. He's yet to give up Draco as being the one he is working for; they haven't worked out the right question to ask. You know what veritaserum is like; you have to tell the truth but you do have a bit of leeway as long as you tell a truth that answers the question. Anyway, he's being held in Azakaban until they're sure they've got all the information they need and then he's been sentenced to the Dementor's Kiss."

Remus chewed that over for a while. "Good," he said finally and lay back down, an air of satisfaction surrounding him.

"Oh, there's one more thing we were waiting to tell you," Sirius said with a glance at Harry.

Harry sighed and nodded; yes, he'd tell Remus about this. "You know how I said I thought Voldemort wasn't dead?" Remus nodded. "Well, I was right. As far as Professor Dumbledore can determine, when I had that…well, vision on my birthday that was Voldemort trying to take over Draco's mind."

Remus sat up and stared at Harry. "Did he succeed?" he asked in a horrified tone.

"Yes and no," Harry replied. "Voldemort wasn't able to actually take over Draco's mind but he is in there. Professor Dumbledore said that they have melded in some way. Kind of like what Professor Snape and I did but a lot more permanent. He says that they both seem pretty happy with the idea or at least neither of them are complaining about it."

Remus sank back down onto the grass, mulling the idea over. "Merlin's beard," he said quietly. "So what happens now?"

"Albus warned Draco to back off," Sirius said grimly. "Said that if he kept pissing Harry off then

Harry might just decide to take some direct action. That he'd be missing more than an eye and bit of his hamstring if that happened. He doesn't think that will stop Draco but he does think it'll give us some time to prepare. He thinks New Year or shortly afterwards is the best we can hope for."

"So what's being done?" Remus asked.

"The wards on the Burrow have been strengthened," Sirius said. "Snape and the Weasleys did that right after you got shot. Albus and I went back to Grimmauld Place and worked on the wards there. Albus is reserving the right to put the Fidelius charm back on the old place. He doesn't think we'll need to do it but he wants the ability to be able to do it quickly if necessary."

"Anything else?"

"Not at the moment," Sirius replied. "The three of us will be back at Hogwarts for the school year and Albus, Filius, Minerva, Pomona and Snape put the wards Voldemort managed to take down back up and they've added a few more to the set. We're just waiting to hear from Nhean. He sent a message to Albus two days ago. Something about the Council needing more information. I don't know anymore than that."

Remus nodded and thought things through for a moment. Then he seemed to put those thoughts away and turned to face Hermione.

"I never got a chance to congratulate you on being named Head Girl," he said with a smile. "So, congratulations!"

Hermione blushed and smiled back. "Thank you! I'm so excited."

"You'll look after Harry then? He's a little nervous," Remus said, shooting an amused look at Harry.

"Thanks, Remy," Harry said dryly as Hermione laughed. "And yes, Hermione has given me the whole chapter and verse on what I'm expected to do."

"Yeah," Ron said with a laugh. "Again and again and again. Ow!" He yelped as Hermione whacked him on the arm. "You know I meant that in a good way," he continued hastily as the others laughed.

Hermione was just about to answer when she saw someone come out of the house, heading towards them. She smiled and waved to them. "Master Nhean!"

Harry looked around as the diminutive Night Master walked up to the group. "Hello, Master. What are you doing here?"

Nhean smiled at his apprentice. "I've come to see you actually."

"Er, really?" Harry said a little nervously. "Why?"

Nhean chuckled. "I need your help."

"Okay," Harry said slowly. "With what?"

Remus looked over at Harry with a grin. "You know, you're getting very suspicious in your old age, Harry. There was a time you would have just jumped up and said 'Yeah, sure. Let's go.'."

"Yeah and look how most of those times worked out," Harry replied dryly.

Remus chuckled. "Good point."

"Well, this is nothing that drastic," Nhean said with amusement. "I need you to come and speak with the Guild Council."

Harry mouth dropped open. "The Council? Why?"

"You recall that the Aurors and the Unspeakables were interested in receiving training similar to what you and your friends have," Nhean explained. "Well, the Council has been very reluctant. So have I, for that matter. Training your friends was one thing, training just anyone is another matter entirely. We now seem to have come to something of a compromise but the Council wishes to speak to you regarding not only the wizarding world here in Britain but also the people we have agreed to train."

Harry looked confused. "Why me though? Surely it would be better to talk to Remy or Siri about something like that?"

"They are not Guild members," Nhean said simply. "You are."

"Oh," Harry said. "Well, okay then."

"Excellent," the little Night Master said, gesturing for Harry to stand. He looked over at Sirius and Remus. "I take it you two don't mind if I steal Harry for a short period of time. It should be no more than a couple of hours."

The two men exchanged glances. "No," Sirius replied. "Should either or both of us come along?"

Nhean thought about this. "You could if you wanted to but you would not be allowed into the Council chamber. Only members of the Guild are permitted to enter. Do not worry, Harry is not in any kind of trouble and I will be there with him at all times."

They exchanged glances again. "Alright," Remus said finally. "I suppose we shouldn't get overprotective. He's seventeen and we've already done this subject this summer."

Sirius grinned as he nodded. "Yeah, that was my first lesson. Don't get overprotective of Harry. It irritates him and he yells."

Harry blushed and poked his tongue out at his godfather then he turned to face Nhean. "Um, is what I'm wearing okay? Or should I get changed?"

Nhean looked at his student. Harry was wearing jeans, sneakers and another t-shirt that Sirius had bought him that had a picture of a big black dog on it with the words: "Diplomacy is the art of saying 'Nice doggie'....until you can find a big stick."

"I think you should get changed," he replied dryly. "Dress robes aren't required but maybe your school robes would be appropriate."

Harry grinned and jogged into the house. He was back fairly shortly in his school robes with his new Head Boy badge pinned to the front. "This better?" he asked his teacher.

"Much," Nhean replied. He eyed the small badge and smiled. "Congratulations on being named Head Boy. It was well earned." He held out a small wooden statue. "We'll be using a portkey."

Harry grimaced as he laid a finger on the statue. "I hate portkeys," he grumbled. At Nhean's curious look, he elaborated. "Bad memories."

"Ah yes," Nhean replied. "Well, I can guarantee that this one is only going to the Guild Academy. Activate."

Harry felt the usual fishhook-in-the-stomach feel of the portkey and then he was standing in a large room with Master Nhean beside him.

"Welcome to Tokyo and the Guild Academy," Nhean said with a smile. "Come this way."

Harry followed his teacher over to a pair of large carved wooden doors. He opened them and they walked into the large room. Half of the room was taken up with by a long table that was curved into a wide U shape. Eleven people sat behind the table and they all looked over at Harry and Nhean as they walked in.

"Ah, Nhean," the man seated at the middle of the table said genially. "This must be Harry Potter."

Nhean led Harry so that he was standing in the middle of the room facing the table and bowed respectfully to the Council. "Yes, Sensai Takao." He turned to Harry. "Harry, this is Sensai Ichiro Takao, the Head of the Council."

Harry gave a short, awkward bow. "Er, hello, Sensai Takao," he said, copying his teacher's form of address.

The older man inclined his head and smiled. "Relax, Harry. We're not going to bite. We just have a few questions that you may be able to shed some light on."

Harry relaxed a little and smiled shyly.

Takao smiled again. "Now, Harry, has Nhean told you much about what we have been deliberating on the last few weeks?"

"Erm, not really," Harry replied. "Just that the Ministry made a request for training and you've been considering it."

"Yes, we have," Takao replied. "And this latest news about your adversary has made things a touch more difficult. I am not sure if you are aware but the Guild normally does not train those who are sighted. Your friends are a bit of an exception to the rule. We can't fault Nhean for his choice though. From what he has said, you needed a Battle Guard and you had the friends there who were willing to do the job." Takao chuckled. "And truly, who amongst us would pass up the opportunity to train a Battle Guard. There have been so few over the years." He paused. "Still, your Ministry has made some good arguments but we are still reluctant to train those who cannot become Guild members. We have come to something of a compromise that we have all agreed to." He indicated the other Council members. "We have decided that Nhean will train four people in some of our methods. In truth, he could not train them in all of our methods for the simple fact that they are not blind. What we want from you is an opinion on those that are to be trained. You know them better than Nhean, you are a Guild Warrior, you are the one whose opinions we will trust."

Harry swallowed and nodded. "Um, okay. Who are they?"

"Nhean suggested Nymphadora Tonks, Fred and George Weasley and Sirius Black," Takao replied.

Harry gaped at him in surprise for a moment then pulled his thoughts together. "Um, I think they'd all do well. Fred and George and Sirius have already done some training so they'd know what to expect and Tonks is an Auror so I think she'd adapt well to the training."

"Tonks?" one of the other Council members said curiously.

"Er, yes," Harry replied. "She doesn't really like her first name. She prefers to be called just Tonks."

"So, you think they could all handle the training physically?" Takao mused. "What about mentally?"

"Tonks and Sirius, definitely," Harry said firmly. "As I said, Tonks is an Auror and their training is pretty hard. She'll handle it fine. Sirius…has been through a lot in his life. I don't think the training will be something that defeats him."

"And the Weasleys?" Takao asked.

Harry grinned. "They'll be fine. Master Nhean might have to shock them a bit on occasion to get their minds on the job." Harry hurried to explain. "They're practical jokers, so they forget to take things seriously sometimes. They did some training with us at the start of the last school year and I think they were doing pretty well before they had to leave."

"You would have no problems working with them," Takao asked.

"No," Harry said simply. "Why?"

"Once they get to certain level, I will get you to help with their training," Nhean said quietly. "This will be part of your training as well."

"Oh, okay," Harry said, thinking about that for a moment. "No, I don't think I'd have any problems with that."

"Good," Nhean murmured.

"Indeed," Takao agreed. "We also wanted to talk to you about something else." Harry looked at him curiously. "This enemy of yours; this Voldemort. Nhean has told us what has happened with him and this former school mate of yours, Draco Malfoy. We wanted ask you whether you would like the Guild's aid. It is your right as a Guild Warrior to ask for this."

Harry blinked as Nhean chuckled quietly beside him. "I…I'd never really thought about it."

Takao smiled. "Well, you don't have to make a decision right now. Talk it over with Nhean and anyone else you think might have a helpful insight and let us know. One of the roles of the Guild is to help its members."

Harry nodded thoughtfully. "I'll consider it," he said slowly. "We're not really sure what Draco is planning other than coming after me and Hermione but if he manages to get the remaining Death Eaters on side, the Guild may be useful."

"Well, as I said you don’t have to make a decision today," Takao said amiably. "But do keep us in mind."

Harry nodded. "Did you need anything else?" he asked politely.

One of the other Council members, a delicate-looking Asian woman, raised her hand. "I have a query regarding Sirius Black," she said calmly. Harry tensed a little as she continued. "He spent twelve years in the British prison of Azkaban surrounded by Dementors. Exactly how sane is he?"

Harry scowled and Nhean placed a hand on his shoulder. "Gently, Harry," the Night Master murmured. "She doesn’t know about your relationship to Sirius. I chose not to inform them."

Harry took a deep breath to calm himself and nodded to his teacher. He turned to face the woman. "My godfather is perfectly sane," he said firmly. "He has been affected by the Dementors, there’s no question about that but he is very sane."

The Council looked at Harry with surprise. "Your godfather?" the woman said, astonished.

"Yes," Harry replied. "Sirius is my godfather. What happened to him and to my parents and I was what kept him sane in Azkaban. He was innocent and because that wasn’t a happy thought, he was able to hold onto it and his sanity."

"I see," one of the other men said. "But you said the experience did affect him. How?"

Harry sighed. "He’s…clingy and a little insecure regarding Remus and myself. He’s afraid of losing us like he lost my parents. He can be a little childish at times as well." He paused and thought for a moment. "Well, not actually childish, I suppose. Maybe a better way of putting it is he often acts like the twelve years never happened and he’s still only in his twenties."

"A defensive mechanism?" Takao suggested. "To help him deal with what happened?"

"Maybe," Harry conceded. "But I don’t care really. He’s my family and I love him. He and Remus are like…I don’t know, surrogate fathers or uncles or something."

"I’m sorry, Harry," the woman said kindly. "I didn’t mean to insult either of you. I was just concerned. Very few people spend that long in the company of Dementors without losing their sanity."

Harry’s thoughts turned to Bellatrix, who had been in Azkban for about the same amount of time. He remembered the madness that had been clear in her eyes and her actions and nodded slowly. "That’s okay," he said carefully. "I guess you’re right. There’s a…woman who worked for Voldemort and now for Draco and she was in Azkaban for the same kind of time. She’s definitely not sane so I can see your point."

"But he’s your godfather," the woman said with a smile. Harry nodded and she continued. "I’m actually rather impressed that he has retained his sanity. He must be a remarkable man and those memories of you and your parents and what happened must have been very strong."

"He was falsely accused of murdering my parents," Harry said softly and the woman gasped.

"Well, that would explain much," she said gently. "A thought like that would be strong. If you chose

to attach your sanity to it, it would be likely to hold you through the effects of the Dementors."

Harry nodded and the woman looked at the other Council members. "I think that clears up my qualms about Sirius Black," she said calmly. "I have no further objections."

Takao looked around the other Council members then back at Nhean and Harry. "Very well then, the Council approves the training of Nymphadora Tonks, Fred Weasley, George Weasley and Sirius Black," he said formally. "Train them well, Nhean."

Nhean bowed and Takao then declared the Council session closed. He and two of the Council members came over to speak to Harry.

"We won't hold you for too long, Harry," Takao said. "I know it is the middle of your summer holidays there but we've wanted to meet you for a while now. It is quite unusual for Guild Warriors to be trained anywhere other than the Academy but Albus' reasons were quite valid. How have you found your training?"

"Challenging," Harry replied with a smile. "Fun, interesting but very, very challenging."

The Council members chuckled. Takao then excused himself as one of the other Council members drew his attention.

"Good," the woman who had asked about Sirius said in response to Harry's answer. "That's the way it's supposed to be." She paused. "My name is Jun'ko Watanabe." She gestured to the scar-faced man beside her. "This is Nguyen Dinh Tien." She smiled at Harry. "I truly hope you were not offended by my question."

Harry gave a wan smile. "No, that's okay. I…understand why you were asking."

"Good," she said. "I'm glad."

"How have you adjusted to your blindness?" Tien asked bluntly.

Harry gave a one-shouldered shrug and wrapped both of his hands around his cane. "Um, okay, I guess. I don't like it very much but there's not much I can do about it."

Tien gave a short laugh. "Well, you've done better than me at the same time," he said ruefully. "I was still an absolute mess a year after I was blinded. I had only taken the very first steps in my training." He paused and gave a soft, rueful laugh. "I tried to deny what had happened to me for a long time. Which was a bit stupid in hindsight. Blindness is a very difficult thing to deny."

Harry laughed. "Definitely," he then looked curious. "Why did you do that? If you don't mind me asking?"

Tien looked thoughtful. "I'm not sure really. I was very upset and angry at what had happened and I let those emotions just take over. I was blinded when a mine left over from the Muggle War in Vietnam exploded in my face. I was skylarking with some friends of mine, showing off really. We knew that the old minefield was there. I was young, arrogant and foolish, trying to prove that I was a big man." He shook his head sadly and ran a hand over the scars that lined his face. "I paid the price for my stupidity."

"I'm sorry," Harry said, a little shocked at Tien's explanation.

"Don't be," Tien replied dismissively. "Wasn't your fault. I've got no one to blame but myself. You, at least, weren't a victim of your own stupidity."

Harry swallowed and nodded. He still didn't like to think about what had happened. "Yeah. I still wish it hadn't happened."

"We all do," Jun'ko replied softly. "I had a degenerative eye disease that claimed my sight." She then laughed and poked Tien in the ribs. "You know you shouldn't do that, Tien," she said with a small smile then turned back to Harry. "This always happens, you know. Whenever a group of Warriors meets for the first time, the first thing we all do is tell each other our blindness sob stories and try and outdo each other with how terrible they are. We can't seem to help ourselves. We just have to get the woe-is-me stories out first before we can get down to business."

Her comment surprised Harry into laughter and Tien and Nhean joined in.

"She's right, of course," Tien said with amused disgust. "Personally I think we all secretly want to have the most pathetic story and gain the most sympathy from our fellow Warriors."

"So who's got the best one you've heard?" Harry asked cheekily.

"Hmm," Tien mused. "Well, Albus told us yours when he was talking us into sending you Nhean and that wasn't too bad. Jun'ko's is good for sheer sob value." He grinned. "Poor Jun'ko with her degenerative eye disease. If you let her she'll go on and on about how her sight slowly, ever-so-slowly dwindled down to nothing and all she was left with was eternal blackness."

Jun'ko gave him a whack on the arm and laughed. "Oh, shut up, Tien. Like you're any better."

"Hey," Tien replied indignantly. "At least I admit to my own stupidity. That's more than some of our colleagues do."

"True," Jun'ko said tartly. "I think those colleagues should remain nameless though."

"Yes," Tien said dryly. "Far be it for us to spoil Harry's gradual discovery of who they are."

Jun'ko giggled. "Well, Harry, the whole point of this was we wanted to welcome you, as two of your fellow Night Warriors, to the Guild. We haven't had a chance before now. And we hope you won't stay away from the Academy when you finish your schooling in Britain."

"Yes, you should make some time to come here," Tien agreed cheerfully. "There are always new things to learn. No one Master can teach you everything."

Harry grinned at them. "Thank you and yes, I think I will come here." He smiled a little wistfully. "I think I'd like to spend some time with others like me."

The two Warriors beamed. "And try and bring your Battle Guard with you," Tien said enthusiastically. "We'd all love to see how the six of you work together."

"Yes," Jun'ko agreed. "I really envy you and Nhean. It's so hard to find five people who can cooperate to the extent that a Battle Guard needs to actually work. It would be fascinating to meet

these friends of yours."

Harry beamed; he really was very proud of his friends and what they had achieved. "I'll talk to them. Maybe we can get over here after we graduate and before they all start on whatever it is they have planned."

"What do you have planned?" Jun'ko asked curiously.

Harry hesitated. "Well, I had wanted to become an Auror but I'm not sure if I'll be able to do that now." He shrugged. "I don't mind teaching. I've done a bit of that with a Defence group I organised at school." He paused. "I'm not really sure what I want to do now."

"Well, maybe spending a bit of time here at the Academy would be good for you then," Jun'ko said. "It's not like you have to stay away from your friends. As soon as you can apparate, you can commute here quite easily. Or you can just use one of the Guild portkeys."

"Yeah, I guess you're right," Harry said, feeling quite pleased with the idea.

Nhean smiled. "I think you'd enjoy yourself. Now, we'd better get back before Sirius and Remus start champing at the bit."

"Okay," Harry said. "It was good to meet both of you."

"You too," Jun'ko said kindly.

"Likewise," Tien added. "And don't forget about coming back here."

"I won't," Harry said as he took the small wooden statue Nhean was holding. "Bye."

The two Warriors waved as the portkey activated and he was rushed back to the Burrow. He reappeared in the back garden where Sirius, Remus and his friends were still sprawled. He walked over and sat down with them, placing the small statue in front of him on the ground.

"Well, how did it go?" Sirius asked.

"Very interesting," Harry replied. "I met some of the other Night Warriors."

"What were they like," Ginny asked curiously.

"Nice. A little intimidating at first but when we all relaxed they were pretty funny." Harry laughed. "Apparently we fell into the same trap that all Night Warriors do when they first meet. We all told each other about how we were blinded."

"Really?" Ginny asked, a little startled.

Harry laughed again. "Yes, apparently it often turns into a small contest about who has the biggest sob-story."

Remus chuckled from where he lay on the grass. "Do they really do that?"

"Mmm," Harry confirmed as Ginny encouraged him to lie down with his head in her lap. Once he was comfortably settled, she began running her hand through his hair. He sighed contentedly then

continued. "They said mine was pretty good."

The others looked a bit startled and slightly uncomfortable at the topic of conversation and Hermione decided to change it.

"So what did they want?" she asked from where she was leaning against Ron, who was resting against a tree with his arms wrapped around her.

"Just to ask me about the training candidates," Harry replied. "Nhean didn't really know them well and I do so they wanted my opinion on whether they would be able to handle the training."

"So who are they?" Sirius asked lazily.

Harry grinned. "Not telling. It's meant to be a surprise."

"Spoilsport," Sirius grumbled. "I put my name down on the list, I'll have you know. It's been very frustrating waiting for an answer."

"That's because you have no patience," Remus replied dryly.

Sirius opened his mouth to answer then laughed. "Yeah, you're right," he conceded. "I have no patience."

The others laughed and Neville looked over at the two men. "So when are you going to play this prank on Fred and George that I've been hearing so much about?"

"Well, we've had it ready for about a week," Sirius replied with a grin. "But Moony here decided to get himself shot so we had to delay it. Couldn't pull the prank without Moony."

"Yes, because I worked hard to make myself a target," Remus said dryly, throwing a handful of grass at Sirius. "And I enjoyed the silver poisoning so much."

The others chuckled and Neville pressed. "So when are you going to do it?"

"The twins are coming over for dinner tonight, aren't they?" Sirius asked Ron.

The red-head nodded. "Yep, Mum likes them to come over at least once a week and I think they've got some new prototypes they want to show Harry, seeing how he's their 'silent partner'."

The twins had finally confessed to their mother where they had gotten their start-up money. She had been startled and a little disapproving but when Harry had explained his reasoning she had quickly settled down. He had had a point after all. The twins had then formally announced to the family that Harry had a third share in their business and was their 'silent partner'. They had even had all the paperwork drawn up to make it legal. Harry had been a little uncomfortable at the idea at first but it was definitely starting to grow on him now.

"Well, we might do it tonight then," Sirius said slyly.

The students laughed and Ron grinned happily.

"I can't wait," he said with a fair amount of glee. "I've been the butt of their jokes so many times. I'm going to enjoy seeing the positions reversed."

Chapter 11

When everyone gathered around the table that night, there was a certain amount of anticipation in the air. The twins, who were sitting between Sirius and Remus, had immediately picked up on this and were looking around rather nervously. Their gazes rested on the men sitting besides them most of all but the two Marauders were their usual selves and spent their time chatting with everyone. The twins eyed the food in front of them and were unusually cautious about their eating that night. The tension and amusement intensified as the dinner went on though everyone affected not to notice it and the conversations went on as normal. The twins through all of this gradually became quieter and quieter and very, very twitchy and it seemed to be all that Ron could do not to fall off his chair laughing.

Finally they reached dessert and Molly brought out a large treacle tart, much to Harry's delight. She served it out and everyone began eating.

"Great treacle tart, Mrs Weasley," Harry mumbled happily through a mouthful of the dessert.

Molly beamed at him. "Thank you, dear. Don't talk with your mouth full." She was about to comment further when her eyes fell on the twins and she began to laugh.

The others followed her gaze and saw, sitting where the twins had been, two very large and very colourful parrots. Sirius and Remus exchanged smug looks and Sirius turned to the parrot sitting next to him.

"Polly want a cracker?" he said cheerfully.

"Squawk!" the parrot responded. "Polly want a cracker!"

Laughter slowly began to build as Remus turned to the parrot sitting next to him. "Pieces of eight," he said calmly.

"Squawk!" the parrot responded. "Pieces of eight!"

Sirius grinned. "I'm a Slytherin."

The parrot sitting next to him fluffed its feathers. "Squawk! Pieces of eight! I'm a Slytherin! Polly want a cracker!"

The other parrot responded with. "Pieces of eight! Pieces of eight! Squawk!"

Ron, who was laughing so hard tears were starting to run down his face, realised what was happening and leaned over. "I like Draco Malfoy."

The two parrots squawked with alarm.

"Pieces of eight!"

"I like Draco Malfoy!"

"Polly want a cracker!"

"I’m a Slytherin!"

"Squawk! Pieces of eight!"

By this stage everyone was in absolute tears of laughter as the two man-sized parrots looked around helplessly. Ginny leaned around Remus and said, "Green and silver."

The parrot closest to her eyed her dolefully before squawking, "Green and silver! Green and silver!"

Neville then cheered the birds up by suggesting "Go Gryffindor" to them and Luna added, "Ravenclaw, Ravenclaw" to their vocabulary. Molly laughingly came up with "Go to your room" while Arthur thought "Rubber ducky" might be fun and Hermione gave them "I like studying". Then everyone looked at Harry to see what he wanted to add. Harry grinned mischievously and looked at the two birds.

"I solemnly swear I’m up to no good," he said then he added. "Mischief managed."

These two suggestions finally managed to reduce Sirius and Remus to helpless laughter. Then Sirius waved a hand at the two birds and choked out, "I think that’s enough words. They can play with them for now."

The two parrots, who by now were looking quite agitated at the laughter, started squawking again, something which just caused the laughter to continue.

"Squawk! Go to your room!"

"Pieces of eight!"

"I’m a Slytherin!"

"Green and silver!"

"Mischief managed!"

Molly looked over at the two Marauders and wiped a tear from her eye. "How long will it last?" she asked merrily.

"A few hours," Remus chuckled. This caused the two parrots to start squawking even more.

"Go Gryffindor!"

"I like Draco Malfoy!"

"Polly want a cracker!"

"Squawk! I like studying!"

"Rubber ducky! Rubber ducky! Squawk!"

"Pieces of eight!"

Ron managed to get himself under control for a moment and looked at Remus and Sirius with something close to awe. "You two are the best," he said before dissolving into laughter again.

Molly got herself under control and shooed them all out into the living room, man-sized parrots and all. They settled into various chairs and on the floor and herded the transformed twins into one corner. Ron and Sirius immediately broke out a chess set while Hermione retrieved one of her text books. As she came back, she smiled at the parrots. They glared back at her.

"Pieces of eight!"

"I solemnly swear I'm up to no good!"

"That's nice," she said sweetly as everyone laughed again. "But I think we already knew that."

"Squawk! Polly want a cracker!"

"Ravenclaw, Ravenclaw!"

Ginny wiped the tears of laughter from her eyes and settled back against Harry's chest. The two of them were lounging on one of the couches so that Ginny could watch the impending chess game. Harry wrapped his arms around her and placed a kiss on the top of her head.

"Where did you get the idea for this?" Harry asked Sirius and Remus as he gestured towards the twins.

"We got the original idea from the Canary Creams," Remus said with a smile.

"Excellent!" Ron said as he made his first move. "Using their own pranks against them!"

"I agree with that," Neville said with a small laugh. The other Gryffindors grinned at him as the remembered the number of times Neville had fallen for Fred and George's Canary Creams.

"Squawk! I like studying!"

"Go to your room!"

"Yes, we thought it was a good idea too," Remus continued. "And then we decided to add a slightly altered version of Silencio to it. It just stops them from saying anything other than what we wanted them to."

"And then we added another charm that makes them repeat everything that's said to them until the phrase 'I think that's enough words' is said," Sirius chimed in with as he shot a wicked look at the twin parrots. "Don't worry, boys, it will wear off."

"Pieces of eight!"

"I like Draco Malfoy!"

"Squawk! Green and silver!"

"Eventually," Remus chimed in with.

The parrots got a little agitated at this and the volley of squawks and phrases started everyone laughing again. When they settled down, Sirius glanced over at his godson.

"So are you sure you can't tell me what the Guild said about the training?" he asked with a grin.

"Yes, I'm sure," Harry replied with amusement.

"Darn," Sirius said good-naturedly. "Well, if you won't tell me about that, what about these other Night Warriors you met? What were they like?"

Harry settled into the couch a bit more. "I liked them," he said thoughtfully. "And I'd like to think I'll be like them eventually."

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked, looking up from her book.

"They…seem to have dealt with what happened to them," Harry explained. "What made them blind. I mean, they even make jokes about it. I…don't think I could do that right now."

"Well, that's to be expected," Hermione said matter-of-factly. "It's only been a year, after all. They've obviously been blind for much longer than that or they wouldn't be on the Council." She looked kindly at Harry. "You'll get there. Just give it time."

"Yeah," Harry sighed. He rested his cheek on the top of Ginny's head as she gently rubbed his arms where they were wrapped around her.

"Green and silver," one of the parrots said quietly.

"I like studying," the other replied.

"So what were they like?" she asked softly, trying to distract her boyfriend a little. "What were their names?"

Harry was silent for a while then he drew in a breath and let it out. "Jun'ko Watanabe and Nyugen….uh, Dinh Tien," he said.

Remus eyed Harry for a long moment. "So how did they go blind?" he asked calmly.

The others looked at Remus with surprise; blindness was normally a bit of a taboo topic. Remus ignored them and just watched Harry intently. All but Remus were surprised when Harry gave a wry laugh.

"Tien admitted it was all his fault and that he was young, arrogant and stupid and was messing around in an old mine field when one blew up in his face," Harry said with a shake of his head. "I thought it sounded pretty horrifying but he just shrugged it off almost."

"Well, if it happened a long time ago, he's probably had time to adjust to it," Hermione said logically as the parrots chimed in with "Go Gryffindor!" and "Rubber ducky!"

"Yeah, I think you're right," Harry said thoughtfully. "He did say he didn't adjust well at first. Apparently he tried to deny it, which is a bit hard with blindness."

"Yes, that would be rather hard to deny," Luna said dreamily. "It's a bit hard to say 'no, I can see' when you're bumping into walls all the time."

Luna's offhand comment startled laughter out of everyone. The twins seemed to find it funny as

well as they joined in the laughter.

"Mischief managed!"

"Go to your room!"

"Good point," Harry said with a grin. "He still managed it for a while though. He'd barely started his training after a year."

"What about the other Warrior?" Ginny asked with interest.

"Oh, Jun'ko had a degenerative eye disease," Harry replied. "Her eyesight just slowly deteriorated until she was totally blind. Apparently she tells a good sob-story about it. Gets a lot of sympathy."

"You know, that's the weirdest form on one-upmanship I've ever heard of," Sirius said absently as he considered his next move.

Harry laughed. "Yeah, it is. Apparently not all of the Warriors are as honest as Tien though, in admitting their own faults, if that was part of what caused their blinding. They wouldn't tell me who those Warriors are though; apparently I have to find out for myself." He paused. "They suggested I spend some time at the Academy after I graduate from Hogwarts."

"Are you going to?" Ginny asked hesitantly.

"Yeah, I think so," Harry mused. "It'd be nice to spend some time around people who've been through the same thing I have. And Tien said that there are other trainers there I could learn things from. His actual words were: 'No one master can teach you everything'. It'd be interesting to see what else there is to learn."

"So you're going to leave?" Ginny whispered.

"I like studying," one of the parrots observed sagely.

"Polly want a cracker," the other replied matter-of-factly.

Her tone finally seemed to register with Harry and he hugged her tightly. "No! No, of course not."

"But you said you were going to go to the Academy?" she retorted. "Isn't it in Tokyo?"

"Yes, it is," Harry said calmly. "But that doesn't mean I have to stay there all the time. I can commute, either by apparating or by using portkeys. Besides the Guild wants to meet the Battle Guard as well. They're pretty impressed with what we've done."

Ginny blushed and settled down against Harry again. "Oh, I…didn't realise that."

Harry grinned and tipped her head back so he could kiss her. "I said we'd all come. You all should have some time after we graduate and before you all head off to whatever you have planned and before Ginny and Luna start school again."

"We've got a few weeks," Hermione said after a few moments of thought. She then frowned at Harry. "But what are you planning on doing?"

Harry shrugged moodily. "I don't know. I had planned on becoming an Auror but I don't think that's going to be an option. I like teaching the DA but I don't know whether teaching's really an option either. That's why I thought I'd spend some time at the Academy after I graduated; see what its like. Maybe I'll come up with something. I don't really want to just sit around doing nothing."

"What about Quidditch?" Ron asked. "You're damn good at that!"

The twins seemed to agree with this.

"Go Gryffindor!"

"Ravenclaw, Ravenclaw"

Harry considered the idea. "I…suppose it's a thought."

"It's more than a thought, Harry!" Ron said indignantly, taking his attention away from the chess game for a moment. "Look, the fact that Charlie beat you is a good sign. It means that your Oversight isn't cheating. You just see the snitch a little differently from everyone else. It still just comes down to your skill against the other Seeker's skill."

"Mischief managed!"

"Go to your room!"

"Not right now," Harry said absently to the parrot as he rolled the thought over in his mind. "You know, you might just have a good idea there, Ron. But how do I do it?"

"Don't worry about it," Ron said easily as he turned back to the chess game. "Scouts from all of the teams come to the school Quidditch games all the time. They don't make a lot of noise about it but they're there. How do you think Oliver Wood got recruited by Puddlemere? Just play well; they'll make the approach to you. Probably towards the end of the year."

Harry looked over at his godfather and guardian. "Well, what do you two think about this?"

Sirius grinned at him. "Harry, whatever you want to do, we'll support you."

"Exactly," Remus added with a smile. "I think it's a good idea and I think you'd enjoy yourself."

"Go Gryffindor!"

"Squawk! Go Gryffindor!"

"I think Fred and George approve as well," Ginny laughed. "You know, I'm sure they'd be able to give you a job if nothing else pans out."

The two parrots began bobbing up and down excitedly.

"Pieces of eight! Pieces of eight!"

"I like Draco Malfoy! Green and silver!"

Harry laughed. "You know, you might be right."

Draco sat in a comfortable chair in the larger of the two parlours in the house. Bella and the remaining Death Eaters sat in front of him. He leaned back in his chair and eyed them from underneath lowered eyelids.

Well, what do you think? He thought at the Dark Lord.

It could have been worse, I suppose, Voldemort answered dryly. It could be Crabbe and Goyle in front of us.

Draco chuckled mentally, True, the junior versions have apparently attached themselves to Pansy.

Isn't she lucky, the Dark Lord responded. Still at least this lot are marginally intelligent. We can work with them. Be careful of Bellatrix though. She's insane.

I am aware of that, Draco thought irritably. I can handle her.

A dark chuckle threaded through his mind. Oh, really? came the disbelieving reply.

Draco snarled mentally and directed his full attention at the others in the room. "Welcome to Malfoy Manor and thank you for coming," he said smoothly.

The Death Eaters nodded nervously. "Why did you want to speak to us?" one asked belligerently.

Antonin Dolohov, the Dark Lord whispered in his mind. The highest ranking survivor.

"I wanted to know whether you wanted to spend the rest of your life hiding in crevices or whether you wanted to aim for glory?" Draco replied lazily.

Dolohov's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean? The Dark Lord is dead and so is your father."

"That is irrelevant," Draco said dismissively. "I intend to succeed where they failed." He ignored the snarl that came from the Dark Lord and glared at the Death Eater. "And I am not my father."

The other Death Eaters looked between the two of them and Draco realised that Dolohov was the important one. If he could bring him over to his side, the others would follow. He just wished that Tybalt Parkinson had been able to attend this evening. The man was firmly in his camp; Draco's acceptance of his daughter sealing his approval.

Dolohov sneered. "And what have you done, boy? Apart from fail miserably in the Battle at Hogwarts."

Draco chuckled lightly, ignoring the slur. "How many of you have dared to act against Potter since the Dark Lord fell?"

The others looked confused and Bella smirked. Dolohov looked at him suspiciously. "What do you mean?"

"What do I mean?" Draco said airily. "I mean how many of you have taken direct action against the wizard who killed our Lord? How many of you have tried to avenge our Lord?"

"No one can get near Potter or those he considers his family," Dolohov said dismissively. "Dumbledore makes sure of that."

"Really?" Draco said silkily. "If Potter and his…family are so well protected, how was I able to take a pot shot at the werewolf so easily? I could have had Potter as well, if I hadn't wanted to amuse myself first."

Dolohov stared at him in shock as the other Death Eaters murmured amongst themselves. "How? What?"

Dolohov never was very imaginative, Voldemort said snidely.

Draco chuckled, both at Voldemort's comment and the dumbfounded look on Dolohov's faces. "Because I am prepared to take chances. I learnt well from our Lord."

"You killed the werewolf?" one of the other Death Eaters said eagerly.

"No," Draco sneered. "Why would I do that? I wanted Potter to know I could get to his family whenever I wanted, not to goad him into coming after my blood."

More murmurs came from the Death Eaters and respect slowly began to crawl across Antonin Dolohov's face. It was quickly replaced with suspicion.

"So what do you want with us?" he asked warily.

Draco rolled his eyes. "I need people, Dolohov," he said irritably. "I must return to Durmstrang in a couple of weeks. Not even they will allow me to wander in and out as I please. It's an annoying restriction but I do need to get my NEWT qualifications. Since I cannot move freely, I need people who can."

Dolohov nodded thoughtfully. "And what exactly would we be doing?"

"Not much at the moment," Draco admittedly candidly. "My move against Potter, while successful, also attracted Dumbledore's attention. I need to play the good little boy while he is still watching me so annoyingly closely. I should have more work for you after the school year starts. He'll be busy with his work then and…well, let's just say I have a distraction all ready for him."

"But later?" Dolohov pressed.

"Ah, later?" Draco drawled. "Later we are going to get Potter and have our revenge. Who knows? Perhaps we may be able to use him to resurrect the Dark Lord?" He smiled at the Death Eaters and they shifted nervously at the look in his eyes.

Dolohov hadn't seen the look however and he smiled smoothly at Draco. "I think that is acceptable. Plans always need time to come to fruition. If we wait until after the New Year that will undoubtedly give Dumbledore time to calm down and relax." He looked satisfied. "I will join you, Draco."

The others slowly echoed Dolohov's words and Draco smiled with satisfaction. He summoned a house elf and had the creature distribute the wine that he had arranged earlier. He stood and Antonin Dolohov walked over and saluted him with the glass.

"To a long and prosperous partnership," he said smoothly.

Draco inclined his head regally and saluted the other man. "Indeed."

"Do you wish me to take charge of that lot?" Dolohov asked, gesturing with his head towards the other Death Eaters.

Draco eyed him blandly for a moment then nodded once. "If you wouldn't mind," he said smoothly. "They know you better than I. Perhaps it will be easier for them to take orders from you at first."

Dolohov nodded smoothly. "Is there anything you wish for us to do right now?" he asked respectfully.

"Yes, Antonin," Draco replied. "I want you to find out everything you can about the Guild of the Night. Potter is mixed up with them somehow."

"Of course, Draco," Dolohov said with a short bow. "Consider it done." He swallowed the rest of the wine in his glass. "I shall get the search underway immediately. No point in delaying." He bowed again and collected all the other Death Eaters except for Bella. They quickly departed through the floo, leaving Draco and Bella alone. The madwoman looked over at Draco with a small curve to her lips.

"Alone again, Draco?" she purred as she sashayed her way across the room.

Draco watched her appreciatively then his gaze became cool. "Get out," he snarled.

Bella's expression became mutinous and she slithered up to Draco and draped herself around him. She nibbled lightly on his ear. "You don't mean that," she purred.

Draco pulled away from her and slapped her hard enough to knock her to the floor. "I said, get out!" he growled.

Bella's face paled and she glared back at him from her position on the floor. She climbed gracefully to her feet and stalked out of the room, gesticulating and muttering to herself. Draco watched her go then chuckled into his wine glass.

You play a dangerous game, Voldemort said warningly.

I know what I'm doing, Draco replied dismissively. In case you didn't notice, I never let my guard down when she is in the room.

You still play a dangerous game. She may be insane but she is still powerful.

I know what I'm doing, Draco repeated.

Chapter 12

The rest of the holidays flew by without further incident. Harry and his friends spent most of their time lounging around together or playing Quidditch. Hermione had insisted they all have their homework complete so a few days were spent finishing that and Harry and his Battle Guard continued their exercises. Sirius joined them every morning and it was during one of these morning exercise times that the owl arrived announcing his acceptance into the Guild training program. That particular training session was never finished due to Sirius' exuberant celebrations.

Their obligatory pre-school trip to Diagon Alley had passed with more fuss than Harry would have preferred. Hermione had kept them all on track with their shopping, making sure they had gotten everything they needed for school before they were allowed to head off to Quality Quidditch Supplies or Florian Fortescue's for ice cream. She had worn her Head Girl badge and had insisted that Harry wear his Head Boy badge. Harry had been resistant to that at first, remembering Percy's antics before the start of Third Year but had eventually given in, for no other reason than to stop Hermione's pestering. He had received at lot of congratulations and comments from other students throughout the day and by halfway through the trip was really wishing he had stood up to Hermione a bit better. Ron had consoled him with the thought that nobody could stand up to Hermione when she was on a crusade and he should be glad she hadn't insisted they wear their school uniforms. Harry had groaned and laughed; he had to agree with Ron on that one. They had finally managed to get home and had collapsed, exhausted, in the living room before being chivvied by Mrs Weasley to get up to their rooms and unpack their bags.

They were now all fussing around, dragging their trunks and various cages and baskets downstairs in preparation for the trip to Kings Cross. Sirius and Remus were helping…or rather Remus was helping, Sirius was getting in everyone's way. The two men were apparating up to Hogwarts later in the day, much to Harry's disgust. He had wanted them to come on the train. Remus had grinned at that and said that one time of ruining their fun was enough. Arthur had once again organised cars from the Ministry with the aid of Dumbledore; what had happened to Harry and Remus over the holidays had prompted the Headmaster to take this action. Mrs Weasley was rather relieved; she hadn't known how they were going to get everyone to the station. They finally managed to get their trunks into the boots of the cars and everyone climbed into a car and they set off for King's Cross.

There was a great deal of smothered mirth in the car with Harry and Ginny. The two of them were still trying to live down the events on Ginny's birthday. She had decided that turnabout was fair play and had claimed her own 'what the birthday girl wants, the birthday girl gets' kiss from Harry. Unfortunately, she had decided to do this when they had both been left alone in the kitchen. The resulting kiss had gotten a touch heated and when Mrs Weasley had walked back into the kitchen she had found her only daughter sitting in Harry's lap, their arms wrapped around each other and their lips locked together. While this was something she was quite happy to see, she was less than happy to see her only daughter wiggling in Harry's lap in such a manner nor was she pleased to see that Harry's hands were underneath her daughter's shirt and heading north. Her subsequent scolding of the two had brought everyone in the house into the kitchen to spectate and comment, much to the embarrassment of the two teens in question. Sirius' comments in particular had been both highly funny and extraordinarily embarrassing. They had also found themselves with a great deal of company in the last weeks of the holidays.

Harry picked up Ginny's hand and wove his fingers in between hers, determinedly ignoring the

amused looks from Ron, Hermione and Remus. Ginny smiled softly at him and leaned into his shoulder. Harry looked over at Ron and Hermione and rolled his eyes at the expressions on their faces.

"What?" he said irritably. "Like you two have never done that!"

Hermione blushed and Ron's eyes widened then the red-head laughed.

"Well, that is true, mate," he said with a grin. "But we were never silly enough to try it in the kitchen where Mum could walk in at any moment."

"Geez, get carried away just once," Harry grumbled. "Besides it's not like your Mum hasn't wanted this to happen since the first time I met her."

Ginny dissolved into giggles and buried her face into Harry's shoulder as the others in the car laughed.

"Okay, I'll give you that," Ron said between laughs. "But Harry, Mum didn't quite want you doing that with her baby girl in her kitchen until you two were…oh, I don't know, married!"

Harry stared at Ron for a moment then finally the absurdity of the situation got to him and he started laughing. "So she'll still be scolding us when we've been married for 80 years and are old and decrepit?"

"Yes," Ron said as he finally dissolved into helpless laughter.

Ginny lifted her head and looked up at Harry. "We're going to be married for 80 years?" she asked with a grin.

Harry froze for a second. "Er, yes?" he said a little warily.

"Oh, good," Ginny replied calmly, inwardly amused at Harry's reaction.

Harry closed his eyes for a moment then decided not to comment any further; he just seemed to be getting himself into trouble. He desperately searched for a different topic of conversation.

"So what exactly do we have to do on the train today?" he asked Hermione with a certain amount of trepidation. He wasn't exactly looking forward to this.

"We have to organise the prefects to do regular patrols of the corridors," she said patiently, having told him this a number of times already. "We'll have to do a couple of patrols as well, of course. Otherwise not too much. We'll probably have a meeting with the Heads of House and Professor Dumbledore tomorrow after classes."

"Yeah, okay," Harry said with a worried frown.

"You'll be fine," Remus said soothingly. "James had no problems and he wasn't a prefect before becoming Head Boy either." He paused. "Of course, he had Lily to help him but that's okay, you've got Hermione."

A wry grin broke over Harry's face and he looked over at the new Head Girl. "Sorry, Hermione. I've been pestering you about this a bit, haven't I? I'm just nervous."

Hermione laughed and patted Harry's knee. "That's okay. I'd sort of worked that out already. You'll be fine, Harry. You're one of the heroes of the Battle of Hogwarts. I don't think people are going cause that much trouble."

Harry smiled a little uncomfortably; he still didn't really like the idea of being considered a hero. He looked over at Remus. "Are you sure you and Siri won't come up on the train?"

Remus chuckled. "We've still got a few things to organise and besides you don't want two of your professors spoiling your trip up. I've already done that once."

"Remus," Harry said firmly. "You didn't spoil our trip in Third Year. In fact, you were very useful even if you were asleep most of the time."

Ron chuckled. "Yeah, not even Malfoy was stupid enough to try anything under the nose of a teacher."

Harry laughed. "Exactly and besides…" He paused and shifted slightly, causing Ginny to look up at him with concern. "You were very helpful when that Dementor came around."

There was silence in the car for a moment then Harry shrugged. "And anyway, it's hard to think of you and Siri being teachers now." He gave a shy grin. "You won't take points if I accidentally call you Remy in class, will you?"

That question startled Remus into laughter. "Well, no, I won't but do try not to. It might undermine classroom discipline."

Everyone laughed and they settled into a more companionable silence. Finally Hermione sighed.

"It's hard to believe it's our last year," she said quietly.

"Yeah, I know," Ron said, putting his arm around her shoulders. "Seems like First Year was only yesterday."

Harry was silent for a moment longer then he said with a small grin, "I wonder what happened to that troll?"

Ron and Hermione stared at him in surprise for a moment then burst out laughing.

"I hope it's living a good life somewhere," Hermione said giggling. "We really do owe it a lot."

"True," Ron said with a wide smile. "The three of us wouldn't have become friends if not for that bloody troll."

"Yes, after all I was a 'nightmare', wasn't I?" Hermione said tartly.

Ron blushed; he was still a bit embarrassed about that comment. "Yeah, well, I…didn't mean it that way," he stammered. "You'd just…"

"Shown you up in class in front of everyone," Hermione said wryly. "Yes, I know. I was a bit of a know-it-all back then, wasn't I? I was just so nervous. I wanted to know everything and I wanted to know it now. Didn't occur to me that I was being a grind."

"Actually, that night was your first lie," Harry said with a grin. "We worked pretty fast to corrupt you. And we were so proud when you broke your first rule willingly."

Hermione blushed and Harry, Ron, Ginny and Remus laughed. They then settled back down and spent the rest of the trip to Kings Cross in easy conversation. The arrival at the train station was another exercise in organised chaos but they all managed to get onto the platform and the train in time. Harry then jumped off the train and walked over to where Sirius and Remus were standing. He stood in front of them a little nervously. He knew he would be seeing them that night but he was reluctant to leave. The two men seemed to understand what he was feeling.

Sirius pulled him into a hug. "See you soon, Pronglet," he said quietly. "Have fun on the trip and don't let Hermione give too many detentions."

Harry gave a strangled laugh as he hugged his godfather tightly. He then turned to Remus and was drawn into his arms.

"Enjoy your last trip to Hogwarts," Remus said softly. "We'll see you tonight."

Harry pulled back and smiled at the two men then as he heard the whistle; he gripped his cane tightly and jumped back on the train. He hurried back to the compartment they had appropriated and waved at Sirius and Remus until they had left the station. He then turned to Hermione and Ron and raised an eyebrow.

"Well, I suppose we'd better go," he said, gesturing for Hermione to lead.

Ron clapped him on the shoulder and the three of them made their way to the front of the train to the prefects' compartment. They were the first to arrive and Harry and Hermione had a quick conversation as the other prefects trickled in. When Hermione indicated that everyone was present, Harry cleared his throat to get their attention.

"Erm, well, hello everyone," he said nervously. "Um, I'm Harry Potter and I'm the Head Boy this year."

There were a few snorts of laughter from the prefects and Hannah Abbott, who was a Hufflepuff prefect, smiled at him.

"Harry, I don't think anyone, other than some muggle-born First Years, doesn't know who you and your friends are by now."

Harry blushed as Ron and Hermione grinned.

"Um, yes, well," Harry stammered then he stopped and laughed at himself. "Okay, let's start this again so I can stop being an idiot." Blaise Zabini and Millicent Bulstrode, the new Slytherin Seventh Year prefects, snorted with amusement and Harry grinned at them. "And thank you for the input from the Slytherins. Now, most of you probably know better than I do what has to be done right now. So I think I'll let Hermione handle that part. I just wanted to congratulate you all on being named prefects for this year and I hope we can all work together well. If you are having any problems in your role, please come and see me or Hermione and we'll do our best to help you." He paused for a beat. "Well, perhaps it might be best to see Hermione; I've got no idea what the job entails, I'll be muddling along with the rest of you." Everyone laughed and Hermione smacked him

on the shoulder. "Just kidding. Seriously, if you are having problems, don't hesitate to come and speak to us. We'll do what we can to help. Now, I think I'll hand over to Hermione so she can get us organised."

Harry sat down to a smattering of applause and a few laughs and amused comments. Hermione then stood and quickly organised the roster for patrolling the train. Much to the amusement of the others, she exercised her right as Head Girl and rostered herself and Harry to the first patrol and Ron to the one after that. The rest of the shifts were sorted fairly amicably and Hermione called the meeting closed. Some of the prefects remained in the compartment while others headed out to join friends elsewhere. Harry and Hermione walked out to start their patrol while Ron headed back to the compartment they had claimed.

Harry and Hermione slowly wandered down the corridor of the train, chatting idly with each other and greeting students. They had just finished greeting a small group of new First Years and were walking down the corridor when Hermione shook her head.

"Were we that small when we started?" she asked incredulously.

"Yes," Harry said blandly. "Though I think I was smaller. I think I'm always going to be smaller."

Hermione looked over at Harry and laughed. He had been slowly growing over the last couple of years but wasn't really threatening to get much taller than his current height of about five feet ten inches. Hermione wasn't that much shorter than him and it was a source of frustration for Harry, particularly when Ron had shot up over six feet. Still, if he did end up deciding to play professional Quidditch, an idea that was becoming more and more attractive, he wouldn't want to get too much bigger. Seekers needed to be small and light.

"Well, well, if it isn't Potty and the Mudblood," came a simpering, sneering voice from behind them.

Harry and Hermione froze for a second before remembering that Draco wasn't at Hogwarts anymore and was therefore not on the train. They exchanged glances that were both curious and exasperated and turned around to see who had spoken. Standing in the doorway of one of the compartments they had just passed was Pansy Parkinson. Crabbe and Goyle could be seen standing just inside the doorway.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Hello, Pansy. How are you?" he said with as much politeness he could muster.

Pansy ignored the pleasantry and sneered again. "Going for a stroll with your girlfriend are you, Potter?"

Harry sighed; he'd rather thought this sort of thing was over once Draco had left. Apparently Pansy felt a need to step up into the gap. "No, Pansy. I'm patrolling the train with the Head Girl because that's what the Head Boy does."

Pansy's eyes narrowed and she quickly ducked back into her compartment slamming the door closed behind her. Harry watched her retreat with surprise then turned to face Hermione, whose expression mirrored his own.

"Well, that was quick," Harry said with a small shrug. "Draco was usually a little more resilient than

that."

Hermione smiled. "Yes, but we weren't Head Boy and Girl then. We can give detentions, you know."

Harry grinned. "Ah, well, that explains it."

Hermione smacked him on the arm and they continued their patrol. After about forty minutes they headed back to their compartment and rousted out Ron, who headed off with a minimum of grumbling to find Blaise Zabini for their patrol. The rest of trip passed in a combination of talk, catching up with friends and games of chess and exploding snap. Far sooner than they expected they were changing into their school robes and climbing off the train. Harry and Hermione stayed on the platform for a moment to make sure everything was going well. They gave a wave to Hagrid as he ushered the First Years to one end of the platform and then scurried off to the carriages. As they rode up, Harry looked out the window, seeing the massive wash of energy colours that was Hogwarts and he felt an odd pang in his chest. This was the last time he would do this. Next year he would be out in the world and would have to make something of himself. There would be no more Hogwarts, no more messing around in the dorms, no more sneaking off to do stupid things and trying not to get caught. He started as he felt a hand on his arm and he turned to see Ginny smiling at him sympathetically. She didn't say anything, just snuggled in closer to him and he wrapped an arm around her shoulders and continued staring out of the carriage window.

When they climbed out of the carriages, Harry looked around and saw Ron, Hermione and Neville wearing what he imagined would be the kind of expression he had. Apparently the thoughts that had occurred to him had also occurred to his friends. They made their way into the school and then into the Great Hall before sitting down at their various House tables. Harry looked up at the teacher's table and grinned and waved at Remus, Sirius and Master Nhean. He looked down the table and nodded a polite greeting to Professor Snape. The Potions Master returned the nod and Harry turned back to his friends. They chatted amongst themselves until Professor McGonagall brought in the latest batch of First Years.

Ron shook his wonderingly. "When did the First Years get so bloody small?" he whispered to Harry.

"I think we grew up somewhere along the way," Harry whispered back.

Both boys fell silent as Professor McGonagall brought the Sorting Hat out and it began to sing.

> Last year I warned you all
> To cleave to one another
> Some of you listened to my words
> Some thought it too much bother
> The danger has not passed
> It has grown in a brand new way
> Darkness wells once more
> And threatens night and day
> And now it falls to me
> To sort you and divide you
> For this it what the Founders wished
> And it surely suits me too
> But it must not be lost
> That though you be parted anon
> All are part of Hogwarts
> And none do stand alone.
> The bold and true I will send
> To stand in Gryffindor's place.
> For this is what he favoured
> To these he gave his grace.
> Hufflepuff shall claim all those
> Who value hard work and true
> But doubt not the hardy badgers
> For they will receive their due
> The intelligent and wise will wend
> Their way to the raven's lair
> But Ravenclaw's must see beyond
> Else let everyone else beware
> Noble Slytherin has returned
> To the values Salazar most prized
> Cunning and sly, seeing all that is there
> Let you not be once more divided
> And that is how I shall part you
> And send you to where you will thrive
> But remember you are but one of a whole
> Else darkness will come alive.

A stunned silence fell in the Hall as everyone exchanged startled glances. Harry merely looked at his friends and sighed. The Hat's song did not surprise him at all; Voldemort was still around, albeit

part of Draco, and the danger was still there. Whispers began to start around the Hall as people peered over and saw the impassive reaction by Harry and his friends. Professor McGonagall cleared her throat and began calling out the names of the first years. Harry ignored this and looked up at the teacher's table. He swore under his breath as he realised he was far enough away that his Oversight would not allow him to tell whether or not Sirius and Remus thought the song was as significant as he did. Then he caught the hand signal Remus was using. It was the one that meant 'later' and Harry relaxed and turned back to his friends.

"Well, that was interesting," Ron said quietly. "It seems the Sorting Hat knows Voldemort isn't dead as well."

"Well, it does live in the Headmaster's office," Hermione said logically. "You would expect it to know such things. It had a similar theme to last year though. The school has to stick together in order to come through this."

"I thought we did that," Neville said dryly. "The Slytherins were very helpful."

"Some of the Slytherins were very helpful," Ginny pointed out. "Pansy and her group actually tried to prevent Blaise and the others from getting to the Battle."

Harry considered this for a moment. "I think we need to talk to Blaise and Millicent. I suspect we're going to need to keep a close eye on Pansy."

Lavender, who had been listening to this, spoke up. "Particularly when you consider the news," she said knowingly.

"What news?" Harry asked blankly.

"Haven't you heard? Pansy and Draco are betrothed," Lavender said in surprise. "Apparently it was in the works last year but Draco getting expelled kind of stalled things but it was in the Daily Prophet social section during the summer. The betrothal has been announced and they'll marry after they finish school."

Harry and his friends exchanged glances.

"Isn't that interesting?" Hermione breathed. "Thank you, Lavender, you've been most helpful."

Lavender beamed and turned back to watch the sorting with Parvati Patil.

Hermione leaned forwards. "We've really got to keep an eye on her now," she said urgently. "If Draco has any plans for something to happen at Hogwarts then he's going to use Pansy."

"Good point," Harry said grimly. "Remus signalled to me that he wants to talk to me later. I'll make sure I bring that up when I see him."

Their conversation was brought to a halt at this point as the Sorting Hat finished its job and they all turned their attention to Dumbledore as he stood.

"Welcome all of you to another year at Hogwarts," the Headmaster said with a gentle smile. "Tuck in."

Food suddenly appeared on the tables and the noise levels rose significantly as everyone concentrated on feeding themselves and catching up with everyone else. After the first pangs of hunger had been assuaged, Seamus leaned over.

"Hey, Harry. I don't suppose you know what the Sorting Hat was talking about and does it have anything to do with what happened on your birthday?"

Harry swallowed his current mouthful. "Yes and yes," he said with a small smile. "Voldemort isn't dead. Mind you, he isn't quite alive either." There were baffled looks from Seamus and the others who had been listening in. Harry continued. "Look, I don't want to go any further. I'm not exactly sure what Dumbledore wants to do with this. I'll probably be speaking with him either tonight or tomorrow and I'll be able to tell you more at the first DA meeting."

The other Gryffindors frowned and nodded and they all turned back to their dinners. After the last dessert had disappeared, Dumbledore once again stood up.

"Well, now that we are all satisfied, it is time for a few start of term notices," the Headmaster said benignly. "First, I would remind you all that the Forbidden Forest is indeed forbidden. Those venturing in will not be welcomed by the denizens. Mr Filch has asked me to remind you that magic is forbidden in the corridors between classes and that the list of banned items may be found on the door of his office. I understand it is quite a lengthy list these days." The Headmaster's eyes twinkled as he continued. "I would like you all to welcome Professor Sirius Black who will be teaching Astronomy this year due to the unfortunate death of Professor Sinistra last year." The Headmaster was forced to pause here as the clapping and, from the Gryffindor table in particular, cheering rang out. When it died down, Dumbledore continued. "And I would also like to congratulate Mr Harry Potter and Miss Hermione Granger on being named Head Boy and Girl this year. I am sure that you will all take your lead from these two fine students. Now, I believe it is time we were all in our beds so off you go."

Harry caught Sirius' small wave and had a quick discussion with Hermione before heading up towards the teacher's table. He was slowed in his progress by the number of students who intercepted him to offer their congratulations and by the time he got there, the Great Hall was mostly empty. The first thing he did was hug his godfather and guardian and the three of them waited while Dumbledore saw off the last of the uninvolved teachers. Harry waited patiently, standing happily between Sirius and Remus, with Sirius' arm around his shoulders. Snape came up and joined them and did Master Nhean. When the Headmaster had finished, he walked over to them and then led them up to his office.

The all sat down and before anything else could be said or done, Harry said rather bluntly, "What do you want me to tell them regarding Voldemort? I've already had a few questions after that song the Hat sang."

"Tell them the truth," Albus said calmly. "There is nothing to be gained by concealing the truth and it may just make young Mr Malfoy pause a little in his actions."

"I think we should keep an eye on Pansy as well," Harry said quietly.

"Why?" Snape asked.

"You did know she's gotten betrothed to Draco over the summer?" Harry asked.

Snape blinked and shook his head. "I do not read the social pages, Mr Potter," he said archly. "And it seems that certain social circles are no longer open to me."

"Well, she has, according to Lavender and if anyone would know, she would," Harry said dryly. "I'm sure Draco will have asked her to try and cause a bit of trouble here if the train trip was any indication. And if he does move against Hermione and I, then I daresay Pansy will be helping him."

"What happened on the train?" Sirius demanded.

Harry snorted with amusement. "Not much really. She made a few insulting comments like Malfoy used to but she backed off pretty quickly when she found out Hermione and I are Head Girl and Boy. She didn't seem to like the idea of detention." Harry paused. "I didn't even know we could give detentions."

"It is not something to be abused, Mr Potter," Snape said sternly.

Harry grinned. "I wouldn't do that, Professor. Hermione would kill me…then she'd resurrect me and kill me again."

Snorts of laughter came from Sirius and Remus, Albus' eyes twinkled and Snape's lips twitched. Master Nhean chuckled quietly then looked over at Harry.

"I think you should call in the Guild," he said softly.

Harry looked at him with surprise. "But nothing's happened yet," he objected.

"On the contrary, I think the Sorting Hat's song was very significant," Nhean replied firmly. "I think something is going to happen and happen soon. And the sooner we can get the Night Warriors accustomed to the castle, the more useful they will be."

Harry thought about that for a moment as Albus caught Nhean's attention. "Precisely how many Warriors were you planning on bringing here? I must ask that you do not alarm anyone prematurely."

"Two," Nhean replied firmly. "Only two, Albus. I think with Harry, his Battle Guard, myself and the four Ministry approved trainees, we will only need a minimum of reinforcement at this time."

"Very well then," Albus said. "If Harry agrees to this, I have no objection."

Nhean turned back to his young apprentice. "I was planning on asking Jun'ko Watanabe and Nyugen Dinh Tien if that is any help. I think I will want Council members here in case we need to make some snap decisions and you have at least met those two."

Harry remembered to two older Night Warriors he had met and he nodded. "Alright. I liked them and I think they won't have any problems fitting in around here."

"Good," Nhean replied. "I'll make the arrangements." He paused. "I'll also arrange for you to train with them. I think you might find the change interesting and challenging."

Harry perked up at this idea and he nodded eagerly.

Dumbledore chuckled at his eager expression and stood. "Well, now that we've settled that, I think

it’s time we all went to bed. Harry, the password for Gryffindor Tower is 'Portable Swamp'."

Harry nodded and they all left the office. Harry walked along with Sirius and Remus as far as the entrance to the Tower where he gave then a hug, said goodnight and crawled through the entrance hole.

Chapter 13

Pansy sat at the Slytherin table surrounded by her small group of cohorts. Crabbe and Goyle sat on either side of her and Theodore Nott and Tracey Davis sat opposite. There was a significant gap between them and the others in their House. Normally this would have irritated Pansy but today she was quite pleased about it. She gestured for Nott and Tracey to lean forward and signalled for Crabbe and Goyle to keep watch for anyone who might overhear.

"Draco has given me a task," she said calmly. "Will you help me carry it out?"

"What kind of task?" Nott asked. "And how is Draco?"

"Draco is fine," Pansy purred possessively. "Very fine. And the task he gave me is the one he was unable to carry out last year. Get rid of Snape."

Both Nott and Tracey's eyes widened.

"That…won't be easy," Tracey said thoughtfully.

"You will help me then," Pansy said with a pleased expression.

"Yes, of course," Tracey said with a malicious smirk. "The man betrayed our Lord and for Dumbledore of all people."

Pansy smiled at the younger girl then gave Nott an arch look. "And you?"

Nott considered the idea for a moment. "Yeah, why not? It'll be a hell of a challenge." He paused. "And what do we get out of this?"

"Draco's favour," Pansy said calmly. "My favour and I will be Draco's lady after we graduate. Draco has plans for what remains of the Death Eaters. Succeed in this and you will be well rewarded in the new organisation."

The other two Slytherins nodded, pleased smiles on their faces. Then they drifted off into thought.

"We can't use poison," Tracey said thoughtfully. "He's a Potions Master. He'd be able to detect anything we could easily get our hands on."

"True," Nott agreed. "And we can't use something like the Killing Curse or any other Dark spell. The first thing Dumbledore will do is examine the wands of anyone he suspects and he'll use the Priori Incantatem. I, for one, have no desire to examine the interior of Azkaban."

Tracey looked over at Pansy who had been watching the brief discussion with amusement. "You've already got an idea, haven't you, Pansy?"

Pansy gave a tinkling laugh. "Oh yes. I've been thinking about this for most of the holidays. I finally found the perfect thing to use among my father's possessions. I have it concealed in my trunk in my room."

Tracey Davis and Theodore Nott leaned forward with curious looks on their faces.

"What is it?" Nott asked. "Some kind of creature?"

"Oh, no, far more insidious than that," Pansy said smugly. "And you were wrong, Tracey, we will be able to poison him because that is what I found, a poison we can use."

"What kind?" Tracey asked incredulously. "He's a Potions Master. He'll be able to detect anything we put in his food or drink and how would we get it in there anyway?"

Pansy smirked. "Who says it's something you drink?" When the others looked at her with surprise and confusion she relented. "It's something that some relative of mine developed," she said airily. "It's a contact poison that is absorbed by the skin and it's in a bottle of ink."

"How quickly does it act?" Nott asked with a delighted smile.

"That's the only downside to it," Pansy said with a small pout. "It's fairly slow-acting. It needs to build up in the system then when there is a sufficient amount present it causes wracking pains, nausea, muscle cramping and a rather slow and painful death."

"Is there an antidote to it?" Tracey asked practically.

"Yes," Pansy admitted, "but it takes three weeks to brew. By the time most people realise they've been poisoned and work out what the poison is, they just don't have the time to brew the antidote before they die."

"Okay," Tracey said thoughtfully. "There is a risk that Snape will be able to figure out what it is earlier but I daresay now that Draco is gone, he's probably the only one in the castle likely to be able to brew the antidote. If this poison acts the way it does, even if he manages to hold on long enough to try brewing it, he probably won't be able to do it physically." She paused and thought through the idea some more. "I like it, Pansy. It's brilliant. Let's do it."

Pansy preened under the praise then sobered. "We'll have to be very careful when we use it to write our assignments. We don't want to go the same way as the traitor after all."

Both Tracey and Nott nodded vigorously in agreement and their conversation drifted into other topics.

Harry hurried along the corridor towards the staff meeting room. He had been caught up in some new exercises that Master Nhean was teaching him and had lost track of time and was now in danger of running late for his meeting with the staff. He reached down and pressed the button on the side of the watch Bill and Charlie had given him for his birthday. Like the clock that Madam Pomfrey had given him, the watch spoke the time but it had been charmed so that it was only audible to his ears. When he heard the time, he swore quietly and put on a little more speed. He reached the meeting room with only minutes to spare, flung the door open and rushed in to find most of the teachers and Hermione already there. He quickly dropped down into the seat next to his friend and tried to get his breathing under control, while also trying to ignore Hermione's faintly disapproving look and Sirius and Remus' amused expressions.

Finally he wasn't able to ignore his friend any longer. "Sorry, Hermione," he whispered. "I got caught up with my work with Master Nhean."

Hermione’s expression softened slightly. "That’s okay, Harry. I shouldn’t be too harsh; you are actually a little early after all."

"Thank you for noticing that," Harry said dryly.

Hermione went to reply but the Headmaster and Professors McGonagall and Snape walked in and she quickly shut her mouth. Once everyone was seated, the Headmaster looked around and smiled.

"Welcome everyone," he said cheerfully. "And I would especially like to welcome our new Head Boy and Girl, Mr Harry Potter and Miss Hermione Granger."

There was a light smattering of applause and pleased and approving looks from the other teachers that caused both students to blush and look embarrassed.

"Yes, well done indeed," Dumbledore said benignly. "Now I think we should get this meeting underway and inform Mr Potter and Miss Granger as to their duties then we can let them go so that they don’t have to sit through our tedious staff meeting."

There were muffled laughs from around the table then Professor McGonagall took over. She handed Harry and Hermione a thick sheaf of parchment each and detailed what was expected of them. She told them the location of the Head Students' private study and common room and gave them the password. By the time she was finished, Harry’s head was spinning and when he looked over he was relieved to see that Hermione was looking a touch overwhelmed as well.

"Do you have any questions?" Professor McGonagall asked, startling him and pulling his thoughts back to where they should be. Hermione shook her head and Harry frowned.

"Not at the moment but I probably will once I have time to wrap my mind around all of this," Harry said ruefully.

Professor McGonagall smiled kindly at him. "Feel free to come and see either myself or Professor Dumbledore anytime you need to, Mr Potter."

Harry nodded and the Headmaster dismissed them. They headed towards the door and Harry paused just as they were about to walk through. He turned back to the Headmaster, deciding to bring up what they had spoken about the night before in a more open forum.

"Professor Dumbledore?" he said soberly. "You are planning on keeping an eye on Pansy Parkinson and her little group of cohorts, aren’t you? Draco doesn’t like me, my Battle Guard or Professor Snape that much and Pansy is his…fiancée. I wouldn’t put it past her to try something."

Concerned looks crossed most of the teachers' faces while Dumbledore looked at Harry calmly.

"Yes, my boy, I am indeed keeping an eye on Miss Parkinson," the Headmaster said calmly. "Has she said anything that concerns you in particular?"

Harry shook his head. "She tried Draco’s little trick on the train but she backed off pretty quickly when she found out Hermione and I were Head Girl and Boy. I just…don’t trust her." Harry paused, wondering if he should broach this subject now. He grimaced and decided that the more people who were alerted to this the better. "Malfoy was under orders to kill Professor Snape. Do you really think anything has changed with those orders?" Harry shot a significant look at the Headmaster,

unsure as to how many people knew about Voldemort's new residence.

Dumbledore sighed and inclined his head. "Your point is well made, Harry. I will most definitely keep it in mind."

Harry stared at the Headmaster for a long moment then nodded curtly, realising he wasn't going to get anything more than that out of the man tonight. He looked over at Remus and Sirius and gave them a quick grin before leaving the room.

Hermione was waiting for him just outside. "Everything okay, Harry?" she asked.

"Yeah," Harry replied. "I was just making sure that Professor Dumbledore was going to take Pansy seriously."

"You really think she's a threat?" Hermione asked dubiously.

Harry shrugged. "I think Draco's a threat and by extension that makes Pansy a threat. I'll have a word with Blaise and Millicent tomorrow. I'm sure they'll be willing to keep an eye on her."

"Good, it'll be easier for them being in the same House," Hermione replied as the two of them walked up towards Gryffindor Tower. "Did you want to go and have a look at out common room and study?"

Harry thought about that for a moment then nodded and grinned. "Why not." His grin became slightly sad. "I'd like to see the room my Mum and Dad used."

Hermione smiled sympathetically at him and they turned around and headed towards the room that was for their use. When they walked in, they were surprised to see that it was actually two rather spacious rooms. One had two desks and a number of bookshelves lining the wall. Some of the bookshelves had books already in them; others were empty. The other room was a comfortable common room, furnished in a manner similar to the Gryffindor common room. Harry wandered around the two rooms examining what little he could using his Oversight while Hermione looked through the books and otherwise acquainted herself with the study. Harry had just settled himself in one of the large chairs in front of the fire when Hermione gave a shout.

"Harry!" she yelled, excitement filling her voice. "You've got to come and see this!"

Harry sighed and got up. He wandered into the study, expecting to see Hermione in rhapsodies over some book but instead she was standing in front of the wall, peering at something. He walked up beside her.

"What is it?" he asked curiously.

Hermione grabbed his hand and pulled him towards the wall, forcing his fingers over a small section in front of them. "Harry, I know you probably can't see this but you should be able to feel it!" she said.

Harry frowned as he ran his fingers over the section of wall Hermione had indicated. It took a few minutes for him to identify what he was feeling and when he did he felt tears start to well in his eyes. Underneath his fingers, carved into the wall, was a small stag and an equally small flower; Harry assumed it was a lily.

"It’s a stag and a lily," Hermione whispered.

"Prongs and Lily," Harry whispered in a choked voice. "Dad and Mum."

Just after he said 'Prongs and Lily', he heard a small click and he quickly drew his hand back from the wall. Hermione’s sudden gasp let him know that she too had heard it. As they watched, a small door swung open. The tiny carved stag and lily had been at the centre of this door. Harry turned wondering eyes on Hermione but all she seemed able to do was stare at the now-open door. Harry took a step towards the passageway that had been revealed by the door but was brought to a halt when Hermione grabbed his arm.

"Harry, don’t!" she gasped. "You don’t know what’s down there."

Harry shook her hands off with a trace of irritation. "Hermione, my Mum and Dad left whatever was down there. They wouldn’t have left anything dangerous." Harry gave a small laugh. "Well, my Dad might have but Mum would have put a stop to anything too bad, I think." He turned and looked at his friend. "I’m going down there, Hermione," he said firmly.

Hermione nodded and bit her lip. "I’m staying here," she said quietly. "But Harry, if you’re not back in half an hour, I’m going to get a teacher."

Harry nodded and started down the passageway. It was only a short distance before he reached another door. He reached out and turned the door handle and the door swung open, revealing a small room. Harry stepped cautiously into the room and looked around. There was a small desk and two chairs in one corner and in the other…

Harry gasped and staggered back against the wall. Then he stepped forward carefully and whispered, "Mum? Dad?"

There, standing against the wall in the other corner, were his parents, looking as though they were about seventeen or eighteen. Harry crept towards them and put out a shaking hand to touch them. He gasped as his hand went straight through his mother and yanked it back quickly. It was at this point that it dawned on him that he could see his parents. See them clearly as though he had his sight back. He swallowed several times and looked carefully at his parents. Now that he had calmed down somewhat he could see that they were standing absolutely silent and still and that they seemed to be created entirely of magic. Harry tore his eyes away from the magical apparitions and walked over to the desk. There were a number of notebooks sitting there and a small wooden box with the initials J.P. and L.E. carved into the lid. Harry ran a shaking hand over the box, feeling the carved initials, then rested it on the notebooks.

"Harry?" came Hermione’s voice, shaking Harry out of his thoughts. He looked around and blinked.

"I’m alright," he called back. He looked over at his parents again and slowly made his way back down the passageway, making sure to close both doors behind him.

When he got out, Hermione looked at him with concern. Harry was looking pale and stunned and that made her rather worried. "Harry? What did you see down there?" she asked with a tinge of fear. "Do you need to go to the Hospital Wing?"

Harry blinked then gave himself a small shake. "No, no," he stuttered. "I…I’m fine. I…I need to see

Siri and Remy." With that he walked straight out of the study and common room and disappeared down the main corridor. Hermione watched him go with concern then turned to look at the two small carvings. She bit her lip then left the rooms, heading towards Gryffindor Tower.

Harry made his way down to the suite that he had shared with Remus and Sirius at times last year. They had told him the password last night in case he ever needed to speak with them so he was able to walk right into the living room. He called out for his godfather and guardian but when he didn't receive an answer he slumped down onto the couch; obviously they were still in the meeting. He didn't know what to make of what he had found. What were those apparitions of his parents? What were they doing in that small room? He stared into the fire as he thought about this then suddenly groaned. He was going to have to apologise to Hermione when he next saw her. She had obviously been worried about him and he'd just walked out on her. He was a little surprised she hadn't insisted on coming with him. Probably only the fact that he was coming here had stopped her.

All of a sudden the door banged open and he heard Sirius' voice.

"Moony, you can't expect the students to learn that in First Year," Sirius was saying with amusement. "Just because you've been spoiled by the DA doesn't mean you can expect that… Harry!" Sirius grinned happily at his godson and collapsed on the couch next to him. "Everything okay?"

"Um, I'm not sure," Harry said softly, immediately gaining the undivided attention of both men.

Remus put the papers he had been carrying with him down on the table and sat on the other side of Harry. "What's the matter?' he asked with concern.

"After the meeting, Hermione and I decided to go and have a look at our common room and study," he said shakily. "We were looking around and Hermione found a small carving on one of the walls of a stag and a lily. When I said 'Prongs and Lily' a door opened. I…I went and had a look and I found a room at the other end of the passageway." He paused and swallowed hard. "In the room were…I don't really know what to call them. There were magical…I don't know, copies of Mum and Dad."

"What?" both Sirius and Remus gasped. They exchanged glances over Harry's head.

"They managed to make it work," Remus said softly.

Harry's head shot up and he stared at Remus. "They managed to make what work?" he demanded.

"Towards the end of Seventh Year we were working on a way to create a working illusion of ourselves," Sirius explained. "Initially we thought it would just be something fun to do for a prank but then Lily mentioned how useful it would be in the war against Voldemort and that no one had been able to do anything like it." Sirius paused. "We wanted to make illusions that would actually have the person's personality and could interact with people. We'd originally come up with the idea in Fifth Year but we'd never been able to get very far. Lily did a lot of work on it in Seventh Year after she and James started dating. He told her about it and she thought the whole thing was one of our better ideas."

Harry frowned. "But…I thought spells cast by a person were cancelled if the person…died. So how are these illusions still here?"

"I don't know," Sirius said with a shake of his head. "Maybe we should go and have a look. Was there anything else in the room?"

The three of the stood up as Harry answered the question. "Yes, there were a few notebooks and a small box with Mum and Dad's initials on it."

Sirius shot a questioning look at Remus. The werewolf shrugged and looked as bewildered as Sirius felt. "I don't know, Padfoot. I didn't even know they'd succeeded."

Sirius nodded and the three of them were silent as they made their way to the common room. Harry spoke the password to let them in and showed them the small carvings on the wall. Sirius and Remus examined the carvings closely.

"Prongs and Lily," Sirius said quietly. The door again clicked open and the three made their way down the passageway. Harry opened the door to the small room and stepped back to let his godfather and guardian enter. The two men walked in and swore when they saw the illusions. Harry followed them in and stared at the illusions as well.

Sirius stood where he was, frozen to the spot and with an anguished expression on this face. Remus swallowed hard and walked over to stand in front of the illusions.

"Prongs," he said quietly. "Lily." He stared at the illusions for a moment longer then gave himself a shake. He turned to look at his friend. "Seventh Year," he said with a small frown. "They look about seventeen, eighteen." He swallowed again and ducked his head. He quickly walked over to the small table and picked up one of the notebooks.

Sirius stared at the illusions for a moment longer then looked over at Remus. "What's in those?" he asked hoarsely.

"Lily's notes," Remus said absently as he read. "They're pretty detailed."

Sirius walked over and looked over his shoulder. Harry shook himself out of his preoccupation with the illusions and walked over to the table. He ran a hand over the small box and quickly opened the lid. Inside was a small crystal globe that was glowing softly, both in Harry's Oversight and in actuality. Harry reached out and gently ran his fingers over the globe.

"Do you think this has anything to do with why the illusions have lasted?" he asked quietly.

Sirius and Remus looked over and gasped in surprise. "Possibly," Remus said slowly. "I don't think I've got to that part of Lily's notes yet."

Sirius frowned. "Crystal magic," he murmured. "Merlin's beard! We've got to let Dumbledore in on this."

"Why?" Harry asked, a little reluctant to share this part of his parents with anyone else.

"Crystal magic, Harry!" Sirius said urgently. "Lily and James figured out how to use crystal magic. Assuming that that crystal is powering those illusions. Lily was compulsive about note taking. The

information on how to do this will be somewhere in these notebooks." He looked over at the illusions sharply then gave a barking laugh. "I solemnly swear I'm up to no good," he said abruptly.

Both Remus and Harry let out oaths as the illusions began to move. The illusion of James looked around brightly and then laughed as it caught sight of Sirius.

"Padfoot!" it yelped as it bounded over to Sirius' side. "What's happened to you? You look terrible… and…old!"

Before Sirius could reply, the illusion of Lily walked over to James and whacked him on the arm. "James," she chided. "That was rude!"

Illusion-James blinked. "Oh, yeah, I suppose it was," he said a little sheepishly. "But Lily, he does look terrible."

Sirius was shaking like a leaf and he let out a strangled noise that might have been a laugh. Illusion-James didn't seem to notice this as he had looked around the room and caught sight of Remus.

"Moony?" Illusion-James said in a distressed tone. "When did you start going grey? And you look terrible, too."

Remus didn't get a chance to answer. Illusion-Lily had also been looking around the room and she had found Harry. Her eyes widened as she looked at him and she grabbed at James' arm.

"James," she breathed. "Look!"

Illusion-James spun around and gaped at Harry. He opened his mouth to speak but before he could Sirius managed to gasp out, "Mischief managed."

The illusions suddenly stopped and resumed the stance that they had found them in. Harry sagged back against the wall and ran a hand over his face and through his hair. His action was echoed by both Sirius and Remus.

"Well," Remus said weakly. "That answers that question."

"Yeah," Sirius choked out.

The three of them stood there for a few minutes, trying to gather themselves. Finally, Remus picked up the four notebooks that were on the table and closed the lid of the box, which he handed to Harry.

"I think we should get out here," he said softly. "And go and see Albus."

The other two nodded and they made their way back out into the Head Student's study. Harry carefully closed the door behind him and they slowly walked up to the Headmaster's office. When Dumbledore saw the slightly shocked and stunned expressions they were wearing he got them seated. He quickly spoke to the Potions Master through the Floo and served tea to his quiet guests. Shortly, the fireplace flared green and Severus Snape stepped out, a small bag in one hand. He looked over at the stunned trio sitting in the room and raised an eyebrow. Dumbledore gestured for his Potions Master to sit and he joined them in front of the fire.

"Sirius? Remus? Harry?" the Headmaster said quietly. "Can you tell me what has happened? Or could Severus offer you a Calming Draught first?"

There was silence at first and then Harry swallowed and bit his lip. "I…found a…door in the Head Students' study. It was locked by a carving of a stag and a lily. There were…illusions of my parents in the room behind the door."

"Illusions of your parents?" the Headmaster said, genuinely shocked for once.

"Working illusions," Sirius said shortly. "It was something the four of us had come up with in about Fifth Year. The idea of creating illusions of ourselves that could actually interact with others in a realistic manner." He grinned sheepishly. "We thought it would make pranking a lot easier. But we could never get it to work. Creating the illusions was easy enough but getting them to act like us was something we could never manage."

"After she had started going out with James, we told Lily about we had been trying to do," Remus said, picking up the story. "She got pretty excited about the idea and thought it might be useful in the fight against Voldemort. But we never knew that they succeeded."

"They were successful in creating realistic illusions?" Dumbledore asked with great interest.

Harry, Remus and Sirius all flinched.

"Yes," Sirius said hoarsely. "When I activated them, they acted exactly like James and Lily in their Seventh Year. James…recognised us but he didn't understand why we looked…so different."

Dumbledore looked at them with considerable sympathy. "Do you have any idea how the illusions survived James and Lily's deaths?"

"I had a brief look through Lily's notes," Remus said, holding up the notebooks. "And there was a small box with a crystal globe in it." He paused. "Albus, I think James and Lily worked out how to use crystal magic. I think the crystal is somehow powering the illusions."

The Headmaster exchanged glances with Snape. "Severus, you have had more time than I to examine what you and Harry learnt of Voldemort's knowledge of crystal magic. Do you believe he knew anything of this?"

Severus leaned back in his chair and steepled his hands in front of his face. "Not from what I have been able to determine. The Dark Lord seems to have concentrated on using the crystals to focus his magic and to act as a repository for certain spells. I have found nothing on using crystals to power a spell." He paused and frowned. "I am not certain how one would go about doing that."

"Does Lily reference any books in her notes?" Dumbledore asked.

"I haven't read that much of them," Remus said. "But if they did find anything in a book, it'll be there. Lily was pretty pedantic about that sort of thing in her note taking."

Dumbledore chuckled then looked at the three Gryffindors kindly. "Could we see these illusions?"

They nodded slowly and the five of them made their way back down to the Head Students' common room and study. Harry once again opened the door and they all trooped into the small room. Harry

quickly found a corner to stand in and he stared hungrily at the illusions of his parents. Remus and Sirius leaned against the table and watched as Dumbledore and Snape walked around the illusions.

"Quite remarkable," the Headmaster said. "I have never seen better."

Snape snorted and stood by the door. Dumbledore ignored him and turned to look at Sirius and Remus.

"How were they activated?"

Sirius swallowed and said, "I solemnly swear I'm up to no good."

Once again the illusions burst into life. Illusion-James yelped and jumped when he saw the Headmaster standing right in front of him.

"Headmaster!" he said with surprise and a little mischievous guilt. "Er, hello! Um, what are you doing here? Er, sir." He looked around as though trying to find something to divert the Headmaster's attention and his eyes lit on Snape. They widened and the Illusion-James swallowed. He looked back at the Headmaster then swivelled around until he caught sight of Sirius and Remus again and he frowned with confusion.

During this the Illusion-Lily had been looking around as well. She found what she had been looking for when she saw Harry standing in one corner and she walked over to him. Much to Harry's surprise, she placed a hand under his chin and raised his head; he could have sworn that his hand passed through the illusion the first time he found them. He hesitantly looked up into his mother's eyes and she smiled gently at him.

"You look like James," she said quietly. "But your eyes are like mine."

The Illusion-James heard her say this and bounded over to stand beside her. He grinned at Harry and slung an arm around Lily. "You're right," he said to his girlfriend. "I'm taller though."

Lily elbowed James in the ribs. "Who are you?" she asked gently.

"Mischief managed," Sirius choked out from across the room and the illusions once again stood upright and still.

Harry sighed with relief and slid out from the corner he was now trapped in and hurried over to stand next to his godfather. He found the illusions of his parents wonderful but also extremely disconcerting. They seemed so real and he wasn't sure how to react to them, though from the look of Sirius and Remus, they didn't know either.

"Do you have the crystal that you believe is powering these fascinating illusions?" Dumbledore asked.

Harry was silent until Sirius gave him a nudge. He started and stared for a moment until the Headmaster's question penetrated then he blushed and handed the small box over. Dumbledore opened the box and Snape moved over to look in as well. Harry ignored them in favour of eyeing the illusions of his parents again.

"Is that really what they were like?" he asked softly.

"Yeah," Sirius replied with a sad smile. "James was always bounding all over the place and Lily was always thinking and asking questions." He ran a hand through his hair. "Merlin but it’s hard to look at those illusions."

"Yeah," both Harry and Remus said heavily.

Their thoughts were interrupted by the Headmaster. "Would you mind if I kept this?" he asked Harry quietly.

Harry nodded and the Headmaster patted him lightly on the shoulder before turning to Remus. "Do you want to read through those notebooks or shall Severus and I do it?"

Remus looked down at the notebooks he was still holding then held them out to the Headmaster. "I think you had better read them through. You and Severus are the ones who have been looking into this crystal magic. Just…don’t damage them, will you? I think they should go to Harry once you are finished with them."

"Of course, my boy," Dumbledore said kindly. "I shall take good care of them. Now, if either myself or Severus wish to have a look at these illusions again, we shall speak to one of the three of you about coming with us. I think that is only fair." He tucked the notebooks under his arm. "Now, I think we should all head off to our beds. It is late and we all have work to do tomorrow." His eyes were kind as he looked at the three men standing in front of him. "And I think you will all find this much easier to deal with in the morning."

With that the Headmaster ushered them out of the room.

Chapter 14

Draco leaned back against a desk in the empty classroom and perused the letter in his hand. Antonin Dolohov had been faithful in his communication and Draco now held in his hand the fruits of the Death Eaters' labour. A thick sheaf of parchment held every detail about the Guild of the Night that Dolohov and the others had been able to glean. Draco set the letter down and started to read the parchments. As he read he realised that much of it was information he had already found out from the books in his library at home during the holidays and the ones in Durmstrang's library in the last few days.

The Guild of the Night was a secretive organisation of blind warriors. Many of the books had been dismissive of the Guild, claiming that the blind could never be effective at either the arts of the warrior or the arts of magic. Draco snorted at that, he knew better. His encounters with Potter during the year and during the battle in front of Hogwarts had taught him at least one thing; Harry Potter was not to be underestimated, blind or not. Draco had no intention of repeating the Dark Lord's mistakes. When he went after Potter it would quick and lethal, without any attempts to sway Potter to his side. He would kill the other wizard and that was it.

Potter could be a valuable asset, growled Voldemort in a menacing tone. He had obviously been following Draco's thoughts and was unhappy about the tenor of them.

Potter will never turn to the Dark, Draco growled back. If he didn't after his Muggle relatives abused and blinded him then he never will.

The Dark Lord grumbled for a moment then withdrew. Draco shook his head and returned to his reading. When he finished he swore quietly to himself. There really wasn't anything that was very useful in the parchments. Oh, he now knew a great deal about the history of the Guild and the conflicts the Guild had involved itself in. But there was no answer to the question of how Potter had seemed to be able to see and there was no answer as to how extensive the Guild was and whether they were likely to get involved if he escalated his plans. Draco snarled and slammed the parchments down in frustration. He tapped his fingers against the desk as he thought about what he could do now.

Well? He thought irritably at the Dark Lord. I don't suppose you know of anyone who could help.

If I knew someone who could help, I would have told you already, the Dark Lord replied waspishly. I told you I would aid you in any way I could and yet you still persist in believing I am hiding things from you. I will say this one last time, foolish boy. I cannot take over your mind now; I am merely a part of it. You are perfectly safe from me.

Draco was still for a long time. It was true that he had yet to truly trust the Dark Lord; not surprising really, the man had been incredibly slippery in life, why would he expect anything to change now? And yet…the Dark Lord's words had not changed once in all the time they had been melded. He had always claimed that he could not take over Draco's mind. Slowly, very slowly, Draco began to relax.

I…apologise, he said carefully. I…have been slow to trust you perhaps.

Of course you have been, the Dark Lord replied with sardonic humour. Don't apologise, boy. You're

a Slytherin to the core, no matter that you are now at Durmstrang, I wouldn't have you any other way. I would have been disappointed if you had trusted me so easily.

Oh, okay, Draco replied, a little nonplussed. He had thought that the Dark Lord would be angry with him for his mistrust.

Is there some place in this godforsaken castle that we can use for your magical training? Voldemort asked dryly. I think you need to start taking advantage of my knowledge.

Elation flooded through Draco; he had been waiting rather impatiently for this. I think I could find somewhere. Seventh Year students have a fair amount of leeway here. Far more than at Hogwarts. And they don't restrict our usage of magic either. They consider us old enough in Seventh Year to do what we wish and to face the consequences of our actions.

Excellent! Then there should be few questions about what I will teach you, the Dark Lord said with satisfaction. Still, the first thing I will teach you is how to shield what we are going to do.

Draco nodded enthusiastically and gathered up his papers. He stuffed them into his bag and headed out of the classroom. I'd best head back to the dorm, he said to the Dark Lord. We get leeway but I don't want to get on the bad side of any of the teachers and have them sniffing into what we are going to be doing.

Indeed, Voldemort observed and he withdrew from Draco's mind.

Pansy and her little group gathered in one corner of the Slytherin common room. This was nothing unusual these days; they were practically pariahs among the Slytherins now and nobody paid too much heed to them. Pansy snuck a quick look around the room and as soon as she was sure that no one was paying attention to them, she uncapped the bottle of poisonous ink she had found amongst her father's things. She placed the bottle in the middle of the table and she, Nott and Tracey pulled out their Potions homework. Crabbe and Goyle were not a part of this; partly because they could not be trusted to not touch the ink but mostly because not even Snape could find a reason to put them in NEWT-level potions nor did he particularly feel the need to these days.

The three students carefully copied their Potions homework onto to clean parchment using the poisonous ink, making sure to keep their hands clear of what they were writing. They would have used their dragonhide gloves for this but they could not think of a way to do that without being completely obvious and they wanted to be very open in doing their homework. Hiding away would only bring suspicion down on them when Snape finally succumbed to the poison, by doing this openly they would avoid that suspicion, at least at first. Once they were done, they carefully rolled the parchments up and put them to one side. Pansy capped the bottle of ink and returned it to her bag. The three of them then turned their attention to their other homework.

Theodore Nott looked around cautiously then leaned over to Pansy. "How long is this going to take?"

Pansy grimaced. "It depends on how much contact he has with the ink," she said quietly. "The more contact he has, the faster it will work. But I think we can expect it to take at least a month or two, possibly longer, for enough poison to build up in his system."

Nott nodded, a malicious gleam in his eyes. "And he won't show any effects until the build-up is

enough?"

"Yes," Pansy said with an exasperated smile. "Just be patient, Theodore."

Nott nodded and turned back to his homework.

Harry sat at his desk in the Head Student's study and stared out of the window. He was meant to be doing his homework but couldn't actually bring himself to concentrate on it. The Headmaster was down in the room with his illusory parents along with Remus and he couldn't get the two illusions out of his mind. This had been a bit of a problem in the last few days since he had found them. His friends had had to jostle him out of his thoughts any number of times and he had even drifted off a few times during his training with Master Nhean. Most of his teachers had been willing to excuse him his lapses, Snape being the sole exception.

Harry sighed and scrubbed his face with his hands. He had gotten into a roaring argument with Snape yesterday during his Potions lessons. He still had those on his own, occasionally combined with an Occlumency lesson. Snape was starting to push him into more and more complex potions and yesterday's class had involved attempting to brew the Polyjuice potion. He had bungled things rather spectacularly when he had gotten lost in his own thoughts and forgotten to stir the potion properly. The explosion had been impressive and when he had admitted it to his friends later, Neville had even congratulated him. Snape's fury and subsequent lecture had also been impressive; they might not be the enemies they used to be but Snape would still not accept incompetence in the Potions classroom. And when he had admitted why he had been distracted, Snape had been particularly vitriolic. Harry flushed slightly as he thought about how he had responded to the verbal attack Snape had launched at him. He knew that he had been thrown by the illusions but he had forgotten that Snape was probably also disconcerted by them, particularly the illusion of James Potter at that age.

Harry leaned back in his chair and remembered what he had said about Snape to Sirius and Remus. That way the Potions Master acted was often a defense mechanism. He wasn't exactly sure how he had come to that conclusion but he was certain it was right. When unsure in any way, the Potions Master would lash out. Harry was fairly sure that the actions of his father and Sirius when they were younger were at least partially responsible for this behaviour. He sighed again as he realized that he really ought to go down to the dungeon and apologise to the Potions Master. He had been taking his nervousness and discomfort out on Snape as much as the man had been taking his own feelings out on him.

His thoughts were interrupted by the return of a very pensive-looking Dumbledore and a pale Remus. The Headmaster nodded to Harry and left the room while Remus dropped into the chair at Hermione's desk and ran a hand through his graying hair.

"That doesn't get any easier," he said quietly. "James keeps wanting to know why I look so old and Lily keeps pinning me with that look of hers that says she's on the verge of figuring everything out."

"Has Professor Dumbledore come up with any answers yet?' Harry asked quietly.

Remus sighed. "I don't know," he said heavily. "If he has, he's not talking about them yet." The werewolf eyed Harry curiously. "I heard about the little fracas you had with Severus yesterday.

What was that all about? You've been getting along reasonably well with him."

Harry buried his face in his hands. He raised his head again and stared at the walls, watching the swirling silver and gold energy of the magic. "We're both a bit off balance with all of this." Harry waved a hand towards the door and the concealed room behind it. "And we kind of took everything out on each other." He gave a wry smile that didn't reach his eyes. "Don't worry, I had already planned to go down and apologise to him."

"Ah, I thought it might be something like that," Remus said with a small smile. "You know I had to restrain Sirius. He wanted to go down and practice his hexes after he heard about it."

Harry groaned and dropped his head into his hands. "Are those two ever going to grow up?" he said, his voice muffled.

"Probably not," Remus said with growing amusement. "Harry, there's a lot of history there, most of it bad. Just be thankful that they're polite to each other most of the time."

"Yeah, I suppose you're right," Harry said as he raised his head. He took a deep breath and squared his shoulders. "I'd better go and do it now. If I wait it'll just give him time to stew over it all some more and make the whole apology thing that much worse."

Remus chuckled. "That sounds like a good idea. So, how long should we wait before sending out the rescue party?"

Harry rolled his eyes at his guardian as he pushed himself to his feet. "Very funny, Remy." He paused for a moment. "How does two hours sound?"

Remus laughed. "About right, I'd say."

Harry gave Remus a quick grin and grabbed his cane. He walked out of the study and headed down to the dungeons, tapping the cane lightly in front of him. He wandered along the dimly-lit corridor until he reached the Potions classroom and knocked on the door. When no answer came he took a deep breath and headed further down the corridor towards Snape's private quarters. He hesitated for a long moment before knocking politely on the door. He swallowed nervously as the door opened after a couple of minutes to reveal a very forbidding-looking Snape.

"Yes, Mr Potter?" he said icily.

"I, er, I wanted to…apologise for what I said to you yesterday, Professor Snape," Harry said tiredly. "I've been a bit upset by those illusions and I kind of took it out on you. I am sorry, sir."

Snape stared at him for a long moment then sighed and stood back from the door, gesturing for Harry to enter. Harry walked in and watched as Snape closed the door behind him. The Potions Master gestured for him to take a seat.

"Your apology is accepted," Snape said stiffly. "And I would like to…tender an apology in return. I… believe my motives were much the same as yours."

"Thanks, I kind of figured that was the reason," Harry said with a lopsided grin then his face fell again. "It's just very hard to look at them. They weren't that much older when they…died," Harry said softly, twisting his cane around in his hands. "And they keep asking me who I am. I mean I look

so much like my Dad that I guess it's not a surprise." He paused. "I think Mum…the illusion of my Mum is close to figuring it out."

Snape cocked an eyebrow at the disheartened young man in front of him. "It is your mother, to all intents and purposes," he said archly.

"No!" Harry burst out. "No, it's not her! I can't think of that illusion as being her…" He leant his cane against the chair and ran a hand through his messy hair. "Professor, if I start thinking of them as my parents, I think I'm going to get myself into a lot of trouble."

Snape nodded approvingly. "I had wondered if you had thought about that."

Harry's head jerked up to look at the swirling energy and ghostly figure of the Potions Master and his eyes widened as he thought back to some of the things Snape had said to him the previous day. "Oh! That's why you…"

"Yes, Mr Potter," Snape said in an arch tone. "That is why." He paused. "Or at least, partly why. I confess I find seeing James Potter at that age again somewhat disconcerting."

Harry grimaced. "Yeah, I can understand why, though Siri has always said that you gave as good as you got." Harry shrugged. "Though I suspect your responses were probably a lot more subtle than humiliating someone in public."

"Of course they were more subtle," Snape replied with a raised eyebrow. "I am a Slytherin after all."

Harry gave Snape a look of wry humour. "You realise that you've just admitted that you did retaliate."

A small smile quirked Snape's lips. "Of course I retaliated, idiot boy. Did you expect me not to?"

"I guess not," Harry said with a snort of laughter. He then fixed Snape with an intrigued look. "Why are you treating me this way?" he asked bluntly. "Honestly I expected to be yelled at some more before you grudgingly accepted my apology. I didn't expect an apology in return or to be spoken to like…like this."

Snape looked at Harry with disbelief. "You truly do not know?" He shook his head. "Merlin's beard, Potter, surely you are not that brainless?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "I'm a Gryffindor; apparently we're all brainless."

"True," Snape replied with a smirk. His expression then became serious and he rolled up his left sleeve, displaying the now bare expanse of flesh on his arm. "You defeated the Dark Lord, Potter, and in doing so you freed me from the consequences of my youthful idiocy. There have been many times over the last twenty years that I thought I may not survive and there have been times when I have not wanted to survive. During all those times, I truly did not believe I would ever see my freedom from the Dark Lord's service coming in any way other than my death. You proved me wrong and I find that I can no longer see you as a mere child nor can I find it in me to see you as just an extension of your father any more. You are a powerful wizard, Potter." He sighed. "Even if you do have the misfortune to be the most stereotypical Gryffindor I have ever had the displeasure of knowing."

Harry's jaw had been dropping during the Potion Master's speech however the last comment quickly had him grinning again. Rather quickly, his face fell.

"But I didn't defeat him," he said glumly. "Not really. He's still alive…well, sort of anyway."

"But not in a form that is useful," Snape observed.

Harry gave Snape a solemn look. "Don't underestimate Draco Malfoy, Professor. Merlin knows I'm not." He ran a hand through his hair. "Look, the two of them individually have made some stupid mistakes but that was mostly because they underestimated me and what I was capable of doing. They're hardly likely to do that now, are they? Particularly considering the two of them now cohabit a brain. They'll undoubtedly be reminding each other not to underestimate me." He paused and grimaced. "I think the fact that Draco was able to hurt Remy should tell you he is not to be taken lightly. Or Pansy for that matter."

"You still think she will make some kind of attempt on me?" Snape said dubiously.

"I'm sure she will," Harry said firmly. "I just haven't been able to figure out how. I've got Millicent, Blaise and the other Slytherin DA members keeping an eye on her and her cohorts. I don't think she's going to do anything in a hurry, if that's any consolation."

Snape stared measuringly at the young man sitting opposite him. He had been inclined to disregard the supposed threat of Pansy Parkinson but the fact that Potter and his own serpents were taking it so seriously was making him rethink his strategy. He shivered slightly as he looked into Harry's sightless eyes and he thought back to the training sessions that he had observed as well as the Battle at Hogwarts. Perhaps it might be wise to listen to the young man; it surely couldn't hurt.

"Very well, Mr Potter," he said finally. "I shall keep an eye on Miss Parkinson and treat the threat you believe she poses seriously."

"Thank you, sir," Harry said with relief. He paused for a second then looked at the Potions Master with a combination of curiosity and apprehension. "Sir? Can I ask you what might seem a rather trivial question?"

Snape raised an eyebrow. "If you wish. Don't expect an answer if it truly is trivial however."

Harry grinned. "Yes, sir. Hermione asked me during the holidays what I wanted to do with myself after I graduate from Hogwarts and I didn't really have an answer for her. I think being blind is kind of going to put paid to any ideas I had of being an Auror. I thought about teaching but again you've got the whole blind thing being a problem and also, the only thing I would really want to teach is Defence Against the Dark Arts and I don't really want to do Remy out of a job. Ron suggested professional Quidditch. He said the fact that Charlie beat me proves that my Oversight isn't an unfair advantage." Harry paused. "I just wanted to know if you had any suggestions about what I might do after I leave."

Snape blinked; of all the things he thought Potter might ask him, this was probably the last one. He leaned back in his chair and narrowed his eyes.

"Had you thought about some further education?" he said thoughtfully.

"No, not really," Harry said curiously. "Why?"

Snape paused, wondering whether he ought to be the one who broached this subject. "You are correct in your assumption that your blindness will preclude you becoming an Auror but teaching is still an option. Lupin's tenure as Defence teacher will not be…as extensive as you might think."

"What?" Harry said with genuine alarm. "What do you mean?"

Snape grimaced. "Surely it cannot have escaped you that he always appears tired and rundown," he snapped irritably.

"Of course I've noticed that," Harry retorted. "What's that got to do with anything?"

Snape scowled. "The transformations take a great deal out of a lycanthrope. Your guardian already finds it difficult to move around the day after the full moon; that will only worsen as the years progress."

Harry's eyes widened. "But…but what about the Wolfsbane Potion? Doesn't that help?"

"It allows a werewolf to retain his or her sanity during the full moon and thus stops them from actively injuring themselves," Snape replied. "But it does nothing to ease the transformations themselves. I am attempting to improve the potion in that direction but thus far I have been unsuccessful."

"Oh," Harry said, a worried and concerned look settling on his face.

Snape sighed; he'd known that bringing this subject up would be a bad idea but that damn mutt and Lupin should have already spoken to the boy about this. "It isn't going to happen overnight," he snapped. "But the time will come when he will be forced to retire. Having a ready-made replacement would be appreciated by most of the staff. Merlin forbid we should be inflicted with another of Lockhart's ilk."

"Oh," Harry said again, this time with a small smile on his face due to the Lockhart comment. "So what exactly did you have in mind?"

"Something that is the equivalent of a Muggle University course," Snape said. "A five year course of education, usually carried out at a school like Hogwarts, though I believe gaining some further education at the Guild Academy might be an appropriate action as well."

Harry found himself actually rather intrigued by the idea. "Why haven't we heard of this before? And what exactly does it entail?"

"You have not heard of it because very few witches or wizards are interested in doing it," Snape said sourly. "Particularly since so many areas, such as the Aurors and the medical fields, have their own training programs. Most think the idea rather redundant. When you add that to the fact that it requires a five year commitment during which time the witch or wizard may not wed or take a job, you can understand how its popularity declined. As for what it entails, that depends entirely on the candidate. The curriculum is tailored to suit the interests, skills and abilities of the candidate. It is in some ways an educational program and in other ways almost an apprenticeship."

The Potions Master rose and rummaged around in one of his bookshelves for a moment. He returned with a slim volume in one hand that he handed to Harry.

"Read that or have it read to you," he said abruptly. "It gives details of the program as well as some of the more famous students and their studies and exploits."

Harry turned the book over in his hand thoughtfully. "Thank you, Professor," he said as he stood and grabbed his cane. "I'll…think about it. Can I ask you any questions I might have?"

"Certainly, Mr Potter," Snape replied in a formal tone as he ushered the young man to his door. "And I suggest you talk this over with others."

"I will, sir," Harry said in a slightly distracted tone. "Thank you."

Harry tucked the book into a pocket in his robes as the door closed behind him. He walked down the corridor in something of a daze. Of all the things he had expected, that was not it. He'd expected to be yelled at, maybe even belittled but to get that talk, well, that was entirely unexpected. Now that he thought about it, Snape had treated him like an…adult. He wandered along the corridors, lost in thought. He'd never seen the Potions Master act like that before but then again, he'd never seen the Potions Master free from the role of Voldemort's lackey before either. Perhaps this is what the man is really like. Harry grinned a little as he realised that Snape had still been a little insulting and a touch acidic, perhaps not everything had changed.

He looked around as he broke out of his thoughts and was surprised to find himself outside the door to Sirius and Remus' rooms. He blinked for a moment then gave a small laugh as he remembered Remus' comment about the rescue party. Obviously his subconscious had remembered and had brought him here so that he could reassure his godfather and guardian that he wasn't in need of rescuing. He knocked on the door and then spoke the password to open it. As he walked through the door, he saw that Sirius was paused in the act of pacing the floor while Remus was sitting on the couch, laughing at Sirius.

"Is everything alright, Harry?" Sirius asked urgently as he rushed over to his godson. "You don't want me to go down and hex the bastard, do you?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "Sirius!" he chided. "I'm fine and no, I don't want you to hex Professor Snape." He gave his godfather a lopsided grin. "It's really fine. We apologized to each other and then had a rather interesting talk."

"Really?" Remus asked curiously. "Can you tell us what it was about?"

Harry wandered around and threw himself down beside Remus on the couch. Sirius wandered around and slouched down onto a cushion on the floor.

"Well, the first part isn't that important," Harry began. "It's kind of just something between Professor Snape and me but I asked him for his opinion on what I should do after I graduate."

"What did he say?" Remus asked with interest as Sirius said, "I thought you were all for the idea of playing Quidditch?"

"Well, I do like the idea of playing Quidditch," Harry said slowly. "But I'm not really sure I want to make it the only thing I do. And he had an interesting suggestion."

Harry looked down at his hands then back up at Remus. "When were you planning on telling me about the long term effects of being a werewolf?" he said flatly.

Remus sighed and sagged down into the couch while Sirius jumped to his feet and burst out swearing.

"That bastard!" the animagus yelled. "I can't believe the vindictive son of a bitch told you that!"

"Sirius!" Harry said irritably. "He didn't tell me to be vindictive. In fact, if I read his tone and what I could see of his expression in the overlay right, I think he wasn't very happy to be the one to tell me. And he's right. You should have told me, Remus. You're my guardian. You and Siri are the closest damn things to parents I have. When were you planning on telling me?"

Remus ran a hand through his graying hair and swallowed hard. "You're right, Harry. I'm sorry. I should have told you about that a long time ago. I…guess I just didn't really want to face the prospect myself." He looked up at Sirius who was still pacing furiously. "Sit down, Padfoot. Harry's right. Severus should not have been put in the position where he was forced to tell Harry." He looked over at the unhappy young man sitting beside him. "I presume it came up during whatever advice he was giving you?"

"Yes," Harry said truculently as Sirius sat down on the cushions on the floor abruptly.

Remus sighed again. "I am sorry, Harry. You have every right to be upset with me. I…just didn't want to worry you."

Harry leaned against his guardian. "Remy, it worries me when you don't tell me things like that. And when I find out, it makes me wonder why you didn't tell me."

Remus wrapped an arm around Harry's shoulders. "I won't do it again, I promise." He gave a small grin. "Should I put things like this in the telling people category?"

Harry laughed. "Yes, definitely!" he said firmly.

"Consider it done," Remus said.

Sirius reached out and placed a hand on Harry's knee to get his attention. "So what exactly was Snape telling you that lead to this revelation?"

"I…mentioned that I liked the idea of teaching but that the only thing I would really be interested in teaching was Defence Against the Dark Arts and I really didn't want to do Remy out of a job," he said with a small smile. "That's when Snape realized I didn't know that you would eventually be forced to retire. He mentioned it because…" Harry trailed off then grinned. "Because I think he'd like me to do what he suggested."

Both Remus and Sirius looked confused. "Well, he's right that the physical stresses of my lycanthropy are going to eventually force me into retirement," Remus said slowly. "But what was this suggestion?"

"He said it would be a good idea to have a ready-made Defence teacher so that Professor Dumbledore isn't forced to hire another Lockhart," Harry said with a laugh. "And then he suggested that I might like to consider doing some further studies. Some kind of five-year apprenticeship-type thing."

Both Remus and Sirius stared at him with their jaws agape.

"A Tyro?" Remus said in astonishment. "Severus suggested you undertake a Tyro?"

"Is that what it's called?" Harry said curiously. "And yes, he did. He gave me a book to read about some other people who have done this." He looked at his rather gob smacked guardian and godfather with curiosity and a little concern. "Um, why? Is there something wrong with doing a… Tyro, did you call it?"

Sirius blinked and shook his head. "Uh, sorry about that, Harry. I was just a bit shocked. No, there's nothing wrong with doing a Tyro. Hell, it's an honour to be accepted for one! I was just surprised that Snape suggested it, that's all."

"I said I'd have a read of the book and think about it," Harry said quietly. "Do you know exactly what doing a Tyro entails?"

"Someone entering a Tyro selects up to three subjects they are particularly interested in and undertakes intensive study in those subjects," Remus explained. "There's also a magical contract involved; you can't marry, take a job or enter into any kind of significant contract while doing your Tyro. There's also a scholarship given to anyone accepted so that you have some spending money if you need it. Basically you're supposed to concentrate on your studies for those five years. That's why so few want to do it."

Harry nodded and made a mental note he'd have to talk to Ginny about this. "Professor Snape said I would probably be able to combine some kind of studies at the Guild Academy with this."

"Really?" Remus said with interest. "Well, I'll take his word for it. Are you really interested in this?"

Harry leaned back into the couch and thought for a moment. "Yeah, I am, kind of. I'll have to read this book and ask a few questions. Get the full story. But I do kind of like the idea." Harry looked over at Remus with a shy smile. "Not that I'm trying to do you out of your job."

"I couldn't think of anyone better to give it up to," Remus said with a smile. "You've gone through a lot in the last few years, Harry. You'd make a good teacher." He laughed. "You already are a good teacher. Look what you've done with the DA."

Harry cocked his head to one side. "That's a good point," he said slowly. "Hmm, maybe this idea isn't so bad."

"If only it didn't come from Snape," Sirius said ruefully, causing both Harry and Remus to burst out laughing.

Chapter 15

Harry sat curled up in one of the chairs in front of the fire in the Head Students' common room, listening to the book Snape had given him via Hermione's present from his sixteenth birthday. The other members of his Battle Guard sat or sprawled around him, mostly completing their homework. Sirius and Remus were with Snape and Dumbledore down in the little room with the illusions of his parents. Harry was quite content to stay out here; while he did enjoy seeing the illusions, dealing with the constant curious looks and questions from them was a little hard. He looked up from the book and stared into the fire, deep in thought.

"Good book?" he heard a voice saying.

Harry jerked his head around and stared blankly at Ron for a moment. Then he shook his head and gave a small laugh.

"I don't know. I haven't been listening for the last who knows how long."

"Yeah, I noticed," Ron said dryly. "So what's got you so riveted and has it got anything to do with why you've been so preoccupied for the last couple of days?"

"Um, yeah, it does," Harry said slowly, gaining the attention of his friends.

"Are you planning on telling us about it anytime soon?" Neville asked cheerfully.

Harry laughed. "Yes, I was. I'm sorry. I wasn't deliberately keeping you all in the dark; I just wanted to think about it for a while before I started asking for opinions."

"So what are these deep and mysterious thoughts you've been having?" Hermione said with amusement.

"Well, you all know Professor Snape and I had…a bit of a disagreement a few days ago," Harry began slowly.

The others snorted with laughter. "A bit of a disagreement?" Ginny said, laughing. "Isn't that like saying the sun is a bit warm?"

Harry rolled his eyes and looked at his friends with exasperation. "Yes, thank you! Well, I went down to apologise to him." Frowns and noises of protest came from his friends and Harry scowled. "I went down to apologise to him because I took my temper out on him," he said firmly. "Turns out he did the same thing. Anyway I took a chance and asked him his opinion on what I should do after I graduate. He had an interesting suggestion and that's what I've been thinking and reading about."

The others looked at him with surprise for a long moment.

"So what was his suggestion?" Luna asked in her drifting voice.

"That I undertake a Tyro after I graduate this year," Harry replied.

There was stunned silence in the room for a long moment then the others burst out in loud babbling and questioning. Harry listened to this for a minute or two then started laughing. This had the effect of silencing his friends and he gradually brought himself back under control.

"You know, this was part of the reason I delayed telling you lot," he said affectionately.

The others stared at him for a moment then started laughing again.

When they all settled down, Harry continued. "Anyway, that's what I've been thinking about the last couple of days. What do you think?"

"Do you want to do it?" Hermione asked calmly.

"I think so," Harry replied. "I want to ask Professor Snape some questions but I…kind of like the idea. It does have it's drawbacks but on the whole I think it would help more than anything else."

"What kind of drawbacks?" Ron asked.

"I have to enter a magical contract and I can't marry, get a job or sign any kind of major contract while I'm doing my Tyro. Apparently the people who started this wanted the person undertaking this to concentrate on what they were doing and not get distracted by anything extraneous," Harry explained, studiously avoiding Ginny's gaze. Their relationship had been progressing well and he was fairly sure that he did indeed want to marry her at some point but he wasn't exactly sure how Ginny felt.

"Well, that won't be too bad," Ginny said blandly, fairly sure she knew what Harry was thinking and feeling quite pleased about it. "I want to undertake mediwitch training after I graduate and that takes three years."

Harry looked up at her with surprise. "Oh," he said a little blankly, much to the amusement of everyone else.

Hermione finally decided to take pity on him. "What do you think you'd like to study…if you do this?"

Harry leaned back in the chair and thought for a moment. "Um, Defence Against the Dark Arts…"

"Obviously," Ron said with a grin.

Harry returned the grin. "I guess we could call my training with the Guild another subject. Um, I think that's probably about it."

"I would like you to consider Potions," came the dark voice of Snape from the doorway to the study, making them all jump.

Harry whipped around in his chair and eyed the swirling energies of the Potions Master with surprise, wondering how long the man had been standing there. Then he frowned. "Potions?" he said with surprise. "But I didn't think I'd be able to get very far with Potions, so many of them require monitoring a colour change and I can't see that."

"That is true," Snape said calmly, his hands clasped behind his back. "But I believe I may have found a way of overcoming that problem. Your Master is most hopeful and has sent my solution off to the Guild for their perusal."

Harry worked his way through what Snape had sent and then looked at the man with surprise.

"You've found a way to alter Oversight?"

Snape raised a rather disdainful eyebrow. "Mr Potter," he said archly. "I believe your Master told you that the theory behind that spell was lost."

"Oh, yes, I remember now," Harry said with a flush.

Snape gave Harry a look that he was able to read quite clearly in the ghostly overlay. It was one that said without words the Potions Master's opinion of his intelligence and Harry rolled his eyes.

"I believe I have developed a method of magically monitoring a potion," Snape said. "At this moment it merely monitors basic colour changes but I believe I may be able to improve on this eventually. The Guild are examining it as we speak."

"Oh," Harry said, feeling rather stunned. A quick glance at his friends showed him they were obviously feeling much the same way.

Snape smirked at them. "Now, Mr Potter, the Headmaster has asked if you would be so kind as to join us."

Harry nodded and slowly pushed himself to his feet, feeling a trifle off-balance. He slowly made his way over to where Snape was standing. The Potions Master looked at him, amusement hidden deep in his eyes and gestured for Harry to precede him into the small chamber. When Harry walked into the room, he quickly glanced around to find the illusions of his parents then stopped in utter astonishment when he saw not only the illusions, Sirius, Remus and Dumbledore but also a second Dumbledore. He stared for a moment before he realized that, like the illusions of his parents, he could clearly see the second Dumbledore while the first Dumbledore was merely a mass of energy colours overlaid with a ghostly image.

"Ah, Harry," the two Dumbledores said in perfect unison.

Harry's jaw dropped and he goggled at the sight before him for a moment. He had just clamped his jaw shut when the illusion of his mother stepped in front of him, a sad and sober look on her face.

"You're our son," she said softly bringing everyone in the room to a standstill.

The illusion of James walked over and joined her. He reached out and placed his hand under Harry's chin and raised his head. His expression was very serious as he looked at the young man in front of him.

"I think you're right, Lily," he said quietly. "Our very spooked son who is having trouble coping with these illusory versions of us."

This pronouncement caused a series of double takes in the room and James let go of Harry's chin and looked around the room with a wicked expression on his face.

"Of course we know we're illusions," he said with a grin. "Just like that version of Professor Dumbledore knows he's an illusion." The second Dumbledore nodded benignly. "You couldn't have an illusion as good as these running around thinking they're the real thing. Think of the trouble it would cause." James' eyes glazed over until Lily elbowed him in the ribs. "Erm, yes," James said with a blush. "Where was I? Oh, yes! It's part of the spell that creates the illusions; it adds the

personality and the knowledge that we are mere illusions." James grinned down at his girlfriend and put an arm around her shoulders.

"How complete are your personalities?" Dumbledore asked curiously.

"Complete up to the point we were created," Lily said calmly. "And when we are dispelled anything we learnt in the time we were separate is imbedded in the memory of the caster. That's why you can only cast an illusion of yourself though anybody can dispel the illusion."

"So you really are the seventeen year old James and Lily?" Sirius asked hoarsely, a hopeful light growing in his eyes.

"We're the illusions of the seventeen year old James and Lily, Padfoot," James said with compassionate look. "We're not real."

The light in Sirius' eyes died and Remus laid a hand on his friend's shoulder.

"You really should dispel us," Lily said softly. "We can see that we are causing the two of you and our son some distress even though we don't really understand why." She paused. "Though I can make some educated guesses. I don't think we should really be here, especially since…well, nevermind."

"Can you tell me anymore about the spells you used to create this?" Dumbledore asked.

"It's all in my notes," Lily said then she continued in a firm tone. "I really think you should dispel us."

"I agree," James said.

Dumbledore looked at them wisely, causing a moment of mirth because his illusion was doing exactly the same thing. A small smile lifted the corners of the Headmaster's mouth and he pointed his wand at his double. "Abeoumbra Albus Dumbledore," he said. The illusory Dumbledore gave a small wave and a smile as he faded out of existence.

The Headmaster looked over at the two remaining illusions. "Are you sure?" he asked kindly.

"Yes," James said firmly. "We are causing too much pain. We need to go. Everything we did to create these illusions and how to power them independently is in Lily's notes. We were never meant to be permanent."

Dumbledore looked over at Sirius and Remus questioningly. The two men exchanged sorrowful glances then Remus nodded silently to Dumbledore. The Headmaster then looked over at Harry kindly. Harry looked up at his parents and then nodded at Dumbledore.

"It was good to see you again, Prongs," Sirius said hoarsely. "You too, Lily."

"Likewise, Padfoot," James said with a grin. "Hope you're making sure that my son gets into plenty of mischief like a good godfather should." At Sirius' start, James' grin widened. "Come on Pads, who else would be godfather to my son?"

"James," Lily chided before looking over at the animagus. "Look after our son, Sirius, and behave

yourself."

Sirius swallowed and nodded, unshed tears standing in his eyes. In his grief he missed the clear implication in Lily's statement now and previously that she had guessed what had happened to her and James.

"Moony, look after yourself and Padfoot," James said to the werewolf. "And make sure that Sirius doesn't get my son into too much trouble!"

Remus nodded as Lily walked up and kissed him on the cheek, causing him to blush. "And let others help you when you need it," she said softly before walking over to stand in front of Harry.

"You are our son, aren't you?" she said with a small smile.

Harry swallowed and nodded as James came up beside his girlfriend. "Mum, Dad," he said in a shaking voice.

Lily drew in a sharp breath and pulled Harry into her arms. She held him for a moment before letting him go and cupping his face in her hands and smiling at him. She let him go without another word. James smiled at his girlfriend and then hugged the son he had never really had chance to get to know. When he pulled away, he left his hands on Harry's shoulders.

"Head Boy, huh?" he said with a small smile and Harry nodded. "Good to hear. You've got up to lots of mischief while you've been here?" Harry nodded again. "Good. You've kicked some Death Eater arse? If they're still around." Harry nodded again. "That's my boy," James said with pride. "I'm sure the real me is very proud of you. I know I am." He pulled Harry into a hug again then let him go and turned to face Snape.

"You've been watching over my boy," he said matter-of-factly.

"A life debt is a life debt," Snape said in a voice devoid of inflection.

"You never owed me a life debt," James said softly.

"Gryffindor," Snape said with a contemptuous snort.

James grinned. "Yes, indeed." He then sobered. "Thank you, Severus."

Snape froze for a moment then nodded once. Lily walked up to stand next to James and they turned to face Dumbledore. James nodded to the Headmaster.

Dumbledore sighed and pointed his wand at the two illusions. "Abeoumbra James Potter," he said sadly. "Abeoumbra Lily Potter."

The two illusions smiled as they slowly faded from view. As they disappeared completely, a rasping sob escaped from Harry and he threw himself at his godfather and wept into his robes. Sirius wrapped his arms around the young man, ignoring the tears falling from his own eyes, and Remus wrapped an arm around Sirius' shoulders. Dumbledore gave Snape a glance and the two of them quietly left the room.

It was quite some time before Harry pulled his face out of his godfather's robes and his eyes were

red-rimmed when he did.

"They didn’t know," he whispered.

Both Sirius and Remus knew exactly what he was talking about.

"Why would they?" Remus replied. "The illusions were made when they were seventeen, long before they had you, before they knew about the prophecy. They never suspected they might die when they were that age."

The three men fell silent at that. Finally Sirius tightened his arms around his godson then let him go.

"Come on," he said hoarsely. "We’d better get the hell out of here. Your friends are probably a bit worried about you."

Harry nodded and the three of them walked out of the room. When they got back into the common room, they found Dumbledore sitting in the chair Harry had vacated chatting idly with the students and Snape leaning against the mantelpiece looking rather intimidating. Harry’s friends looked up at them and their faces rather quickly became concerned. They didn’t say anything and Harry rather suspected the Headmaster had cautioned them against doing so. Harry had taken them down into the room only once so that they could see the illusions though he had refused to activate them.

Harry slumped down onto a cushion next to Ginny and the red-haired girl quickly snuggled up next to him. He wrapped his arms around her and pressed a kiss against her hair. Sirius leaned against the mantelpiece opposite Snape and sighed heavily while Remus stood next to him. Dumbledore watched the three of them kindly for a moment then the twinkle reappeared in his eyes.

"I see you are considering a Tyro, Harry," he said, waving his hand at the book Harry had been reading then smiling at the surprised blink from all three men.

"Erm, yes," Harry replied, a bit startled at the change of subject.

"Good, good," the Headmaster said benevolently. "I think you would enjoy the challenge of such a course of study. What subjects do you think you would specialize in?"

"Uh, Defence Against the Dark Arts, my Guild studies and…um, Professor Snape suggested Potions," Harry said slowly, now feeling rather pleased that the Headmaster had changed the subject. He knew he would eventually have to explain everything to his friends but for now he was glad of the reprieve.

"An excellent combination," Dumbledore said cheerfully. "If you don’t mind taking advice from an old man, I would thoroughly recommend doing the Tyro. I myself undertook a Tyro and I feel I benefited greatly from those extensive studies."

Harry looked up at the Headmaster. "Really, sir? May I ask what you studied?"

"Defence Against the Dark Arts, Transfiguration and Charms," Dumbledore replied.

Harry looked at the Headmaster for a long moment. "Was it worth it?" he asked soberly.

"Yes," Dumbledore said without a hint of his usual good humour. "I believe I would not have defeated Grindelwald as quickly had I not had the knowledge gained from my Tyro."

Harry nodded slowly. "It might be a good idea then. I'll speak to Master Nhean."

"Excellent," Dumbledore said with a sudden reappearance of his usual smile. He stood and looked around the students. "Now I think that we adults should leave you lot to your homework. It's very important, you know."

Dumbledore gave them a small bow and he and Snape left the common room. Sirius and Remus looked at Harry with concern.

"You okay?" Sirius asked quietly.

Harry drew in a deep breath then let it out in a gusty sigh. "Yeah," he said wearily. "You?"

"Mostly," Sirius said with a sad smile.

"We'll be fine," Remus said softly before grabbing Sirius' arm and drawing him out of the room.

Harry looked around his friends, an expression of wry amusement on his face. "I suppose you want to know what happened."

"Only if you want to tell us," Ginny said firmly.

Harry pressed another kiss into Ginny's hair. "Dumbledore dispelled the illusions," he said quietly.

"Why?" Luna asked with compassion.

"Because they asked him to," Harry said, an answer that surprised the others.

"The illusions asked him to?" Hermione said with a hint of disbelief.

Harry nodded, a small sad smile quirking his lips. "Apparently the part of the spell that creates the personalities of the illusions also implants the knowledge that they are illusions. My…parents realized they were bothering Siri, Remy and me and asked Dumbledore to dispel them."

"But what about the knowledge of the spell?" Hermione asked.

"Hermione! That's hardly the important thing here," Ron said indignantly.

Harry laughed. "Its okay, Ron. My…Mum said that everything was written down in the notebooks and that they were never meant to be permanent."

"Was it…difficult?" Neville asked with a hint of his old timidity.

"Yeah, kind of," Harry said heavily. "They figured out I was their son and they…didn't know that they were dead." He gave a mirthless laugh. "Dad was pleased that I was Head Boy, checked to make sure that I had got up to lots of mischief and that I had kicked some 'Death Eater arse' as he put it. Then he said that he was sure the real him was proud of me."

Harry's voice trailed off and he buried his face in Ginny's hair. His girlfriend wrapped her arms

around him and held him, whispering calming words to him.

"They didn't know they had died," Neville said softly.

"Why would they?" Hermione replied logically. "The illusions were created when they were still at school. They didn't know what was coming."

Harry raised his head, revealing red eyes. "Exactly," he said in a choked voice. "They were so young…"

"They were our age," Ron said. "Not that young. And Voldemort was pretty active then. I'm sure they knew what they were getting themselves into." He paused. "And didn't you say that your Mum thought these illusions would be good for their work fighting Voldemort."

"Yeah," Harry said slowly.

"So I don't think they were that young," Ron said soberly. "They were already planning on fighting Voldemort. They knew what was happening."

Harry was silent for a while as he thought about that. "I guess you're right," he said finally.

Ron paused for a moment then a small grin flicked across his face. "Wow, that's a first! I'm right!"

There was a moment of silence in the room then everyone burst out laughing. Harry leaned over and swatted Ron on the shoulder, inwardly relieved at the lightening of the atmosphere in the room. When they finally managed to calm down, Hermione closed her book and gave her boyfriend an affectionate and appreciative look.

"Now that Ron's gotten over the shock of being right for once," she said impishly, causing renewed sputters of laughter. "I think it's time we all headed off for bed. It's late."

The other looked up at the clock as Harry checked his watch. There were a few muted oaths as they realized the time and then a flurry of packing up before they left the room.

Harry, Ron and Neville got changed as quickly and quietly as they could; their Housemates, Dean and Seamus, had long ago gone to bed and were now fast asleep. They said quiet goodnights and climbed into bed, closing the curtains. Harry ended his Oversight and stared into the blackness as his thoughts tumbled over themselves. The talk he had had with his friends had helped a bit but he still wasn't sure how he felt about those illusions. Part of him was immensely relieved that they were gone; it had been so hard to look at them and to deal with them. They were so young and happy. He let out a ragged sigh; at least now he had some real proof that his parents had really loved each other. He closed his eyes; there was another part of him that hadn't wanted to get rid of the illusions. That part felt that those illusions were last remaining piece of his parents that he had and had wanted to keep them, no matter what. But he couldn't go against what his…parents wanted. They thought they should be dispelled and Harry had found that he couldn't disobey just for his own selfishness. He sighed again and rolled onto his side then before his thoughts could grab him again he fell asleep.

Harry shifted in his sleep then gasped and flinched. He opened his eyes and was startled to find

that he was once again surrounded by a crystalline darkness. He swallowed and looked around frantically, aware at some subconscious level that, as always in his dreams, he could see.

It's only a dream, he thought to himself. Remember, it's only a dream.

The thought calmed him a bit and he slowly began to walk forwards. As he did the darkness began to fade slightly and he could finally see his surroundings. As he looked around he could see that it wasn't so much that the darkness had faded but that it had been drawn into the crystal around him. He was walking down a long black crystal corridor and in the distance he could see that the corridor opened up. He peered ahead and stumbled slightly. Looking down he could see that there were small crystal lumps and shards poking out of the floor and then he noticed that the walls and ceiling were similarly adorned. He slowed his pace and started to tread a little more carefully. As he got closer to the end of the corridor, he slowed even further. Finally he moved into a crouch and crept up to the entrance to the crystalline room and very carefully peered into it.

He drew with an indrawn breath as he saw the man pacing around in the room. He swallowed once then peered in again. As he did the man turned and looked at him. Harry flinched backwards and scrabbled in his robes for his wand. He swore as he realized that it wasn't there and neither was his cane. He backed himself up against the wall and held his hand out, hoping that his wandless magic would work here. He stood there for a few minutes more before it occurred to him that the room wasn't that large and surely the man should have reached him by now. He lowered his hand and peered around the entrance again. The man was pacing again and Harry slowly edged into the room. The man turned and looked right at him again before continuing to pace.

He can't see me! Harry thought.

Harry slowly walked into the room to get a good look at the pacing man. When he did he let out an oath then flinched almost involuntarily. He had said the same word at the Weasleys over the summer when a misjudged attempt at a Quidditch maneuver had caused him to almost fall. Mrs Weasley had been displeased with his language…to say the least. The word seemed appropriate at the moment though. Harry recognized the man pacing the crystal room; it was Voldemort. Or rather it was Tom Riddle. He looked like he was in his late twenties and Harry knew from a discussion he had had with Dumbledore that Voldemort had not started much of the experimentation that had so disfigured him until he was in his late thirties. Harry crept closer to Riddle and as he did he realized that Riddle was talking to himself.

"Damn that idiot boy," Riddle was muttering. "Trapping me in his thrice-be-damned mind. What the hell was Lucius thinking, not training the boy correctly? Pity the fool is dead or I'd find some way to make him pay for that!"

Riddle's voice has risen to a snarl by the end and he stopped in his tracks and clenched his fists, seemingly trying to get his temper under control. When he had succeeded, he gestured with one hand and threw himself into the chair he had just conjured.

"There must be a way of getting out of this crystalline prison permanently," he said irritably. "The boy is inventive, I'll give him that, but he has no sense of grandeur. I recruited my Death Eaters for a reason and he cannot see that. There must be a way to claim his mind as my own."

Riddle lapsed into his own thoughts at this point and Harry carefully sat down. He was somehow seeing where Voldemort was trapped in Draco's mind. But how? He hadn't felt anything in all the

time since that last blow-up on his birthday. As he was thinking this, Riddle's head shot up and his eyes narrowed.

"Potter?" he whispered.

Harry stared over at Riddle in shock and scrambled to his feet, quickly backing away.

"Yes, you're here, aren't you?" Riddle said, a triumphant look crawling over his face. "Somehow you have found your way back into my mind. How interesting."

Harry flattened himself against the wall and began to edge over to the entrance to the corridor he had originally found himself in.

"Well, well, this offers just so many opportunities," Riddle continued. "I had wondered what had happened to the link between us. I had even started to think that it had been broken by Draco's asinine actions. But now I find that it had merely been pushed down and hidden until such time as I had recovered sufficiently."

Harry froze and swallowed. The link hadn't been broken? He closed his eyes and hung his head. Dammit, he really couldn't get a break, could he?

"So let's see just how effective it really is, shall we?' Riddle said, a malevolent smile spreading across his face. "Did you know that the Cruciatus curse does not actually need to be cast on a person? Did you know that if one has a trained mind the Cruciatus curse can be cast mentally? Shall I prove it to you? Let me see, Crucio!"

Pain stabbed through Harry's scar and spread throughout his body. He screamed and fell to the ground, writhing at the sudden agony. All of a sudden the pain stopped and Harry lay were he had fallen, gasping for air. That had been so much worse than anything he had experienced before.

"Wasn't that interesting?" Riddle said, chuckling darkly. "Would you like to try it again? Crucio!"

Once again the intense pain ripped through Harry's mind and body. He tried to shore up his shields but it seemed to have no effect. Then the pain overwhelmed his ability to concentrate and all he could do was scream.

Chapter 16

Sirius was pacing in the living room of the suite he shared with Remus. It was late but he knew he wouldn't be able to sleep. He looked over at Remus and gave him a sad half-smile.

"Go to bed, Moony," he said quietly. "Just because I'm a bit screwed up at the moment doesn't mean you should pay for it as well."

Remus snorted from where he was slouched on the couch. "I wouldn't be able to sleep anyway, Padfoot. You think very loudly when you're upset and between that and your pacing you'd keep me up. Besides I think I'm not too far away from you in the screwed up stakes at the moment."

Sirius gave a bark of very sour laughter. "Don't say that. One of us has to hold himself together and it sure as shit isn't going to be me." He stopped his pacing and looked over at Remus. "I want to kill that little rat bastard, Moony. I want it so much it's actually scaring the crap out of me. I mean I thought I wanted to kill him four years ago but, Merlin's balls, that's absolutely nothing on how I feel right now."

Remus sighed and scrubbed his face with his hands. "Don't do that, Padfoot," he said wearily. "Harry needs you and you can't do him any good if you really are sent to Azkaban for murder."

The look Sirius gave his friend was solemn and actually managed to scare the werewolf a little. "Believe me, Moony, that is the only thing stopping me right now."

"Peter is going to get what's owing to him," Remus reminded his friend. "The Aurors and Unspeakables have just about finished questioning him. He's due to receive the Dementor's Kiss in about a week."

"Has he given up the ferret?" Sirius asked, copying Harry and Ron's favourite term for Draco Malfoy.

"No," Remus said sourly. "You know what veritaserum's like, you have to answer with the truth but that's all. You don't have to answer with all of the truth and there are generally many versions of the truth. The Auror's haven't hit on the right question to ask yet. Hell, even if they do, it'll be hard to prove."

"What?" Sirius yelped. "It's a confession under veritaserum! What further proof do you need?"

"Padfoot! You know as well as I do that if someone believes something to be true then that's the answer they'll give under veritaserum," Remus said with exasperation. "And that's exactly the defense Draco Malfoy will use if he's accused. The Aurors will need to find further proof and he's got the money to evade them for a while."

Sirius ran a hand through his hair and sighed. "Yeah, I know." He looked over at Remus. "I keep changing my mind over whether I want to see him, you know. I know he's asked to see us…"

Remus was just about to answer when a loud banging started. Both men jumped and Sirius leapt over to open the door. A breathless and frightened looking Neville was hopping from foot to foot outside.

"It’s Harry!" he gasped.

Sirius didn’t wait for anything more, he pushed past the young Gryffindor and sprinted up the corridor. Remus leapt off the couch and grabbed Neville by the shoulders.

"What’s happened?" he demanded.

"Harry’s having some kind of nightmare or vision," Neville babbled. "He’s screaming and thrashing around and we can’t wake him up."

Remus swore. "Go down to the dungeons and get Professor Snape," Remus ordered. "Tell him what you just told me. Go!"

Neville didn’t hesitate and he took off down the corridor at a dead run. Remus didn’t watch him go, he headed after Sirius.

When Sirius burst into the Seventh Year boys' dorm it was immediately obvious what the problem was. Harry was lying on his bed, convulsing and screaming. Ron was standing beside him, trying to keep Harry from throwing himself off the bed and Sirius had passed Dean and Seamus in the stairway outside the room where the two boys were keeping the curious at bay. Hermione was helping Ron and Ginny was kneeling on the side of the bed, deftly avoiding Harry’s flailing arms and trying to reach her boyfriend with her words. Sirius threw himself towards the bed and grabbed at his godson’s shoulders, ignoring the inadvertent blows that came his way.

"Harry!" he yelled. "Harry, wake up!"

The screams didn’t abate and Sirius moved around so that he was behind Harry. He wrapped his arms around his godson and started talking softly into Harry’s ear, hoping he could somehow reach the distressed boy that way. He looked up as Remus ran into the room, his eyes full of everything he could not and would not say. Remus came over and sat on the edge of the bed, laying his hand over Sirius' arms and he joined in Sirius' attempts to reach Harry. They were still absorbed in this when Snape arrived, trailing Neville in his wake. The Potions Master took in the scene in front of him then looked around the dormitory. He found what he was looking for on the table beside Harry’s bed and walked over.

"Where does his mind go?" he hissed at Orinda in Parseltongue.

"Somewhere dark and sharp," the right head of the Runespoor answered. "We cannot follow. We do not understand what has happened. You have two legs like our Harry, you may understand and follow."

Severus turned away from the Runespoor with an irritated snarl. That had been both useful and incredibly vague. He moved around to the opposite side of the bed from Remus and tapped Ginny on the shoulder sharply. She whipped around and glared at him.

"If you don’t mind, Miss Weasley," Snape said sharply, inwardly quite amused at the glare. It was certainly a match for Molly Weasley’s glare and with a bit of practice might actually come somewhere near his own. He raised an eyebrow when the girl did not move. "Unless you care to let Potter remain this way?"

Ginny's glare ratcheted up a few notches, gaining a little more of Snape's internal amusement, before she reluctantly climbed off the bed and stepped aside. The Potions Master sat down on the side of the bed and gently placed his fingers on Harry's temples, allowing his mind to insinuate itself inside.

He flinched away from the pain that was washing around Harry's mind then steeled himself and wormed his way through the boy's weakening shields. The moment he was completely inside he found himself grabbed by a strong mental grip and thrown forwards. He stumbled and found himself standing in a room with black crystal walls. That detail quickly became irrelevant when he saw what lay in front of him.

Standing and grinning maliciously was a young Tom Riddle and lying on the ground on the other side of the room was Harry Potter, screaming and writhing in absolute agony. Snape easily recognized the effects of the Cruciatus curse and he strode over to Harry. As he reached the young man, the curse was ended. He gently rolled the young man onto his back and Harry's eyes flickered open.

"Pr'fess'r," he whispered. "Can't stop…help."

Snape looked up at Riddle just as he began to speak.

"Did you enjoy that, Potter?" the insane wizard asked. "Why don't you show yourself so that we can have some more fun. No? Well, perhaps I should continue to have my fun then."

"He can't see us," Harry whispered.

Snape nodded and his eyes narrowed. He pulled his wand out of his robes and leveled it at his former Master. "Stupefy!" he said forcefully.

An odd yellowish light burst out from the end of his wand and slammed into Riddle, throwing him into the crystalline wall behind him with considerable force. Riddle's head hit the wall with a very audible clunking sound and the Dark Lord slumped down to the ground unconscious. Snape slid his wand back into his robes and turned back to Harry. He gently slid an arm under the boy's shoulder and propped him up.

"Can you wake yourself up?" he asked urgently.

Harry blinked at him stupidly for a moment then seemed to pull himself out of his post-Cruciatus exhaustion. "I…I think so," he murmured.

"Good, do so," Snape said. He helped Harry sit up then frowned and reached inside his own mind. He was relieved to find that it was relatively easy to pull himself out of Harry's mind, in spite of his forceful entry and in fairly short order he found himself back in his own body, sitting on the edge of Harry's bed with the realization that the screaming and convulsing had stopped. As he drew his hands back from Harry's temple, the young man's eyes began to flicker and open.

Harry head fell back on the shoulder of whoever was supporting him and he drew in a deep breath. He relaxed further as the scent of his godfather enveloped him. "Si…Sirius?" he rasped.

"Yeah, I'm here, Pronglet," he heard Sirius say in a voice full of sheer relief.

Harry swallowed. "Remus?" he forced out.

A gentle hand ran through his hair. "I'm here," he heard Remus said softly.

"Good," Harry replied and then he allowed himself to fall into unconsciousness.

Sirius tightened his arms around his godson and looked up at Snape. "What the hell happened?" he demanded.

"He seemed to be trapped in some kind of crystalline room with a young version of the Dark Lord," Snape explained. "He was being subjected to Cruciatus. The Dark Lord could not see either of us but he did seem to be aware that Mr Potter was there." Snape paused. "The Dark Lord was…amusing himself."

A low growl escaped from Sirius. Remus placed a soothing hand on his friend's arm then looked over at Snape. "You were able to get him out?"

"No," Snape replied. "I was able to stop the Dark Lord, Mr Potter got himself out."

"You were able to stop Vol…the Dark Lord?" Remus said with surprise, hastily changing his reference to Voldemort when he caught Snape's small flinch. "How?"

"Stupefy," Snape said simply. "Why Mr Potter did not use magic, I do not know."

Remus dismissed this question for the moment and looked down at the young man he had come to love like a son. "We should take him to the Hospital Wing," he said hesitantly.

"No!" Sirius replied firmly. "He hates it there and you know it. We'll take him down to our suite. We can get Poppy to come there."

Remus nodded and he stood up and held out his arms. "Give him to me, Padfoot," he said.

Sirius hesitated for a long moment then carefully maneuvered Harry so that Remus could pick him up. Harry wasn't as thin as he used to be; a summer spent eating properly and running around outside had put some weight on him and Sirius was aware he probably wouldn't be able to carry Harry all the way down to the suite. Remus, on the other hand, was a fair bit stronger than he looked.

Remus settled Harry into his arms and waited while Sirius pushed himself off the bed. The animagus looked over at Snape. "Thank you," he said a little hesitantly.

Snape inclined his head gracefully and pulled two small potion bottles out of his robes. "Give him these when he wakes," he said in a neutral tone. "One is to treat the aftereffects of the Cruciatus and the other is a general pain-relieving potion."

Sirius took the bottles and nodded. He headed over to the door to the dorm and held it open for Remus. The werewolf started walking but paused beside Snape.

"Thank you, Severus," he said quietly.

The Potions Master inclined his head again and followed the two men out of the room. Ron, Hermione, Neville and Ginny exchanged glances and their expressions became firm. They headed

downstairs and quickly caught up with Snape, Sirius and Remus who looked around in surprise to see them there.

"Where do you four think you're going?" the werewolf said sternly.

"With you," Ron replied obstinately.

"No, you're not," Remus replied. "You're going back to bed."

Ron snorted. "Professor Lupin…Remus, do you really think we'll get any sleep if we stay here? At least if we're in the suite we can always curl up on the couch if we get tired but we want to be there for Harry. We always have been before, what makes you think we're going to stop now?"

"Let them come," Sirius said softly. "And don't complain, Moony. You think we wouldn't have done the same for you…hell, we did do the same for you."

Remus blushed a little then nodded to Ron. "I'm sorry. Sirius is right; you do have every right to be there."

Ron relaxed a little and the little procession headed down the stairs. Ahead of them they could hear Dean and Seamus ordering everyone back into their dorms rather ferociously and when they got down to the common room, it was empty except for the two Gryffindor Seventh Year boys. They watched solemnly as the group headed out of the Tower and made its way down the corridor. Snape left them at one point to head back down to the dungeons and the rest made their way to the suite.

Once they got there, Remus settled Harry into the bed in his room which the two men always kept ready for him. He then left the room and quickly flooed Poppy and Albus before returning to watch over Harry.

Draco winced and buried his head in his hands. He had a headache unlike anything he'd ever felt before and he had a strong suspicion it had something to do with the Dark Lord. It had started only a few minutes ago and since it had started he had not been able to get the Dark Lord's attention. He slumped back on the couch and allowed his head to fall back. He was thankful that the common room was empty, everyone else having gone to bed already. He really didn't want any witnesses to this; they would insist that he go to the Hospital Wing and he would struggle to explain this to the mediwitch in a way that she would accept. He certainly didn't want any of the teachers or worse, the Headmaster, poking their noses into this. There were skilled Legilimancers among the staff and he couldn't rely on the small amount of shielding he had learnt from his father holding through any kind of interrogation.

He gasped as a lance of pain assaulted his mind and swore through gritted teeth. He tried to contact the Dark Lord again but between the pain and whatever it was that was taking up the other wizard's attention, he was unsuccessful. He let his breath out in a hissing sigh; he was just going to have to ride this out. He'd managed to survive the Cruciatus curses that had been flung at him by the Dark Lord; he would survive this as well.

It seemed to be an age before the pain finally subsided and he was able to relax. He took a few deep breaths before reached towards the Dark Lord once more.

Lord? he asked, keeping the irritation out of his mental voice.

There was silence for a long moment. What is it, Draco? The Dark Lord's voice was full of frustration.

Is there something wrong? Draco asked in a voice dripping with acid sweetness. Something so important that it was necessary to subject me to a ripping headache for all that time?

There was a startled silence from the passenger in his head. What? came the somewhat unintelligent response.

The pain you saw fit to subject me to, Draco said irritably. The last Merlin knows how many minutes of pain that I had to go through that if it had happened anywhere but here and at anytime but now could have got both of us into a lot of trouble.

You felt that? The Dark Lord said incredulously.

Yes, Draco replied acidly. What was it?

Harry Potter saw fit to invade my mind, Voldemort replied absently. I decided to amuse myself.

Draco paused for a long moment. Potter invaded your mind? How? I'm not sure I like the idea of Potter being able to get into your mind when it is then such a short step to mine.

There was silence from the Dark Lord. He could not get out of my mind, he said carefully. At least not in the short term and now that I know he can enter I can take steps to control it.

Are you sure? Draco asked suspiciously. Because if he gets in and finds out what our plans are then that is a great deal of work down the drain.

Of course I'm sure, Voldemort replied irritably. I know what I am doing. Leave this to me.

Very well, Draco replied reluctantly. But try to give me some warning next time. The consequences would be very unpleasant if this occurs in public in the future.

As you wish, was the slightly sarcastic reply from the Dark Lord and then the wizard's presence faded from Draco's awareness.

Draco scowled and muttered a few maledictions under his breath. He pushed himself to his feet and stretched out the muscles that had been tensed during the Dark Lord's 'playtime'. He ran a hand through his hair and headed off for his room.

Harry slowly seeped towards consciousness, fighting it all the way. His last memory was of pain and for the first time in his life, he really didn't want to face any more. His consciousness had others ideas however and in fairly short order he found himself awake. He kept his eyes closed and let himself drift, just listening to what was going on around him. Immediately next to the bed he could hear Ron and Hermione having a low voiced argument about something completely unimportant. Someone was sitting on the edge of the bed, holding his hand and chuckling at what Ron and Hermione were saying and Harry quickly identified that person as Ginny. He could smell Luna's distinctive and delicate perfume in the air and assumed that she and Neville must also be here. And

underneath the argument being conducted next to the bed, he could hear a discussion in the other corner of the room. He lay still and listened hard before finally identifying the voices as Sirius, Remus and Professors Snape and Dumbledore. He listened a bit harder, trying to determine what they were saying but the argument beside him was too loud. Finally he sighed quietly and opened his eyes, looking up into blackness.

"Harry?" Ginny said softly, giving his hand a gentle squeeze. "How are you feeling?"

Her question brought all conversations in the room to a halt.

"You know I get that question a lot," Harry replied with a wan smile.

He felt the other side of the bed dip and then a hand gently ruffled his hair. "Well, you keep scaring us, Pronglet," came Sirius' voice.

"Not my fault," Harry grumbled as he sat up with Ginny and Sirius' help. "Bloody Voldemort keeps screwing around with me."

"So it was Voldemort then," Dumbledore said, patting his feet under the blankets.

"Yeah," Harry said wearily. "Somehow I ended up in his mind again…or Draco's mind or both. He told me the link hadn't been broken, just hidden until he had recovered enough."

"I see. And have you been shielding your mind?" the Headmaster asked.

"Yes," Harry said indignantly. "I always have the shields up. I don't know how I got in there."

"Severus indicated that Voldemort could not see either of you."

"Yeah," Harry said thoughtfully. "He knew I was there after a while but he couldn't see me. I could see him though." He paused. "He looked…young, more like the diary version. Like Tom Riddle rather than Voldemort. And he wasn't very happy about his situation. He thinks Draco's not ambitious enough and is trying to find a way out of what he called his crystalline prison."

"He plans on taking over Draco's mind then?" Remus asked.

"I think so," Harry replied. "It sounded like it anyway."

"That's not good," Ron said dryly.

"What did it look like in the dream?" Dumbledore asked.

Harry frowned in thought. "I kind of…arrived in a crystal corridor that had a lot of bumps and shards all over the walls and floors and the corridor led to a crystal room. Voldemort was in there and he was able to conjure a chair."

"There was nothing in any of the literature I have read about this," Snape said. "Not even Lily's notes mentioned something like this being possible."

"It may be that Voldemort did this inadvertently in his struggle to claim Draco's mind," the Headmaster said wearily. "It is entirely possible that not even he understands what he did."

"Did you want me to try and find out?" Harry ventured tentatively.

"No!" The shouted word came from everyone in the room.

"Okay," Harry said with a small smile. "Maybe not." He then looked towards where his godfather had been sitting quietly. "Where am I? And what time is it?"

There was a moment of silence. "Your room in our quarters," Sirius finally replied. "And it's ten o'clock in the morning."

"Don't worry about your classes," Dumbledore said hastily, patting Harry's feet again. "You and your friends have been excused for the day. Now, I'm afraid I must get back to work. I'm glad you're alright, dear boy."

"We have to get to our classes," Remus said quietly. "Will you be alright on your own?"

"Oy!" Ron said indignantly. "We'll be here!"

Remus chuckled. "I stand corrected."

"I'll be fine," Harry said with a grin. He then heard the sounds of people leaving the room however the presence at his side didn't move and he looked in that direction. "Siri?"

"You haven't got your Oversight active," came the neutral observation.

"I don't need it in here," Harry replied. "And I think after last night I might end up with a headache if I use it right now. I'll activate it later." He paused. "I'm really alright."

He felt Sirius pat his hand and stand up. "Call me if you need anything."

Harry nodded then he heard Sirius leave the room. As soon as the door closed, his friends gathered around the bed. Harry had just opened his mouth to speak when he heard the door to his room open again.

"Shouldn't you lot be in classes?" came a vaguely familiar and cheerful voice.

"Who are you?" Ron asked belligerently as he and the others swiftly took defensive positions between the bed and those who had just entered.

"Ron, it's alright," came Master Nhean's voice.

Harry pushed himself upright and reluctantly activated his Oversight. He immediately found that his prediction to Sirius was correct, as his Oversight appeared so did the first edges of a headache. He grimaced and tried to ignore the pain as colour flooded through the room. He peered around the defensive structure his friends had formed and saw the energy colours and shadowy figure of Master Nhean standing next to the energy colours and vague shadows he recognised as the two Council members he had met in Tokyo during the summer holidays.

"Ron, they're Guild members, Night Warriors, it's fine," he said in a conciliatory tone.

Ron relaxed slightly and the others followed his lead.

"Well, wasn't that fun!" Jun'ko Watanabe said with admiration. "I've never seen a Battle Guard in action before. That was very impressive."

The students goggled at her and Master Nhean chuckled. "I think you've managed to confuse them, Jun'ko."

"Oh, I hope not," she said. "I mean, their reaction was excellent. Just how a Battle Guard should react, if what I've read is right."

Harry's friends slowly settled back into the seats they had originally been in and looked at Harry questioningly.

A slow smile appeared on Harry's face. "Everyone, this is Jun'ko Watanabe and Nyugen Dinh Tien, both Night Warriors and Council members. Jun'ko, Tien, these are my friends and Battle Guard, Ron Weasley, Hermione Granger, Ginny Weasley, Luna Lovegood and Neville Longbottom."

The two Council members nodded to each of the students in turn and then looked back at Harry.

"So, are you going to tell us what has happened to cause all of you to be missing your classes?" Tien asked.

"The link between Voldemort and I is still active and somehow I ended up in his mind…or Draco's mind…or both…last night. It…wasn't very pleasant."

"Damn," Jun'ko breathed softly. "Then I think we've arrived in good time then."

"I have to agree with that," Tien said grimly. "Nhean, I think we had better get settled in and then you can start familiarising us with the castle. I think Harry needs the rest and I think we don't have as much time in front of us as we thought."

Nhean raised an eyebrow. "A good idea," he said calmly before looking over at Harry. "Rest well, my apprentice. You shall have some new challenges when your training starts again."

Harry grinned. "I'm sure I will."

The three Guild members left the room and Harry's friends stared at him.

"Wasn't that a bit of an over reaction on the part of the Council members?" Hermione asked in a dubious tone.

"Maybe," Harry replied. "Unless they know something we don't know. I'll probably be able to find out either way tomorrow."

"Why do I get the feeling they do know something we don't know?" Ron grumbled.

"Because that's always the way things seem to work out," Ginny said lightly. "I guess we'll just have to face things as they come."

Chapter 17

Severus Snape leaned back and put down the quill he had been using to mark the Fifth Year essays on his desk. He frowned and flexed his fingers. His hands had been growing quite stiff in the last few weeks and while it was just a couple of weeks shy of Christmas and snow blanketed the ground outside, he didn't think it was any colder down in the dungeons this year compared to any other years. He certainly wasn't old enough to be worrying about arthritis or rheumatism or any other infirmities.

As he stared down at his hands, a shiver of pain ran down his spine. He drew in a sharp breath and stood up. This action caused the shiver of pain became something rather more and Severus was driven to his knees by the wracking pains that suddenly gripped him, just barely missing the edge of his desk on the way down. He doubled over and gasped as a wave of nausea assaulted him in addition to the pain. He fell onto his side and curled up into a foetal position, gasping and moaning slightly as the pain and nausea assaulted him. Slowly he began drawing in slow, deep breaths, trying to push the pain and nausea down slightly. He knew from his experience with the Cruciatus curse that the Dark Lord had favoured that this was the best way of doing this. When he felt he could, he slowly levered himself onto his knees and began to crawl towards the fire. He was about halfway there when he heard a knock on the door. He slowly allowed himself to fall back down onto his side as he considered what to do. As yet another wave of pain assaulted him, his decision was made for him.

"Come," he croaked as loudly as he was able to manage.

"Professor, I'm sorry to disturb…" came the cheerful voice of Harry Potter as he opened the door. The young man's voice broke off with a gasp as he saw his teacher lying on the floor in obvious pain.

Harry rushed over and crouched down next to him for a brief moment, gently touching his shoulder, then without another word he stood and darted over to the fireplace, grabbed a handful of Floo powder and summoned Madam Pomfrey with harsh urgency. As soon as he was sure that the mediwitch was coming he returned to Severus' side. Severus was surprised and pleased that Harry chose not to ask any inane questions, partly because he quite honestly did not have the strength to answer them, all his strength going into keeping himself conscious, but mostly because he did not have an answer to the most obvious and important question; what was wrong?

Madam Pomfrey suddenly burst out of the green flames in the fireplace and she rushed over and pulled out her wand.

"Is this how you found him?" she asked Harry tersely as she ran her wand over the Potions Master.

"Yes," Harry replied with equal brevity. He paused for a moment then continued with a confused frown on his face. "His energy colours are shot through with Murky-Yellow and Black."

"What does that indicate?" Poppy asked as she continued her examination.

"Illness…death and evil," Harry said haltingly.

Poppy flicked a quick, unreadable look at him then turned back to her examination. Severus tried

to find it in himself to be angry with the two of them for talking about him as though he wasn't there but was unable to summon the indignation required through the pain and nausea.

Finally Poppy hissed through her teeth. "Poison," she said grimly. "But I don't know which." She looked down at Severus, clearly intending her next comments for him. "The diagnostic spell doesn't know this one so it's not one of the common ones. It only knows it's a poison. Still, I think a strong painkilling potion and a general antidote may just hold it off long enough for you to try a better diagnostic. Do you think you could stand with our help?"

Severus gave a small nod of his head and, with the aid of Harry and Poppy, got to his feet.

"I think we'll go through the Floo," Poppy said after consideration. "Whoever poisoned you will be waiting for some kind of confirmation and dragging you through the corridors will only give them that confirmation." She looked around Severus at Harry. "If I go through first, do you think you could get Professor Snape through with you?"

Harry nodded firmly, though confusion still lingered in the back of his eyes. The three of them made their way over to the fireplace then Poppy pulled away from Severus and quickly Flooed out of the room. Harry grunted slightly as Snape's weight was left to him then shuffled the two of them forward. He pulled one arm away and was inwardly relieved that Snape seemed coherent enough to compensate for the loss of the support. He grabbed a handful of Floo powder and quickly had the two of them on their way to Hospital Wing. When they emerged at the other end, Harry struggled hard and just barely managed to keep the two of them on their feet. Poppy quickly came over and helped him manoeuvre the Potions Master onto the nearest bed. Harry collapsed onto the nearest chair with relief, tapping his fingers against his knees nervously. He felt a little odd without his cane, having had to leave it behind in Snape's office in order to help the man.

As he sat there, Snape again curled up into the foetal position he had found him in. Poppy frowned and quickly bustled off into a nearby room, returning with two small vials in her hand. She placed one of the vials on the bedside table and helped Snape drink the other. Then she repeated the process with the second potion. She then stepped back and waited. After about ten minutes the potions seemed to finally have an effect. Snape slowly stopped shuddering and he gradually uncurled and rolled onto his back, lying with his eyes closed and taking deep breaths.

"How much of an effect have those potions had?" Poppy asked with a frown.

"It is…manageable," Snape replied. He opened his eyes and turned his head to look at Harry. "It appears that Miss Parkinson was more resourceful than I gave her credit for."

Harry nodded absently as he stared at the Potions Master chest. Snape's eyes narrowed as he realised that the young Gryffindor wasn't precisely looking at him but at the energy colours that signified him.

"Mr Potter?" Snape said archly. "What exactly are you seeing and what is the problem?"

Harry gave a start and his sightless eyes stuttered up to the Potions Master's face. "Sir?"

"What are you seeing and what is the problem?" Snape repeated with thin-edged patience.

"Murky-Yellow and Black," Harry said in a shaken tone. "Your normal colours of Golden-Yellow and

Scarlet are shot through with Murky-Yellow and Black."

"What does that mean?" Snape asked, finally starting to get a little worried at Harry's obvious shock.

"Murky-Yellow is illness," Harry said softly. "The Black means evil and death. Sir…" His voice trailed off. He swallowed then took a deep breath and continued. "I'm not sure about this…Master Nhean will know more…but I think this poison has been in your system for a long time. The energy colours look…old…or at least I think they do." He shivered and wrapped his arms around himself. "I just don't know why I didn't see it before," he finished softly.

Snape was startled. "You didn't?" he asked carefully. "You had your potions lesson two days ago, you didn't see anything then?"

Harry paused and thought back then shook his head. "No, there was no sign of the Murky-Yellow or the Black. The only change I've seen in your energy colours since I first learnt how to use my Oversight was that the Blood-Red Brown faded after your role as a spy stopped."

"Would you have noticed if you weren't looking for the change in colours?" Snape probed.

"Yes," Harry replied. "The colours are pretty vibrant and it's usually pretty obvious when there's a change. I noticed the Blood-Red Brown disappearing, didn't I?"

Snape grunted and sat up. He swung his legs around and stood, swaying slightly before he managed to hide it.

"Severus! What do you think you are doing?" Poppy said fiercely.

"I am going back to the dungeons to try and find out what this poison is," Snape replied with acid precision. "I cannot do that from here."

Poppy opened her mouth to object but closed when she realised that she really couldn't. She just didn't have the expertise required to do this. Harry watched this with interest then he looked at Snape again and his eyes narrowed.

"Professor, could you please hold your hands out?" he asked politely.

Snape looked at Harry suspiciously but complied. There was a small silence as they all saw the way the Potion Master's hands were shaking. Snape quickly snatched his hands away and tucked them into his robes.

"Let me go and get Hermione," Harry said pragmatically. "You can't make a potion with your hands like that and you know she's the best Potions student you've had in years."

Snape scowled fiercely and opened his mouth to object.

"Sir," Harry said firmly, before he could say anything. "You know I'm right. I know you don't like it but if you try to make a potion with your hands like that, you'll probably make a mistake and that might just make things worse." Harry sighed and looked up at Snape with a rueful expression. "Sometimes, sir, you just have to accept help from people, even when you don't want it. I learnt that one last year," he said with a wry smile.

Snape’s scowl deepened then he finally drew his robes around him and swept towards the door in a close approximation of his usual manner. As he opened the door, he paused.

"Tell Miss Granger not to tarry, Mr Potter," he said over his shoulder as he walked out the door.

Harry watched him go and stood. He gave a small quirk of a smile to Madam Pomfrey then made his way out of the Hospital Wing and up to Gryffindor Tower as quickly as he could. He felt a little naked without his cane and when he got to the Tower he looked around for his friend.

"Hey, Harry," came Ron’s cheerful voice from one side of the room.

Harry turned and saw his friends sitting around one of the tables. He quickly made his way over to Hermione.

"Hermione, I need you to come with me right now," he said quietly and urgently.

The bushy-haired girl looked up from her homework with surprise. "Now? Can it wait?"

"No," Harry replied firmly. "Come on."

He grabbed her arm and gently pulled her to her feet. Hermione stared at him with some surprise but came with him. He led her over to the doorway and ushered her out of the common room, ignoring the looks from his friends. Once they got into the corridor, he set a swift pace, forcing Hermione to almost jog to keep up.

"Harry!" she said indignantly. "What is going on?"

Harry slowed enough to let her catch up then grabbed her arm again and continued hustling her down the corridor.

"There been a bit of a problem," he muttered in a low tone. "Professor Snape’s been poisoned."

"What!" Hermione gasped.

"Quiet!" Harry ordered. "We don’t want whoever did this to know that they’ve succeeded."

Hermione gulped and nodded vigorously as she kept up with Harry with no complaint. "What poison is it?"

"Madam Pomfrey didn’t know," Harry replied tersely. "And it obviously wasn’t one that Professor Snape recognised by the symptoms. Madam Pomfrey gave him a pain-killing potion and a general antidote but they’re only holding off the poison, not curing it."

"So what does he need me for?" Hermione asked.

"Because his hands are shaking," Harry replied as they made their way down to the dungeons. "He can’t make any kind of potion at the moment. You’re the best student in the school in Potions. If you don’t know what needs to be done, he can direct you." Harry hesitated. "Just don’t be surprised if he’s a bit vitriolic. He’s not happy about being poisoned or needing the help."

Hermione gave a quick grin. "I can imagine," she said dryly.

By this time they had reached Snape's classroom and office and Harry knocked once and pushed the door open. They walked in to find the Potions Master dumping some books on the front table. He looked up at the two students and scowled.

"Well, Miss Granger?" he snapped.

Hermione's eyes widened imperceptibly at the tone of voice then she sighed and walked up to the front desk in a business-like manner.

"I'll need a list of the symptoms," she said as neutrally as possible.

Snape whipped around and swayed for a moment then he stalked back into his office and emerged with a piece of parchment and Harry's cane. He thrust the parchment into Hermione's hands and then stalked over to Harry.

"I believe this is yours," he growled as he thrust the cane at Harry.

Harry grabbed it quickly. "I'll, er, leave you to it. I don't think I'd be of any help."

"Indeed you would not," Snape said with a hint of his old nastiness before turning and heading back to the pile of books on the front desk.

Harry swallowed the almost automatic retort, knowing that not only did Snape probably not mean it but also that Hermione really wouldn't want him getting Snape any more riled than he was now. He made his way silently out of the room and left them to it.

While this was happening Hermione had been silently reading the list of symptoms. When she finished, she frowned and looked up at Snape.

"You've been getting stiff joints for a couple of weeks," she observed. "Could this be something you took a while ago and is only kicking in now?"

A muscle in Snape's cheek twitched. "That is possible," he said coolly. "Or it could be something that has been building up gradually. However, you are not here to read your way through my library. I need you to make the following potion. You will find all the equipment and ingredients you need in my workroom."

He shoved another piece of parchment into Hermione's hands and pointed her towards his workroom, which had an entry from the classroom. She looked down at the parchment and her eyes widened. This was by far the most complex potion she had ever seen. She looked up at Snape with the closest thing to panic he had ever seen on her face.

"Er, sir? I've…never made anything this complex before," she stammered. "Erm, I think maybe you ought to supervise me for this one."

Snape scowled. "I do not have time for that, Miss Granger. I think if you can manage to brew the Polyjuice potion in Second Year in a girls' lavatory, you will have little trouble with this one. It merely looks complex."

Hermione swallowed and nodded. She did recognise the name of the potion; it was one that, with the addition of three drops of the victim's blood, would identify any foreign substances in the blood.

It wouldn’t identify the poison but it would identify the ingredients in it and for an unknown poison that was probably the best way to go about figuring out what it was.

She slowly made her way into Snape’s workroom and looked around. The Potions Master had laid out everything she would need and she took a deep breath and walked over to the table. She placed the parchment down where it would be easy to refer to and set to work. It would take her nearly two hours to brew this properly and she had a hunch that Snape would need the antidote as soon as possible.

Two hours later, Hermione leaned on the table and looked down into the cauldron with relief and a certain amount of pride. The potion looked perfect and was ready for the three drops of blood. She picked up the vial that had been provided and carefully ladled some of the potion into it, capping it once she was done. Then she walked back into the classroom to find Snape sitting at the front desk, surrounded by open books and clearly in some pain.

"Professor Snape?" she said hesitantly. "I’ve finished, it’s ready."

The Potions Master looked up and Hermione could clearly see the pain etched into his face and hidden in his eyes. He gestured imperiously for the vial and examined the potion carefully.

"Well done, Miss Granger," he admitted reluctantly.

He stood and slowly made his halting way into his office. A large piece of parchment sat in isolation on his desk with a small knife beside it and he sat down in his chair. He rested the vial in a holder and picked up the knife. He stared down at his trembling hand for a moment then looked over at Hermione, who was standing in the doorway with an uncertain expression on her face.

"It seems you will have to do the honours, Miss Granger," he said with irritated resignation. "I fear I may do myself considerable damage if I try."

Hermione swallowed and nodded. She walked over nervously and took the knife from him. He offered his hand to her and she licked her lips before squaring her shoulders in determination. As Snape watched, all nervousness flooded out of her and she took his hand with a surprisingly firm grip. She swiftly prodded at his finger and when the blood welled, she quickly grabbed the vial, uncapped it one-handed and allowed three drops of his blood to fall into the vial. The blood caused the potion to seethe for a moment then it settled down and changed colour from clear to a deep ruby red.

"Pour the potion onto the parchment," Snape ordered as he pulled a small piece of cloth out of his robes and wrapped it around his abused finger. "Let it pour at the top and run it from side to side."

Hermione nodded and did as she was asked. The potion stood on top of the parchment for a moment then seeped in. They waited for a moment then spidery lines began to crawl out of the potion stain at the top. The spidery lines began to form the names of potion ingredients and Hermione quickly grabbed another piece of parchment and began to write them down. Her face got paler and paler as the potion ingredients appeared. Essence of belladonna, bubotuber pus and hellebore were all listed. Then an ingredient appeared that caused her to gasp; basilisk venom. When the red writing finally stopped, Hermione had a list of ingredients that horrified her. Many of

them were deadly in their own right and she couldn't imagine what they would do combined together. She looked at Snape and was surprised to see that he seemed to look almost resigned.

"Sir?" she said softly. "Do…do you know what this poison is?"

"I believe I do," Snape replied acidly.

He levered himself to his feet and disappeared through a second door in his office. Hermione watched him with surprise. It was commonly believed that that door led into Snape's private quarters but, whether it did or not, she had no intention of invading his privacy by following. Before she could do anything else, Snape reappeared with a small black leather-bound journal in his hand. He sat down at his desk again and started flipping through it. About halfway through, he found what he was looking for and stopped and began reading. Hermione leaned forward slightly; the journal was handwritten and the writing looked like Snape's. After a few minutes, Snape sat back in his chair and hissed with pain, fatigue obvious on his face. He shoved the journal in Hermione's direction and she nervously picked it up and began to read. On the page was detailed a poisonous ink owned by a Tybalt Parkinson. Snape had included the known ingredients of the ink, the actions of the poison and the antidote, all of which had been conveyed to him by Tybalt Parkinson.

"Well, I guess this puts Pansy right in the middle of this," she muttered sourly under her breath as she read. When she was done, she looked over at Snape. "Well, there is an antidote to this, sir."

"It takes three weeks to brew, Miss Granger," Snape said irritably.

Hermione looked down again at the antidote instructions. "I could do it," she said firmly. "It's certainly less complex than the one I just brewed."

Snape snarled silently then winced as he was once again assaulted by pain. He wasn't sure if his irritation was caused by the pain or his current helplessness. He knew from the reading he had just done to refresh his memory that this current level of pain was only the start and that he had three very evil weeks in front of him. Finally he nodded.

"Very well, Miss Granger," he said as he pushed himself to his feet. "I believe you will find everything you need in my workroom. I trust that you will see the wisdom in beginning this immediately. I must see the Headmaster to make some arrangements."

Hermione nodded and dashed off for the workroom. She had read everything on those two pages in the journal and was aware that Snape was going to be in incredible pain by the time she finished brewing the antidote. Behind her she heard the fire flare then she turned her attention solely to the job in front of her.

Once she had the brewing process started, she turned back to the journal. She could only do a small amount tonight then the potion would have to simmer for three days before she could continue. It would have to be stirred three times clockwise and eight times anticlockwise every six hours so she took careful note of the time when she set it to simmer. She stepped back and stretched; she had been working for a solid hour on the antidote. She closed the journal and carefully placed it on a shelf above the simmering cauldron then she walked out into the classroom where she found Professor Dumbledore waiting for her.

"You've got it started then," he asked quietly and she nodded in reply. "Excellent. I have arranged for you to be able to leave you classes whenever you need to in order to continue the process of brewing this potion. Professor Snape has requested your aid in helping him mark homework; he intends to continue teaching for as long as he can."

"Of course, sir," Hermione replied, slightly surprised that Snape had made that request though she felt it had not been made in the almost polite way that the Headmaster reported. "I'll do whatever I can to help." She hesitated. "I take it he told you that the poison ink was owned by Pansy Parkinson's father."

"Yes, indeed," Dumbledore said sternly. "I think Miss Parkinson and I need to have a little chat tomorrow morning about the appropriateness of her actions. I may need to call in the Aurors." Hermione looked startled and Dumbledore raised an eyebrow and continued. "Attempted murder of a Hogwarts teacher is a serious matter, Miss Granger."

"Yes, I know," she stammered. "I just…she was probably told to do this by Draco, sir."

"Yes, I am aware of that," Dumbledore replied wearily. "Both Mr Potter and Madam Pomfrey had already come to see me before Professor Snape contacted me." He paused and sighed. "Harry was most upset that we had not kept a closer watch on Miss Parkinson."

"He did warn you," Hermione pointed out as diplomatically as she could. "A number of times."

"Yes, I know, my dear," Dumbledore sighed. "And he warned Professor Snape several times as well. I fear we did not see things as clearly as he did."

Hermione wilted a bit. "Well, Blaise, Millicent and the other Slytherin DA members didn't see anything unusual either and they were certainly looking." She paused. "They won't be happy with Pansy and her cronies, sir. They're very proud of Professor Snape."

"I shall take that as the warning it is," the Headmaster said with a small smile. "Now we have already taken into custody all of the homework submitted by Miss Parkinson and her friends that Professor Snape still had. I shall be getting Alastor Moody to examine that but I would ask you not to touch any homework that they submit in the next few weeks."

Hermione swallowed and nodded. "I'd better go, sir. The potion needs to be stirred every six hours at this point and I'll need to get some sleep."

"A wise idea," Dumbledore said with a kind smile. He then offered a key to Hermione. "This is a key to Professor Snape's workroom. His classroom door is always open but he generally locks his workroom each evening."

The Headmaster gave the door to the workroom a significant look and Hermione smiled wryly. She walked over and locked the workroom door with the key and when she turned around again the Headmaster was beaming at her, his eyes twinkling.

"Off you go now, my dear," he said and Hermione did not hesitate to obey. She was going to have a tiring three days of constantly watching the clock and she wanted to make sure she got enough sleep.

She walked briskly through the silent corridors and considered what had happened tonight. Anger

seethed within her at Pansy's actions and she snarled silently. Draco! It had to have been his idea! He had been given the order by Voldemort last year and obviously thought it would be a good idea to carry it out even though it could hardly benefit anyone now. She sighed and let the anger go as much as she could; it wouldn't help her to get worked up right now and she knew that Harry was going to be angry enough for all of them. He had warned them and warned them and not been properly heeded. She didn't think he would actually be that angry at Professor Snape but she imagined that the Headmaster had been on the receiving end of some sharp words. She chuckled as she walked up to the portrait of the Fat Lady; Harry's temper was more under control these days but when he did let loose, he tended to be more creative.

"Canary creams," she said to the Fat Lady and the portrait door swung open. She crawled through the entrance hole into the common room to find Harry pacing in front of the fire. Ron was slouched in one of the chairs, Ginny was curled up on the couch and Neville was fast asleep in another chair. Harry swivelled around as she entered as Ron kicked at Neville's feet to wake him.

"Well?" Harry demanded.

Hermione walked over to Ron and he pulled her down onto his lap. She snuggled into him as he wrapped his arms around her comfortingly and she sighed with relief.

"It was a poison in ink that Pansy was using for her homework," she said wearily. "A contact poison, slow acting but very nasty when it finally hits. There is an antidote but it takes three weeks to brew. I've started it but Professor Snape's in for a nasty time."

"Dammit!" Harry burst out as he started pacing angrily again "I told them! Again and again! But, oh no! What would I know?"

"Harry," Hermione said soothingly. "I think they're aware that they made a mistake. There's nothing we can do now to change that. Let's just concentrate to what needs to be done now." She sighed and continued almost absently. "I'm going have to contact my parents tomorrow to tell them I won't be home for Christmas."

"I know Dumbledore said he was going to speak with Pansy tomorrow and probably call in the Aurors," Harry said grumpily. "I assume you're brewing the antidote?"

"Yes," Hermione replied as she stood up. "Which is why I'm am off to bed right now. The antidote has to simmer for three days at the moment and I have to stir it every six hours. Professor Dumbledore has given me permission to leave any class when I need to do something for the antidote."

Harry nodded. "Go on," he said with a relieved smile. "Far be it for me to put a spanner in the works. I need to work off a bit more of my temper before I'll be able to get some sleep."

"I'll go up with you, Hermione," Ginny said with a yawn. "I know from experience that Harry just has to work through his temper on his own these days."

Harry grinned at her and grabbed her as she walked passed, pulling her in for a hug and a kiss. Ron rolled his eyes then copied the gesture with his own girlfriend. Neville groaned and pushed himself to his feet.

"And on that note, I'm going to bed," he said with a small smile. "You know it's very unfair for you lot to do that when my girlfriend is in a different House."

The two couples broke apart and laughed.

"Poor Neville," Ginny said sweetly. "Well, we won't torture you any longer."

With that she and Hermione headed up to the girls' dormitories. Ron and Harry watched them go with amusement then Ron walked over to Neville.

"Come on, Nev," he said good-naturedly. "Let's leave Harry to stew a bit longer. Some of us actually need to get some sleep before classes tomorrow."

Ron and Neville both shot mock-superior expressions at Harry then darted up the stairs, leaving Harry to himself. He shook his head in amusement for a moment then continued his pacing as his anger bubbled to the surface again. He couldn't honestly work out at the moment who he was angry at; Pansy and Draco were obvious targets as were Professor Dumbledore and Professor Snape but he had to admit he was angry at himself as well. He knew that Pansy was a danger, he should have pushed harder, should have made sure that something was done.

He sighed and collapsed into the chair Ron had been sitting in, scrubbing his face with his hands. What more could really have done though? Would searching Pansy's belongings really have got them anywhere? One bottle of ink looks like another and Harry was willing to bet there was nothing obvious to differentiate the bottle of poison ink from a normal bottle of ink. His thoughts were still churning around in his mind and he was staring blankly into the fire, which he could see merely as an odd red, orange and yellow energy flow, when the portrait door opened again behind him.

"Harry, staying up all night brooding is not going to help," came Remus' gentle voice.

Harry gave a start and leaned around the chair to find his guardian walking across the common room, an amused but understanding look on his face.

"I know, Remy," Harry said heavily. "It's just…"

"You warned us all. You did all that you could," Remus pointed out logically. "What has happened has happened. It can't be changed; we just have to deal with it now. Which, if I understand correctly, Hermione is doing admirably."

"Yes," Harry replied with justifiable pride in his friend then his face fell. "But it's going to take three weeks to brew the antidote. Hermione said it's only going to get worse for Professor Snape."

Remus sighed. "Yes, I know and that's not all Hermione is going to have on her plate."

Harry looked at his guardian blankly for a moment then comprehension dawned. "Oh, the Wolfsbane potion." He gave a small laugh. "She'll complain about the workload but she'll be thrilled. She's wanted to have a go brewing that ever since we found out about it in Third Year."

"Maybe she can make it taste a bit better," Remus said humorously. "I've always suspected Severus makes it taste as bad as possible as a form of revenge."

Harry gave a snort of amusement. "That’s a bit petty, isn’t it?" he asked with a slow smile.

"Ah, and thus you sum up the relationship between the Marauders and Severus Snape," Remus drawled with amusement. "Petty and stupid, the lot of us."

Harry gave another snort of laughter then yawned.

"Maybe you should try getting some sleep," Remus observed.

Harry smiled at his guardian. Remus had done it again. There was something about the werewolf that never failed to calm Harry down. He wasn’t sure what it was, maybe just the man’s unfailing good humour and ability to see the best in everything, but it always worked.

Harry stood and stretched. "Good idea," he said with another yawn.

Remus stood and Harry walked over and he drew the young man into a hug. He was always inwardly pleased that Harry was still willing to be hugged by himself and Sirius. Most boys his age scorned such things but Remus suspected that Harry was making up for a lot of neglect. Harry gave his guardian a slow smile and trailed off up the stairs to his dormitory.

Chapter 18

When Harry woke the next morning, a quick check of his clock told him it was just before six in the morning. He lay back on his bed then sighed when he realised that he wasn't going to get any more sleep. He activated his Oversight and slipped quietly out of bed. He dressed as quickly and quietly as he could so as not to disturb the other boys and then headed downstairs. He slipped out of the Tower and wandered down to the Guild classroom. He opened the door and walked in to find Jun'ko and Tien warming up and chatting sleepily. They looked around when he walked in and smiled.

"You're up early," Jun'ko said.

Harry grunted. "I couldn't sleep so I thought I'd come down here and do a few exercises." He paused. "I think I need to work off a bit of steam as well. I didn't know you would be here."

The two Warriors exchanged glances.

"Nhean told us what's happened to the Potions Master," Tien said carefully. "Is that what's got you so worked up?"

"Yeah, kind of," Harry said running a hand through his hair. "I warned them that Pansy wasn't to be trusted but I don't think they took me seriously and look what happened!"

"Ah," Tien said in sudden comprehension. "So Professor Snape was already a target but nobody paid too much attention. Was that deliberate?"

Harry thought for a moment then shook his head dismissively. "No. Dumbledore would never allow that. I think they just couldn't bring themselves to see past Pansy's prissy and prim exterior."

"But you did?" Jun'ko ventured.

Harry grimaced. "Well, not really, I just figured anyone who was willing to marry Draco Malfoy probably didn't have too many scruples of her own."

Jun'ko gave a snort of laughter. "Good point. Unless she doesn't know what he does."

This time it was Harry's turn to snort though his was more derisive than amused. "Pansy's been in this from the beginning. She was one of those who tried to keep the Slytherin DA members away from the battle."

"Ah, she's no innocent victim then," Jun'ko said with amusement.

"Exactly," Harry said firmly.

"Well, how about you work off some of that steam by sparring with us?" Jun'ko suggested. "We'd like to see how skilled you are and you'll probably learn some things from our different styles."

Harry brightened and nodded. This was the first time either of them had suggested that he train with them and he was eager to do so. They had been mostly concentrating on training Sirius and the other adults. He joined the two senior Warriors in their warm-up and when that was completed he looked over at them.

"So how do we do this?"

"I'll spar with you first," Jun'ko said in a very professional manner. "Tien will monitor our bout then he and I will swap." She moved into position then paused. "Nhean has taught you how to magically dull your blade in practice bouts, hasn't he?"

Harry chuckled as his sword blade suddenly shimmered. "What do you think?" he said cheekily.

Jun'ko raised an eyebrow and smiled. "Well then, have at ye!"

Harry quickly realised that Jun'ko fought in a fashion very different from the one Nhean had taught him. She was small and slender and used these as part of her fighting style. She never closed with him but darted in and out and jumped around. She almost danced with the sword. Nhean had taught him a more traditional form of sword fighting, mostly because he would most often be fighting along with his Battle Guard. Jun'ko managed to score a number of hits on him before he turned to a more defensive mode while he tried to figure out how to fight against her. Finally he had to take a step back and grounded the tip of his sword. Jun'ko immediately stopped and followed suit.

"I don't know how to combat your style of fighting," he admitted with a certain amount of frustration.

Jun'ko grinned at him. "I'm not surprised. You've only be learning for a little over a year and I'll bet this is the first time you've come into contact with this style." Harry nodded and Jun'ko continued. "Now, your problem was you were letting me dictate the way the fight was going. That's the basic point of this style, to keep moving so fast the enemy gets confused and can't adapt. Now obviously with this style, I don't want to close in and get caught in close battle. I'm too small, even you would be able to overpower me in that situation and you're smaller than Tien. So that's what you want to do."

"But how?" Harry asked then he paused. "No, wait a minute, let me work this out. Okay, I need to close in and force you to fight my way but you're quicker than I am and can generally work your way out if I just try and move in. So…I need to get you into a position you can't get out of."

"Very good," Jun'ko said approvingly. "So how do you do that?"

Harry thought and looked around the room. "I…go back into a defensive mode but a slightly different one. You were able to manoeuvre me around before, I want to reverse that but in such a way that you don't notice. So that you're manoeuvring me where I want us to be."

"Correct again," Jun'ko said cheerfully. "So where do you manoeuvre me to?"

"A corner or somewhere you can't back out of easily," Harry replied promptly. "Then I close in."

"Bingo!" Jun'ko said with a grin. "Now, can you do it?"

"Let's see," Harry replied with a determined light in his eyes.

They both stepped back and raised their swords and then resumed the bout. Harry quickly found that doing the kind of manoeuvring he wanted was easier said than done. He was usually successful at first but Jun'ko always managed to get control back. After another half an hour, it was

Jun’ko who stepped back and grounded her sword. Harry followed suit and wiped some sweat off his forehead.

"Well done, Harry," Jun’ko said with a pleased look. "That was a very good effort for someone who is facing this style for the first time. You’ll get better with practice. Why don’t you take a short break then you can try sparring with Tien?"

Harry nodded. "Good idea. That was harder than I thought it would be," he said ruefully.

"Jun’ko’s right, you did well for a first time," Tien said, walking over and handing Harry a towel. "Her style is one of the harder ones to combat if you have a more traditional style. You might want to consider learning it though. You’re small enough and light enough to be able to manage it, I think, and it would be useful to have another string to your bow."

"I wouldn’t be able to use that style effectively with the Battle Guard, would I?" Harry asked dubiously.

"No, you’d end up getting in their way and fouling their weapons most likely," Tien conceded. "But remember, you won’t always be fighting with them. It would be useful to have a second style."

Harry nodded thoughtfully. "Hmm, good point. Do most people learn two styles?"

"Not really," Tien replied as he took the towel back from Harry and threw over onto the table. "But most of us only fight singly. You are probably actually better suited to Jun’ko’s style of fighting but because of your Battle Guard, you’ve been forced to use a more generic form of fighting in order to coordinate things properly. I’m not saying that’s a bad thing. I would say learning to fight with a Battle Guard is a very good thing but I think you need to learn a proper solo fighting style."

"Okay," Harry said slowly.

"I’ll talk to Nhean about it," Jun’ko said from where she was walking back and forth to cool her muscles down. "He’ll probably get me to train you."

Harry nodded again then Tien gave him a nudge. "Ready to try yourself against me?"

"Yep," Harry said cheerfully and the two men moved into position.

Harry found this bout to be a completely different kettle of fish. Tien was taller and bulkier than him and used a different fighting style again. His was a more bullocking style that had much to recommend it in strength and the ability to finish a fight quickly but it wasn’t the most graceful method of fighting. It was effective though, as Harry found out when he ended up flat on his back with Tien’s sword at his throat.

"How did you do that?" he asked incredulously as Tien stood up and offered him his hand. Harry couldn’t even recall how he had ended up on the floor.

Tien chuckled as he pulled Harry to his feet. "I’m bigger and stronger than you."

"Yeah, I noticed," Harry replied dryly.

"I just bullied you and overpowered you," Tien elaborated.

"How on earth do I counter that?" Harry said with exasperation. He was used to being the best among his friends and being so easily trounced by both Night Warriors had pricked his ego a little. The fact that both Warriors were his senior in both years and experience hadn't quite occurred to him as yet.

"By using Jun'ko's style," Tien replied patiently. "Don't let me close in with you. Use in and out attacks. Defeat me using a method of attrition, not outright attack."

Harry groaned. "But you're too fast."

Tien grinned at him mercilessly. "Then be faster. Come on, Harry. What if this was life or death?"

Harry sighed. "Sorry, I'm…just not used to be so thoroughly beaten."

Tien chuckled. "I know. That's part of the reason why Nhean wanted us to start working with you. You've had it too easy for too long!"

"Yeah, because the battle last year was so difficult," Harry grumbled.

"That was mostly magical," Tien said seriously. "This is non-magical combat."

Harry sighed and nodded. "Alright, I guess the easy days are over then." He gave a lopsided smile. "Well, my friends are going to enjoy this if nothing else. I've been beating them for so long."

Tien laughed. "Oh, I'm sure they will. Now come on, let's try this again."

Harry sighed then he grinned and moved into position. He had to admit he had had things too easy. Nhean was the only one who could stretch him these days though Neville and Ron could occasionally give him a run for his money. Obviously his Master had decided that it was time for him to work his arse off again. The sparring bout started again and Harry tried to keep away from Tien. It wasn't easy; the older man was quick as well as being taller and stronger. When Tien finally called the bout to a halt Harry was dripping with sweat. He had not landed a single blow on the older man though he had fended off plenty. It had taken all his current skill just to keep away from Tien; he hadn't even had a chance to try any of the in and out attacks that had been suggested. He stood where he had been when Tien called a halt to things and breathed deeply.

"Good work," Tien said amiably. "You've got a fair way to go but that was a good start."

Harry looked at the other man with disbelief written all over his face. When there was no reaction, Harry blinked then shook his head. He suddenly realised that while Jun'ko and Tien most likely had their Oversight working, neither of them knew him well enough to pick up facial expressions in the ghostly overlay yet.

"You can't mean that," he said, projecting the disbelief he had originally felt in his voice. "I got royally trounced by both of you."

"Well, yes," Jun'ko admitted. "But you tried hard, you worked hard and you weren't afraid to try using different styles to combat us. Harry, you're comparatively inexperienced. I know that you do have some direct combat experience but as Tien said, that was mostly using magic. You've only been doing this for, what, a little over a year. Give yourself a break!" She gave a small laugh. "You're making good progress and when you get used to our styles, you'll be able to start counter-attacking

more."

"I guess," Harry replied dubiously.

"Jun'ko's right," Tien said firmly. "That was very good for a first effort against experienced Warriors by an apprentice." He paused. "You do have a certain amount of natural skill, Harry, which is why you were able to take to Nhean's instruction so easily. He is the best of the trainers at the Academy but he has been teaching you the most basic style of fighting, mostly because you had to integrate into your Battle Guard as quickly as possible. Now it's time to spread your wings a little and that's never easy."

Harry nodded. "I guess you're right."

"Of course, we're right!" Jun'ko said cheerfully. "Now I think you'd better head back up to your dorm and have a shower." She paused for a beat. "You smell!"

This startled Harry into laughter and he stuck his nose into the air in mock-hurt. "Well, if you think that way about me, I'm leaving." With that he did his best to flounce petulantly out of the room, followed by the laughter of the two older Warriors.

Once he got out the door, Harry started laughing himself and he was still chuckling when he got back to the Tower. He quickly made his way up to the dorm and grabbed a change of clothes. The other boys were still asleep and he didn't see any reason to wake them. He ducked into the bathroom and showered and changed. The others were still asleep when he came back in to dump his dirty clothes and he quietly slipped out again. When he got down to the common room he saw Hermione opening the door.

"Hermione," he called.

The bushy haired girl turned and smiled at him tiredly. "I've got to down to the dungeons and stir the potion," she said.

"Want some company?" Harry offered.

"Yes, that would be good," Hermione said as they climbed through the entrance hole. "You can keep me awake."

"Didn't you sleep well?" Harry asked with concern.

"No, not really," Hermione replied with a sigh. "I was still pretty angry and worried and it took a while for me to settle down. You look a lot better than I thought you would."

"Remus came by," Harry replied. "He always manages to calm me down."

"He's a very calm person," Hermione said with a fond smile. She had a great deal in common with the werewolf and they had spent a bit of time at the Weasleys talking about books and other such things.

"That he is," Harry replied. "And he always knows how to say the right thing. I guess he's had plenty of practice dealing with Siri."

Hermione laughed. "Yes, Sirius does tend to go off at a drop of a hat. Does he do that during the training he does with Master Nhean?"

"No," Harry said with a grin. "And I'm beginning to suspect my godfather is trying to fool us all. He's very disciplined during training, takes all of Master Nhean's orders without baulking at all."

"Well, he was an Auror before…" Hermione trailed off, looking uncomfortable then decided to continue. "Before your parents…died. He would have had to be disciplined for that."

"Exactly," Harry said with a grin.

Hermione looked at him with a small smile. "You think he has this lovely reputation as being impulsive and full of life and he likes to live up to it?"

"Oh yes," Harry said with a laugh. "Not that he isn't impulsive but he's got a very disciplined inner Sirius that he lets out from time to time."

By this time they had reached the Potions classroom and Hermione led Harry through to the workroom door which she unlocked before ushering him in.

"Now, go and sit over there," she ordered, pointing imperiously to a stool well away from her working area. "You're much better than you used to be at Potions but you're still a menace at times."

Harry laughed and went and sat on the designated stool. "Why, Hermione, have you no faith?"

"Why should she?" came the irritated reply.

Harry looked over to the door to see Snape walk into the workroom. The man looked like he had aged twenty years overnight and Harry knew from personal experience that from the way Snape was standing that he was in a great deal of pain. He looked back to where Hermione was carefully stirring the antidote she was brewing and his expression sobered.

"No, good point," he said quietly. "I don't want to risk messing anything up. I'll stay right where I am and well away from that cauldron."

"You're not that bad, Harry," Hermione said absently as she counted her strokes. "I'm just not risking this for anything. Nobody comes near this cauldron except for me. Not you, not Ginny, not Professor Dumbledore, not even you, Professor Snape."

Snape raised an eyebrow but did not comment on that statement.

"I will have another potion for you to brew in a few days, Miss Granger," he said instead.

Hermione's eyes widened. "Er, really?" she said in a worried tone. "Um, what?"

"The Wolfsbane potion," Snape replied as he leaned against the doorway. Neither Harry nor Hermione commented on the uncharacteristic pose, knowing it was pain causing it and that the man would not welcome any kind of remark, smart, kind or otherwise. And Hermione's attention had just been caught by Snape's answer.

"Wolfsbane!" she yelped then broke out into a huge smile. "Oh! I've always wanted to try that! Is it

difficult?"

Harry bit his lip at the expression on Snape's face; obviously the constant pain was making it hard for the man to hide his feelings the way he normally did. The Potions Master had an expression that Harry could only translate from the overlay as a 'give me strength' look. Harry took a deep breath to control himself and looked over at Hermione.

"Hermione?" he said patiently. "I know you're thrilled but, um, perhaps now is not the time to…um, well, you know."

Hermione looked at him blankly for a moment and Harry tipped his head slightly towards Snape. Hermione's gaze turned in that direction and she blushed.

"Er, sorry, sir," she said sheepishly.

Snape raised an eyebrow and nodded slightly. "The instructions are in the book over there." He gestured towards a large leather-bound book sitting on a table to one side. "You will need to start it by the day after tomorrow at the latest."

Hermione nodded then hesitated, an acquisitive light kindling in her eyes. "Sir? May…may I read that book?"

Snape nodded and Harry could see that it was all Hermione could do not to hug the man. He swallowed a smile; while he would actually pay rather a lot of money to see that happen, he also rather thought that there might be blood on the floor if it did. Hermione managed to control herself however and almost leapt over and opened the book.

Snape watched her with an oppressive look then turned to Harry. "And what exactly are you doing here, Mr Potter?"

"I'm keeping Hermione company," Harry replied calmly. "I was up early anyway and when I saw her leaving the Tower, I offered to come with her."

Hermione looked up at that. "What were you doing this morning?" she asked curiously. "You were far too alert to have just gotten up."

Harry grinned at her. "I'd been doing some sparring with Jun'ko and Tien and I'm sure you'll be pleased to hear they wiped the floor with me."

Hermione grinned back at him. "Serves you right," she said tartly. "Considering the number of times you done that to me."

Harry groaned theatrically. "I told them I wouldn't get any sympathy from you lot."

"Bet you didn't get any sympathy from them either," Hermione continued in that tart tone.

Harry relaxed and laughed. "Correct, Miss Granger! They seemed to think it was about time I had to work my arse off."

"Good for them," Hermione replied as she turned back to the potions book.

Harry grinned then looked over at Professor Snape. "And I've just found out that I'm also here to

make sure Hermione remembers to eat this morning because, given half a chance, she'll stay here all day reading that book of yours."

One corner of Snape's mouth twitched. "Then perhaps now might be the time to carry out that task."

Harry touched the button on the side of his watch and nodded. "You're right, sir. We'll get out of your hair."

He jumped off the stool and headed over towards Hermione. "Come on," he said in an amused tone. "We have to go and eat, Hermione, because I am not putting up with Ron if you faint with hunger."

Hermione looked up at him with surprise that quickly faded to amusement. "Alright," she said in a mollifying tone, as though she was merely humouring him. She walked back over to the bench to gather her things.

Snape drew Harry's attention. "What exactly were you coming to see me about yesterday?"

Harry paused. "Er, nothing really important, sir. I…just had some question about the Tyro but it's nothing that can't wait until you're better," Harry replied firmly.

Snape paused then nodded slightly. "Very well."

Hermione walked up beside them and with small nods the two students left the workroom and headed up to the Great Hall.

"Damn, he's stubborn," Harry breathed, partly in admiration, partly in exasperation.

"That he is," Hermione said dryly. "You know he's going to keep working until he literally falls over, don't you?"

"Of course he is!" Harry said with disgust. "Because Merlin forbid he should actually accept some help for once."

"Harry, he is accepting some help," Hermione said soothingly. "He's letting me brew those potions and he's asked if I will help him mark homework. That's pretty good for Professor Snape."

Harry paused for a moment then gave a small bark of laughter. "Yeah, I suppose you're right. Stubborn bastard." He was silent for a time. "How bad is it going to get?" he asked softly.

Hermione face became sober. "Pretty bad. He's still able to stand and move around at the moment. In a week or two, he won't be able to do that. By the time I get the antidote done he's likely to be unconscious more than conscious most of the time."

"Shit," Harry muttered under his breath, drawing a disapproving look from Hermione as they walked into the Great Hall. Harry quickly glanced over at the Slytherin table and saw Blaise trying to get his attention. "You go on, Hermione. Blaise wants to talk to me," Harry said as he walked over to the Slytherin table.

He sat down opposite Blaise and Millicent and raised an eyebrow.

"What's happened?" Blaise demanded. "Professor McGonagall came down to the dorm this morning

and took Pansy up to the Headmaster's office. Then she came back and got Tracey, Nott, Crabbe and Goyle." Blaise scowled. "Then when we tried to speak to Professor Snape he didn't answer. We went up to the Headmaster's office and McGonagall wouldn't tell us anything."

Harry sighed. "Pansy succeeded in what Draco wanted her to do," he said shortly.

"Professor Snape's dead?" Millicent asked incredulously.

"No, no!" Harry hurried to explain. "But he has been poisoned."

"Poison?" Blaise said dubiously. "He's a Potions Master and a former Death Eater. How did she manage that?"

"She used a contact poison," Harry replied sourly. "It was in ink of all things."

Both Blaise and Millicent looked stunned. "Ink?" Blaise stammered. "So she was poisoning him using her bloody homework and she did it all under our bloody noses!"

"Is Professor Snape alright?" Millicent asked with concern.

"Not really," Harry replied with a sigh. "He's in a hell of a lot of pain but he's being a stubborn bastard at the moment. He's determined to keep teaching as long as he can."

"Is he going to die or is there an antidote?" Blaise demanded.

"Yes, there is an antidote," Harry said soothingly. "Hermione started brewing it last night. It's going to take three weeks to brew so if you see her around the dungeons, that's why she's there."

"Three weeks!" Blaise yelped. "But surely he'll be dead by then!"

"No, apparently this poison takes a long time to kill you." Harry paused and grimaced. "It's going to be a pretty bad three weeks for Professor Snape though. He's in a lot of pain now and it's only going to get worse. Hermione said he'll probably be bedridden in a week or so."

"Why is Hermione brewing the antidote?" Millicent asked suspiciously.

"You mean instead of Professor Snape?" Harry asked and Millicent nodded. "Because the pain's making his hands shake badly and Hermione's the best Potions student in the school. Hell, she brewed the Polyjuice potion in Second Year; I think she can manage the antidote."

"Oh," Millicent said, a little taken aback.

"I don't suppose you know what's going to happen with Pansy?" Blaise asked, an undercurrent of anger creeping into his voice.

"No idea," Harry replied sourly. "I spoke to Dumbledore last night." He paused and looked a little sheepish. "Actually I yelled at him a bit. I'd warned him about Pansy and look what happened." Harry shook his head. "Anyway, he said he was going to speak to her today and he might have to call in the Aurors."

"The Aurors. Why?" Blaise asked.

"Attempted murder of a Hogwarts teacher," Harry replied simply.

Both of the Slytherins gave nods of comprehension and Harry stood. "I'd better go and eat," he said. "Try and keep the Slytherins calm, will you?"

Blaise and Millicent nodded and Harry walked over to the Gryffindor table and sat down next to Ginny.

"I heard Remus came and calmed you down last night," the red-haired girl said in greeting.

"Yeah, he's good at that," Harry said with a fond expression.

The others smiled though the expressions didn't last long before returning to the grim looks they had been wearing.

"What's going to happen to Pansy?" Neville asked quietly.

"I don't know," Harry replied shortly. "But I hope she gets what's coming to her."

They others nodded soberly and they continued their breakfast in silence.

Chapter 19

Pansy walked beside Professor McGonagall with an expression of bored petulance on her face. She rather suspected this was going to be yet another session where the Headmaster tried to convince her to betray Draco. The last one had been almost laughable; as if the Headmaster could offer the temptations that Draco could. It seemed the old man just couldn't grasp the idea that she wanted the power that was within her grasp and that she wasn't being manipulated by Draco at all. She sighed as the gargoyle stepped aside for them and plastered a pleasant expression on her face; just what she needed a potentially lovely day destroyed by this tiresome business.

She was a little surprised to find the Headmaster wearing such a grim and severe expression when she walked into his office. Usually he looked kindly and nice, like a friendly grandfather. But not today; today he looked more like the powerful wizard that he actually was.

"Sit down, Miss Parkinson," he said sternly.

Pansy gave him a winsome little smile and sat down in the chair in front of the desk in a very prim, ladylike manner as Professor McGonagall stood behind her. That was when she was what was sitting on the Headmaster's desk. A small bottle of ink. Her breath caught slightly and her eyes narrowed for a fraction of a second but it was enough for the Headmaster.

"I see that you recognise what has come into my possession, Miss Parkinson," he said.

Pansy considered her position for a moment then dropped all pretences. "Of course I do," she said scornfully. "It belongs to me. I borrowed it from my father."

"And used it, I see," Professor Dumbledore observed.

Pansy smiled maliciously. "Is the traitor dead then?"

The atmosphere is the room became decidedly cool and disapproving.

"No, Professor Snape is not dead," Professor McGonagall said stiffly. "Nor is he likely to die. There is, after all, an antidote."

Pansy smirked. "Ah, but who other than the traitor has the skill to brew it," she sneered.

"You might be surprised, Miss Parkinson," the Headmaster said calmly.

Pansy considered that for a moment then dismissed it. "So, how many points is it and how long am I in detention?" she said with studied weariness.

Both Albus and Minerva stared at her with disbelief. They couldn't believe that after attempting to murder her own Head of House she expected to get away with nothing more than loss of points and a detention.

"I don't think you quite grasp the seriousness of your situation, Miss Parkinson," Dumbledore said leaning forward and looking at the girl sitting in front of him sternly. "There will be no loss of House points nor will you sit through a detention. You have admitted to attempting to murder a teacher. I have no choice but to expel you and I am afraid that I must also call in the Aurors."

Pansy looked at him with disbelief. "But you can't do that to me, my father won't allow it."

"I am afraid your father has little voice in this matter now," Dumbledore said in a steely voice. He looked past Pansy. "Will you please summon Auror Shacklebolt, Minerva?"

"Certainly, Headmaster," Minerva replied in a frosty voice. She stepped away from the chair and quickly floo-called to Auror Headquarters at the Ministry. He was waiting, having been contacted earlier by the Headmaster and told that his presence may be requested and the reason. The experienced Auror had been genuinely shocked to hear what had happened. He had little liking for the sarcastic Potions Master and former spy but the sheer maliciousness of the Slytherin girl's act was beyond him. At Minerva's call, he stepped into the green flames and emerged in the Headmaster's office.

"Ah, Auror Shacklebolt," Professor Dumbledore said with a small smile. "Thank you for coming so promptly. I'm afraid we've had a rather nasty incident occur which lies more in your purview than mine."

"Indeed," Kingsley said with well-manufactured surprise. "What might that be?"

The Headmaster picked up the small bottle of ink. "It appears this ink is actually a rather insidious poison that this student, Miss Pansy Parkinson, has used to unfortunate effect on one of Hogwart's teachers."

"Is this teacher dead?" Kingsley asked gravely.

"No," Dumbledore said with relief. "But he is in for a bad time until the antidote can be brewed."

"I see," Kingsley replied. "Well, this is indeed a serious matter. I am afraid that you will have to accompany me to the Ministry, Miss Parkinson. If you could please contact her parents, Headmaster, and have them meet us there."

"Certainly," Albus replied.

Kingsley stepped forward and gestured for Pansy to stand. He then took her arm and led her over to the fireplace before flooing both of them back to the Auror Headquarters. Dumbledore looked over at Minerva.

"Thank you for your help, Minerva. Could you please go down to the Slytherin dormitory and organise for Miss Parkinson's belongings to be gathered while I speak with her father. I would also like you to bring Miss Tracey Davies, Mr Theodore Nott, Mr Gregory Goyle and Mr Vincent Crabbe to my office when you are finished with Miss Parkinson's belongings."

"Certainly, Albus," Minerva said then she left the room.

Harry was pacing the Guild classroom. He was the only one there at the moment, Ron and Hermione both had classes this morning and Master Nhean, Jun'ko and Tien were clearly running late. His thoughts were swirling around his mind and he couldn't seem to get them to clear. Finally he growled and dropped to the mats on the floor to sit cross-legged. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes, concentrating on clearing his mind. At first he was less than successful but then

finally his mind began to obey him and he slowly slipped into a mild meditative state. He was still there, breathing calmly, when the door opened. He quickly brought himself back to full awareness and turned around to see who had entered.

"Hello, Master, Jun'ko, Tien," he said with a small smile. "You're late."

Nhean chuckled. "Ah but we're late for a good reason. The Headmaster thought you might like to know the outcome of his interview with Miss Parkinson but, for obvious reasons, he did not want you to be conspicuously missing classes when Hermione is already doing the same."

"So what was the outcome?" Harry asked urgently.

"She has been expelled," Nhean replied. "But that was a given really, considering the nature of her offense. Albus has also called in the Aurors." He paused for a moment. "Albus allowed me to view his memory of the interview. I must confess I found it quite chilling. She was so completely unconcerned about what she did and was expecting to be merely slapped on the wrist."

"What?" Harry yelped. "She tried to kill Professor Snape! She's condemned him to a living hell for the next three weeks!"

Nhean hesitated for a long moment, frowning. "I…hesitate to say this on such a short viewing of the girl but I would call her behaviour almost psychopathic."

Harry gaped at his Master for a moment then he slowly shook his head. "She's a perfect match for Draco then," he said.

Jun'ko gave a wry snort. "I'll take your word for it. Now, get up, lazy boy!" She gave a laugh. "Your Master has decided it would be a wonderful idea for you to learn my style of fighting."

Harry groaned as he pushed himself to his feet. "Lovely! I'm sure that you're going to become my Battle Guard's favourite person."

The three Guild members laughed.

"I might leave you to your torture," Tien said amiably. "I'm going to see how good my memory of the castle is. Send out a search party if I'm not back in a couple of hours, will you?"

Harry laughed. "Siri has a map that will help with finding you if you get lost. We'll send him after you if you're not back by dinner."

"Ah, thank you," Tien replied dryly as he headed towards the door. "But lunch would be the meal of preference if you don't mind."

"Okay," Harry said with amusement as Tien left the room. He then turned to face his soon-to-be torturer. "Now what?"

"Warm up and get ready," Jun'ko said wickedly. "And prepare to have your arse handed to you repeatedly."

Harry slowly began his warm-up exercises. "You've been talking to Moody, haven't you?" he said is a wry tone. "He was always worried about my buttocks getting blown off."

Both Nhean and Jun’ko stared at Harry for a second then roared with laughter.

"I’ve never met the man though I do remember Tonks mentioning something about that sort of thing once," Jun’ko said between giggles as she too warmed up. "Why was he worried about your buttocks?" She paused then continued in that same wicked tone as before. "Not that you don’t have very nice buttocks, from what little I can see of them."

Harry blushed and spluttered for a moment then he laughed. "I’ll thank you to keep your eyes off my buttocks or would you like me to tell Ginny you’ve been eyeing them?"

"Oh no! Don’t do that!" Jun’ko said in a mock-horrified tone, clearly caught on the edge of laughter.

Harry grinned at the other Warrior, unsure as to whether she would be able to see it. "I take it you get along well with Tonks then?"

"Ah! Nymphadora Tonks!" Jun’ko said fondly. "I can’t tell you how wonderful it is to find a witch after my own heart." Her voice suddenly turned quite arch. "However I note that you did fail to mention her inherent clumsiness when you spoke to the Council during the summer."

"I figured it would be more fun for you to find out for yourself," Harry said with amusement. "Besides she’s a good Auror despite that."

"Hmph!" Jun’ko said. "Well, I suppose she has been improving. Those twins are a bloody menace though!"

"Hey, Gred and Forge are very good friends of mine," Harry protested lazily; he could only imagine the mischief those two had been getting up to in their training.

"I’m not saying they’re not good," Jun’ko replied. "But I’ve learnt not to take anything from them."

Harry stifled a laugh. "What did they get you with?" he asked merrily.

"They called it a Canary Cream," Jun’ko said with sour amusement.

"Ah, there’s nothing like a classic," Harry replied, laughing. "Don’t worry; they still get Neville on a regular basis. He never remembers not to accept things from them." He hesitated for a moment, almost afraid to ask this next question. "What about Siri?"

Jun’ko rolled her eyes. "Sirius! Well, apart from me having to eat my words, everything’s going well with him!"

Harry blinked. "It is?"

"Yes," Nhean said firmly. "Your godfather is coming along very well. He’s the best of the lot, you know." He paused and eyed his apprentice for a second. "I believe he uses you as his motivation for improvement."

"Oh," Harry said, rather touched about this.

"So," Jun’ko said in an effort not to allow the mood to dim, "what was this about Moody being worried about your buttocks?"

Harry snorted with laughter. "Oh, he didn't like me putting my wand in my back pocket. Said it was the best way to blow your own buttocks off."

"Really?" Jun'ko replied with amused curiosity. "Now that would be something worth seeing; someone blowing their own buttocks off."

"Yeah, that's what I've always thought," Harry said.

"Well, as interesting as that thought is, I think it's time to get down to work," Nhean said with quiet amusement.

The experienced Night Master directed Harry and Jun'ko in their training until Harry was exhausted and dripping with sweat. It wasn't any easier than the sparring bout that he had done that morning and when Nhean finally called things to a halt he was rather relieved. He headed back up to the Tower to have a shower and change then headed downstairs to his first class of the day.

Severus Snape sat hunched in his chair in his rooms, wracked with pain. He knew he should be taking the pain-relieving potions that Poppy had suggested but he found that they clouded his mind more than he really liked. The pain was already doing a good job of that and he really didn't want to add to it. The Headmaster had informed him that Pansy Parkinson had been expelled and would likely be in a great deal of trouble with the Aurors for her actions. Severus dismissed any thought that she would see the interior of Azkaban; her father was simply too wealthy and too influential for that to happen. The Headmaster had questioned her cohorts and Theodore Nott and Tracey Davis had also been expelled for their actions and were being questioned by the Aurors. Crabbe and Goyle had escaped with detentions and loss of points; they had not used the ink nor were they really that aware of what had been going on. Severus rolled his eyes irritably; how those two had passed enough classes to continue on to NEWTs was beyond him.

His Fifth, Sixth and Seventh Year Slytherins, led by Blaise Zabini and Millicent Bulstrode, had approached him throughout the day to let him know that they would help him in any way they could, starting with making sure there were no problems in the dorms. He had accepted that; he knew that he was in no condition to deal with adolescent traumas at the moment. He would be more likely to add to the problems than solve them.

He twitched as another lance of pain flashed through his body then twitched again as a knock came on his door. As he debated whether or not to answer it, a voice came floating through the door.

"Professor Snape? It's Harry."

Severus sighed. "Come in," he said, allowing the door to unlock.

"I…I'm sorry to disturb you, sir," Harry said hesitantly as he came in. "I came down with Hermione and I just…wanted to check how you were and to see if you needed anything."

"Silence and an absence of pain would be preferable," Snape snarled. "Though an absence of you will suffice."

Harry froze for a moment, looking a little hurt. "Oh," he said quietly. "I…I'll go then."

He turned and headed towards the door, his shoulders slumped, and Severus snarled silently.

"Mr Potter," he said irritably. "I…apologise. I…am in…considerable pain."

Harry turned and gave a small smile. "I realise that, sir, and I've kind of gotten used to the sarcasm and snide comments." He paused for a long moment then his words tumbled out hurriedly. "If you want me to go, just tell me. You don't need to be cruel."

Severus sighed again. "You might as well stay, Mr Potter. You are already here and perhaps your irritating self might be a sufficient distraction from what I am currently forced to endure."

Harry's lips twitched in a small grin and he wandered over and sat down in the chair opposite the Potions Master. "Maybe I could ask you the questions I was coming down to ask last night."

"You could," Snape replied, wincing as he shifted slightly. "But I cannot guarantee the usefulness of the answers I might give."

"Or I could tell you how my day went," Harry suggested with a growing smile.

"By all means, bore me to tears with the mindless minutiae of your insignificant life," Snape replied irritably.

"Master Nhean told me what happened to Pansy and her friends," Harry offered.

"The little bint deserves everything she gets," Snape snarled, gasping as the rush of anger caused the pain to spike. "Though I doubt she will get everything she deserves. Draco is welcome to her."

"Mmm," Harry murmured in agreement. "Then Master Nhean had Jun'ko kick my arse several times."

"I'm sure you earned that," Snape said nastily, though Harry could pick up in the undertone that the man didn't truly mean it…at least not completely.

"I'm sure my Battle Guard will agree with you," Harry said benignly then continued in a musing tone. "Though Jun'ko did seem inordinately concerned about my buttocks."

Snape stared at him with utter disbelief for a moment and it was all Harry could do to maintain a straight face. When he didn't elaborate, Snape scowled at him.

"And why, pray tell, would Miss Watanabe be interested in your buttocks?" asked Snape in a decidedly acid tone.

"Because Moody was always worried I might blow them off," Harry replied innocently, working hard to stop his lips from twitching into a smile.

Snape blinked and Harry took some pity on the man. "Because I tend to stick my wand in my back pocket all the time," he said cheerfully. "Apparently Moody thinks that my wand could go off accidentally and, boom, there go my buttocks. Tonks always found that amusing and I think she might have told Jun'ko."

Finally Harry's amusement got the better of his control and he started laughing. "I…I'm sor…sorry, sir," he gasped out between laughs. "I just couldn't resist. If you think that was weird to listen to,

imagine how it felt for me at the time." He paused and laughed again. "Normally my buttocks are nobody's business except mine and perhaps Ginny's but apparently I was wrong."

Snape gave him a flat look though Harry definitely saw the man's lips twitch slightly. "Indeed," Snape replied dryly. "Well perhaps you would be so good as to keep your buttocks to yourself. I personally have no desire to know any more about them."

Harry grinned. "But, sir, everyone tells me they're such nice buttocks."

Snape gave Harry a glacial look though Harry could see in the ghostly overlay a glimmer of amusement in the man's face. "I should not be able to tell you one way or another," Snape said icily.

Harry gave a small huff of laughter. "Anyway," he said with a smile, "at least the rest of my classes weren't as weird."

"I should hope not," Snape replied as he shifted painfully and uncomfortably in his chair.

"Hermione seems to be quite pleased with the progress of the antidote," Harry observed. "Though I suppose it's a little too early to tell at the moment."

"Indeed it is," came the arch reply. "Though she does have some skill," Snape conceded.

"Yes, she does," Harry replied with a note of pride in his voice.

They fell into silence for a moment then Harry sighed. "I suppose I might as well ask you one of the questions I had," he said. "If the answer doesn't make any sense I can always ask again after this is over."

"By all means, ask away," Snape replied sarcastically.

"I was looking through that parchment you gave me with the rules of doing a Tyro on it," Harry said slowly. "It says I have to have a…mentor. Now if I read everything correctly then Remy won't be able to do that because he's also my guardian. Master Nhean's out because he's not an official member of the Hogwarts staff. So if I do the subjects I want to do that leaves…well…you."

"Was that a question, Mr Potter, or a rambling summation of events?" Snape said snippily.

Harry sighed. "Well, I guess it was a rambling summation of events if you want to be pedantic about it," he said patiently. "Professor Snape, if I decide to undertake a Tyro would you be willing to be my mentor?"

"Yes," Snape said bluntly.

"Oh," Harry said a little surprised. He had thought he would have to talk the Potions Master into it a bit more. "Thank you, sir."

Snape inclined his head carefully. "You have not yet decided on the Tyro?"

"Well, I'm pretty sure I want to do it," Harry said thoughtfully. "I…guess I'm just waiting until we find out what Draco's planning."

"Well, after your accuracy in predicting Miss Parkinson's intentions, I shall not argue with you

regarding Draco," Snape said sourly.

Harry wisely chose not to comment on the fact that he had warned both Snape and the Headmaster repeatedly. "Do you think the Headmaster was right when he said we could expect something from Draco after the New Year?"

"I've no doubts he is," Snape replied in a disgruntled tone that rapidly turned into a gasp of pain. Harry shifted forward slightly in his chair then relaxed back when the Potions Master continued with a sharp glare in his direction. "Though I think it will be later rather than sooner if your last unfortunate encounter with the Dark Lord is anything to go by."

"Mmm," Harry murmured. "Yeah, Voldemort wasn't very happy about being stuck in Draco's mind." He snorted. "I'd be worried if it were anyone other than Draco Malfoy."

"I would be worried even though it is Draco," Snape said acidly. "For if the Dark Lord succeeds he will have what he wants; a new body. Unless you'd like to repeat the last few years again."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Good point." He opened his mouth to continue but again the Potions Master gasped and shuddered as his body was wracked with pain. Harry watched for a moment, feeling rather helpless but knowing that Snape would probably not welcome any expressions of sympathy. When the other man finally relaxed a bit, Harry picked up his cane. "I…I should go," he said hesitantly. "You've probably had enough of me prattling on." He paused and then decided to put his head into the lion's mouth, so to speak. "Do you need any help, Professor?"

Snape glared at him for a long moment then sagged back into his chair. "If…you would be so…kind as to help me into the other room," he said stiffly.

Harry nodded silently and stood, before walking over to the other chair. He carefully helped Snape to rise, wincing in sympathy as he listened to the Potions Master's pained breathing. Snape placed an arm around his shoulders and the two of them slowly made their way over to the door to Snape's bedroom. From his close proximity, Harry was aware of the stiffness of Snape's posture which all but shouted the amount of pain the man was suffering and from this distance he could also hear the occasional muttered oath. Once in the bedroom, he carefully lowered Snape until the man was sitting on his own bed.

"Do you need anything else, sir?" he asked in a neutral tone.

"No, thank you," Snape replied, his voice full of pain.

Harry gave him a small nod and made his way out of the bedroom. He had his hand on the door to the corridor when he heard the Potion Master's voice come from the bedroom.

"Your…prattling…was not entirely useless, Mr Potter," Snape said neutrally.

"Thank you, sir," Harry replied with a smile, hearing what was meant underneath those words. "I really think you should take those potions Madam Pomfrey gave you."

"Get out, idiot boy," came the grumbling reply.

Harry swallowed a laugh and hastened to obey. As he walked down the corridor, he became aware that Hermione was just leaving the Potions classroom and he quickened his pace to catch up with

her.

"Hermione!" he called.

The bushy-haired girl spun around and looked at him with surprise. "Harry! What are you still doing down here?"

"I, er, went to speak with Professor Snape after I left you," Harry replied.

Hermione blinked. "Oh! Er, Harry? Why?"

Harry shrugged, not really remembering what took him those extra steps down the corridor to the Potions Master's private quarters. "I don't know. I…guess I was a little worried about him."

Hermione gave him a surprised look. "And how was he?"

"Cranky," Harry replied with a small laugh then he sobered. "In a hell of a lot of pain."

"What did you do?" Hermione asked curiously.

"Rambled on about nothing," Harry said with amusement. "I think sneering at me helped to take his mind off things for a little while at least."

"He wasn't being…unpleasant, was he?" Hermione asked with concern.

"No, not really," Harry said with a dismissive wave of his hand. "He didn't really mean what he was saying. Snarking at me means he feels compelled to think up clever, witty and intelligent insults. As I said, it helped take his mind off things for a while."

Hermione gave him a significant look. "You know there was a time when you would have flown off the handle at just about anything Professor Snape said."

"Yes, Hermione, there was a time I was a self-absorbed idiot too," Harry replied dryly. "He's in pain, Hermione. And if making snide comments about me gives him even the slightest bit of relief, far be it from me to deny him that. Besides, now that I'm not taking things so personally, I can appreciate that he's actually pretty funny at times."

Hermione smiled. "Don't let Ron hear you say that, he'll think you've gone stark, raving mad."

"What? You mean I'm not already?" Harry said humorously.

"Harry!" Hermione chided gently.

Harry laughed and switched the conversation to more mundane topics as they continued up to Gryffindor Tower. When they walked in, they found Ron, Ginny, Neville and Luna sitting around one of the tables and staring at something.

"What's going on?" Harry asked as he and Hermione wandered over.

The four students at the table jumped nervously and exchanged glances.

"Erm, Harry," Ron started then he cleared his throat and looked over at his sister.

Ginny rolled her eyes and picked up the object on the table. It was an envelope. "Harry, Mum sent a letter this morning. She said she'd received this in the mail. The Muggle mail." She paused. "It's… addressed to you, care of our address at the Burrow."

"Who's it from?" Harry asked with a confused look.

The others exchanged glances again.

"Erm, the return address says Mrs Petunia Dursley," Ginny said as calmly as she could.

Chapter 20

Harry stalked through the corridors, the envelope containing the letter from his Aunt clutched in one hand, his other hand gripping his cane overly tightly, his knuckles white. He hadn't opened it yet. Ginny had offered to read it to him but he had refused. He wasn't sure what his Aunt had written and he really didn't want to expose his girlfriend to any of the unpleasantness his relatives were so capable of. That had also been his reasoning behind not allowing any of the others to read it either. So that had left his godfather and guardian. The others had wanted to come with him but he had vetoed that idea as well, causing more than a little angst of the part of his friends. They had calmed down a little when he said he was going to see Remus and Sirius but they had demanded to know everything as soon as possible after he got back. Harry had reluctantly agreed then hurried out of the common room.

When he reached the portrait that guarded their rooms, he knocked sharply and opened the door. When he walked into the living room, Sirius and Remus were both sitting in chairs in front of the fire, reading.

"Harry!" Sirius said, seeing the closed expression on his godson's face. "What's wrong?"

"I need one of you to read this to me," he replied in a tight voice, thrusting the envelope out in front of him.

Sirius leapt out of his chair and took the envelope, turning it over to read the return address. He swore and thrust the envelope at Remus before ushering Harry over to the couch. Harry dropped his cane to the floor and slumped down onto the rather comfortable piece of furniture. Sirius sat down next to him and threw an arm around his shoulders. While this was happening, Remus had also read the return address and was now turning the envelope over and over in his hands. He looked over at Harry.

"Are you ready?" he asked gently.

"Not really," Harry replied in a slightly shaky voice. "But do it anyway."

Remus nodded and opened the envelope. He pulled the letter out and cleared his throat before beginning to read.

> Dear Harry,
>
> I know that you will probably not welcome this letter but I ask that you please hear me out before throwing it away. I also know that you will probably also find this request rather presumptuous given the way we have treated you in the past but I honestly do not know who else to turn to. Marge has given us up for dead, considering us nothing more than a disgrace, and there is no one else that we are close to that could help us.
>
> Dudley has been acting very oddly the last couple of months. I had thought he was doing well in his new school, his grades had been good and his reports were also good. But then he met some odd friends, older men mostly, and since then his behaviour had become very strange. He is not rude or violent but he has become very secretive and he has been asking about you in a very strange manner and with a very odd expression on his face.
>
> Last night, while he was out, I went and investigated in his room. What I saw shocked me deeply. Harry, I believe that he has fallen in with some kind of cult. There were the oddest death's head symbols on some papers he had and a strange black cloak and white mask. They seem to fit the descriptions Lily used to tell us of those supporters of that Dark wizard but I understood from what I heard of these people from her that were not interested in those such as us. I looked at some of the papers and while I didn't understand what was on them, I did see some names. Anton Dolohov, Bella Lestrange, Dray Malfoy and Pansy Parkinson were among the names I could make out.
>
> Harry, I'm terribly afraid that Dudley is in some kind of trouble. I know you have little reason to want help us but I truly do not know who else to turn to.
>
> Yours,
>
> Petunia Dursley

Silence reigned in the room after Remus finished reading. Finally Harry leapt to his feet and started pacing the room wildly, barely missing the low table.

"She actually wants me to help her! After everything she and that lump of lard of a husband did to me!" Harry railed, nearly knocking the table again. "Why should I? I should just let them rot!"

He continued on in that vein while Remus and Sirius sat and watched, allowing him to get his anger

out of his system. After nearly half an hour, when Harry was finally starting to wind down, Remus placed the letter on the table next to the couch, stood and walked over to stand in front of the gesticulating Harry. He placed his hands on the young man's shoulders.

"Harry!" he said gently. "Come and sit down."

Harry stared at him intently for a moment then nodded curtly. He stomped over to the couch and flung himself down next to his godfather. Sirius immediately wrapped an arm around Harry's shoulders and Remus sat down on the other side of the distressed young man.

"Those were the names of Death Eaters," Remus said calmly.

Harry, who had been glaring sightlessly at the fire, suddenly slumped, all of the anger draining out of him. "I know," he said wearily. "I know."

"We'd better tell Dumbledore," Sirius said. "He'll know better than us what we should do."

"Now?" Harry said in an odd tone.

Sirius looked down at his godson and was surprised to see tears welling in the young man's eyes, tears he was clearly trying desperately to stop.

"Hey, Pronglet," he said softly. "What's wrong?"

Harry was silent for a moment, seemingly struggling with himself. "I'm sick of this!" he half-yelled as the tears now fell freely. He threw himself into his godfather's arms.

"I'm so sick of it all," he continued, his voice muffled by Sirius' jumper. "Why can't they just leave me alone?"

Sirius wrapped his arms around Harry and rocked him gently. He didn't know which 'they' Harry was talking about but either way he just didn't have an answer for his godson's question; he wasn't sure anyone did. He looked up when Remus touched him lightly on the shoulder.

"I'll go up and talk to Albus," the werewolf said softly.

Sirius nodded and watched his friend pick up the letter from Petunia Dursley and quietly leave the room. He then turned all his attention back to his distressed godson. He felt a little helpless, unsure of what to say or do exactly. He hadn't known this might be in the job description when he had accepted the role of Harry's godfather. He snorted quietly; most of what had happened in the last seventeen years hadn't exactly been in the job description. He would do what he could though. He knew that Lily had been a little dubious about the idea of him being named godfather and Merlin knows he'd been more than a little irresponsible in his youth. But he had fallen in love with Harry from the first moment he'd laid eyes on him in St Mungo's, barely an hour old, and had quickly promised himself he would never let any harm come to the boy. He snorted softly again; he hadn't done that very well either but he knew that mostly wasn't his fault.

He felt Harry's sobs dying down and pulled back fractionally. He tipped the young man's head up and gave him a gentle smile. "Hey, Pronglet," he said softly.

Harry gave him a weak smile. "I'm sorry," he said in a shaky voice.

"Merlin, Harry!" Sirius said in disbelief. "You have nothing to be sorry for!"

"I got your jumper wet," Harry replied with wan humour.

Sirius stared at him for a second then started laughing, wrapping his arms around his godson in a firm hug.

"I've got plenty of jumpers, Pronglet," Sirius said with a barking laugh as he wiped the tears from Harry's face. "Moony keeps buying them for me for some reason."

Harry gave a tiny snort of laughter, Sirius' wry sense of humour edging past his upset. "Probably trying to keep you out of the leather jackets."

"Yeah, the man has no sense of style. He wears tweed after all," Sirius replied with a smile. "You can't ride a motorbike wearing a jumper. Riding a motorbike demands a leather jacket." Sirius paused and Harry gave him another small smile. Encouraged, Sirius continued. "Got one for you too but Moony won't let me give it to you. He doesn't want to encourage you to get on the bike. He says it's bad enough that you insist on flying around on your broom." He paused again and said in a conspiratorial manner, "Moony's not a very good flyer."

This surprised a burst of laughter out of Harry and the young man finally relaxed. Sirius slowly let him go and Harry settled back on the couch again, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand.

"You don't have to help them, you know," Sirius said matter-of-factly. "Nobody would fault you if you didn't, considering the way they always treated you. They gave up any right to your care or concern a long time ago."

Harry looked down and plucked at the hem of his shirt. "I know," he said softly. "But Dudley's gotten himself mixed up with the Death Eaters somehow and he probably doesn't realise how bad they are or that they don't really like him. They'll probably kill him when they're finished with him just so he can't identify them."

Sirius nodded dubiously. "Not to sound too callous but so? What did Dudley ever do to help you?"

"Nothing," Harry said with a one-shouldered shrug. "But I can't let that happen to him."

Sirius looked at Harry with a proud smile. "You're a good man, Harry. James and Lily would be so damn proud if they could see you right now."

Harry looked up in surprise. "Really?"

"Yeah, really," Sirius said in a slightly exasperated tone. "Why wouldn't they? Harry, I love you dearly but sometimes I wonder about you. You are a wonderful, brave and loving young man. Everyone else can see this; I don't know why you can't."

Harry ducked his head as he blushed. Sirius looked at him with love and amusement.

"Never mind," the animagus said fondly as he ruffled his godson's hair. "We can work on your self-esteem issues later. Now, do you feel up to going to see Dumbledore?"

Harry sighed. "Yeah, I suppose so."

The two of them stood and Sirius picked up Harry's cane from where it had been droped. He handed it to his godson and they headed out of the room. As they walked down the corridor towards the Headmaster's office, Harry looked up at his godfather.

"Do you really have a leather jacket for me?" he asked curiously.

"Of course!" Sirius replied with a wicked grin. "A black one." His face fell. "Bloody Moony won't let me give it to you," he repeated with exasperation.

Harry looked at Sirius with amusement. "Okay, what exactly did you do to him with the motorbike that gets him so worked up about it?"

"Nothing!" Sirius protested, trying to look innocent and failing.

"Uh huh," Harry said with amusement. "And what was this nothing?"

"It really was nothing," Sirius protested. "I just gave him a lift back to his apartment after we'd gone out one night with Prongs and Wo…well, we'd gone out." Sirius shook his head mournfully. "Moony insists on thinking I was drunk."

"And were you?" Harry asked, struggling not to smile. He was glad of this silliness. The upcoming talk with Dumbledore was likely to be unpleasant and he didn't really want to think about it too much.

"No!" Sirius said indignantly. "I'd had a few ales, I'll admit that, but in no way was I drunk. I flew that bike nice and smoothly with an absolute minimum of aerobatics. It's not my fault that Moony's the worst flyer I've ever seen in my life."

Harry couldn't hold it back anymore and burst out laughing. Sirius grinned down at him and threw an arm around his shoulders.

"So want me to sneak you that jacket?" the animagus asked with a grin.

Harry nodded enthusiastically. "But only if I get a ride on the bike," he said then he paused and on odd expression crossed his face. "Though if what Hagrid told me is right, I think I already have."

A sad smile crossed Sirius' face. "Yeah, you have."

They walked in silence for a moment then Sirius grinned again. "I reckon Ginny might like your jacket as well."

"Huh?" Harry said, looking confused. "Why would she be wearing it?"

Sirius snorted with amusement. "I'm not saying she'll be wearing it, I'm saying she'll probably like it on you."

"Really?"

Sirius snickered. "Oh yeah. Girls like leather, Harry. Trust me, I have experience in this. Wear the jacket with jeans, a white t-shirt and boots and you'll be beating the girls off with a stick, my boy."

Harry snorted. "You mean Ginny will be beating the girls off with a stick. I don't need to attract the

girls, Siri, I've already got one."

"Well, true," Sirius conceded. "But there's nothing wrong with letting the others know what they missed out on."

Harry laughed. "Well, maybe, but I don't want to upset Ginny."

Sirius shook his head mock-mournfully. "Harry, Harry, Harry! You're too young to go the same way as Prongs! At least he waited until after we finished Hogwarts to slide fully under Lily's thumb. You're already there! Live, my boy, live!"

Both of them burst into laughter and it took Sirius three attempts to get the password out in a form that could be understood by the gargoyle. It finally leapt aside and they headed up the stairs still spluttering with laughter. When they walked into the Headmaster's office, both Remus and Dumbledore looked up in surprise to find them laughing. Remus was rather pleased, clearly Sirius was better at this whole parenting thing than he had given him credit for.

"Are you going to let us in on the joke?" he asked mildly.

Sirius and Harry looked at the smiling werewolf and burst out laughing again. Remus raised an eyebrow and looked over at the Headmaster.

"Why do I get the feeling that I might be part of whatever those two are finding so funny?" he asked drolly.

"I have no idea, my boy," Dumbledore said with an amused smile. "But I do believe you might be right."

"Alright, you two," Remus said archly. "What's so funny?"

Harry struggled to get himself under control. "Siri thinks I'd look good in leather. I told him I didn't want to get in trouble with Ginny," was all he could manage before starting to laugh again.

Remus considered this for a moment as he put two and two together then he sighed. "Oh, give him the jacket then, Padfoot," he said with amused resignation. "But if he falls off that damn bike, it's on your head."

"Remy!" Harry yelped. "I'm not going to fall off. When have I ever fallen off my broom?" He paused then continued hurriedly. "In normal conditions, not as result of Dementors or people trying to hex me or anything else like that, because that doesn't count."

Remus opened his mouth to answer but was interrupted by the Headmaster.

"I think this is a discussion the three of you need to have a bit later," Dumbledore said, his eyes twinkling with delight.

Remus subsided and Sirius and Harry sat down. Dumbledore waited until they were settled then picked up the letter and looked at Harry.

"What do you want us to do?" he asked kindly.

Harry's good humour disappeared in a flash and he sighed. "Help her," he said quietly.

"Are you sure?" the Headmaster asked gently.

"Yes, no, I think so," Harry replied as he ran a hand through his hair. "I…Dudley's got himself caught up in something that I'm sure he doesn't understand. He probably thinks that these people really do want to be his friends, the spoilt berk. But you and I know that Death Eaters don't make friends with Muggles. So they're after something." He paused and sighed. "Probably me…and, while I've got no love for the Dursleys, they don't deserve that."

Dumbledore looked at the young man in front of him with approval and pride. "Very well," he said. "I think we will keep you away from this as much as we can though."

Harry looked up and frowned. "Why?"

"Because there is a good possibility that this is some kind of trap," the Headmaster explained patiently.

Harry blinked. "Oh! I didn't think about that."

"I shall deal with this myself," Dumbledore continued. "Petunia knows me and will hopefully trust me."

Harry nodded dubiously. "If you're sure."

"I may ask you to come along if there are problems," Dumbledore replied. "But I would prefer to keep you out of it if possible just in case it is a trap."

Harry nodded again and Dumbledore stood.

"Now I suggest the three of you head off to your beds," he said kindly. "You all have classes tomorrow and we can do no more about this tonight."

Harry, Sirius and Remus all stood and quietly made their way out of the office. When they got to the point where Harry had to leave them to head up to Gryffindor Tower, they stopped.

"Are you going to be okay?" Sirius asked with a concerned look.

Harry nodded. "Yeah. I'll be fine."

"Good," Sirius said after a short pause.

Remus gave Sirius a look and the animagus grinned and gave Harry a hug before heading down the corridor.

"You do know I'm not upset about you riding the bike, don't you?" Remus asked a little anxiously. "I just worry about you."

Harry smiled at his guardian. "Yeah, I know. But I'm a good flier." He gave a small grin.

Remus sighed. "And I'm not," he replied dryly. "Just be careful, Harry."

"Always," Harry said seriously.

Remus nodded and gave Harry a hug before giving him a small shove in the direction of the Tower.

"Now get to bed," the werewolf said with a smile. "You've got Defence Against the Dark Arts tomorrow and you'd better be alert for it."

Harry laughed and headed up the corridor. When he crawled through the entrance hole he was completely unsurprised to find his friends sitting and sprawling around the fireplace, waiting for him. The rest of the common room was empty and he quietly walked over and joined them, sitting in one of the large squashy chairs in front of the fire. Ginny immediately got up from where she had been lying on the floor and cuddled up next to him in the big chair. He wrapped his arms around her and rested his cheek on the top of her head, breathing in the scent of her hair and her perfume. He felt a lot of the tension drain out of him and he tilted her head up and kissed her softly.

"Oy!" Ron said with amusement as the kiss intensified. "That's my sister you're mauling there."

Harry and Ginny broke apart and Harry looked over at his best friend. "Why, I do believe you're right," he said with mock-surprise.

The others chuckled then Hermione fixed him with a stern look.

"Are you going to tell us what happened?" she asked.

Harry tightened his arms around Ginny and she responded by gently stroking his hands.

"Dudley's gotten himself into trouble," Harry said finally. "The Death Eaters have been…getting close to him."

"Death Eaters?" Ron objected. "But he's a Muggle. Why would they have anything to do with him?"

"Because he's Harry's cousin," Neville said flatly.

"Yeah, that's what we think as well," Harry said grimly. "Aunt Petunia wrote to ask if I would help. She thinks he's in big trouble and I agree with her."

"So are you going to help?" Ginny asked softly.

"Yeah," Harry replied heavily. "Well, Dumbledore is anyway. He wants to keep me out of it as much as he can."

"Why?" Hermione asked. "Not that I don't agree with him. I don't think you should have anything to do with those horrible people again."

Harry smiled at her then sobered. "There's a good chance that this is some kind of trap. I mean, why else would Death Eaters make friends with Dudley?"

The others exchanged grim looks.

"How would Draco have known that you would help the Dursleys though?" Hermione asked with a worried frown. "I would have thought that Slytherin thinking would assume that you would completely abandon them after what they did to you."

"Voldemort," Harry said unhappily. "It's probably come from him. He's been in my head after all. He

probably understands me better than Draco."

Hermione’s worried look was suddenly shared by everyone and Harry started looking distinctly upset. Ginny looked around at the others with exasperation and when her gaze came back to Harry she sighed gently. She reached up and pulled his face down to hers and kissed him gently. Harry didn’t respond at first then he seemed to realise what was happening and the kiss rapidly became rather heated. It took Ron’s rather embarrassed throat clearing and Hermione’s giggling to break them apart and when they did Harry blushed furiously. He did notice that Ginny wasn’t blushing and looked rather smug.

"Do you feel better now?" she asked in an amusingly coquettish tone.

Harry’s blush deepened and he began to smile again. "Yes, much," he managed to say.

"Good," Ginny replied. "Because we’ve got classes tomorrow and I think it’s time we all went to bed."

Harry grinned as the others laughed. "Yeah, that’s what Remus said."

Ginny returned the grin and the six of them headed off for their dorms.

Chapter 21

The next morning found Harry waiting in the Guild classroom in an agitated state. Last night, just before he fell asleep, he had remembered something he had forgotten to ask the Night Master. He whipped around as the door opened and sighed with relief as he saw Nhean enter.

"Master Nhean!" he exclaimed. "I've got to ask you something."

Nhean looked at his young apprentice with surprise then drew the agitated young man over to two of the comfortable chairs he'd had brought in for when they discussed the more theoretical sections of the training. Once they were both seated, he raised an eyebrow.

"Now, what is it you wanted to know?"

Harry paused, trying to marshal his thoughts. "Master, when I found Professor Snape after he'd collapsed because of the poison, I saw that his normal energy colours were shot through with Murky-Yellow and Black."

"Yes, I've noticed that myself," Nhean observed. "They are common colours to see in one who has been poisoned."

"Yeah, I know. I remember that bit," Harry said with a frown. "But Hermione said that this poison is a long term one. It takes a long time to build up enough to take effect and than it takes a long time to kill the person who has been poisoned."

"So I've been told," Nhean said. "So what is the problem?"

"Why didn't I see the Murky-Yellow and Black earlier?" Harry demanded. "Why didn't you? Or Jun'ko? Or Tien? I had a Potions lesson with him two days before he collapsed and there was no sign of the Murky-Yellow and Black."

Nhean looked at Harry in surprise. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, absolutely," Harry replied firmly. "I would have noticed. I noticed when the Blood Red-Brown faded after he stopped being a spy; I would have noticed the Murky-Yellow and Black if they had been there."

Nhean nodded; yes, Harry would have noticed. He knew that his apprentice was rather fascinated by the energy colours. The diminutive Night Master settled back in his seat and thought for a moment.

"Was it a magical poison in the ink?" he asked.

"I…don't know," Harry replied hesitantly. "Why? Does it make a difference?"

"Yes, it does," Nhean replied absently then he looked intently at Harry. "It must have been magical in nature; that is the only explanation for there being no change in the energy colours until the poison struck."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked curiously.

"This was a long term poison," Nhean explained. "In that it was one that has to build up to a certain level in the body before it takes any effect. Now, if the poison is magical in nature then it can effectively hide itself. Thus is makes itself invisible to nearly every kind of detection possible, including Oversight. Only when there is enough of it the body does it activate itself. Then, of course, it becomes visible to anything that might detect it."

Harry let out a ragged sigh. "Thank Merlin," he breathed. "I thought I'd missed something."

Nhean smiled sympathetically. "No, Harry, you didn't. I saw nothing either; do not blame yourself for this. Lay the blame where it ought to be, with Pansy Parkinson."

Anger flashed across Harry's face at the mention of Draco's fiancee. "I heard she was released by the Aurors," he growled.

"Harry, be calm," Nhean warned. He waited while Harry took a few deep breaths and wrestled his temper down. "Yes, she was. Apparently her father is quite influential and wealthy. He negotiated her release by saying he would see that she remains confined at home. The Aurors were reluctant to condemn someone so young to Azkaban and agreed with his suggestion."

Harry snorted with contempt. "As if her father isn't in league with Draco," he said with frustration.

"I'm sure he is," Nhean replied dryly. "But without proof, the Aurors can do nothing."

Harry grumbled under his breath. Nhean watched him with rather muted amusement then clapped his hands together. Harry gave a start and looked over at his Master.

"Come, Harry," Nhean said encouragingly. "It's time to train."

Harry gave a deep sigh then grinned at Nhean. The Night Master gestured for Harry to move into the centre of the room and they began.

After his training had finished and he had cleaned up, Harry wandered down towards the dungeons, unsure if this was really what he was meant to be doing. He normally had his Potions lessons with Professor Snape at this time but he wasn't sure if they were meant to continue with the man in the condition he was. Harry wasn't going to not turn up though; if he didn't and Snape waited for him, there would be hell to pay. He wandered into the classroom and found it empty. He hesitated for a moment then knocked on the office door.

"Come in," came the snapped response and Harry carefully pushed the door open.

He walked into the office to find Professor Snape hunched in his chair behind his desk, Orinda wrapped around one wrist and hissing soothingly. The Runespoor looked over and hissed a quiet greeting to his friend.

"Hello, Professor," Harry said carefully. "Is my Potions lesson on today?"

Snape looked at him through slitted, pain-filled eyes. "Yes," he snapped. "Fetch that leather-bound book from the table over there."

Harry looked around and saw a small book lying on a side table in the office. He breathed a small

sigh of relief that there was only one; he really didn't want to test the man's uncertain temper by asking him what he might consider inane questions. He grabbed the book and walked over to hand it to Snape.

"Keep it," the Potions Master said. "There is something I wish to try since Orinda found it necessary to come down here." He unwrapped the Runespoor from his wrist and handed him to Harry. "I have found that while Orinda gifted me with the ability to speak and understand Parseltongue, I cannot translate that ability into reading Parseltongue. The book you are holding was written by the Dark Lord in Parseltongue which is the reason I know it is possible. I would like you to attempt it."

Harry hesitated. "Er, Professor, I can't read this," he said slowly. "The Oversight doesn't work that way."

"I am aware of that," Snape said impatiently. "I was speaking to Orinda before you arrived and I asked him whether it would be possible for you to use his eyes via Legilimancy."

Harry blinked and thought that one through. "But I've never tried Legilimancy. I thought you said it was difficult to learn and almost impossible to use with animals."

Snape grimaced as the pain he was living with spiked momentarily. He took a deep breath and continued. "That is why you and I will link our minds together again. I have used Legilimancy on Orinda; that is how I reached you during the battle. I will link us into Orinda's mind and then you will attempt to see through his eyes."

"Okay, sir," Harry said nervously.

He settled back in his chair until he was reasonably comfortable and then closed his eyes and slowly lowered his shields. A moment later he felt Snape's mind nudge his and then they meshed once again. The moment the mesh was complete, Harry gasped as the pain the Potions Master was suffering flooded into his mind.

Dammit! he heard Snape mutter mentally.

He then felt Snape trying to shield the pain. He watched that mentally for a while then when he had worked out what the other man was trying to do he joined in. Between the two of them they managed to get the pain shielded to a level that made it possible to think. Harry took a few deep breaths, wondering how Snape was even capable of sitting upright, let alone able to teach.

Pain can be endured came the Potions Master's thought. He had obviously been following Harry's thought. **Now shall we try this?**

Okay Harry replied. **What do you want me to do?**

Nothing for the moment Snape replied. **Let me reach Orinda.**

Harry slowly opened his eyes and watched as Snape stared at the Runespoor wrapped around Harry's wrist.

"Legilimens," he whispered and Harry felt the jolt as they other man's mind entered the serpent's mind. Then he felt Snape trying to reach him. Harry frowned as that attempt failed. He could sense

that the mesh was undisturbed; it just seemed that Snape could not actually move in the mesh while he was in Orinda's mind.

As he waited, Snape tried several more times to reach him and pull him into the Runespoor's mind but each attempt failed. Finally Snape withdrew from Orinda's mind and relaxed.

Are your shields down? he asked irritably.

Harry swallowed his own irritation. **Yes, sir. The mesh wasn't disturbed by what you did, it just felt from my end that you were stuck while you were in Orinda's mind.**

Yes, that was the impression I got as well Snape replied in a disgruntled tone.

Both men suddenly winced as the pain that the Potions Master was suffering spiked again. Harry gave his head a small shake and then something occurred to him.

Sir? Is it possible for me to see through your eyes? he asked curiously.

Snape froze for a second then looked at Harry with surprise and shock. **You would be willing to allow the mesh to deepen that much?**

Er, I didn't know it had to. Harry replied. He paused for a moment to think. **But…yes, sir. I would.**

Are you mad? Snape said incredulously.

I do trust you, sir. Harry said with exaggerated patience. **I think you've saved my life too many times for me to doubt that. I think we should try it.**

Snape stared at him for a long moment, his face opaque. Then he nodded slowly. **Very well. Bring the book around here.**

Harry stood and dragged his chair around the other side of the desk, the book tucked under his arm. He sat down again and looked over at his teacher, disengaging his Oversight.

What do we do now?

A set of instructions filtered into his mind and Harry sorted through them. When he was certain he knew what he had to do, he looked over at the Potions Master again and nodded. As they worked through what had to be done, they both felt the mesh deepen until it seemed that they were both one yet separate. Harry had closed his eyes during this and when he now opened them again, he gasped and nearly fell out of his chair.

Snape caught him and steadied him. **What is it?** he asked with uncharacteristic concern then he too gasped as his sudden actions caused the pain to swirl around inside him. Both men sat still and closed their eyes until their respective discomforts calmed. Then Snape opened his eyes again and Harry slowly followed suit. Again Snape picked up the distinct feeling of distress from the young man sitting beside him.

What is wrong? he asked.

I can see what you see came the choked reply. **I…I…I'd almost forgotten what it was like to see.**

That last thought came as a mere whisper and Snape frowned.

But you see as Blaze, do you not? he asked. **And you see through Oversight.**

Yes but that's as a wolf. came the eventual reply. **And not that often. This is seeing. Real seeing. Not just energy fields and ghost images.**

Snape thought that perhaps he understood a little of what Harry meant and he slowly began to look around the room. When he got to where Orinda lay curled up on the desk, Harry gasped.

So beautiful. came the admiring comment and Harry's lips curled in a delighted smile.

"I see you. You are beautiful," he hissed in Parseltongue to his Runespoor.

Orinda hissed in delight and curved up to look at Harry. "Harry sees?" the left hand head hissed questioningly. "How is that possible, Sightless One?"

"I see through Snape's eyes," Harry explained.

Orinda cocked his three heads to one side, looking amusingly curious. "You see through Black Snape's eyes? How odd," the left hand head said. The right hand head undulated on its neck. "They are human," it hissed sourly. "Everything they do is odd."

Harry laughed at Orinda's comment and Snape's lips twitched momentarily. The Potions Master then sighed.

Harry. was all he said though.

Harry sighed. **Yes, sir.**

He opened the book and placed it on the desk in front of Snape. The Potions Master looked at the page and Harry frowned.

I think it's some kind of journal, sir. he said after a few minutes. **Do you want me to try reading it aloud?**

If you wouldn't mind, Mr Potter. came Snape's reply.

Harry paused. **Give me a minute, sir. I've never tried reading in Parseltongue and speaking normally before.**

Speak in Parseltongue then, idiot boy. Snape said with exasperation. **Your Runespoor gave me the ability to understand it.**

Harry laughed ruefully. **I forgot.** He frowned and began to read in the hissing tones of Parseltongue.

My investigations into how the Potter boy managed to destroy my physical body have come to a standstill. I have many theories but each seems more fantastic than the last. How could a boy barely a year old destroy my physical form like that? I must be wary of him; such power is remarkable and quite dangerous. In some ways I am reluctant to use the Killing Curse on the boy again. Is it worth the risk that the protection from his Muggleborn mother would once again guard him in

such a fashion? Though I now share in that protection somewhat, it is nothing compared to what surrounds the boy. No, the Killing Curse cannot be risked. The boy will have to be disposed of in far more mundane means.

Enough! Snape barked through the link, his distaste clear. **I do not think we need to hear what his plans for you were.**

Harry nodded his agreement and Snape flipped through the book slowly as Harry glanced briefly over each page, summing up what was on it.

Wait! he said urgently. **This page seems to deal with the crystal magic.**

Ah! Snape said with interest. He leaned forward then collapsed back in his chair as the pain suddenly overwhelmed his shielding and flashed through them both. Snape struggled with it and slowly managed to wrestle it down once again.

Sir? Perhaps we should do this after you take the antidote. Harry said carefully. **We know it works and I don't think this is so urgent that you need to…to…suffer like this.**

I thought you were adamant that Draco was going to make a move against you? Snape said irritably.

He is but I don't think it's going to happen in the next three weeks. Harry replied patiently. **It'll be in the new year sometime and we'll have time after Hermione's brewed the antidote to finish this.**

Harry felt Snape hesitate for a long moment.

Sir, the more you rest the more you will be able to keep to your normal schedule. Harry suggested.

Snape looked at him sourly, causing Harry to flinch as he saw himself through the other man's eyes. Snape muttered under his breath and loosened the mesh enough so that Harry could no longer see through his eyes.

"That was very Slytherin of you, Mr Potter," he said archly as he dissolved the mesh entirely.

Harry sighed as he re-engaged his Oversight. "Well, the Sorting Hat did want to put me in Slytherin," he said sadly.

"So you have mentioned before," Snape replied with a smirk then his expression softened fractionally. "You will have other opportunities to see through my eyes, Mr Potter."

"Thank you, sir," Harry replied softly.

The Potions Master stiffened and grimaced. "Now go," he said shortly.

Harry nodded and dragged his chair back around the desk and grabbed his cane before making his way out of the office. He was feeling very odd about what had happened. The diary was confronting enough but being able to see again, albeit through another's eyes, had left him feeling unbalanced and out of sorts. He didn't really feel like going back to the Tower nor did he really want to discuss

this with Remus and Sirius. He stopped and dithered for a minute in the middle of the corridor then decided to head for the Room of Requirement.

He was just walking up and down the corridor outside the Room when he realized that someone was watching him. He finished his pacing then looked up to see who it was as the door to the Room of Requirement appeared.

"Mind if I join you?" Ginny asked quietly.

Harry shook his head and opened the door, gesturing for Ginny to precede him. The Room had manifested itself into a small cozy sitting room with a large comfortable couch in front of a fireplace. Harry slumped down on the couch and let his cane fall to the floor. Ginny made a small sound and picked it up and leaned it against the arm of the couch. She then sat down next to Harry and took one of his hands in hers. She slowly entwined their fingers together before curling up on the couch and leaning against her boyfriend. Harry responded absently by curling an arm around her and pulling her close. They sat like that for a long time, both just staring into space. Ginny did not want to push Harry; obviously something was wrong but if she pushed he might just withdraw further into himself. So she was content to wait, knowing there was a good chance that given time to think a bit, he might just tell her.

"Professor Snape asked me to try and read a journal he had," Harry said into the silence. "It was written by Voldemort."

Ginny gave a small start; she had fallen into almost a trance. "Why did you have to read it?" she asked softly.

"Because it's written in Parseltongue."

Ginny frowned. "I thought that Professor Snape understands Parseltongue now."

"He speaks it and he understands it but he can't read it," Harry explained.

"Oh, why's that?" Ginny asked with interest.

Harry shrugged. "I'm not sure. Maybe because he was given Parseltongue by Orinda somehow." He snorted. "I've asked him about that and I can never get a straight answer out of the wretched creature." Harry's tone was affectionate. "Anyway, Runespoors can't read so maybe that's why Professor Snape can't read Parseltongue."

"But you can?"

"Mmmhmm," Harry replied.

Ginny paused. "Um, Harry? How?" she said hesitantly.

Harry stiffened and Ginny gently squeezed his hand. The young man slowly relaxed and sighed.

"He…Professor Snape thought I might be able to use Orinda's eyes to read the book since Hermione's little device won't work on it." Harry gave a small laugh. "It doesn't understand Parseltongue."

"It sounds like that didn't exactly work though," Ginny said shrewdly.

Harry sighed. "No, not exactly. I haven't learnt Legilimancy and it's not easy to use on an animal anyway." He paused. "Actually you're not supposed to use it on an animal at all. Their minds are very different from ours and it's possible to get lost in their minds."

"So you weren't able to read the journal," Ginny said, knowing that she was wrong but wanting to prompt Harry into continuing.

"Erm, well, actually I was," he said uncomfortably and Ginny realized they had arrived at the matter that Harry so unsettled.

"How?" she asked gently.

Harry was silent for a long moment then he spoke in a barely audible voice. "We…Professor Snape and I meshed again to try and see if I could see through Orinda's eyes. When that didn't work, I suggested that perhaps I could use Professor Snape's eyes." He paused again for a moment. "We had to deepen the mesh which was…a little odd. I mean, we had to go pretty deep when we first meshed. You know, really get to know each other but this was…different." His voice trailed off.

"Did you succeed?" Ginny asked, not sure if she was worried or interested in this.

"Yes," Harry whispered. "I was able to…see through Professor Snape's eyes."

Harry fell silent again and Ginny wasn't sure what to say.

"I saw Orinda," Harry said softly, a small smile curving his lips. "He's beautiful."

Ginny smiled as well. "I know. I'm glad you were able to see him properly."

Harry suddenly turned and looked at her, running his free hand down the side of her face.

"I wish I could have seen you," he said intently.

Ginny blushed and leaned into the caressing hand. "I don't think Professor Snape would agree to that," she said lightly.

Harry chuckled. "No, probably not. I doubt I'd want to stop at just looking and he wouldn't like that much at all."

Ginny's blush deepened and she leaned forward and kissed Harry. The young man slid his hand around her neck and into her hair, deepening the kiss. When they finally pulled apart, both of them were rather breathless. Harry gently rested his forehead against hers, his hand still buried in her hair, and they stayed like that for a while. Then Harry gently extracted his hand and they slowly settled back on the couch.

"What was in the journal?" Ginny asked idly as she traced patterns on the back of Harry's hand.

"Voldemort's plans on how to kill me," Harry said with a trace of impishness.

"What?" Ginny gasped.

Harry's lips twitched. "They were old plans, Ginny. Besides Professor Snape wouldn't let me read too much about them. I think he thought that would be a bit distasteful."

"Good for him," Ginny said in a disgruntled tone. "Don't scare me like that."

"Sorry," Harry said in a contrite tone. "Most of the journal was just Voldemort's thoughts and plans but it looks like there some information on the crystal magic he was using last year."

"Really?" Ginny said. "What exactly?"

"We didn't really get into that," Harry admitted. "Professor Snape's in a lot of pain. I got to feel a bit of it through the mesh. How he's managing to stay upright is beyond me. I suggested we come back to this after Hermione finishes the antidote. We know it works and it's not that urgent."

"You're worried about him," Ginny observed.

Harry paused. "Yeah, I guess I am," he said slowly. "I know it sounds odd considering how he's treated me in the past."

"He doesn't treat you like that now," Ginny pointed out.

"Yeah I know. And when I've spoken to him in private he generally treats me like an adult." Harry paused. "I like that you know. He's still sarcastic and snide even then but it's much funnier and less personal. I think that's just the way he works, his personality, his sense of humour." Harry's tone had turned musing.

Ginny chuckled. "You realize that if you'd said this two years ago, we'd have thought you'd lost your mind."

Harry laughed as well. "Well, I guess both of us have changed a bit since then."

"Yes, you have," Ginny said soberly. She looked at Harry and abruptly decided that she wanted to change the mood. "But enough about that," she said mock-sternly. "Here we are in this lovely room, just the two of us with a very comfy couch. You're not going to waste this opportunity, are you, Mr Potter?"

Harry looked bewildered for a second then he slowly began to grin. He wrapped his arms around Ginny and lowered his head so that they were almost nose to nose.

"And just what did you have in mind, Miss Weasley?" he said in a soft, low voice.

"Use your imagination," Ginny breathed.

Chapter 22

A week later, Harry was just sitting down to lunch when Professor McGonagall came over.

"The Headmaster would like to see you after classes today," she said briskly.

Harry looked up at her with surprise but relaxed when she gave him the barest of smiles.

"Relax, Mr Potter, you are not in any trouble," she said.

"Oh, good," Harry replied. "And thank you, Professor. I'll be there."

Professor McGonagall patted him on the shoulder and walked briskly up to the teachers' table.

"What do you think it's about?" Ron asked, leaning over the table and keeping his voice down.

"Who knows?" Harry replied wryly as he poured himself some pumpkin juice. "It could be about Professor Snape, Draco, Aunt Petunia and Dudley, my studies, my duties as Head Boy, my Guild training, the Ministry, Wormtail, Voldemort, the crystal magic or any combination of the above."

"Gee, Harry, have you ever thought about simplifying your life a bit?" Ron asked with a grin.

"I'd love to," Harry replied dryly. "Where do you think I should start?"

"No idea, mate," Ron replied with a laugh and they both turned back to their meals.

After his classes were done for the day, Harry headed up to the Headmaster's office. When he got there he found Remus and Sirius waiting along with Professor Dumbledore.

"Ah Harry," the Headmaster said genially. "Sit down. Tea? Sherbert lemon?"

Harry sat down in the chair next to Sirius and nodded in acceptance of the tea but refused the sherbert lemon. Once he was settled in with his tea, the Headmaster looked at him more seriously.

"Firstly, Harry, let me assure you that you are not in any trouble," he said with a twinkle in his eye. "This has to do with your Aunt and cousin."

Harry paused. "Are…they alright?"

"Yes," Dumbledore replied. "But your Aunt is reluctant to trust me on my own."

"Why?" Harry asked incredulously.

"I'm sure she has her reasons," Dumbledore said patiently. "She wishes to speak to you herself."

"Albus, that can't be a good idea," Sirius said worriedly. "I thought you wanted to keep Harry away from this in case it was a trap."

Remus indicated his agreement and the Headmaster held up his hands.

"I know, I know. The matter concerns me greatly as well. I firmly believe this may indeed be a trap," he said patiently. "However, I believe I have a solution. Remus, Sirius, how good were the illusions

of James and Lily?"

"Erm, very good," Sirius stammered. "But Moony might have a better idea. My memory is still a bit spotty in some places." He shook his head, a dark expression flitting across his face. "Some memories never came back after Azkaban."

There was a small silence at that then Remus spoke up. "They were just as I remembered them at that age," he said softly.

"Good, good," Dumbledore said. "Then my plan might just work. Harry, did you have any problems seeing the illusions with Oversight?"

"Um, no," Harry replied. "In fact, I could see them normally."

"How do you mean?" Remus asked curiously.

"I mean I could see them as though I wasn't blind," Harry replied. "The rest of you were just energy colours and the overlay but they were clear as day." His lips curved in a small smile; he had enjoyed being able to see his parents when they were young. It had been a lot like looking into the Mirror of Erised again.

"Interesting," Dumbledore said, his eyes twinkling. "And potentially useful. Now, I am sure you have worked out that I intend to teach you how to create one of these illusions of yourself with a slight alteration that I have managed to develop. Lily's notes were most useful."

Harry nodded slowly; he had suspected that was where the Headmaster's questioning was leading. "You'll take the illusion with you to meet with Aunt Petunia," he said.

"Yes," Dumbledore beamed. "And because it will retain your personality, she should not suspect anything is wrong. And if it is a trap…well, I think the results could be quite interesting."

"Do you really think Draco would act this quickly?" Harry said dubiously.

"I do not think he is prepared to act this quickly," Dumbledore said calmly. "However I also do not think he will waste an opportunity if it is presented to him. We can only hope that the plan will not be very well thought out."

The Headmaster paused and smiled. "Now, Harry, creating the illusions is a complex process but I think you should be able to manage it. In fact you must if this is to work. While anyone can dispel these illusions, you can only create an illusion of yourself. Creating them requires a number of steps. The first step is to create the basic illusion of yourself. You must picture yourself quite clearly in your mind and then the incantation is 'egosimilitudo'." Harry nodded and Dumbledore continued. "Then you must place your personality into the illusion. This is done in a similar manner to using a pensieve. You must place your wand to your temple and remove what is effectively a copy of your personality using the incantation 'creoanimus'. You then transfer that to the illusion."

Harry nodded again then looked a little intimidated as the Headmaster continued once more.

"You must then implant the knowledge into the illusion that it is just an illusion," he said. "This is done by the incantation 'sciosimulatus'. Now this part is new. I have developed a means of allowing the caster to see and hear what is going on where their illusion is. They cannot directly influence

anything their illusion does though." He paused and gave the others a conspiratorial smile. "I'm working on that part. The incantation for this is 'contemplorlocus'. Finally you activate the illusion by using 'Vivo'."

Harry swallowed. "My parents used a different method to activate theirs, didn't they?" he said, trying to avoid thinking about what he was going to have to do.

"Yes and no," the Headmaster replied. "They would have used 'Vivo' to initially activate them but then they tied the activation into the crystal along with that rather interesting little phrase which I am sure has so many uses."

His eyes twinkled as both Sirius and Remus blushed and looked sheepish. Harry gave a small laugh at their expressions then looked at the Headmaster.

"When do you want to do this?" he asked nervously.

"I have arranged to meet with Petunia on Saturday morning," Dumbledore replied. "That way if anything does go wrong, you will not have to miss classes in order to keep track of what happens to your double."

Harry nodded and Dumbledore clapped his hands and smiled.

Now," he said enthusiastically as he stood and beckoned to Harry. "I would like you to try creating your illusion tonight."

Harry took a deep breath and joined the Headmaster in the middle of the room. Dumbledore then moved to stand slightly behind him.

"Alright, Harry," he said calmly. "I want you to concentrate on yourself. You don't have to do it too hard, just be aware of yourself. Then raise your wand and speak the incantation. There are no wand movements involved with this; it is strength of will that matters."

Harry nodded and took a deep breath. He did his best to concentrate on himself then he raised his wand, pointed it towards the middle of the room and said, "Egosimilitudo."

The air in the middle of the room shimmered for a moment then slowly began to coalesce. As those in the room watched, the shimmering increased in speed and then, with a small flash of light, a figure appeared in the middle of the room. Harry's jaw dropped open as he looked at a carbon copy of himself. He whipped around to face Sirius and Remus.

"I look like that?" he stammered.

His godfather and guardian looked at him like he'd grown an extra head.

"Er, yes?" Sirius said with confusion.

Harry turned back to look at the illusion of himself a little wild-eyed. This was the first time he had really seen himself since he had been blinded and due to the fact that this was the same kind of illusion as the ones of his parents, he could see himself clearly. It was odd the things that had changed about him and the things that hadn't. His hair was still the same, black and messy, and his eyes were still the same green. But he had grown slightly and his face had changed a bit. It was

perhaps a bit less like his father's and maybe now had more hints of his mother in it. His shoulders were a bit broader and he looked less like a boy now and much more like a man. Part of his mind was telling him it was silly to be shocked like this; after all, he had been using the shaving charm for a year now. But it was one thing to know something intellectually and quite another to be suddenly confronted with the evidence.

He winced a little as he looked at his face. Madam Pomfrey had healed most of the scars on his face from the impact of the shattered glass but there were still small pale scars around his eyes. It also seemed odd to see himself without glasses. He stared at himself for a bit longer then shook his head suddenly.

"We…we'll need to get another cane," he said in an odd voice. "Wouldn't look right without that."

"I've already organized that," Dumbledore said calmly. "Do you feel up to trying the next part?"

Harry stared at the illusion for a moment then nodded slowly.

"Good," Dumbledore said in a soothingly tone as he placed a hand on Harry's shoulder. "Now place the tip of your wand against your temple and speak the incantation. Then slowly remove your wand. The copy of your personality should appear as a rather amorphous silver blob attached to the end. You will then need to take that over to the illusion, place it at the temple of the illusion and speak the incantation again."

He patted Harry on the shoulder reassuringly and stepped back slightly. Harry took a deep breath and carefully followed the Headmaster's instructions. He staggered a fraction as he stepped back from the illusion and Sirius leapt forward and grabbed at him. Harry took a deep breath and leaned against his godfather.

"This…isn't easy," he murmured.

Sirius rubbed his back. "You're doing well," he said softly then he smiled. "Hadn't you realized that you'd grown up physically as well?"

Harry gave a small laugh. "No, not really. I guess I just still saw myself as being the same as when I was…blinded. Bit silly, I suppose."

"Just a bit," Sirius said cheerfully, drawing another laugh from his godson.

Harry took a deep breath and stood up. Sirius let him go and ruffled his hair before stepping back to stand beside Remus again. Harry looked over and the Headmaster.

"Sorry about that, sir," he said shyly. "What do I do now?"

Dumbledore waved away the apology. "It is quite difficult to do this the first time. One never really knows what they look like until they see for themselves. Mirrors can only tell us so much," he said wisely. "Now you need to add to the illusion the knowledge that it is an illusion. This is much easier. The incantation to use is 'sciosimulatus' and the wand action you need to use is as follows."

The Headmaster waved his wand in a curiously sinuous manner.

"Could you repeat that for me, sir?" Harry said with a frown.

Dumbledore smiled and repeated that odd wand action until Harry nodded.

"Thank you, sir."

"Are you ready to try it?" the Headmaster said encouragingly.

Harry nodded and levelled his wand at his double. "Sciosimulatus," he said as he copied the Headmaster's wand movement.

The illusion glowed for a moment then went back to normal. Harry looked over at Dumbledore, a question on his face.

"Well done, Harry," the Headmaster said. "We won't do the part that allows you to see what your illusion is seeing. As your double won't be leaving the room, it seems rather extraneous. You can activate it now."

Harry took a deep breath before pointing his wand at his illusion and saying, "Vivo."

The illusion suddenly moved and then stiffened, looking around blindly. As Harry watched his double, frowned for a fraction of a second and then relaxed. Harry realized that must be what he looked like when he was activating his Oversight. It looked over at him and grinned. Harry stared for a moment then slowly grinned back.

"What do you say to going up to Gryffindor Tower and scaring the hell out of people?" his double said to him mischievously.

Harry laughed at that mental image then got himself back under control. "Um, maybe not."

"Darn," said his double good-naturedly. "Would have been fun."

"I'm sure it would have," Dumbledore said with amusement. He looked over to Harry. "Do you remember how to dispel the illusion?"

Harry thought back to the day that the Headmaster had dispelled the illusions of his parents.

"Um, it's 'abeoumbra' and my name, isn't it?" he asked as his double turned and grinned at Remus and Sirius.

"Correct," Dumbledore replied.

Harry pointed his wand at his double. "Abeoumbra Harry Potter."

His double looked back at him and laughed as he slowly faded out of sight. Harry was silent for a while as he stared at where his double had been.

"That was very strange," he said quietly.

"Yes," Sirius agreed. "And offered endless opportunities for mischief."

Harry gave a small laugh. "Yes, I suppose it did."

"Padfoot, please do not encourage him," Remus said with weary amusement. "Harry gets into

enough trouble on his own. I'd hate to think what two Harrys could do."

"Hey! I don't get into trouble," Harry said indignantly though with a trace of a smile. "Trouble usually comes and drags me into the middle of it."

"Uhuh," Remus said with amused disbelief.

Harry shook his head in mock-disgust. "What's the world coming to? My own guardian doesn't believe me."

"Your own guardian is well aware of what you are like," Remus chuckled.

"Now, Moony," Sirius said walking over and throwing an arm around his godson's shoulders. "It's a boy's job to get into trouble. As I recall you got into a certain amount of trouble when you were Harry's age."

"Yes and whose fault was that?" Remus replied dryly.

"Well, mine and James mostly," Sirius conceded. "But you went along with us."

"Under protest," Remus said.

"Not that much protest if I recall correctly," Sirius said with a laugh. Then his face darkened slightly. "I think I remember that correctly."

"Er, well, yes, you may be right there," Remus said hastily. Sirius still had problems with his memory after his years in Azkaban and neither Harry nor Remus liked him to get agitated about it.

The three of them jumped when the Headmaster cleared his throat and they looked around to see the older man watching them with some amusement.

"Before this degenerates into a series of recollections I should probably not know about," Dumbledore said with a smile, his eyes twinkling, "Harry, I would like you to come here at nine o'clock on Saturday morning. I have arranged to meet Petunia at nine-thirty."

Harry nodded and was about to answer when a small device on the Headmaster's desk started to ring. The Headmaster gave a start and immediately headed for the fireplace where he made a floo-call. Harry, Remus and Severus were able to hear the Headmaster's end of it.

"Poppy, go immediately to Severus' rooms," Albus barked. "He has collapsed and will need to go to the Hospital Wing. Be sure to give him some privacy."

He then pulled his head out of the fire and looked over at Harry and the others.

"It has happened," he said with concern. "The pain caused by the poison has overwhelmed even Severus' formidable defences. He will have to remain in the Hospital Wing from now on." He chuckled sadly. "I suspect he will try to defy me but this collapse signals the next stage of the poison's progress."

"It's still another week before the antidote will be finished," Harry protested.

"Yes, I know, dear boy," Dumbledore replied. "He will survive long enough to take it. It would take at

least another three to four weeks for the poison to finish its task."

Harry shuddered at the thought of suffering that kind of pain the poison induced for that length of time. "Wouldn't that…drive someone insane?" he asked softly.

"Yes," the Headmaster replied. "That was, I believe, part of the point of using that particular poison." He took a deep breath. "Well, gentlemen, that is all for tonight, I think. I must go and see to Severus. Don't forget to be here on Saturday, Harry."

With that the Headmaster flooed out of his office. Remus placed a hand on Harry's shoulder.

"Come on, Harry," he said quietly. "Maybe you should stay with us tonight?"

"Do you mind?" Harry asked quietly.

"Of course not," Sirius said as the three of them headed towards the door.

Harry sighed and rubbed his forehead. "I just want this all to be over," he said wearily.

"I know you do," Sirius said. "So do we." He paused and decided to change the subject. "So have you made a decision yet about what you want to do after graduation?"

Harry blinked as his mind caught up with the sudden change then he nodded. "Yeah, I have. I'm going to do the Tyro. Professor Snape has agreed to act as my mentor so that's sorted out and Master Nhean said that the Guild would be agreeable to being part of it."

"Ginny doesn't mind?" Sirius asked slyly.

Harry blushed as Sirius chuckled; he liked teasing his godson about his girlfriend. "Erm, she's planning on going into mediwitch training so there'll only be a year where at the end where we're both not studying."

"So you are planning on marrying the girl?" Sirius said with a laugh.

"Er, well…I…um," Harry sputtered.

"Padfoot, leave him alone," Remus said with amusement. "You'd think that after James hexed you when you did this to him you'd learn not to tease the Potter men about this sort of thing."

Harry looked at Remus. "What did Dad do?" he asked with a smile.

"He never did tell me what hex he used but he left Sirius with a face like a horse for about three hours," Remus said mischievously. "Pity for Sirius that James used it right before the start of classes for the day." He paused. "Oh, and that's literally a face like a horse. Mind you, it got a bit annoying listening to Padfoot neigh and whinny all that time."

Sirius reached around Harry and whacked Remus on the back of the head, struggling not to smile. "Oh, thank you for telling that, Moony, my oldest friend. See if I don't go around telling stories about you."

"What stories?" Remus countered. "Unlike you two reprobates, I was as pure…"

"As what they shovel out of a stable," Sirius broke in with. "I was friends with you back then, Mr Moony. I know what you were like. We didn't drag you into those pranks kicking and screaming, you were a willing participant."

"Well, if you say so, Mr Padfoot," Remus replied mildly.

"I do say so, Mr Moony," Sirius said firmly, much to Harry's amusement.

That amusement quickly faded as the knowledge of what was happening to Professor Snape trickled back into his mind.

"I want to go down and see Professor Snape," he said quietly.

"Harry, he's unconscious. There's nothing you can do," Remus said kindly as Sirius looked slightly discomforted. The two men might have declared a truce but even now neither particularly liked each other.

"I know," Harry said with frustration. "I…I don't know. I just want to make sure he's alright. Well, as alright as he's going to get for now."

"Wait until the morning," Remus said reasonably. "I doubt Poppy would let you in to see him right now anyway. He may be awake in the morning and she might let you in then."

Harry opened his mouth to protest then closed it again. "I guess you're right," he said reluctantly.

"I don't know why you'd want to see him anyway," Sirius grumbled.

"Sirius!" Remus chided and Harry shot a hurt look at his godfather.

"Siri, I know you don't like him that much," Harry said patiently. "But I do and he is going to be my mentor for the next five years. I'd get used to it if I were you."

Sirius grumbled to himself, looking rather uncomfortable, and Harry shot him a sly look.

"I told Professor Snape that the two of you had a remarkable ability to bring out each other's inner five-year-old," he said blandly.

Sirius spluttered and Harry laughed. "That was pretty much his reaction too."

Remus laughed quietly. "Harry's right, Padfoot. You two do act like children around each other. You've got to grow up at some point."

"I will if he does," Sirius replied sullenly.

Harry and Remus rolled their eyes. "This is what I was talking about," Harry said to his guardian in a long-suffering tone.

Remus chuckled and eyed his friend mischievously. "Come on, Padfoot. You're not going to let Severus get one up on you, are you?"

Sirius eyed the other two with deep suspicion. "You're ganging up on me!" he said indignantly. "That's not fair!"

"Well, yes," Remus admitted. "But we're doing it for the forces of good."

Sirius snorted. "Since when has Snape been part of the forces of good," he muttered.

"Sirius!" came the admonition from both Harry and Remus.

Sirius threw his hands in the air. "Alright! Snape is a part of the forces of good." He sighed. "Just don't expect me to like him."

"Wouldn't dream of it," Harry said dryly. "I'll settle for the two of you being polite."

"Yeah, okay, I guess I can manage that," Sirius muttered.

"Thank you," Harry said firmly.

They walked along the corridor towards the suite with Sirius mumbling under his breath and Harry and Remus struggling not to laugh. As they reached the portrait that guarded the door, Sirius stiffened and gave Remus an alarmed glance.

"Did you tell him?" he said urgently.

Remus looked blank for a moment then he swore quietly. "No, I thought you were going to."

"Tell me what?" Harry demanded.

"Dammit!" Sirius groused. "This probably isn't the time or the place but you deserve to know. Peter," his lips curled into a snarl and a growl resonated from him, "is to receive the Kiss tomorrow."

Harry was still for a long time. "Good," he said finally.

"He's asked to see us," Sirius said reluctantly.

"Why?" Harry yelped.

Sirius snorted with disgust. "No idea."

"Do we have to go?" Harry asked with alarm.

"No," Sirius growled. "I'm not going."

Harry looked over at Remus.

"I'm not going either," Remus said flatly.

"Good," Harry said with relief. "I don't want to see him or speak to him."

The two men nodded and Harry leaned into his godfather. "He deserves it," he muttered.

"Not going to get any argument out of me," Sirius replied firmly.

"Nor me," Remus added.

They stood there quietly for a moment.

"Dumbledore’s going to be disappointed in us, isn’t he?" Harry observed quietly.

"Quite likely," Remus replied. "But I think he’ll understand."

Harry nodded then the three of them headed inside.

Chapter 23

The next morning Harry got up a little early and headed down to the Hospital Wing but was firmly repulsed by Madam Pomfrey. He grumbled at the closed door for a moment then headed down to the dungeons. Hermione seemed to have almost set up camp in Snape's workroom. She had owled her parents that she would be staying at Hogwarts this Christmas; they hadn't been happy about it but when she had sent a brief explanation, they had been surprised but understanding. Harry and the rest of the Battle Guard had chosen to stay as well. The rest of the students were leaving tomorrow and Harry was looking forward to spending his Christmas with his godfather and guardian.

He opened the door to the Potions classroom and headed over to the door to the workroom, knocking and waiting. He heard a muffled 'Come in' from inside and opened the door and wandered in.

Hermione looked up from the cauldron and smiled. "Hello, Harry. You're up early."

"I wanted to see Professor Snape but Madam Pomfrey wouldn't let me in," Harry replied slightly grumpily.

"She won't let anyone other than Professor Dumbledore in to see him," Hermione replied. "The only way I'm going to get in there is if I turn up with the completed antidote."

Harry grunted and peered at the cauldron. He couldn't see much, just odd circules of vague energy colours. "How's it going?"

"Very well," Hermione said with satisfaction. "It'll be ready in five days."

"Just in time for Christmas," Harry said with a small smile.

"I'm not sure if he'll care about that," Hermione replied with a matching smile.

"Yes, he doesn't seem to be a very Christmassy person," Harry said. "Too bad. I got him a present anyway."

Hermione laughed. "Yes, so did I. He'll probably growl at us."

"Oh, joy," Harry said wryly. "So what's new?"

"You'd better get used to it if he's going to be your mentor," Hermione grinned.

"Yeah, I'm thinking by the end of the five years we're either going to have killed each other or actually be friends," Harry said with amusement.

Hermione paused and thought for a moment. "I'm not sure which is more likely," she said with a wicked look.

"Hermione!" Harry spluttered then he started laughing as well. "I suppose you might have a point though."

Hermione smiled. "Well, maybe it won't be that bad."

Harry snorted. "Actually I'm hoping that by the end of the five years, Professor Snape and Siri will be capable of being polite to each other for more than five minutes."

Hermione laughed. "That be may be asking for too much. Seriously though, I thought they weren't that bad now?"

"They're better than they used to be," Harry conceded. "They just irritate me every now and then when they start narking at each other."

Hermione opened her mouth to comment but was interrupted when the door to the workroom opened and Ron, Ginny, Neville and Luna walked in.

"So this is where you two have got to," Ron said cheerfully.

Harry looked at him suspiciously. "Alright, what's going on? You're never this cheerful in the morning, Ron."

Ron looked hurt. "Harry! How could you think that? I am merely pleased that Christmas is almost here."

"That and the fact that Mum and Dad have decided to relocate the family Christmas to Hogwarts since we felt it necessary to stay here," Ginny said with a grin. "We just got the owl this morning about it. Apparently Dumbledore thought it was a great idea. So you get a Weasley Christmas after all, Harry."

"Though why you want one, mate, I don't know," Ron said shaking his head. "The whole family goes absolutely barking mad on Christmas day."

Harry grinned. "That sounds pretty good to me, Ron. This'll be the best Christmas I've ever had." His voice echoed with satisfaction.

The others exchanged quick glances then Ron spoke again.

"Did the two of you want to go down to Hogsmeade on Saturday?" he said hastily.

"Oh yes," Hermione said with delight. "I haven't got even half of my Christmas shopping done. I've been so busy with the antidote."

Harry was silent for a moment. "Um, I can't," he said finally. "Dumbledore's meeting with Aunt Petunia on Saturday and he needs me there."

There were protests from his friends.

"But Harry, I thought Dumbledore didn't want to risk you in case it was a trap," Ginny said with concern, wrapping her arms around her boyfriend.

Harry pulled her close. "He's not," he replied then continued when his friends looked confused. "He taught me how to make one of those illusions of myself. The illusion will go. I'll be staying here."

There was silence for a moment.

"Is it difficult?" Hermione asked eagerly, causing the others to laugh.

"Hermione Granger," Ron said with affectionate exasperation. "Shouldn't the question be more along the lines of 'are you okay, Harry?' or 'do you need our help, Harry?'"

Hermione blushed and Harry laughed. "Don't worry, Hermione. I'd think there was something wrong with you if you weren't interested in how to do this."

"I didn't mean in that way, Harry. You do know that, don't you?" she asked earnestly. "Of course I'm worried about you but I just thought that if Dumbledore was behind this then it must be alright."

"Actually not only Dumbledore but Siri and Remy as well," Harry said. "And it's alright. As I said, I'd have been worried if that hadn't been your first question."

There were a few moments of levity as the others poked fun at Hermione and she answered back tartly then she turned to Harry again and looked serious.

"So is it difficult?" she asked.

Harry shrugged. "Not really, magically speaking, but it's pretty difficult in other ways." He paused and continued softly. "I…didn't realize I'd changed so much. I…can see the illusions as clearly as if I could see again and it's the first time I've seen myself since…well, you know."

"What's wrong with the way you've changed?" Ginny said impishly. "I think you look wonderful!"

Harry blushed. "I…just wasn't expecting it, that's all."

"What did Sirius and Remus think?" Neville asked curiously.

Harry chuckled. "Siri was contemplating all the trouble I could get up to with the illusion and Remy was being stern about it all but I think he thought the idea was rather good too."

"He tries to be responsible but every now and then the Marauder in him slips out," Hermione said with a smile.

"He lets the Marauder out more away from school," Harry said. "Remember the summer?"

The others grinned and nodded in remembrance at some of the things Sirius and Remus had gotten up to during the summer, usually aided and abetted by Fred and George.

"Do you really think Draco would try anything?" Neville asked with a worried look.

Harry shrugged. "I don't know. The Headmaster seemed to think he might but that whatever it is won't be very well planned. He's managed to add something to the process that will allow me to see and hear what my illusion does so whatever happens, I'll know." He paused. "For what its worth, yes, I think Draco will try something. I can't think of any other reason for him and those other Death Eaters to be getting friendly with Dudley."

"Just be careful," Ginny said with concern.

"I'll be okay," he reassured her. "The illusion can't really be harmed and I can dispel it at any time. Dumbledore's spell only allows me to see and hear, I won't feel anything that happens to the illusion."

"That’s awfully cold-blooded," Hermione said with a shudder.

Harry gave her a strange look. "Hermione, it’s just an illusion. Yes, it’s a very good one but it’s just an illusion. It’s not me."

"You’ve thought about this," Hermione observed quietly.

"Yes," Harry replied bluntly. "With the illusions of my parents. If I took the attitude that you were thinking of, I would have gotten myself into a hell of a tangle. If I’d treated them like they really were my parents, I’d have ended up doing something really stupid. But they weren’t my parents, Hermione. They just looked and acted like them. Think of it as being like someone using Polyjuice. They can look and act like someone else but they aren’t that person."

Hermione nodded slowly. "I guess you’re right."

"I know I’m right," Harry replied firmly.

"Do you want us to be there?" Ron asked.

Harry shook his head. "No, Siri and Remy will be there. You guys go into Hogsmeade. No point all of us ruining our Saturday."

"Are you sure?" Ron said.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Yes, I’m sure. Now come on, it must be time for breakfast and I’m starving."

Ron seconded that notion with alacrity and the six of them left the workroom, teasing the tall red-head.

Antonin Dolohov waved a lazy hand to the young man who had just entered the restaurant. They had quickly found that one of the keys to dealing with Dudley Dursley was to feed him. If you fed him fine food and bolstered his ego then he was happy and would go along with you. Hence the reason they always met with him in restaurants.

"Fat slob of a Muggle," Bellatrix Lestrange said in disgust.

"Hush, Bella," Antonin said firmly. "He’s a useful fat slob of a Muggle. Humour him."

Bella sneered and leaned back in her chair as Dudley sat down. The fat boy looked at her with leering eyes and she swallowed the bile that had collected in her throat and gave him a simpering smile. Antonin watched this with amusement then reached out his hand.

"Good to see you again, Dudley," he said with an air of bonhomie as they shook hands.

"'Lo, Anton, Bella." Dudley smiled smugly, looking around surreptitiously to see if anyone had noticed what kind of friends he had. Antonin and Bellatrix hid their sneers and Antonin waved to the waiter to bring them their menus. After they had ordered, Antonin looked at Dudley expectantly.

"You said you had something for us?" he said with a raised eyebrow.

"Oh, yeah," Dudley grunted. "It's about that freak Potter."

"Oh?" Antonin said with artfully concealed interest. They had carefully cultivated Dudley Dursley in the hopes they might be able to use him to get to Potter. It looked like their patient work might now pay off.

"Mum thinks I'm doing something wrong," Dudley said with a sneer. "She's contacted the little freak. She's meeting with him and that Headmaster, Dundydore or whatever his name is, on Saturday."

Both Antonin and Bella both kept hold of themselves and allowed their only reaction to be a small smile.

"Do you know when and where?" Bella purred as she leaned in towards Dudley.

The fat boy flushed and nodded frantically. "Uh, they're meeting at home because I said I was going to be out and it's at ten o'clock."

Bella beamed at him. "That's good to hear."

Antonin drew the fat boy's attention. "Make sure you do go out. We don't want you there when we move."

"And this will help my Dad," Dudley said, suddenly intent.

Antonin leaned back in his chair again. "Of course, Dudley," he lied blandly. "The Potter boy lied and will be forced to admit that. Have no fear; we'll get your father out of that prison as soon as possible."

Dudley sighed with relief. His life had taken a distinct turn for the worse since his father had been jailed. He'd been withdrawn from Smeltings because they could not afford to pay the fees and Aunt Marge refused to pay them. In fact Aunt Marge refused to speak to them. His mother had been forced to get a job and that had been quite a shock to Dudley. He now had to get his own breakfast and lunch and get himself to school. And dinner was often a slapdash affair because his mother was generally tired after a full day's work. That this was a normal state of affairs for many of his schoolmates was not something that had occurred to Dudley, mostly because he hadn't made any friends at his new school. The word had quickly got around that his father had beaten and abused his cousin and that his cousin had been removed and sent to new guardians. Dudley's bullying past was also coming back to haunt him. The first time he had tried his usual tactics at school, he had been immediately sent to the principal's office where he had received a lecture about appropriate behaviour and how he wouldn't want to end up like his father. The rest of the students had steered clear of him after that and Dudley found all of this a very unsatisfactory state of affairs.

When he had been approached by Anton Dolohov, he had been wary at first but the man had then introduced him to a boy his own age named Dray Malfoy. Dudley had thought that was an odd name but had thereafter been distracted by Dray's promise to do something for his father. Dray had said that his family had a great deal of influence and could undoubtedly help. All they needed was Potter. Dudley had been fine with that; this was all the freak's fault anyway.

The lunch continued with the conversation being nothing more than flattering small talk. Finally

the two Death Eaters managed to get Dudley to finish eating. They paid the bill and sent the boy on his way. Antonin waited until Dudley was well out of earshot then turned to Bella.

"Get back to the others and get them ready," he ordered harshly. "We only have a couple of days to organize this. I'm going to Bulgaria to see Draco."

Bella scowled and Antonin glared back at her. She held his gaze for a moment then nodded in submission before whirling and stalking away, gesticulating and talking to herself. Antonin watched her go with a sneer then headed off in the opposite direction. He ducked down a convenient alleyway and apparated to London where he immediately headed to the Ministry. An hour's worth of tedium saw him with permission to travel to Bulgaria and he headed to the international Floo fireplaces. The trip was dizzying and dusty and he grimaced as he emerged in the British Embassy in Sofia. He chatted for a few minutes with the wizard on duty then apparated to the gates of Durmstrang.

The walk up to the front door was cold and windy and he was extremely relieved to get inside. The teacher that met him recognized him as Draco's business partner and immediately went to fetch the blond boy. Draco greeted him with a shark-like smile as he sauntered into the entrance foyer and led him into a private room.

"I take it you have news," Draco said as he summoned a house elf and ordered tea.

Antonin waited until the house elf had served them the tea and disappeared. "Bella and I had lunch with Dudley today. It seems his mother has a meeting set for Saturday with Dumbledore and Potter. I take it you would like to take advantage of that?"

Draco's eyes lit up. "So Dumbledore is going to risk his Golden Boy outside of Hogwarts? That is very interesting news."

Antonin smiled. "I thought you'd like it."

Draco's eyes narrowed in thought. "Do you think there would be an opportunity to grab him?"

Antonin leaned back in his chair. "Yes, possibly. I have been to the Dursleys' house and I think we should have an opportunity. Our timing would have to be very good and it would be a hell of a risk due to the presence of Dumbledore but I think we have a shot at it."

Draco nodded. "Good. I want to keep this to the minimum of people involved. You, me, Bella and Pansy should be enough."

Antonin sighed and nodded. "Very well," he said in a weary tone.

Draco grinned maliciously. "Having troubles, Antonin?"

The other man grimaced. "That Lestrange woman is insane," he said flatly.

"Yes, I know but she is useful in her own way," Draco replied.

"Pansy's no better," Antonin growled.

Draco chuckled. "I know," he said indulgently. "Such a delightfully wicked girl. I was very impressed

with her handling of the Snape situation. Pity we don't know if she succeeded but I suppose it was inevitable that Dumbledore would throw her out. Tybalt's very proud of her, moved heaven and earth to get her out of the clutches of the Aurors."

Antonin shook his head. "You have very interesting tastes in women, my friend."

Draco just chuckled again. "I will have no trouble getting free this weekend. I shall return to England on Friday night. Come to Malfoy Manor and we'll hash out a plan."

"They won't mind you leaving?" Antonin asked curiously, gesturing with one thumb towards the bulk of the school.

"No," Draco said airily. "They know that after my father's death all of his business dealings fell to me. They understand that sometimes I need to return to London to deal with that business."

Antonin nodded in understanding and rose. "I should get back. Merlin only knows what Bellatrix is getting up to. The woman needs strict supervision."

Draco chuckled and waved the other man off before settling back into his chair.

Well? he said.

An interesting opportunity, Voldemort replied thoughtfully. But one well worth taking.

Any advice? Draco asked.

Don't get caught by Dumbledore, came the dry reply.

Helpful, Draco replied sarcastically. Any useful advice?

Be flexible, Voldemort said. Don't get mired down in a plan. Potter has a nasty habit of doing the unpredictable.

Draco grunted. Good point.

And keep very tight control on Bellatrix, Voldemort continued. Her insanity makes her dangerous to us as well as them. He paused. You might want to apply the same control to that Pansy of yours. She's as bad as Bella.

I wouldn't say that, Draco replied mildly. Bella's had years of practice that Pansy lacks.

Better watch out, boy, Voldemort said snidely. Or Pansy will be poisoning you next.

She knows better, Draco said coldly.

Voldemort snorted. And you might want to keep the two of them separated. They're unpleasantly like bitches in heat when they're both around you.

Draco chuckled smugly. I know.

Better take care of your little flower then, Voldemort said snidely. Bella can be rather direct when she decides she wants something.

She already knows not to do that, Draco replied. She's had ample warning from both Tybalt and myself. Now, back to Saturday, any suggestions?

Be careful, Voldemort warned. Try to separate Potter from Dumbledore. But if you can't do that then do it outside. It's much easier to maneuver and you don't risk ricochets off the walls. Are the wards still up around the house?

I should hardly think so, Draco replied. Potter doesn't live there anymore and I think the Dursleys have lost many of their privileges.

That will make things easier, Voldemort said with satisfaction. Where do you plan on taking him once you have him?

Draco paused. Hmm, good question. The Manor is obviously out of the question as are any of the places you used. Too obvious, they'll be the first places searched.

Perhaps not all of them, Voldemort said slowly. There is a place you might use in Yorkshire.

The Dark Lord's knowledge of the place flooded into Draco's mind and the blond boy nodded slowly.

Yes, that looks promising, Draco said slowly. Do the others know where it is?

Bella and Antonin do, Voldemort replied. You will have to inform Pansy.

Draco nodded. Does Dumbledore know about this place?

I do not believe so, Voldemort said musingly. Though it is possible that there are some older Aurors, Moody perhaps, who might know of it. It will be far down on the list of places they will search as they will not believe that you know of it.

Good, this will work then, Draco said with satisfaction. Thank you, my Lord.

Voldemort chuckled and his awareness faded out of Draco's mind. Draco rose and left the room, heading for the Headmaster's office. He needed to get permission to be absent for the weekend.

Chapter 24

On Saturday morning Harry made his nervous way up to Dumbledore’s office to find the Headmaster, Sirius and Remus waiting for him. He smiled at them and slumped down on the couch next to his godfather.

"Are you ready, Harry?" Dumbledore asked.

Harry nodded and pushed himself off the couch. He walked over and stood next to the Headmaster. He lifted his wand and began the process of creating the illusion of himself, this time including the spell that would allow him to see and hear what was going on. He paused before activating the illusion and looked over at the energy swirls of the Headmaster.

"Activate it," Dumbledore said kindly. "It’s time he and I were going."

Harry nodded. "Vivo," he said quietly and the illusion came to life. Again he saw it pause and activate the Oversight.

Dumbledore walked over to his desk and pulled a cane almost identical to Harry’s out from behind it. He then walked over and handed the cane to the Illusion-Harry.

"Come, Harry," he said calmly. "It’s time to go."

The illusion, with its knowledge of every Harry knew up until the moment it was created, nodded nervously. It then looked over and Harry and grinned wickedly.

Harry grinned slowly back it his double. "Be nice," he said quietly.

His double laughed then placed a hand on the book Dumbledore was holding out. "Of course I will," the illusion said. "I’m you after all."

The Headmaster then activated the portkey and the two of them disappeared. Harry swayed a little and Sirius leapt up from the couch to steady him. He then led his godson over to the couch.

"Are you okay," he asked urgently.

Harry nodded absently. "Yeah, just following what’s happening. The portkey was strange."

Sirius sat down beside him and the two men watched with worry and some interest as Harry followed the actions of his double.

Dumbledore and the double arrived in the middle of Arabella Figg’s living room, startling the old woman and her cats.

"For goodness sakes, Albus!" Arabella scolded as her cats fled the room. "Give a body some warning next time."

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow at the old woman. "Arabella, I told you we would be arriving this morning."

"Yes, but not into the middle of my living room," she said archly. "And please enlighten me as to why you feel it necessary to endanger Harry like this. I thought you said this was probably a trap."

"This is not Harry," Dumbledore replied, smiling at the illusion. The illusion grinned at the two adults and Arabella's eyes widened.

"An illusion?" she breathed. "Like the ones of James and Lily you told me about?"

Albus nodded. "Indeed. Harry did a wonderful job of creating it."

"Why thank you, Headmaster," Harry replied with a shy smile.

Arabella blinked. "Are you sure you have the right Harry, Albus?"

Albus chuckled. "I certainly do but the illusion is very accurate."

"So I see," Arabella said, still staring at the illusion with some awe. She then shook her head and glanced at the clock. "You'd best be going, Albus. You don't want to be late."

Dumbledore nodded and ushered the illusion out of the room. They walked along the street towards Privet Drive and Dumbledore looked around, apparently admiring the houses.

"Any sign of them?" Harry murmured.

"No, but no doubts they are here," the Headmaster replied calmly. "They would not pass up this opportunity."

"Well, that's why I'm here," the illusion replied pragmatically. "By the way, did you know that I can communicate with the real me through this spell of yours?"

"Why yes, I do believe that is part of the spell," Albus said, his eyes twinkling.

The illusion's lips twitched. "He said to tell you that you're a manipulative old bat." He paused. "Oh no, hang on, that was meant just for me."

Dumbledore chuckled, rather intrigued at this illusory Harry. If he recalled Lily's notes correctly the illusion spell tended to reproduce the best of the personality of the caster. This then was Harry at his best, without the doubts, fears, brooding and unhappiness that so often was there. This was a Harry that perhaps only Ginny, Remus and Sirius and maybe Ron, Hermione, Neville and Luna had ever seen. He felt rather like he had been given a gift to see this Harry.

"Tell him that this is normal," he said softly. "That Lily's spell takes the best of the person and tries to leave as much of the sadness and such like as it can."

The illusion almost seemed to look inwards for a moment then it smiled softly. "He understands. He knows himself and he knows that that is exactly what I am. He just never seems to get much of a chance to show this."

Dumbledore nodded in understanding. "You realize that we will have to get…accidentally separated at some point today."

Harry nodded. "Yes, sir. Inside the house or outside?"

"We'll try both," Dumbledore replied.

"Inside will be easy enough since they're still living in the same place," Harry said thoughtfully. "He suggests I just go to the bathroom. Outside will be a little harder."

"Rush out of the house," Dumbledore suggested. "Like you cannot wait to leave. Rush out and I will endeavour to lag behind sufficiently."

Harry nodded as they walked up to the door of Number Four. The Headmaster rang the doorbell and they waited. After a couple of minutes the door opened and Petunia Dursley stood in the doorway. When she recognized them she gave them a genuine smile which surprised Harry.

"Hello, Professor," she said politely then she looked at Harry nervously. "Hello, Harry," she said quietly. "You're…looking well."

"Hello, Aunt Petunia," Harry said softly after Dumbledore had said his greetings.

"Come in," Petunia said, stepping aside for them.

The two men walked into the house and Petunia closed the door behind them. She then led them into the living room and gestured for them to sit. Harry sat a little nervously, having never really been welcome in this room before. He wondered if he really was welcome now.

"I…I'm sorry to drag you all the way back here," Petunia said quietly. "But there were some things that Professor Dumbledore spoke of that I didn't understand and he can't seem to explain to me. I was hoping that you might be able to…translate."

Harry looked at his Aunt and saw in the ghostly overlay that she was looking rather different from the last time he had seen her. She looked much more careworn now, tired and overworked. And yet there was also a hint of honest pride about her as well as though she had faced a task she hadn't thought herself capable of handling and had succeeded nonetheless. Harry supposed that was indeed what had happened; she had been forced to take up the reigns with Uncle Vernon in prison and do everything for herself. She had obviously found herself more than a match for the task at hand and was quite pleased about this. He wondered what would happen when Uncle Vernon got out of prison. Somehow he couldn't see things going back to the way they had been.

"I'll do my best," he said, little confused. He couldn't imagine the Headmaster not being able to make himself understood to anyone then he caught Dumbledore's quick but careful glance around the room and understood. Dumbledore had wanted this trap to be set, hence the reason behind sending the illusion and not the real Harry. The Headmaster had wanted to force Draco's hand, to find out just what cards lay in it. He could feel the irritation, annoyance and grudging admiration coming from the original Harry.

Petunia looked relieved and brought up the first of the points she wanted clarification on. The illusion Harry gave the Headmaster a hard glance then turned his attention to his Aunt. It took nearly two hours to work through all of the issues Aunt Petunia had and both Harrys had to conceal their amusement at the thought of the irritation and impatience that Draco and his cronies must be suffering right now. Finally Aunt Petunia seemed satisfied that she understood what Dumbledore had been saying about Dudley's erstwhile companions and she was not happy with the news. When the Headmaster said that it would be dealt with, the only proviso she gave then was a rather curt

entreaty not to hurt Dudley. She then paused and suggested that they allow him to keep the memories of how he had been used as a salutary lesson.

"Would you like some lunch before you head back?" she asked as they rose at the end of the explanatory session.

"That would be marvellous," Dumbledore said and Harry nodded.

"Um, I…just need to go to the bathroom," he said hesitantly.

"Well, you know where it is," Aunt Petunia said as she disappeared into the kitchen.

Dumbledore winked at him as he followed her and Harry slowly walked upstairs. He could feel that the real Harry was still a little taken aback at this new and improved version of Aunt Petunia and from their shared memories he could certainly see why.

Maybe she's done some growing up? he suggested to the original.

Maybe, came the slightly disorientated reply.

The illusion slowly walked along the upstairs corridor and hesitated for a moment outside the smallest bedroom. He then shook his head and headed for the bathroom. There was no point in dwelling on the past and if Draco was indeed going to make a move then they both needed to have their wits about them. After he finished in the bathroom and headed back downstairs, he felt the original Harry getting his equilibrium back.

Hang on to that thought, he said dryly. I think we're going to need it. Looks like Draco's going to make his move after we leave.

We probably should have expected it, was the reply. Dudley probably asked that nothing be done to risk his mother. He probably does love her, at least as much as the spoilt prat is capable of loving something other than himself.

He walked into the kitchen and was forced to discontinue the conversation. Lunch was simple but surprisingly pleasant and when the time came to leave, Harry was able to thank his Aunt quite politely. He then winked at Dumbledore and made a beeline for the front door, looking for all the world like he couldn't wait to get out of there. He heard his Aunt gasp behind him and then Dumbledore's soft voice soothing her as he walked out of the door, slamming it behind him.

He stalked down the path towards the gate, his cane tapping lightly in front of him, and he heard the soft sounds of someone moving around behind him. He heard a familiar voice say, "Stupefy" and then he knew no more for a time.

When the illusory Harry woke, he found himself bound and lying on the floor of a large well-lit room. The floor was carpeted and there were a couple of chairs from the shapes in his Oversight within his field of vision. There was heat at his back and he assumed he must be near the fireplace.

"We know you're awake, little baby Potter," came the sing-song voice of Bellatrix Lestrange and Harry swallowed a growl.

He lifted his head slightly and looked around and much as he could. The insane witch moved around until he could see her energy form and he was surprised to find that he could also see her dimly in the ghostly overlay. She smiled viciously at him then in a lightening quick move, pulled her wand out and cast the Cruciatus Curse at him. He screamed and arched in his bonds and heard the voice of the original Harry chanting reassurances in his mind. He clung to that voice as the curse washed over him. He dimly heard a voice saying Bellatrix's name and then the curse was ended. He gasped for breath for several minutes and slowly opened his eyes.

The first thing he saw was Bellatrix lying unconscious on the floor and his eyes narrowed with hateful delight. Then he saw a pair of boots move to stand in front of his face. He sighed and shifted himself so that he could look up and see their owner.

"Hello, Potter," Draco Malfoy said with a smug grin. "I see you are still as stupid as ever."

"Hello, Draco," Harry said pleasantly. "And I see you are still believing everything you see."

Draco's eyes narrowed and he stared hard at Harry. His eyes became slightly distant and then pain exploded through Harry's scar. He could feel the pain coming from the original and could only assume that Voldemort had also come out to play. Draco's expression became suspicious and confused.

"That's a genuine reaction," he said though Harry felt it wasn't directed at him. "Polyjuice?"

Again there was silence as the blond boy seemed to listen to something then he grinned maliciously down at Harry.

"Well, only one way to find out," he said. "Enjoy yourself Potter."

Draco stalked out of the room and Harry sighed with relief. The further away from him Draco went, the less his scar hurt.

Are you okay? came the query from the original Harry.

Yeah, was the illusion's reply. I gather you only feel it if Voldemort comes out to play.

Uh, yes, came the hesitant reply.

Good, no sense both of us suffering and besides, I'm not really real, the illusion said as cheerfully as he could. Have you told Dumbledore about what you've seen so far?

Yes, Harry replied. He's put a tracking charm on you. Not a strong one because they would have noticed. He knows your general location. He's already called in Tonks and Moody. They might have a better idea where you are. They know where all of Malfoy's properties are and some of Voldemort's as well.

Good, the illusion replied. Tell them to hurry. I may not be real but that curse hurt. He paused then grinned. Are you enjoying seeing Bellatrix like this? He asked as he looked over at the unconscious witch.

He got a sense of amusement and agreement from the original then he sensed that Harry was a little distracted and he settled down to wait. After about half an hour, Bellatrix began to moan as

she slowly came round. The Illusory Harry watched nervously as she came back to herself and stood up shakily. She glared down at him then gave him a swift kick in the stomach before stomping out of the room. Harry gasped and curled up a little but inwardly was glad that that was all that happened. He slowly relaxed over the next hour and actually started to get a little bored. He knew what Draco was doing and he found the idea a little amusing. Did he really think they would risk using Polyjuice? With all the attendant problems that the potion had.

An hour after he left, Draco came sweeping back into the room, accompanied by three other people. Harry recognized Bellatrix and Pansy immediately but the other man, while familiar, was not one he knew the name of. Draco stopped in front of him again and once more both Harrys' scars burst with pain.

"No Polyjuice then," Draco said with a hint of disappointment. "So what exactly are you?"

The illusion Harry grinned up at Draco. "Wouldn’t you like to know?"

"Unless you’re stalling, of course," the blond boy said with narrowed eyes.

Harry lurched as best as he could towards Draco and grinned again as the other boy jumped backwards looking alarmed. "Twitchy little ferret, aren’t you?" he mocked.

Draco snarled silently and then stared hard at Harry. "You are Potter," he snarled then he, like Bellatrix, lashed out with one booted foot. His caught Harry on the side of the head, knocking him backwards and leaving him with his head ringing.

"Temper, temper, Draco," Harry said with a slight slur. "Not going to learn anything if I can’t speak."

Draco reigned his temper in with visible effort. Both Harrys felt their scars flare and assumed that Voldemort had had to step in and calm the boy down.

Draco leaned over and grabbed the front of the illusion’s shirt, lifting him off the ground slightly. "Who are you?" he growled.

"Harry Potter," the illusion replied with a wicked, if slightly lopsided, grin.

Draco glared at him fiercely then let go of his shirt and let him drop to the floor again. The blond boy paced back and forth for a moment then Pansy stopped him. She whispered in his ear and a slow, malicious smile spread over Draco’s face. He looked down at Harry and leaned over.

"Maybe leaving you to Bella’s tender mercies would convince you to stop playing games," he said in a deadly tone.

Harry sighed. "Alright then, I’ll confess. I’m really Professor Snape." Draco snarled and Harry raised an eyebrow. "Okay, I’m Remus Lupin." Draco’s face became livid. "Um, Sirius Black?"

Draco reared back and raised one foot as though to lash out again. He suddenly froze then that raised foot came thumping down onto the ground. He screamed and grabbed at his head as the Death Eaters watched in surprise and horror. Harry inched away from the blond ex-Slytherin as best as he could and watched with wary interest. He had a very uncomfortable suspicion he knew what was happening.

Draco suddenly screamed and arched backwards sharply, falling to the floor. Bella and Antonin both leapt out of the way and started edging towards the door while Pansy hovered, seemingly unsure as to what to do. Harry kept inching backwards, having been seemingly forgotten by the others. As he watched, Draco gave one last shrill scream and then fell silent. The room seemed to freeze as everyone waited for the outcome of whatever battle had been going on within Draco.

The silence stretched on for several minutes before Draco slowly pushed himself upright. The Illusion Harry was the first to see his face and the look in the blond boy's eyes drew a startled gasp out of him. It was partly due to the fact that the overlay of Draco had changed. It was now the strongest and clearest overlay Harry had ever seen, including those of Sirius and Remus. It took a few seconds for the reason for that to filter through. There was only one person Harry knew better than anyone else, the person he had shared a link with since he was fifteen months old. That was confirmed when his scar exploded with pain.

Voldemort/Draco looked around the room as he slowly settled in. He had finally managed to take over the boy's mind though not quite in the way he had intended. He had hoped to evict the boy entirely but it seemed that whatever Draco had done originally to bind them together had been more or less permanent. So instead of being able to evict the boy he had only managed to meld them completely. That had instigated a minor battle to determine who would be the dominant personality, a battle that Voldemort had won convincingly. Draco was still there, subjugated and fuming but essentially powerless.

He turned his gaze on Bella, Antonin and Pansy. The two Death Eaters immediately recognized the look in those eyes and fell to their knees, grovelling and whispering platitudes to their Lord. Pansy looked at him suspiciously, trying to work out what was wrong. Voldemort/Draco walked over to her and placed one hand under her chin, raising her head and looking into her face.

"He's right," he said with a smile. "You really are lovely, little flower."

Pansy's eyes widened as the implications of that statement sunk in and she tensed. Voldemort/Draco's hand tightened on her chin fractionally and she warily relaxed her posture.

"Very good, little petal," Voldemort/Draco crooned. "It seems you are everything he claimed for you." He ran a gentle finger down the side of her face.

Pansy preened under the compliment and caress then smiled winsomely at the Dark Lord in the body of her fiancée. A low snarl from the side of the room startled her and she turned to see Bella launching herself at her, a look of insane fury and hatred on her face. Pansy's eyes widened but she never had a chance to do anything else. Voldemort/Draco held out one hand and said quite calmly, "Doloroglacialus."

Bellatrix was slammed to a halt mid-leap and held frozen in place. Only her eyes could move and Pansy could see in them the intense pain she was clearly being subjected to. Voldemort/Draco walked over to the frozen witch and walked around her, smiling viciously.

"My dear Bella," he said in a nasty purr. "While I admire your possessiveness, it is entirely misdirected. What you fail to realize is that I am not yours. I have never been yours and I will never be yours. You are mine. To do with as I please. Do you understand that?"

He eased the intensity of the spell he had cast and Bellatrix nodded imperceptibly. Voldemort/Draco

smiled and released the insane witch. She crashed to the floor and immediately grovelled in front of him. He stared at her for a moment then lashed out with a sharp kick.

"Get out of my sight," he snarled and Bella quickly stood and left the room.

Voldemort/Draco walked back over to Pansy and cupped her cheek in one hand. "Do not fear her, little petal," he crooned.

Pansy nodded, torn between nervous fear and pride at her new place in the Death Eater hierarchy. Voldemort/Draco stroked her cheek once more then turned his attention back to where he wanted it.

"Harry Potter," he said menacingly as he stalked over to where the illusion had backed himself into a corner. "No more little games. I am no Draco to be taken in by your foolishness."

The Illusion Harry pushed himself around so he was sitting up as best as he could. "No, I guess you're not," he said solemnly. "Goodbye." He raised an eyebrow and slowly faded into nothing.

Voldemort/Draco's eyes widened then his face suffused with rage. He rounded on Antonin and Pansy and pulled out his wand.

"Crucio!" he screamed. "Where has he gone? What was that?"

But the man and the girl could do nothing more than scream.

Harry winced as his scar throbbed with pain and he leaned into his godfather. Both Sirius and Remus were tense with worry. Harry had been talking to them, albeit in a slightly distracted manner, about what was going on but had suddenly fallen silent shortly after the Headmaster had returned. Since then he had flinched a number of times and then finally had gasped with a look of utter horror on his face. But in all that time he did not speak to them nor did it seem like he even heard them. The only thing he had uttered was a frightened, "Abeoumbra Harry Potter."

When it all seemed to be over, Sirius wrapped his arms around his godson and exchanged worried and almost frightened looks with his oldest friend. Remus leaned over and ran a hand through Harry's hair but neither of them pressed him to speak. Sirius could feel how much he was shaking and was wondering just what in hell could have induced that kind of reaction other than the obvious pain. Albus stayed quiet still in the chair he had taken and waited patiently. Like the others, he knew they would get their answers if they waited for Harry to recover.

After what seemed like hours, Harry finally lifted his head. His face was pale and his eyes full of horror but he seemed to be alright. He took a deep breath and sat upright. Sirius let him go but placed an arm around his shoulders. Harry smiled weakly at his godfather then gave Remus a second weak smile when the werewolf moved over to sit on the other side of him on the couch.

"Would you like something to drink, Harry?" Dumbledore asked gently.

Harry nodded. "Pumpkin juice," he murmured and the Headmaster summoned a house elf and passed on the order. The little creature returned quickly and handed the tall glass of orange-coloured juice to Harry. The Gryffindor took it with a polite thank you and drained half of it in one

go. He sighed and seemed to relax a bit more before taking a few more sips.

"Professor Snape's going to say I told you so," he murmured after a few minutes.

He got curious looks from the three men. "Why do you say that?" Dumbledore asked with a small smile.

"Maybe I should start at the beginning," Harry suggested.

"Good idea," the Headmaster said and with a wave of his wand he refilled the glass in Harry's hand.

Harry gave him a small smile in thanks that didn't extend to his eyes. "I…well, my illusion, he woke up in a room. Draco and Bellatrix were there," he said, glossing over a lot of what happened. "Draco and my illusion talked to each other and I…he…made them think that he wasn't what he seemed to be. Draco seemed to think that maybe we used Polyjuice and left the room to wait it out."

"And Bella?" Sirius asked with a frown.

"Er, she…left too," Harry said hastily. "I told my illusion about the tracking charm and that you were trying to locate him. After about an hour, Draco came back. He had Bellatrix and Pansy with him as well as a man I kind of recognized but I can't put a name to him. They realized that it wasn't Polyjuice and Draco started asking the illusion who he was. I…he started…taunting Draco, I guess you'd call it."

"Did you have something to do with that?" Dumbledore asked.

"Kind of," Harry replied nervously. "I just suggested he try and drag things out a bit. To give you and Tonks and Moody a chance to find him. But Draco got angry and…something happened."

"What?" the Headmaster asked calmly.

"I'm…not really sure," Harry replied hesitantly. "But I think Draco getting angry caused…I don't know, something to happen in his mind. I think Voldemort took the opportunity to take over."

There was silence from the three men and an air of resignation settled in the room.

"Tell me everything," Dumbledore said decisively. "Leave nothing out, not words, not actions, nothing."

Harry nodded and gave as detailed an account of what happened as he could.

"And what about just after you dispelled the illusion?" Dumbledore asked after Harry had finished.

"He was angry but I couldn't see what was going on," Harry replied. "I just got the emotion."

"And now?"

Harry shrugged. "I think he's calmed down. I'm not getting anything through my scar anyway."

Dumbledore nodded and lapsed into thought.

"What did you mean about that comment about Severus?" Remus asked curiously, trying to change

the subject a bit.

"Um, he and I got onto the subject of Draco about a week or so ago," Harry explained. "I said something about not being sorry that Voldemort was trying to find a way to take over Draco's mind just because it was Draco. Professor Snape told me I ought to be worried about it because if Voldemort did manage it then he would have what he wanted. A body again." He sighed. "I guess he was right."

"I don't think we could have anticipated this," Dumbledore said, surprising them a bit. "Oh, we knew that Voldemort wanted his freedom but we could not have anticipated that he was so close to achieving his goal." He paused and looked kindly at Harry. "Sirius, Remus, take Harry back to the suite. I think you all need some rest. I will send your dinner there."

"Sir? What are we going to do?" Harry asked wearily as Sirius pulled him to his feet.

"Nothing for the moment," the Headmaster replied. "At least for you. Christmas is in a few days and I think that should be what you must concentrate on. I doubt Voldemort will make a move in a hurry. He will need to find out how much support remains for him. We shall revisit this after the New Year."

Harry nodded and allowed his godfather to lead him out of the office.

Chapter 25

The next day Harry told his friends and Master Nhean, Jun'ko and Tien what had happened. The subsequent grim mood lasted for nearly the whole day before Jun'ko decided enough was enough and regaled them with stories of her trials and tribulations in the Guild until she had managed to lighten the mood and get people laughing again.

"No point moping around about the whole thing," she'd said pragmatically when Remus called her on it. "Voldemort'll do what he wants, when he wants. There's nothing we can do now except prepare for it. Getting miserable won't help."

They'd all had to admit that she was right and Harry and his Battle Guard had determined among themselves to really throw themselves not only into their schoolwork but also their training in preparation.

The day after that found Harry, Ginny, Ron and Hermione in Snape's workroom. Hermione was hovering over her cauldron while the others were perched in various out of the way places. The antidote was almost finished and Hermione wanted to get it up to the hospital wing as soon as it was ready. She was now only waiting for the final colour change.

"Do you know how Professor Snape is?" Hermione asked absently as she watched the cauldron intently.

"I presume that question was directed at me?" Harry asked from where he was sitting with his arms around Ginny. "I don't know. Madam Pomfrey still won't let me in."

Hermione grimaced then she gave a cry of triumph and quickly swung the cauldron off the fire. She placed it carefully on the bench and began decanting it into a large flask. Once she was finished she gave a satisfied smile.

"It's done," she said with relief. "And it's perfect."

"Well, get it up to the hospital wing," Harry said urgently.

Hermione carefully picked up the flask and turned towards the door. Halfway there she paused.

"Um, Harry?" she said in an odd tone. "Do you think you, Ron and Ginny could come with me? I wouldn't put it past Pansy to have asked Crabbe and Goyle to try to ruin this. There is no way they could have gotten into the workroom but this last part is very vulnerable."

The others looked startled for a moment then became very grim.

"Should we get Neville and Luna?" Harry asked quietly.

Hermione paused. "I suppose a few more minutes aren't going to make a difference in the long run," she said almost to herself. "Yes, get them," she continued decisively.

"I'll go. I know where they are," Ginny said and she ran out of the room.

It was about fifteen minutes before she was back with Neville and Luna with her. The three of them had obviously been to the Guild classroom on their way back down as they carried the Battle

Guard’s swords.

"We thought it might be best to be prepared for all possibilities," Ginny said blandly when her brother raised an eyebrow at her on receiving his sword.

"Good idea," Hermione said firmly. She carefully placed the flask on the bench and strapped on her own sword. "How do we do this?"

"Same as always," Harry replied. "Except that you take my place in the formation. Neville, you drop back into Hermione’s place and I’ll take point."

The others nodded and Hermione picked up the flask again. Harry led the way to the door and opened it. They made their way through the classroom to the corridor and established their formation.

"Thank Merlin it’s Christmas holidays," Neville said in a low voice. "Not that many people around."

"You know, something just occurred to me," Ron said. "Crabbe and Goyle went home for the holidays."

Ginny poked her brother in the back. "And you think that means that we’re safe? I’ll admit they’re probably not going to have left any surprises but they could have done something on behalf of Pansy and Draco. They’re not creative but they are very good at following orders."

Ron considered that as they walked warily along the corridor. "Good point," he said finally. "Would they know the timing of the antidote?"

"Pansy probably would have," Harry said from his position at the front. "The ink belonged to her father and Master Nhean said she knew about the antidote. You can only assume she’d know when Hermione was going to finish it."

A grim mood settled over the six students as they started up the stairs. Suddenly Harry held up one hand.

"Everyone, stop!" he said sharply. He then knelt down and examined the stairs in front of them carefully. Through his oversight he could see a strange dark purple tracery in the normal gold and silver energy colours of the school. He considered the matter for a long moment.

"Hermione? Could that antidote handle going through the floo?" he asked over his shoulder.

"No," Hermione said firmly. "Why?"

"There’s something wrong with the stairs, I think," Harry replied absently as he examined the tracery some more. "I don’t know what it is and I don’t recall seeing it on the way down."

"Whatever it is probably activated when the antidote was finished," Hermione said as she peered over Harry’s shoulder. "Time-activated spells aren’t unusual. I don’t see anything obvious though."

The others indicated their agreement to Hermione’s statement and Harry frowned.

"I don’t think it is anything obvious," the blind man said. "I can see a kind of dark purple tracery in the school’s magic where the stairs are. If I hadn’t been specifically looking for something unusual,

I might not have seen it."

The other's exchanged nervous looks but were prepared to trust Harry's reading of the energy colours.

"What do you want to do?" Neville said pragmatically.

"You must try and get rid of it," Luna said suddenly.

"What?" Harry yelped. "Luna! I don't know what's been done. I was planning on getting one of you to go back and floo Dumbledore and Master Nhean."

"We can't," Luna said flatly. "That will end in disaster."

The others looked at her curiously.

"You've Seen something?" Harry asked quietly. Luna rarely spoke about her visions unless they were actually going to be of some use.

Luna nodded. "It was quite vivid."

Harry frowned then looked at the floor behind them. "Shit!" he said sharply, drawing a reproving look from all three girls. He then looked down and swore again. "Nobody move!" he said with alarm. "Luna's right. That purple tracery runs all along the corridor, including under our feet."

The others froze, alarmed expressions on their faces, and they looked down at the floor with some fear.

"What does it do?" Hermione asked, her voice shaking ever so slightly.

"I don't know," Harry said absently. "Let me see what I can see."

During the first couple of weeks of the school year, Master Nhean had taught him how to use his Oversight in a more aggressive fashion. He had thought that with Harry's fascination with the energy colours, he might be able to grasp the subtleties better than many other Night Warriors were able to. This was part of the reason why Harry had ended up being so distressed when he had thought that he had not seen the poison in Snape's system.

Harry took a deep breath and relaxed as much as he could in a standing position. He then allowed himself to enter something similar to a trance state that would enable him to concentrate solely on the energies and not on anything extraneous. He concentrated on the purple tracery and let his focus sharpen. It took a few minutes for the process to start and once it did he had to forcibly stop himself from tensing up. It looked oddly like his vision was focusing in like a Muggle camera and was extremely disorientating.

Once his focus got closer he could see that the dark purple was in fact a mix of the purple of magic along with a red that indicated aggression and hate, a red-brown that indicated death and misplaced energy and a green-yellow that indicated deceit.

One of the things Nhean had only recently started teaching him was how to leach energy out of various colour strands. This technique only worked on magic and magical items and not on people

though Nhean had told him that some of the Guild healers could use a variation on the technique to help emotionally damaged people.

Harry pulled back from his examination of the tracery and looked around. "I think I can do something about this but you can't disturb me while I'm doing it, no matter what happens," he said nervously. "I've only just started learning how to do this and I'm not very good at it. It's also kind of dangerous."

"Are you sure you should be doing it then?" Ron asked with alarm.

"Do we have any other option?" Harry replied, half-dryly and half-seriously.

Ron cocked his head in thought then shook it. "No, unless we knew what the spell was going to do if we moved."

"Something bad," Harry said very dryly. "The energy colours in it show there is a lot of magic involved as well as hate, death, misplaced energy and deceit. I think if we did the wrong thing it could get very nasty."

Ginny had been frowning through all of this. "Did the tracery exist when we left the room? Are you sure that we'll get skewered in some way if we move?"

"I don't know," Harry said plainly. "But are you willing to take the chance considering what the consequences could be?"

Ginny paused. "Well, when you put it that way," she said with a small smile. "What do you need us to do?"

"Be prepared for anything," Harry said flatly. "And make sure I don't fall. I don't think I will but I've never done this much before. We've only just started working on this sort of thing." He paused. "And protect Hermione and that flask at all costs."

"Got it," Ron said firmly. "Protect you and Mione and be prepared for anything."

The tall redhead shifted his sword into a more business-like position and the others followed suit. Ron then nodded to his friend. "Ready when you are."

Harry drew in a deep breath and returned to the trance state. He once again allowed his focus to return to the tracery and he examined the individual threads again. He decided to start on what looked like the easiest of the energy strands, the one indicating deceit. He gently pulled part of the green-yellow strand away from the tracery and began to work on it until he had formed a small rupture in the strand. He gently began to pull the green-yellow energy out of the strand and allowed it to flow into the castle. He watched for a moment and saw the green-yellow fading as it merged with the castle's magic. He sighed with relief when that happened and continued pulling the energy out of the strand. Master Nhean had only taught him this method of clearing an energy strand so far. There were other methods for when you found yourself in an area without a great deal of residual magic, ways in which the wizard or witch could cleanse the energy on their own but he had yet to learn that. Nhean had told him that Hogwarts' magic was strong enough to cleanse the energy without any help and he was relieved to find that was true outside of their training sessions.

As he continued to pull the green-yellow energy out of the strand, he briefly glanced around at the tracery surrounding them, trying to estimate how long it would take. He didn't want to rush this; he was still very much a novice and had no idea whether the process even could be sped up in any way. Finally he sighed and turned his attention solely back to what he was doing.

It seemed to take hours to get to the point where there was no longer any green-yellow energy left in the strand though he suspected it wasn't that long. Someone would undoubtedly have come looking for them. He gave a sigh of relief as the last of the deceit energy faded into the castle and then began the process of feeding some of the castle's energy into the strand as a temporary measure. The castle seemed to understand what he was doing and he quickly found the strand taken out of his 'hands' as the castle took over the job. He paused and tried to send a feeling of thanks to the castle. He knew he'd succeeded when the castle touched his mind briefly with a feeling of affection.

Harry shook his head with something akin to wonder and turned to the next strand. He decided to tackle the red strand of aggression and hate next and slowly teased it out of the tracery. Again he gently ruptured it and began to feed the energy into the castle. He felt more than saw what happened next. The energy tried to fight him, not at the strand for he was able to continue pulling it out easily enough but he distinctly felt the buzzing shimmer of hate and aggression coalesce in the air around him. He grimaced and carefully kept his breathing steady and his attention on where it needed to be, trusting the others to protect him.

He dimly heard Hermione barking orders and then he felt a very subtle magic start. In the trance state he was in he was quickly able to identify it as being the yellow, light purple and scarlet of Luna's magic and he smiled. The odd Ravenclaw had some very interesting depths to her and she was quite capable of being as complex as she was strange; the complexity of her energy colours indicated that with the intelligence, wit, prowess and happiness from the yellow, the indication of psychic powers from the light purple and the courage and loyalty from the scarlet. As he continued to pull the red energy out of the strand, he felt Luna's complex subtlety weave into the aggression and hate and begin to draw it away. As the buzzing shimmer slowly started to move, a second spell was woven into Luna's, strengthening it and Harry recognised it as being the scarlet, brown and burgundy of Neville's magic. He always marvelled at Neville's attributes; while the courage and loyalty from the scarlet was expected for a Gryffindor, the earthy, natural and reliable attributes from the brown and the success, power and elegance from the burgundy were good indicators of the hidden strength within the shy Gryffindor. He paused momentarily and watched with something close to awe as Neville and Luna's magic wove and danced together as they drew the aggression and hate away from the group. He'd never seen that before and briefly wondered whether he and Ginny might be able to manage it. He then sternly turned his attention back to the energy strand he was working on and continued.

He gave a sigh of relief when the last of the red energy disappeared into the castle's magic because at the same time he felt the buzzing shimmer that Neville and Luna had been holding at bay fade as well. It had been rather nerve-wracking having that air of hate and aggression hovering near him, not to mention potentially distracting. He felt that if Luna and Neville hadn't taken the action they had, the shimmering may well have been able to disrupt his work and he rather felt they wouldn't have wanted to see the outcome of that.

Once again as he started to feed the castle's magic into the empty strand, the castle stepped in and took over the job and he turned his attention to the next strand. He eyed the red-brown energy

indicating death and misplaced energy with some trepidation and very warily teased the strand out. He could feel it almost pulsing in his mental 'hands' and he took a deep breath before gently rupturing it. As he began to pull the energy out and feed it to the castle to cleanse, he felt a darkness approach him. In an almost instinctive reaction, he closed his eyes. Useless though the gesture undoubtedly was, it gave him some small measure of comfort and allowed him to retain his focus. Once again he was going to have to rely on his friends. As he thought that he felt the castle touch him again, this time with an emotion he didn't quite understand though he almost defined it as determination. Then the touch was gone and he concentrated on his work.

He opened his eyes again as he continued to feed the red-brown energy into the castle, shivering as the darkness grew, becoming cold and isolationist and he began to lose the sense of his friends being with him. He could very dimly hear shouting but that quickly faded and the blackness enclosed him. All he could see through the Oversight was the red-brown energy strand in his hand. He resolutely set his shoulders and continued his work. As he did the strand slowly began to writhe in his grasp and sparks of energy began to crawl over it sluggishly. The sparks slowly began to close in on where he held the strand and when the first one touched his mental grasp, it disappeared in a small explosion, burning sharply and causing Harry to gasp with pain. He gritted his teeth and tightened his grip. More sparks started to crawl around the strand and the blackness deepened. The sparks started approaching where he grasped the strand with increasing regularity and the pain from the small explosions intensified.

Tears rolled down Harry's face from the pain and his breath started coming in short pants but he stubbornly kept feeding the red-brown energy into the castle. Just as the pain began to become unbearable, he saw a small speck of light in the blackness. It slowly began to spread in a delicate filigree through the dark and Harry saw that it pulsed with the colours of scarlet, brown and blue-violet. He smiled through the pain as he recognized those colours. It was Ron and his courage and loyalty from the scarlet, his dependability and reliability from the brown and his honour and devotion from the blue-violet shone in the filigree. The filigree slowly expanded and then was joined by a second speck of light that began to spread in its own filigree pattern. The two patterns complimented each other and as the second spread, Harry recognized the yellow, scarlet and burgundy of Hermione. The energy filigree rippled with her attributes of intelligence and prowess from the yellow, courage and loyalty from the scarlet and elegance and power from the burgundy.

As the combined filigrees spread they began to overpower the blackness. Then the filigrees moved, closing the blackness within it like a net then spreading to the energy strand where they formed a second delicate net over where Harry still firmly grasped the strand, preventing the sparks from touching him. Harry gave a small laugh and slowly finished feeding the red-brown energy into the castle, sighing with utter relief when the last of the red-brown energy disappeared along with the blackness and sparks it had engendered. Again the castle took the strand out of his hands when he began to feed energy into it and Harry was able to turn his attention to the final strand.

He delicately pulled the purple strand out of the tracery and examined it. This was the strand that was providing the magical energy to power the spell. What lay under their feet was still dangerous until he could siphon the energy out of this final strand. While the mechanics of the spell were now disarmed, an explosion of pure magical energy could be just as damaging. As he looked at the strand, he felt the first inklings of weariness trickle through him and he wondered for a moment whether he was going to be able to finish this and whether he perhaps should have tackled this in the reverse order. As this thought sat in his mind, the castle once again touched him, this time gently and with fondness. It then withdrew and after a few moments returned with a second

presence. Harry watched with curiosity as the castle seemed to instruct the second presence and then he felt a mental 'hand' reach out to him. He gingerly reached out and grasped that 'hand' and felt strength and energy flow into him, sparkling with the scarlet, green and brown of Ginny's energy colours. Harry basked in the energy flow for a moment, admiring the attributes Ginny displayed; the courage and loyalty in the scarlet, the healing power in the green and the practicality and dependability in the brown. He felt the weariness retreat and then the castle seemed to instruct Ginny again. The mental 'hand' was removed from his grasp and the two presences faded, leaving Harry feeling refreshed and ready to face this last task.

He slowly, gently ruptured the strand though this time he did not need to pull the energy out. The purple energy seemed to almost leap out of the strand and Harry quickly grabbed it and directed it into the castle. He was surprised and relieved that this last strand seemed to be the easiest in terms of what was happening. It did not seem to want to fight him, being almost eager to join with the castle's magic but he quickly found that while he was not having to fight off any attacks, it was very tiring having to direct the magic. He got the distinct impression that if he did not maintain his careful direction the magic would just as happily go in all directions, causing unknown damage as it did so. By the time the last of the energy was absorbed by the castle, Harry was exhausted. He still had one last task to complete however and he very wearily took the other emptied strands into his mental hands. He allowed the castle's magic to drain from them and then began the process of unpicking the fabric of the strands. Once he had started the process on each strand, he did not have to do anything more. It was something like starting a chain reaction; once begun it needed no further impetus.

He watched as the strands unravelled themselves and the tracery under their feet slowly disappeared. Once he was sure it was all gone, he pulled himself out of the trance state and swayed on his feet. Ron and Neville quickly caught him and held him steady.

"Can we move now?" Ginny asked shakily and at Harry's tired nod, she threw herself into his arms and burst into tears.

Harry wrapped his arms around her, looking startled, and glanced around at the others for an explanation. It was then he realized that the others were all looking pale and shaken as well and when Neville and Ron let him go, Luna and Hermione were quick to seek refuge in their arms. Though from what Harry could see the seeking of refuge was mutual.

"Did you know the castle is…well, alive and rather forceful when it wants something?" Ron said in response to Harry's questioning look and sounding rather shell-shocked.

"Yes, I did know the castle is alive, sort of," Harry replied quietly. "What did it do?"

"Did you see what we…did?" Neville asked, his voice sounding almost like it had in his first year.

Harry nodded. "Yes and I can't thank you all enough," he said with gratitude.

"We weren't the ones who knew how to do that," Hermione said, her voice slightly muffled by Ron's jumper while the flask of antidote was still clutched tightly and protectively in her arms. "I mean we did it but the castle showed us what to do…rather abruptly."

Harry stared at them in shock as he gently stroked Ginny's hair as she cried. When her sobbing started to slow, he gently raised her face, cupping it in both hands and wiping the tears from her

cheeks with his thumbs.

"What's wrong, dear heart?" he said softly, the endearment coming almost unconsciously.

Ginny gulped and her lips quivered. "I'm sorry," she stammered. "It was just…so sudden and you were so tired." She gave a weak smile. "And Ron's right, the castle can be kind of forceful when it really wants something."

"I'm…kind of glad it was, I really needed some help right then," Harry said gently before leaning down and kissing her tenderly.

Ginny leaned into the kiss though it remained sweet and gentle and when they finally pulled apart, she smile tremulously at him.

"I was glad to help," she said. "It just would have been nice if the castle had asked before it whipped me into there."

Harry chuckled and pressed a kiss into her hair before pulling away slightly and wrapping an arm around her shoulders. He looked at the floor around them and nodded once in satisfaction.

"The tracery's gone," he said to the others. "Are you ready to go on or do you want a few moments more?"

The others exchanged glances then determined expressions slowly settled onto their faces once more.

"Let's get going," Ron said firmly. "Snape's waited long enough for this antidote. I may not like the man but I'll be damned if I let Pansy bloody Parkinson stop me from doing anything."

Small laughs came from the others and they once again established their formation before heading upstairs again. They trod warily the rest of the way up to the Hospital Wing but it seemed that no more traps lay in wait for them. Harry could only conclude that Pansy had only had the opportunity for one throw of the dice.

When they reached the Hospital Wing, Harry knocked sharply on the door and they waited. It took a few minutes for the doors to open and Madam Pomfrey looked at them with irritation that quickly modulated to relief and then concern as she took in their grim expressions and pale faces.

"Have you got the antidote?" she said urgently then her concern took over. "And what on earth has happened to all of you?"

Hermione held up the flask for a moment before clutching it to her body protectively again as Harry spoke.

"We had a bit of an…experience getting it up here," he said blandly, trusting Madam Pomfrey to read between the lines. He wasn't sure he or the others were really ready at the moment to talk about what they had done.

The mediwitch's eyes narrowed and her lips thinned as she looked them over sharply. "Get in here, the lot of you," she said briskly. "I'll have a look at you after I get that antidote into Professor Snape."

The six students shuffled into the Hospital Wing and Hermione carefully handed the flask to the mediwitch. Madam Pomfrey took the flask with equal care and hurried over to a curtained off area of the ward. As they watched she pulled back the curtains, leaving them open in her haste. They could see Professor Snape lying on the bed; he looked unconscious though he seemed to be twitching slightly.

Madam Pomfrey carefully put the flask down on the bedside table and cast protective and stability spells around it before decanting the appropriate dosage. She then paused and took a deep breath before pulling out her wand. She pointed it at the unconscious wizard and said softly, "Enervate."

The Potions Master arched off the bed and screamed as he was brought into consciousness. Harry and the others winced and flinched as they realized how much pain the man must be in to break through his normally iron control. Harry almost felt sick; he more than the others was aware of the kind of pain Snape had been subjected to at the hands of Voldemort and how stoically he had endured it. That he could be reduced to screaming by this poison made Harry shudder as he imagined how bad it must be.

Madam Pomfrey quickly cast the full body bind on Snape and moved rapidly over to force his mouth open. She did not want to leave him in the body bind for long; he would damage himself in his struggles against the pain. The moment she had his mouth open, she poured the potion into it and began stroking his throat to force him to swallow. She then stepped back, released Snape from the body bind and watched. The antidote, if brewed correctly, should begin to act almost immediately to counteract the poison.

The moment the body bind was ended, Snape again arched with pain but as quickly as that had happened he slumped down onto the bed. Madam Pomfrey gave a sigh of relief and watched the Potions Master's body slowly begin to relax and his eyes open in tight slits.

"An'dote?" he rasped weakly.

"Yes," Madam Pomfrey said as she helped him settle himself more comfortably on the bed. "Now stop talking. You need to rest."

Much to her surprise, Snape gave the barest of nods and closed his eyes again, rapidly settling into the relaxation of sleep. She chuckled softly; this was the first time she could ever remember Severus Snape doing what she told him to do without any kind of argument. She would have to remember this moment…and savour it.

Once she was sure the Potions Master was sleeping peacefully, she walked over to where the six students were sitting. Again she was surprised; this group was hardly known for its passivity in the Hospital Wing. All of them were usually champing at the bit to get out, even Miss Granger who should know better, in her opinion.

"Now Mr Potter," she said. "What exactly has happened to the lot of you?"

"Um, nothing too bad," Harry said slightly defensively. "I think we're all just a bit worn out more than anything. I know I am."

Poppy reached out and took Harry's chin in her hand, closely examining his face and eyes before releasing him and casting a few diagnostic charms. She then transferred those charms to the other

students and hummed to herself.

"I think you're right, Mr Potter," she said finally and with a certain amount of suspicion. "You all look like you need a good night's sleep. I'll give you all a Pepper-Up Potion and a restorative but I want you all in bed early tonight." She turned to walk towards the potions cabinet then paused and fixed them all with a stern look. "But I want you to tell Professor Dumbledore about what happened. Do you hear me?"

They all nodded obediently and Harry gave her a tired grin. "We were going to do that anyway, Madam Pomfrey," he said with as much cheek as he was able to muster. "As soon as we can get out of here."

Poppy gave him an arch look but soon chuckled. "See that you do, Mr Potter," she said tartly as she took out the large bottles of Pepper-Up and restorative. She quickly and efficiently administered doses to all six students and was pleased and relieved to see them perk up a bit, looking more like their normal selves. She put the bottles away and made shooing motions towards them.

"Now get out of here," she said with a smile. "You're cluttering up my nice clean Hospital Wing."

The students smiled and thanked her before quietly trooping out of the room.

"We'd better go up and see Professor Dumbledore now while we still remember everything clearly," Harry said quietly.

The others nodded. "Yeah, I want to get this over and done with," Ron said firmly and the six students headed for the Headmaster's office.

Chapter 26

Harry led them up the stairs to the Headmaster's office, hoping that the password had not been changed. He was relieved to find it had not and the six of them made their way up the revolving staircase and knocked on the door. When the Headmaster opened it, he viewed them all with a benign smile.

"Ah, welcome," he said, standing back so that they could enter. "Poppy said you'd be coming up to see me. She seemed to think that something happened to the six of you. I see that she was correct. Come and sit down and tell me everything."

The students shuffled in and sat down in various chairs couches around the fireplace. The Headmaster joined them and offered tea and pumpkin juice all round, aware that the three couples were sitting in very protective poses. Once everyone was settled, he leaned back in his chair and looked expectantly at Harry.

Harry took a deep breath and, after a quick glance at his friends, launched into the tale of what had happened when they brought the antidote up to the Hospital Wing, with occasional additions from the others. The Headmaster listened to the entire thing without interruption.

"Ah, so that is what happened to distract the castle so much," he said quietly when Harry was finished. "I was wondering."

"Then the castle really is alive?" Ron said, looking flabbergasted and wrapping his arms more firmly around Hermione.

"To a certain extent, yes," Dumbledore replied. "The sheer amount of magic has made her somewhat self-aware and certainly capable of aiding those who need it. As the six of you did."

"She's helped you?" Harry asked.

"Yes, dear boy," Dumbledore replied. "Though normally she's waited until she was asked. But she does like you, Harry, very much. You are among the few who have always considered her to be home and she has always had a soft spot for those who like her in that way. And it was an emergency."

"Then she's not likely to do that again without being asked?" Ginny asked a little shakily.

The Headmaster closed his eyes and was still for a few minutes then he chuckled and opened his eyes again. "The castle extends her apologies for being so rough with you. She cannot actively act on us; she can only act through intermediaries. Harry needed her aid and she knew the five of you had the power to help him. You just needed the skill, which she could provide. She promises she won't do it again without your permission."

"I don't object to what she did," Ginny said hastily. "I just would have liked to have been asked first. It was very disconcerting to be snatched up in that way."

Dumbledore closed his eyes again. "She understands and apologises for frightening you," he said when he opened his eyes again.

"That's okay," Ginny said to the castle in general then she gasped when the castle touched her again, almost in a benediction.

Dumbledore smiled at her, his eyes twinkling. "Now, I believe some congratulations are in order for your superb handling of a rather tricky situation. Let me see, I think fifty points each would be about right. I'm sure Master Nhean would like to hear about this, Harry. Do make sure you tell him. And lastly I think all six of you ought to go and get some rest. I'll see that you are woken for dinner but you all look quite exhausted." He paused and smiled at them. "I am very proud of all of you. You faced an uncertain situation and worked together admirably to overcome it."

The students gave tired smiles, the potions Madam Pomfrey had given now starting to wear off, and stood shuffling down the stairs. They made their weary way up to Gryffindor Tower, Ginny having offered Luna one of the beds in her dorm. She had accepted, it being a longer walk to the Ravenclaw dormitories than the Gryffindor ones. The three couples paused in the common room for a moment, seeking comfort and reassurance in each other's arms before separating and heading upstairs and collapsing on their beds. Just before he dozed off, Harry felt the castle brush his mind again in what almost seemed to be a gentle benediction.

Voldemort/Draco admired his new robes in the mirror and brushed the front of them almost primly. He glanced over his shoulder and smirked; Pansy lay naked on the bed, asleep or passed out he did not know. Nor did he care. He had been careful not to harm her permanently though; she was far too valuable for that. Her plan for disposing of the traitor Snape had been excellent; it was just a shame that she had been caught before the end. It would be interesting to know how long it would take the Potions Master to die. Severus was stubborn and stoic; Voldemort was sure that he would hang on far longer than others had, enduring increasing and endless pain. He chuckled maliciously as he smoothed his hair back. No more than the traitor deserved really.

With one final flick of his robes, Voldemort/Draco limped out of the room without a backwards glance. He stalked along the corridors of Malfoy Manor, revelling in the feel of his new body. This was far better than what he had gained from the ritual in the cemetery. That body had been harsh and admittedly ugly, even frightening. This body, even though it was hampered by a limp and one missing eye, was young and in its prime and he would have decades before he had to think of its upkeep. A quiet snarl came from the dim recesses of his mind and he chuckled softly at Draco's impotent complaints.

He couldn't believe the foolish boy had believed him when he had said he had no intentions of trying to take over his mind. Surely the boy had known better. It had taken him many long months to work out how to shatter his crystalline prison within Draco's mind and in the end the solution had been laughably simple for such an experienced Legilimancer as himself. The prison had been formed as a result of the crystalline magic that had sustained him after his body had been destroyed yet again by Harry Potter and Draco's surprisingly strong will. The magic had been very pliable for a split second after he had invaded Draco's mind and the boy's strong fight against him had affected that magic, creating the crystalline prison.

He had discovered almost by accident that the strength of the prison lay in the strength of Draco's desire to keep them separate. He had discovered this during one night when Draco was being thoroughly distracted by Pansy. The walls of his prison had thinned and when he had tested one of them it had fractured and almost shattered. Had he started on his investigations earlier, he may

well have been able to achieve his escape that very night. But Draco and Pansy had finished their distracting activity and the walls had quickly thickened and strengthened again. Since then he had been testing the wall every time Draco had gotten angry, upset and in any other way worked up. He had soon come to the conclusion that Draco would need to be extremely agitated for the walls to thin enough for him to escape. That the Potter boy had provided that opportunity had just come as a delicious irony.

He hadn't expected thing to go quite the way they had when he had escaped. He had thought he would be able to take over entirely and crush Draco's mind. But when it had happened he had found that he was not able to evict the boy entirely. The body had held on grimly to its original personality. He had been able to subjugate the boy thoroughly though and trap him in a distant corner. The boy could not reach anything, could not affect anything and Voldemort could only hear the most distant grumbles from him. It was not perfect but it was far better than anything else he had achieved since that disastrous night sixteen years ago.

Voldemort/Draco swept into the large parlour where his remaining Death Eaters were waiting, talking quietly amongst themselves. They became silent as soon as they noticed him enter and bowed deeply almost as one. When they straightened, he could see the wary looks in their eyes and he almost smiled. The Death Eaters caught the look of malicious amusement that he did allow to show in his eyes and he could see the belief spread through them. The subsequent subservient murmurs of 'Master' pleased him greatly.

"So few left," he said as he viewed the sparse population in the room. "Such a pity but we shall recruit more. I am pleased to see you, my faithful Death Eaters. As you can see I have once again returned though in a manner far more pleasing on the eye." He paused and the Death Eaters obediently laughed. "Now to business, have you found out any more on the Guild of the Night?"

The Death Eaters all looked to Antonin Dolohov and the man stepped forward and bowed.

"My Lord, we have had some luck on that score," he said, relieved to have some good news for he did not think that a change in form would have affected the Dark Lord's fondness for the Cruciatus curse. "While we have found little new information on the Guild itself, we have found something far more interesting. The Guild is very secretive but it has had its share of enemies over the years. One of those enemies came very close to wiping out the Guild entirely."

Voldemort/Draco gave Antonin an intent look. "How? If the Guild is so secretive about how they do what they do and where their home is then how did this enemy achieve that?"

"They did not try to attack the Guild as whole or try to fathom their secrets," Antonin explained. "They worked out that the Guild Warriors have some unknown way of seeing what is around them and they finally worked out that whatever method is used is based on magic. Their first thought was to create a spell or artefact that absorbs magic but they soon discovered that such things are notoriously indiscriminate. If they absorb magic from one person, they are likely to do so from everyone in range and also from any magical structure around. Then someone within their organization realized that if the Guild Warriors are using the magic to see then they did not need to remove magic from an area but merely make it invisible in some way."

"I take it they succeeded," Voldemort/Draco said, sounding intrigued.

"Yes, my Lord," Antonin replied. "It is not easy but it is effective. An object needs to be infused with

a spell then all of the magic within the influence of that object will be effectively rendered invisible. It will still be there and be able to be used but it will not be able to be seen by any kind of revealing spell."

"Does it work against the Warriors?" Voldemort/Draco asked.

"They weren't sure until the first time they lured a Warrior into a place they had prepared with one of these objects but once they had they found it was amazingly effective," Antonin said with a hint of triumph. "As long as the Warrior remains near the object then they are no more effective than any other blind person. Whatever advantage they have through their Guild training is lost. And even better, they are usually so disorientated because of the loss of whatever gives them sight that they become easy prey."

Voldemort/Draco considered this for a moment. "And what is the down side to all of this?"

Antonin swallowed nervously. "The spell requires an enormous amount of energy and to get a sphere of influence that is effective usually takes many wizards many months of work. If all of us were to do this, I estimate it would take three months to achieve a sphere of influence with a radius of six feet. And the object must be something substantial in order to take that much power. The group in question used a large basalt pillar which they said was effective but a crystal based object would be ideal. They just couldn't find one big enough. The more power the spell has, the larger the object must be."

Voldemort nodded thoughtfully and paced the room. This looked like being a sound plan though expensive in terms of time and magical power. He stopped his pacing and whirled to face his Death Eaters, revelling in the strength and freedom of movement he had in this youthful body.

"This is a workable plan," he said finally and smirked at the current of relief that ran through the Death Eaters. "You have done well, Antonin. Know that I am pleased with you. You will give me the spell needed and instruct the others. I shall provide the anchoring object. I will have to consider very carefully where this is to occur."

He smiled in grim satisfaction and turned towards the door. He paused as he laid a hand on the doorknob and turned back to those in the room.

"And know this, my faithful Death Eaters," he crooned dangerously. "Pansy Parkinson speaks with my voice. If she orders you to do something and you refuse, have no doubts I will find out and you will not like the consequences."

With that he opened the door and swept out of the room, leaving the Death Eaters to exchange worried and nervous looks. Only Bellatrix Lestrange felt anything else; she glared angrily at her departing Lord and scowled.

Severus Snape slowly drifted towards consciousness becoming aware first of all of the absence of pain. Pain had been such a constant companion for the last three weeks that it seemed almost strange not to be feeling it. He contemplated this as he slowly woke and wondered what he'd find when he opened his eyes. He had to assume that he was still alive; surely his sins would not allow him any peace after death. He drew in a shuddering breath and slowly opened his eyes. He blinked

at the bright light assaulted him and he squinted into it until his eyes adjusted.

"It's good to see you awake, my boy," came the Headmaster's relieved voice from besides him and only his long years as a spy allowed him to react no further than turning his head.

"How long?" Severus said in a scratchy, gravelly voice.

"Since the poison first showed itself, three weeks," the Headmaster replied. "Since you finally succumbed to it, about a week. Miss Granger has done some excellent work."

"Yes, I suppose she has," Severus grunted, his normal reluctance to praise a Gryffindor lost for the moment in his relief to be alive and pain-free.

The Potions Master lay silent for a moment, assessing how he felt, then he slowly levered himself into a sitting position. He turned to face the Headmaster and his eyes narrowed at the other man's expression.

"What has happened?" he demanded. "And do not tell me that I must rest first. I am perfectly alright."

Albus sighed. "I think I have learnt the futility of trying to make you behave yourself, Severus. Very well. As you know, on the day you collapsed I was taking the illusion Harry created of himself to see Petunia Dursley."

"Something went wrong," Severus said sourly, breaking into the Headmaster's narrative.

"Indeed," Albus replied dryly. "There was indeed a trap set and we allowed the illusion to be taken. Harry reported that his double was taken to Malfoy Manor. Draco was there along with Bellatrix and Pansy. There was another male Death Eater that Harry recognized but didn't know the name of. There was a certain amount of verbal toing-and-froing and somewhere during the middle of this something happened with Draco. It appears your fears were well-founded if what Harry said is true. Voldemort has somehow taken over Draco's mind."

Severus closed his eyes momentarily, remembering the conversation Albus was alluding to. He sighed. "What else?"

"We know nothing more," Albus said. "Harry dispelled the illusion at that point. The presence of Voldemort was causing him some pain and he was quite distressed by what he had seen. I received the distinct impression that while he has no love for Draco, seeing his mind destroyed as it surely must have been was not pleasant."

"What are we doing then?" Severus asked.

"Very little unfortunately," Albus said, feeling unpleasantly helpless. "We have no access to Voldemort's inner sanctum and no knowledge of what he is likely to do. I have activated the Order again and have set people to watching the Death Eaters in the hope that they may lead to some sort of answer. I shall ask Harry, Sirius and Remus to stay here at Hogwarts until we can be sure of their safety. There is little else we can do."

"As you know, I returned to search some of the Dark Lord's boltholes after the battle last year," Severus rasped. "I did not tell you I discovered a journal of his. It is written in Parseltongue and I

hoped to find out if there was anything relevant and then burn the cursed thing. Unfortunately, the Parseltongue ability I was gifted in was merely for speaking and hearing, not visual understanding."

"You wish Harry's help?" Albus hazarded.

"He has already agreed to this," Severus said. "We made one attempt two weeks ago but my…illness prevented us from doing too much. The journal may contain information, hopefully some of the Dark Lord's possible plans though there are no guarantees."

"What do you wish from me?" Albus asked.

Severus grimaced. "Mr Potter was…unsettled by what happened and will likely be further unsettled by the subject matter in that journal. I have thought about this and think it might be best if he were to have someone there to aid him during this. I cannot; to do this requires us to mesh quite deeply and I will be as exhausted as he is."

Albus nodded, a curious look in his eyes. "I could arrange for Sirius or Remus to be available?"

Severus shook his head. "I am reliably informed that Mr Potter chose to go to Miss Weasley after the last attempt. Perhaps she might be the better choice."

The twinkle grew in Albus' eyes and Severus scowled. "Very well, Severus," Albus said cheerfully. "I shall inform her teachers that she is to be allowed to leave her classes whenever you and Harry wish to attempt this reading again."

"Thank you, Headmaster," Severus grumbled.

Dumbledore chuckled and pushed himself to his feet. "I'd best leave you, dear boy. Poppy will have my head if I tire you."

Severus snorted and watched with discontent as the Headmaster ducked around the screens. He heard the man's footsteps fade and then the school's mediwitch came bustling in. He endured her questions and poking and prodding with ill grace and short answers then sighed with relief when he was left alone. He was pleased to see that someone, most likely the Headmaster, had had the foresight bring up the book he had been reading and leave it on the bedside table and he picked it up and returned to where he had been forced to leave off.

Much later it was the sound of someone bumping into a bed and some quiet swearing that alerted him that he was no longer alone. He placed the book down on the bed and smirked; he recognized that voice.

"Mr Potter, I am coming to believe that you are chronically incapable of following the rules," he said conversationally. "I used to think it was just in response to what you perceived as threats but now I have come to the conclusion that you are just a born troublemaker." He paused and said thoughtfully, "No great surprise really."

There was a shuffle of the screens surrounding his bed and a rustle of fabric then a flustered-looking Harry Potter emerged from beneath his invisibility cloak.

"I…just wanted to make sure you were alright," he stammered, juggling his cloak and cane and

looking like he was about to lose both.

Severus gave a world-weary sigh. "Do sit down, Mr Potter. I daresay Madam Pomfrey will not throw you out. She sees so much of you, it must seem strange to her when you are not here."

Harry draped his cloak over the chair the Headmaster had been using and sat down, fiddling with his cane. Finally he broke into a tiny smile. "I guess you're definitely feeling better then, sir? Your insults are much more fluent."

"My life became so much more difficult the day you grew up enough to determine when I am not serious in my insults," Snape replied regretfully. "Before then you would cower and snap. So much more entertaining."

Harry's smile became a fully-fledged grin. "Yes, sir," he said as insolently as he could.

"Aggravating brat," Severus grumbled as he marked the page in his book and closed it. "Did you have some purpose in coming to see me or did you just want to be generally annoying?"

Harry sobered. "Has the Headmaster spoken to you about what happened to Draco?"

"Yes," Severus replied bluntly.

Harry sighed. "You were right again."

"You, or rather your illusion, did not stay," Severus observed.

"It hurt too much," Harry admitted.

Severus nodded in understanding. "You are sure that the Dark Lord has taken over Draco's mind though?"

Harry nodded. "Yes. The image overlay changed after Draco had that little fit or whatever it was. It became clearer and more defined."

"And what exactly does that mean?"

"The better I know someone the clearer and more defied their image overlay is," Harry explained. "During the Battle, Voldemort's was the clearest and Draco's became the same and my scar hurt pretty badly."

Snape frowned. "But how could you know the Dark Lord that well?"

"The link," Harry said dryly. "I've had that link there since I was about a year and a half. I sort of know Voldemort better than anyone else in some ways."

Severus grimaced. "I suppose that makes sense then."

"This is going to change things, isn't it?" Harry asked glumly.

"Yes, indeed, Mr Potter," Snape replied. "The Dark Lord will come after you and you must be ready. He will not leave anything to chance this time."

Harry nodded soberly. "I know. Master Nhean spoke to me this afternoon and said he was going to increase my training sessions and those of my Battle Guard. We'll also be working more with Sirius and the others."

"Good," Snape replied. "I also think it might be best if we were to delve back into the Dark Lord's journal."

Harry grimaced and nodded. "Yes, sir."

"I have taken the liberty of asking the Headmaster to allow Miss Weasley to attend those particular sessions," Snape said blandly. "She seems to have a calming effect on you that I think may be valuable."

Harry looked startled then rather pleased. "Um, yes, sir," he stammered.

"I suspect the journal may be useless in determining what the Dark Lord may do now," Snape said sourly. "But any information we can get regarding crystal magic will be highly useful. Your mother's notes were informative but she and your father did not go in the same direction as the Dark Lord. Their use of it was far more benign."

"I think they were thinking more in terms of spying," Harry said. "Rather than using it as a weapon of some sort."

Severus raised an eyebrow. "A pity they apparently abandoned the project. I would have found it most useful."

Harry thought back to what had happened with his double. "More than useful," he said. "I wonder why they did abandon it. Was there any reason given in Mum's notes?"

"No," Severus replied. "It is clear they intended to come back at some point to ensure the crystal worked as a power source." He paused and thought for a moment. "Ah, I believe I have the answer. Your mother wrote that they intended to return in two years to see if the crystal worked."

"Oh!" Harry said in sudden understanding. "But I'd…been born and…"

"Their priorities changed," Severus completed for him. "Understandable. Particularly after the Headmaster told them of the prophecy."

Harry nodded glumly.

"Now, I believe it is time you left," Severus said briskly. "There is nothing more either of us can do regarding Draco and as it is the middle of the night, you should be in bed."

Harry nodded and stood, fumbling a little with his cane and cloak until he got the garment around him. He looked over at the Potions Master. "Thank you, sir," he said as he flipped the hood of the cloak over his head.

Severus inclined his head in reply and watched as the screens surrounding his bed shivered as the young man passed them. He listened as Harry's footsteps faded and then opened his book again, determined not to think of Draco. What he had told Harry was true; there was nothing they could do now.

Chapter 27

Harry sat in the Gryffindor common room and looked around with satisfaction. People were sitting, lying or sprawled all over the place and there was a veritable mountain of ripped wrapping paper and gifts sitting in piles everywhere.

Sirius and Remus were sprawled in front of the fireplace with Fred and George, something that was making everyone nervous every time they looked over in that direction. Ron and Hermione were sitting together in one of the over-stuffed chairs near the Christmas tree talking quietly, Hermione in Ron's lap. Neville and Luna had copied them in another over-stuffed chair. Mr Weasley was over at a table on one side of the room catching up with Bill and Charlie while Mrs Weasley was suffused with delight as she spoke with Percy and Penelope nearby. Tonks was lounging on several cushions on the floor along with Jun'ko and Tien and the three of them seemed to poking gentle fun at each other. Master Nhean was sitting in an armchair talking with a slightly uncomfortable Severus Snape who was lying on a couch on Poppy Pomfrey's strict orders. Harry was sitting on a small couch nearby with his arms wrapped around Ginny and feeling very content.

Ginny looked up from where she had been examining the emerald necklace Harry had given her for Christmas. "You look pleased," she observed.

"This is the best Christmas I've ever had," he said with immense satisfaction. "I thought last year's was good. This one was better."

"It has been good," Ginny agreed. "Mind you, Fred and George have been on their best behaviour. Normally there are a lot more explosions."

The young couple looked over towards the fireplace and both shuddered at the animated expressions on the faces of the four pranksters lounging there.

"The day is young," Harry said lightly.

"Mmm," Ginny agreed. "We've still got Christmas lunch to go. Ample opportunities for the four of them."

"Shall we tell your Mum?" Harry asked idly.

"I'm sure she's already prepared," Ginny replied with a grin. "She's had years of putting up with Fred and George. I don't think the addition of Sirius and Remus is going to bother her."

Harry chuckled and Ginny leaned into him a little more. "Have I thanked you for my necklace?" she asked.

"Several times," Harry replied dryly.

"You really didn't have to spend so much," Ginny said feeling a little overwhelmed. It was by far the most expensive present anyone had received.

"I didn't," Harry said shyly. "It was my Mum's. There's a larger vault that contains all of Mum and Dad's things as well as the Potter family stuff that I don't officially have access to until I graduate. Siri took me there during the summer holidays. He wanted me to be aware of it and to know about

some things I'll have to deal with almost immediately after I have access to it. He suggested I might want to pick something out for you. I'd…already got your birthday present by then so I decided to pick something out for Christmas. Siri described all of Mum's jewellery and I liked that piece the best." He paused and looked nervous. "You do like it, don't you?"

Ginny swallowed hard. "I love it, Harry. It's beautiful."

"So are you," Harry said still in that shy tone. "I think Mum would be pleased to see you wearing her jewellery."

"We've got very similar colouring so it will suit me," Ginny said with a small laugh.

Harry grinned wryly. "I know. Sirius keeps teasing me about the Potter men preferring red-heads."

"Hmmph," Ginny grumped. "I'd say the Potter men simply have good taste in their women."

"I'm not going to argue with you," Harry said hastily

A chuckle from Master Nhean caught their attention and they looked over to where the diminutive Night Master was sitting with Professor Snape.

"It is a wise man who learns not to argue with the woman he loves," Nhean intoned with mischief in his eyes.

"I think that's the first time I've ever been called wise," Harry said dryly.

"I feel I must agree," Snape said with a twitch of his lips. "I would also like to thank you for your gift, Mr Potter." He gestured to the book in his lap; he had one hand lying on it very possessively. "I was wondering where you managed to obtain it. I believe it is out of print."

"Uh, same place I got Ginny's necklace," Harry stammered. "It was in the Potter vault. There were two copies of it in there. Sirius told me it was rare and since there were two copies, I thought you might find it of more use than I ever would."

A small smile crept onto Snape's face, surprising the two students. "I believe I will however by the end of your Tyro I think you will find the other copy of value as well."

Harry looked a little dubious. "I hope so. Did the Guild approve of your method of magically monitoring a potion?"

"They are in the middle of doing some extensive testing of it," Nhean responded. "They want to be absolutely sure it works under as many conditions as possible before they disseminate it through the Guild. Some of our members can react badly if something they are using to replace their lost sight fails on them."

Harry nodded firmly. "I can understand that," he said fervently. "But it does work?"

"Yes," Severus replied. "However Nhean wishes to wait until the Guild formally approves of it before I teach it to you."

"That's okay," Harry said. "It's probably better to wait. If it does fail in some situations, I want to know about it before I start using it."

"You're nervous about that sort of thing?" Nhean asked cautiously.

"Yeah, a bit," Harry replied. "I know I'd be pretty disconcerted if something like that suddenly stopped working just as I was relying on it."

"Do we need to do more work on doing things without Oversight?" Nhean asked with concern.

"Um, I don't think so," Harry replied. "But I suppose it wouldn't hurt."

Nhean nodded thoughtfully. "I might get you to start working with Jun'ko and Tien on that score. I know you can move around fairly well without your Oversight but I might get them to start working on fighting without Oversight."

Harry gaped. "Is that even possible?"

"Of course it is," Nhean said firmly. "It's not easy but it is something I always intended you to work towards."

"Oh," Harry said nervously. "It sounds dangerous."

Snape snorted derisively but both Nhean and Harry ignored him.

"We'll start with unarmed combat," Nhean said soothingly. "Only once you have established some expertise with that will we move onto doing this with weapons."

"Oh, okay," Harry said relaxing a fraction.

"You lot aren't talking business at Christmas, are you?" came the cheerful question from one of the twins.

"Because you know there's a penalty to be paid if you are," the other one finished.

Snape glared fiercely at them and the twins pretended to cower in front of him.

"I'm hit!" Fred said rather melodramatically as he collapsed into his brother's arms. "Go on without me, Forge! It is your destiny!"

George slowly and dramatically lowered his supposedly dying brother to the floor as the room erupted in laughter and proceeded to weep and wail over his "dead" body.

"Oh, my dear, dear brother, Gred!" he wailed. "However can I go on without you? To think that you could withstand the trials and tribulations of the dreaded Umbridge only to be felled by a Snape." He leapt to his feet and struck a dramatic pose. "But I shall persevere! Onwards to our noble destiny!"

With that he charged across the room and sprawled down next to the laughing Remus and Sirius. Mrs Weasley picked her way through the wrappings and presents to George and swatted him on the back of the head while smothering her laughter.

"I'm dreadfully sorry, Severus," she said as she fixed Fred with as stern a look as she could manage.

"Do not apologise, Molly," Severus said with amusement lurking in his eyes. "Would that it was

true," he finished slyly.

The laughter, which had been tapering off, erupted again at that and Bill and Charlie began poking fun at their brothers. Nhean chuckled as Fred scampered off the join his twin then looked at Harry.

"I shall defy the brothers Weasley only a little more," he said. "I would like to step up your training in manipulating magic strands. Particularly considering what happened with that magical trap when you were bringing the antidote up to the Hospital Wing."

Ginny shuddered and Harry tightened his arms around her in a reassuring manner. Snape frowned at this.

"What precisely happened?" he asked curiously.

Harry hesitated for a moment then swallowed hard before describing the trap that had been left, most likely by Pansy, and what he and the others had done to get rid of it.

"The castle can be a little forceful when she wants to be," Harry concluded as Ginny shivered again.

Severus, in the meantime, was more than a little startled. No one had mentioned this little incident to him. From what little he knew of the ways of the Guild from his reading and the few scraps of information Nhean was willing to share with him, what Harry had done was remarkable for someone with as little training as he had.

"Are you sure it was Miss Parkinson?" was all he asked however.

Harry shrugged. "Well, that's just an assumption. Hermione said that time-release spells aren't that difficult once you know what you're doing and I somehow doubt Crabbe and Goyle would have the knowledge to set that up."

Snape snorted. "Indeed. They would have neither the knowledge nor the power required."

Harry was about to answer when a trickle of pain ran through his scar. He hissed and stiffened.

"Harry?" Ginny asked with concern.

Harry did not reply but instead concentrated on that feeling of pain. It lingered for a few moments longer then faded.

"Potter?" Snape snapped.

Harry relaxed back into the couch. "It's gone. It was definitely Voldemort but it didn't last long."

"What was it?" Snape asked.

Harry frowned. "I…don't know," he said slowly. "I think he was pleased about something." He shrugged and snorted. "Maybe he got a really good Christmas present."

Severus grimaced and shifted slightly on the couch. Thanks to the antidote, the poison had left his system but the weeks of its presence in his blood stream had left him with some residual stiffness and aches. Poppy had determined that these would fade given time and rest, hence his position on the couch.

"I would think that any present that would cause the Dark Lord that much pleasure would not bode well for us," he observed.

Now it was Harry's turn to grimace. "I know," he said quietly.

Ginny looked at the two men and decided to change the subject. "Harry? What was that present you got from Sirius? You and he seemed to find it incredibly funny though I noticed Remus was rolling his eyes a bit. You wouldn't let me see it."

A blush crept onto Harry's cheeks, much to the amusement and curiosity of the others. "Er, that's something Siri has had for a while. He wanted to give it to me ages ago but Remy wouldn't let him."

"But what is it?" Ginny persisted.

"A leather jacket," Harry admitted. "So that he can teach me how to ride his motorbike."

Ginny's jaw dropped a bit and she seemed to eye Harry speculatively for a moment. Then her eyes narrowed and her mouth settled into a firm line. "You are not wearing that jacket around school," she insisted.

Harry looked surprised which caused Nhean to start laughing. Snape looked slightly confused however.

"Miss Weasley, why would you forbid him from wearing an item of clothing?" he asked curiously.

Harry opened his mouth to answer but Ginny beat him to it. "He's not wearing that where other girls might see him," she said hotly. "I worked damn hard to get Harry all to myself and I'm not letting some jumped up little tart try to take him away just because he looks good in a leather jacket."

Harry's blush deepened. "Ginny," he said soothingly as Snape started to chuckle deeply as well. "I'm only going to wear it when I'm riding the bike," he finished in a tone of entreaty, giving Snape and Nhean a look that said without words 'help me'.

"I should think that if Harry has not left you after everything that has happened in the last year and a half then some…er, what did you say…some jumped up little tart is not going to be able to now," Nhean said smoothly much to Harry's relief.

Ginny blushed a little. "Well, I suppose that's true," she admitted.

"Besides," Harry said wryly. "I really don't think they're going to be too interested in a blind man, leather jacket or not."

Ginny let out an exasperated sigh. "Harry! There is more to you than just being a blind man. You're handsome, you're kind, you're funny, nice, lovely and powerful." She stopped as she caught sight of Harry's surprised and slightly disbelieving expression and she growled in frustration. "Harry Potter! Honestly! And people think I have self-esteem issues at times."

Harry stammered for a moment. "When you spend so much time being told you're a freak, it's hard not to believe it," he said softly.

Both Snape and Nhean had heard that soft comment though they rather thought they weren't meant to and they exchanged surprised and incredulous glances.

"You are not a freak," Ginny said in a firm but equally soft tone. "I swear if I ever meet those Dursleys I'm going to teach them what magic is all about."

That surprised a laugh out of Harry and he ran a gentle hand down her cheek. "Maybe just Uncle Vernon and Dudley," he said with wry humour. "Aunt Petunia seems to have rather improved since I've been gone."

Ginny blushed and gave a self-conscious laugh. She then leaned up and kissed Harry softly on the lips. The young man curled a hand round the back of her neck and deepened the kiss somewhat though not as far as he would have liked, being aware of the considerable audience in the room. He pulled back with a sweet smile that was echoed by Ginny.

"Tell you what," he said quietly. "I'll start believing in myself if you stay away from the Dursleys."

"Deal," Ginny said with a growing grin.

Nhean cleared his throat gently, causing the two young Gryffindors to jump and look at him with surprise. The Night Master was smiling gently while Snape eyed them with sardonic amusement.

"I believe we were talking about your training," he suggested, trying to bring the conversation back to its original track.

"Er, yeah," Harry said. "Um, I guess it'd be a good idea to do more training. I remember thinking that I wished I knew more about it before I started deactivating that spell." He paused. "Is there a way of stopping those weird side-effects of leaching the magic from the strands?"

"Yes," Nhean replied. "We just hadn't got that far."

Harry gave a sigh of relief. "Oh good, because that was definitely unnerving."

Nhean reply was cut off my Mrs Weasley announcing it was time to go downstairs for lunch and warning the twins, Sirius and Remus that any pranks would be looked upon dimly. The four pranksters gave her very innocent looks that nobody in the room believed for a moment and they all wended their way down to the Great Hall.

The next morning Harry stood outside in his new leather jacket watching Sirius wheel his motorbike up from where it was stored in a shed behind Hagrid's hut. The animagus was also wearing a leather jacket and was grinning broadly. Harry had managed to convince the others, with a little help from Remus, that he really didn't need an audience for his first attempt at riding the bike. He had a sneaking suspicion that it wouldn't be anything like riding a broom and he wasn't that enthusiastic about making a fool of himself in public. Sirius wheeled the bike up in front of him and kicked the stand out.

"Now, how much can you see of the bike through the overlay?" Sirius asked.

Harry examined the machine in front of him. "Er, not much actually. Just the general shape of

everything."

Sirius nodded to himself. "Kind of what I expected," he said. "Okay, we do this the long way then."

He gestured for Harry to join him and began describing each part of the bike, being careful to point it out and have Harry run his hands over it even if there was little to feel. He described what each part was for, how it worked and why it was important. Harry listened intently and realised that his godfather was actually quite a good teacher. For a brief moment he regretted dropping Astronomy then he concentrated on what Sirius was telling him. Once Sirius finished his spiel, he pointed to various parts of the bike at random and got Harry to tell him what it was.

"Excellent!" Sirius said when they finished that. "Hop on."

Harry did so, feeling a little awkward. That feeling faded as Sirius explained the mechanics of actually starting and riding the bike, as well as operating the flying and invisibility mechanisms. He got Harry to run through the process of starting the bike three times before he actually allowed his godson to start her up. Harry finally started to grin as he felt the engine growl underneath him.

"Alright, now release the clutch slowly and give her a bit of juice," Sirius said over the noise of the engine as he pushed the kickstand up with one foot.

Harry did so and yelped when the bike began to move and then wobble. He quickly steadied the bike and slowly steered it in a circle around Sirius. When he brought the bike back to where he started, Sirius moved in closely again and got him to tell everything he'd been told about changing gears. Harry glibly repeated Sirius' instructions and the animagus eyed him with amusement.

"Okay, Pronglet," Sirius said with a grin as he climbed on the bike behind his godson. "Let's see if you can put those instructions into practice."

Harry's grin faltered for a moment then that competitive fervour that always overtook him on the Quidditch pitch came to the fore. He drove slowly at first but with Sirius' encouragement and his own growing confidence, he was soon zipping around the grounds at a fair pace.

"Let's get airborne!" Sirius yelled into his ear.

Harry nodded and flicked the switch that engaged the flying spell. The bike took off rather smoothly and Harry couldn't resist a yodel of exhilaration as they flew through the air. He heard Sirius laughing delightedly behind him. He couldn't have determined how long they flew through the air before Sirius tapped him on the shoulder.

"We'd better land," he yelled cheerfully.

As Harry guided the bike back towards the entrance to the castle, they both noticed Remus come charging out and wave at them frantically.

"Moony looks a little worked up about something," Sirius bellowed and Harry nodded absently as he concentrated on landing the bike without killing or maiming either of them.

His landing was a little bumpy but didn't throw either of them off the bike so Harry counted it as a good one. He brought the bike to a halt with what he thought was a professional flourish only to have that completely ignored when Remus came running up to them.

"He’s escaped," was the first words out of his mouth.

Sirius grinned at Harry and clapped him cheerfully on the shoulder as they both climbed off the bike, seeming to ignore his friend at first. "Great job, Pronglet!" he said, his eyes bright. "You’re a natural. I knew you would be." He looked over at Remus. "Now what are you blathering on about, Moony old pal?"

"He’s escaped," Remus repeated grimly.

Harry and Sirius exchanged blank looks. "Who’s escaped?" Sirius asked patiently.

"Peter," Remus replied with a hint of bitterness.

"What?" Sirius yelped in unison with Harry. "I thought he’d been given the Kiss!"

"They delayed it," Remus said, the bitter tone becoming more prominent. "Apparently he said he had some more information and they believed him. They postponed the Kiss because what he said was something important. They delayed it until they could either confirm or deny his story and he escaped sometime yesterday."

Harry gasped and paled. "Oh no, that’s probably what it was."

"What are you talking about?" Sirius demanded, his hand suddenly hard on Harry’s shoulder.

"Yesterday," Harry babbled, slightly incoherently. "There was a moment, just a really brief moment when my scar hurt. It didn’t hurt too badly and went away so quickly that I didn’t think anything of it. All I could get was that Voldemort was really happy about something."

"Why didn’t you tell someone?" Sirius asked.

"I did," Harry said indignantly. "Master Nhean and Professor Snape were right there when it happened."

"Why would Voldemort be happy about that little rat bastard escaping?" Sirius growled. "He has to know he sang like a bird in the Aurors hands."

"I’m sure he does and I’m sure Peter will pay for that," Remus replied sourly. "But Peter is also the perfect person for sneaky little spying missions. After all, who notices a rat?"

"Why didn’t they tell us?" Harry asked.

"That they’d delayed the Kiss?" Remus asked. At Harry’s nod, he continued. "Because they didn’t think it would matter. No matter what he told them, it wasn’t going to change his sentence. It was just a matter of timing. They didn’t think we’d care when he was Kissed, just that it happened."

The low growl from Sirius was all the warning Harry and Remus had before the Animagus burst out in a vicious bout of swearing. Before either of them could do anything, Sirius had leapt onto his bike and gunned it into the air, disappearing before their eyes as the invisibility mechanism was engaged.

"Sirius!" Harry yelled after his godfather. He turned abruptly, wanting to head to the Tower and his broom but was stopped when Remus wrapped an arm around him, much as he had that terrible

day in the Ministry of Magic.

"Let him go," the werewolf said sadly. "I don't think he'll do anything stupid. He's just…frustrated and angry. He wants nothing more than to see Peter out of our lives for good. He knows it won't bring back James and Lily or change anything that happened to you but he's afraid of what Peter might do."

Harry struggled against his guardian for a moment then sagged back into the older man's embrace.

"The Headmaster is going to strengthen the wards around the school," Remus said as soothingly as he could. "And instruct the ghosts and portraits to keep an eye out for a rat with a silver paw." He paused and much to Harry's surprise chuckled softly. "Professor McGonagall has promised to patrol the castle as much as she can in her animagus form. She seemed rather taken with the idea of playing ratcatcher."

Harry gave a small huff of laughter. "Maybe Ginny can join her."

Remus chuckled; Ginny had finally managed her animagus transformation about a month previous. She had been highly frustrated at not being able to join the others in their occasional jaunts through the Forest. She had been able to get through all steps of the process except the last one, the actual transformation itself. She had finally approached the Transfiguration Mistress and with Professor McGonagall's patient help, she had succeeded into transforming into the marmalade cat that the visualisation spell had shown her. Harry and the others had been highly suspicious and more than a little nervous about the secretive looks the two women tended to share from time to time since that day. This was not helped by the occasional sightings of two cats, one grey tabby and one marmalade, slinking through the castle.

"I've no doubts she will," Remus said, his mood lightening. "Come on. There's no point waiting out here. Sirius will be back when he's good and ready."

Harry stared up into the air where his godfather had disappeared for a long moment, unable to see anything through the Oversight. Finally he sighed and allowed Remus to steer him inside the castle.

Chapter 28

It happened as Harry sat leaning against the wall in the Entrance Hall waiting for Sirius to return. Remus hadn't been able to get him any further into the castle than that and had eventually given up trying to persuade him to wait anywhere else. He sat down at the rear of the hall and simply waited.

He'd been there for nearly an hour when the first frisson of pain shot through his scar. He frowned and rubbed his forehead then turned his attention back to the doors. The next stab of pain made him gasp then the pain decided to settle in and it rapidly began to grow. Within a couple of minutes, Harry was curled up on the floor gasping in agony. He'd not even had time to scream.

The pain throbbed through his head and just as it began to overwhelm him, he heard a worried and frightened voice say, "Harry? Pronglet?" Then he passed out.

When he eventually drifted towards consciousness again, the first thing he heard was low voices talking near him.

"This is getting to be a habit that I really don't like."

"I wonder what happened."

"Something bad."

"Thank you, Padfoot. Because I couldn't have worked that out on my own."

"Your welcome, Moony. When do you think he's going to wake up?"

Harry drew in a deep breath and felt someone grab his hand.

"I think he's waking up now." Harry finally identified that voice as Remus.

"Harry?" That one was Sirius.

"Mmmph," Harry murmured as he rolled onto his side and curled up.

He felt a hand run through his hair.

"Harry? Can you wake up a bit more?" Sirius said softly.

Harry grumbled and slowly opened his eyes as slits. He shut them again immediately.

"Black," he murmured.

"What? Me?" Sirius said, sounding rather confused.

Harry heard a snort of laughter from Remus.

"I think he meant all he could see was black," the werewolf explained. "His Oversight probably shut down during whatever happened. Harry, don't start it up again. Not yet anyway."

Harry nodded into his pillow and muttered, "Sleepy."

He felt the hand card through his hair again.

"Go to sleep, Pronglet. We just wanted to make sure you were okay."

"Mmm'kay," Harry muttered as sleep claimed him.

Sirius ran a hand down his face and looked over at his friend. "Do you think he's really okay?"

"I think so," Remus replied. "I think he would have told us if anything was terribly wrong."

A soft knock at the bedroom door made both men turn and Remus got to his feet. He walked quietly over to the door and opened it a fraction.

"How is young Harry?" Dumbledore asked gently.

Remus opened the door further to allow the Headmaster entry.

"He woke a minute ago," Remus said. "But he fell asleep again fairly quickly."

"Severus asked me to bring these up to you," Albus said, handing a small box to the werewolf. "When I reported what had happened to Poppy, he insisted that I fetch these from his rooms. He says you will know what they are for."

The twinkle in the Headmaster's eyes indicated that Snape had said so much more and that some careful editing had just been done.

Remus flipped the lid open and, after a moment of study, nodded. "They're stronger potions than Poppy normally has. One's for headaches, treating Cruciatus, muscle soreness. Harry's taken these before."

"Did he say what caused this?" the Headmaster asked, looking kindly at the sleeping Harry.

"No," Sirius replied. "I don't think he completely woke up."

"Then we must wait," Albus said with a sigh before he turned and quietly left the room.

Sirius sighed and returned to his place beside Harry's bed.

The next time Harry swam towards consciousness he immediately regretted it. His head was pounding and his body ached. He groaned and heard someone shuffle around near the bed.

"Harry?" came Remus' voice.

"Urgh," Harry said in response.

Remus chuckled. "How are you feeling?"

"Don' ask," Harry moaned.

"Severus sent some potions up for you," Remus said softly. "Do you think you can sit up a bit to take them?"

"Do I have to?" Harry said, a hint of whining entering his voice.

"Yes, I think so," Remus replied.

Harry felt an arm slip behind his shoulders and then he was lifted slightly. He groaned as that made his head pound some more and his muscles complained vociferously then he felt a vial placed at his lips.

"Drink up," Remus said firmly. "You'll feel better."

Harry grimaced then obediently swallowed the bitter-tasting potion. "Urgh, that's awful," he complained.

"I know," Remus replied, amusement clear in his voice. "They always are. Here drink this one as well."

Harry felt another vial placed at his lips and he swallowed that potion as well. Remus lowered him back onto the bed and he curled up on his side as he waited for the potions to take effect. Slowly the pounding in his head began to subside and the ache in his muscles lessened. He rolled back onto his back and opened his eyes, seeing nothing but blackness.

"Feeling better?" Remus asked.

Harry nodded. "Yeah."

"Do you think you can sit up?"

Harry nodded again and with Remus' help levered himself into a sitting position. "Where's Siri?"

"Asleep, thank Merlin," Remus replied, amusement once again creeping into his voice. "He's been driving everyone crazy. I think exhaustion got him about an hour ago."

"How long have I been out?" Harry asked, a little worried.

"Two days," came the reply. "I gather it was something to do with Voldemort?"

"Yeah," Harry replied. "But I don't really know what it was. I've never felt anything like it before."

"Well, let's leave it until the Headmaster and Sirius can be here," Remus said soothingly. "No point telling the tale more than once."

Harry nodded. "I think I remember you telling me not to activate my Oversight. Why?"

"We weren't sure what happened but Poppy and the Headmaster seemed to think it had something to do with magic," Remus explained. "When Sirius first brought you to the Hospital Wing there were signs of some kind of unknown magic on you. Poppy used a simple diagnostic charm on you and it…well, fizzled out would probably be the best way of putting it. The magic just seemed to disappear. That's why I told you not to use your Oversight. You still had traces of that strange magic on you and I didn't want you to try your Oversight and have it fail."

"Oh," Harry said with surprise. "Can I use it now?"

Remus hesitated. "I…would rather that you wait until Poppy or the Headmaster can ascertain whether the magic is still present. If it made a simple diagnostic charm disappear, I have no idea what it might do to a spell as complex as the Oversight spell must be."

Harry sighed but nodded. "Can I get up then? And where am I?"

"We moved you to the suite once we were sure there wasn't anything physically wrong with you so you're in your bedroom," Remus said. "And yes, you can get up if you feel up to it."

"Yeah, thanks to those potions, my head doesn't hurt anymore and the aches are down to what I might get out of Quidditch," Harry said as he pushed the blankets back.

"Do you want any help?" Remus asked as he moved back from the bed.

Harry paused then shook his head. "No, I think I know my way around here well enough." He groped towards the bedside table until his fingers brushed his cane and he grabbed it. "Besides you're here to stop me from bumping into walls if I make a wrong turn."

Remus chuckled as the two of them made their way out into the living room where Harry collapsed onto the couch. Remus joined him and Harry leaned into the older man.

"I'm surprised you don't have a plethora of Weasleys camped out in here," Harry observed after a minute.

Remus laughed. "Well, we did for a while then Sirius threatened them with bodily harm if they didn't vacate the place. He got a bit grumpy there for a while."

"Did not," came Sirius' sleepy voice from across the room.

"Did too," Remus replied with a laugh as Sirius slouched his way over to the couch and joined his friend and godson.

"Well maybe," Sirius conceded. "How are you feeling, Pronglet?"

"Um, okay," Harry replied. He was silent for a moment. "Why did you do that?"

"What? Evict the Weasleys?" Sirius asked, sounding confused.

"No," Harry said flatly. "Run off like that after we heard about Wormtail."

"Oh, that," Sirius said. "I'm sorry, Pronglet. I didn't mean to worry you, I just…" His voice trailed off and he took a few deep breaths. "I just want him gone," he choked out. "I don't want to have to think about him ever again. And I don't want to take the risk that he's going to cause more damage or…or take away someone else I care about. It just got a bit much for a moment and I always thought better on the bike."

"Oh," Harry said with understanding. "I guess I think better when I'm flying." He paused. "I was just afraid you'd run off to try and find him."

"No! No, I wouldn't do that," Sirius said hastily. "The last thing I want is to end up back in bloody Azkaban again."

Harry sighed with relief. "Oh, okay."

Sirius pulled Harry into a warm hug. "I would never do anything that would leave you alone."

"Oi!" Remus said with amused objection. "What am I then? Chopped liver?"

"Well, you do have a tendency to resemble chopped liver the day after a full moon," Sirius teased.

"Oh, thank you, Padfoot. Your charm has overwhelmed me," Remus said dryly as Harry snickered. One of the things he'd learnt since Remus had become his guardian was that the werewolf wasn't one to get overly precious about the way his transformations left him feeling or looking. He always said that years of James and Sirius' bad jokes had left him immune and anyway the comments were usually reasonably funny.

"Well, I am a very charming person," Sirius said matter-of-factly. "So it makes sense that you would be overwhelmed."

Harry heard Remus make a retching sound. "Quick! Where's Madam Pomfrey?" Remus demanded urgently, grabbing at Harry's sleeve. "I'm feeling nauseous and I think I'm going to be sick."

Harry dissolved into laughter as he generally did whenever Sirius and Remus degenerated into behaving like they were back in school. As he laughed he heard Sirius splutter indignantly as Remus continued to poke fun at his supposed charms.

"Jun'ko likes my charms," Sirius said in a tone that was half sulky and half amused.

That statement brought Harry's laughter to an end and he gaped at his godfather then scowled as he realised how pointless that was at the moment when he couldn't see the man.

"She does?" he asked, unsure of what it was he was actually asking.

Sirius seemed to figure it out almost immediately. "Whoa, Harry! No! No, no, no. Not like that! I mean Jun'ko's very nice and all but she's…well, a little young really."

"She's about the same age as Tonks," Remus said in a flat tone that confused Harry even more.

"I…well, yes, I know," Sirius said in a garbled voice. "And I'm not saying it's wrong or anything, Moony. I'm just saying I think Jun'ko's too young for me."

Harry blinked and stared into the blackness for a moment as he put all of that together in his mind then his head suddenly swivelled in the general direction of Remus.

"Tonks?" he said incredulously.

He felt Remus stiffen beside him. "She's…a lovely woman," he said in a tone that was both defensive and indignant.

Harry blinked again; this was not how he'd thought this day would go. On the other hand, it had effectively distracted him from what had happened.

"Well, yes," Harry said feeling unaccountably baffled. "You and Tonks? Really?"

"You don't approve?" Remus' voice was flat and toneless and Harry's eyes widened in shock.

"Of course I approve!" he half-yelled. "I like Tonks! She's great. I just…didn't realise that you liked her. I know I've been a bit wrapped up in my own stuff but I…just didn't notice."

"Well, it is sort of recent," Remus said softly.

"What Moony means to say," Sirius said with great affection, "is that he's been so busy insisting that's he's somehow not worthy of being loved and cared for by a gorgeous woman that until recently he completely missed the way my cousin has been throwing herself at him at every opportunity."

"She has?" Harry asked with slowly growing amusement. "I can't believe I missed that as well!"

"Well, okay," Sirius conceded. "She has been smart enough not to do it in public. Like most women, she's not particularly fond of being rejected in public. Besides I think she was also smart enough to realise that Moony wouldn't do anything in public. So she's been ambushing him secretly."

"I wasn't rejecting her," Remus protested weakly. "I…just thought she could do better than a battered old werewolf."

"Nonsense!" Sirius said cheerfully then he paused for a moment. "Dammit! The only thing I can refute there is that you're old. You're not old, Moony, because that would mean I'm old. And I'm not old! But you are a werewolf and I suppose you are a bit battered."

"Oh, thank you, Padfoot," Remus said with amused indignation. "Once again your charm overwhelms me."

"You mean you're not a werewolf?" Sirius said with mock-amazement. "You've been lying to me for all these years? How could you, Moony?"

Harry dissolved into laughter again at Sirius' falsely shocked tone of voice and this time he was joined by the two men. When he finally got himself under control he turned in the direction of Remus again.

"I'm sorry, Remy," he said quietly. "I didn't mean to imply that I was unhappy or anything. I was just surprised, that's all."

"That's alright, Harry," Remus replied. "I…think I'm just a little defensive about it. It's not going to be…easy for either of us. There are those who won't like the idea of a young woman like Tonks getting involved with a werewolf."

"Then they're stupid," Harry said staunchly. "If Tonks doesn't mind then it's none of their business."

"Hear, hear!" cheered Sirius. "Harry's right, Moony. Don't let the idiots get to either of you."

Remus' reply was interrupted by a knock on the door.

"That's it," Remus grumbled good-naturedly as he stood. "Arrange for someone to arrive to get you both off the hook."

"You mean you're glad someone arrived to get you off the hook of all the questions Harry was about

to ask you," Sirius said laughingly.

Remus gave an amused growl as he opened the door. "Headmaster! Severus! Welcome! Do come in!"

Both Albus and Severus looked a bit startled at Remus' fervent greeting. However when they saw the mischievous expressions on Harry and Sirius' faces the Headmaster started to chuckle while Severus rolled his eyes and huffed. The two men came in and sat down in the armchairs by the fire while Remus rejoined Harry and Sirius on the couch.

"Well, Harry, you do look much better than the last time I saw you," the Headmaster said cheerfully.

"Thank you, sir," Harry replied. He looked over at where he thought Snape must be sitting given where the Headmaster's voice had come from and where he knew the chairs were placed. Sirius and Remus were always careful not to move the furniture around without warning him. "I'm glad you're out of the Hospital Wing, Professor."

"No doubt not as glad as I am, Mr Potter, but thank you nonetheless," Severus replied, slightly disconcerted by the once-more sightless gaze being pointed in his general direction. He wasn't aware how much he gotten used to Potter using his Oversight.

"Oh, no sir," Harry said dryly. "I completely understand the wild elation and the desire to run as far away as possible whenever you get out of Madam Pomfrey's clutches."

"Yes, I suppose you would," Severus said, his tone as dry as Harry's had been.

Harry snickered as Remus and Sirius snorted with amusement.

"Well be that as it may," Dumbledore interjected, his own amusement quite plain. "I believe we should get down to the matter at hand. I see that you are not using your Oversight, Harry."

"Yeah, Remus told me about what happened," Harry said.

"Then let me just ascertain whether you must continue like this," the Headmaster said before falling silent.

Harry heard the rustling of robes that must have meant Dumbledore was getting his wand then he felt an odd sensation wash over him. It wasn't painful, just strange and slightly warming. The Headmaster sighed as his robes rustled again and Harry assumed he was putting his wand away.

"I am afraid you must remain as you are for a while longer, Harry," Dumbledore said regretfully. "There are still some lingering traces of that strange magic."

"Oh," Harry said a little nervously. "Well, that's okay. I…remember how to get around without my Oversight and it is the holidays at the moment. It should be gone by the time school starts again in the New Year, shouldn't it?"

There was a moment of silence that didn't do much for his spirits then Dumbledore said calmly, "Yes, I'm sure it will, Harry. And if it is not, we will find a way to work around things. No doubt Master Nhean will be a font of useful knowledge."

Harry nodded firmly though he was unable to hide the nervous tremor that ran through him and he knew Sirius and Remus would have picked it up. That thought was confirmed when Sirius spoke.

"Do you know what the magic is, Albus?" the animagus asked in tones of frustration and worry.

"No," Dumbledore replied calmly. "It has so far defied our ability to understand it. Revealing spells do not work against it nor does any kind of diagnostic or locating spell. You know that, Sirius, you were there when I performed them. The spell I use does not touch Harry; it merely identifies any magic on him. We can do no more for now. The only other spells we could use to determine what the magic is could harm Harry."

Harry felt his godfather slumped down on the couch beside him and he reached out and patted the man on the first part of him that he found, which turned out to be his arm.

"It's okay, Siri," he said as confidently as he could manage. "It doesn't hurt much anymore since I took the potions Professor Snape sent up and I'm not getting anything through the link either. I did get used to walking around the castle blind and without Oversight before Master Nhean taught me that spell."

"Yes, he did," Remus said proudly. "You weren't here then, Padfoot. Harry is very capable of getting around Hogwarts." He paused and said the next bit very slyly. "He's had a lot of practice."

"Yes, indeed," came Severus' sour contribution and it caused Harry to start laughing again.

"Well, I think we should leave Harry's experience with the castle for another time," Dumbledore said cheerfully before continuing in a sober voice. "Harry, can you tell us what happened?"

Harry's laughter stopped almost instantly and he hunched a bit. He felt an arm come round him from either side and forced himself to relax a bit.

"I don't really know how much I can tell you," he said slowly. "I was waiting for Siri in the Entrance Hall and I felt some pain through my scar. It went away for a second then it came back and just kept getting stronger and stronger until I passed out."

"How long were you waiting in the Hall?" Dumbledore asked.

Harry shrugged slightly. "About an hour, I think, but I'm not sure exactly."

"That sounds about right," Sirius added. "I was gone for about an hour, give or take."

"And how long did the pain last?" Dumbledore asked.

"Um, I don't know," Harry said uncomfortably. "Maybe five minutes or so before I passed out."

"Harry was curled up in utter agony when I found him," Sirius said in a flat voice. "And he passed out just as I got to him."

"So, quick onset and quite intense," Albus mused. "You received nothing other than the pain then, Harry?"

"Just the pain," Harry confirmed.

"Hmm, curious," Dumbledore said thoughtfully. "Clearly Voldemort was doing something of a magical nature that has backlashed down the link between the two of you."

"Were you shielding your mind?" Severus asked abruptly.

"Of course," Harry replied indignantly. "I never forget that now."

"So we can assume that it was not deliberate," Albus mused. "Perhaps some magic that got away from him." The Headmaster hummed for a moment then he continued, his voice brisk. "Severus, Harry, I wish you to continue looking through Voldemort's journal as soon as Harry feels up to it. It may be that there are some answers in there if only of the negative kind."

"Huh?" Harry said, looking confused.

"Your eloquence is astounding as always, Mr Potter," Snape said with amusement. "What the Headmaster means is that we may be able to find out what it is not which will go some way to finding out what it is."

"Oh, process of elimination," Harry said in understanding.

"Very good," Snape replied with a hint of sarcasm.

Harry felt his godfather draw in a breath and decided to head of anything potentially unpleasant.

"I do pay attention to Hermione sometimes, sir," he said in a deliberately offhand manner. "Not often but sometimes."

He grinned at the snort of amusement he heard from the Potions Master's direction and looked over towards the Headmaster.

"I'm willing to try it," he said firmly.

"Excellent," Dumbledore said with satisfaction. "Now, I think Severus and I shall leave you to finish your recovery in peace and quiet though, since I have no doubts that your friends will be down soon for news of your condition, that may not last."

With that the Headmaster and Snape rose and left the room.

Chapter 29

Three days later the magical residue was still lingering and Harry was still unable to use his Oversight. With the rest of the students arriving back in a week, he was starting to get very nervous about this. He'd kept quiet about his misgivings so far because the Headmaster had said that the residue was fading, just not fast enough for Harry's peace of mind. Master Nhean had taken the opportunity to run Harry through the very first exercises he'd been taught and Harry had realised just how much he'd come to rely on his Oversight. While it was nowhere near having normal eyesight, it did allow him to live a relatively normal life. Now, without it, he had to remember back to those first days after he'd been blinded and recall how he'd moved around.

Master Nhean had decided that today would be a good day to try working with his Battle Guard without Oversight. He'd been working with Jun'ko and Tien the last couple of days and had found it was far more difficult training without Oversight. He couldn't 'see' what they were doing as he normally could and had earned more than a few bruises until Jun'ko had sat him down an explained what he should do. She'd explained that he was getting panicked. That they were simply running through the normal patterns; he knew them and he knew how to counter them. She told him to listen hard, that the other senses compensate when one is lost. He should be able to hear her breathing, the sound of her footsteps, even the whistle of her sword moving through the air. Once he'd taken a few deep breaths he'd tried her suggestions and found that she was right. It was far more difficult than usual but once he got the hang of listening he was able to do much better.

But today would be a different kettle of fish. Today he would have to work with his friends. Master Nhean had spoken to them all the previous night and had explained what the differences would be. Harry would not only have to listen hard to his surroundings but he would have to listen to his friends. They would be the ones to warn him of where the enemy was coming from and he would in many ways have to rely on them. Jun'ko and Tien would acting as the enemy for the first exercise and if all went well Sirius and Tonks would join in. If that went well then Fred and George would complete the enemy attack.

Harry and his Battle Guard were now standing in the middle of the training room as Master Nhean told them the final details of what would be happening. Their swords were drawn and warded to ensure any blows would cause only bruises and they looked serious and sober.

"Jun'ko and Tien have orders to attack and capture Harry," he explained. "It's the job of the Battle Guard to not allow that to happen. You must protect Harry and it must be done in two ways. Obivously you must do your best to keep Jun'ko and Tien away from him but you must also remember that Harry cannot see what is going on. You must keep him aware so that he is not subjected to a surprise attack. You are used to Harry having no problems during your training. Well, now he will. It is your responsibility as his Battle Guard to see that he is not endangered." The Battle Guard nodded grimly as Harry looked rather uncomfortable. "The first exercise will last for fifteen minutes," Nhean continued. "If you succeed in that, we will add Sirius and Tonks to the next exercise. Again it will last fifteen minutes. If you succeed there, we will add Fred and George. Does everyone understand?"

There were nods and affirmative noises from everyone in the room. Jun'ko and Tien were standing on opposite sides of the room ready to start the exercise. Sirius, Tonks, Fred and George were standing in one corner behind a protective ward and Nhean walked over and joined them. Also

standing behind the ward were Snape and Remus both of whom had professed an interest in seeing this.

"Very well," Nhean said once he was behind the ward. "Begin."

Tien and Jun'ko began a slow circling of the Battle Guard, trying to work out the strengths and weaknesses of the group. Hermione began a low voiced commentary to Harry as they watched the two Night Warriors warily. Harry's head dropped slightly and began to weave from side to side fractionally as he concentrated on listening not only to Hermione but also for the noises from Jun'ko and Tien.

The two Night Warriors leapt forward at the same instant and there was a clash of swords as they met with resistance from Ron and Luna on one side and Ginny and Hermione on the other. Neville had grabbed Harry's free arm and dragged him out of the way of the fighting, shoving him rather unceremoniously behind him and taking up Hermione's commentary.

The two pairs of students separated out so that they were attacking the Night Warriors from two different sides, making their defence as difficult as possible. Tien was the first to overcome his opposition. With a quick shove he pushed Luna halfway across the room then he bound Ron's sword with his own and sent it flying. As he turned towards Neville and Harry, Ron sprinted across to where his sword had come to rest.

"Luna! Help Neville and Harry!" he yelled as he ran.

The blonde Ravenclaw shook her head to clear it and pushed herself to her knees. She then leapt forward and briefly caught the back to Tien's foot as he ran towards Harry and Neville. Her grip swiftly slipped but it had been enough to cause Tien to fall heavily to the floor though he had the presence of mid to retain hold of his sword. Luna took the opportunity to run over and join Neville and Harry. Neville had quickly manoeuvred himself and Harry away from the two Night Warriors when Tien fell and Luna and then Ron joined up and formed a triangle around Harry with Neville. Harry could hear the clash of swords from where Ginny and Hermione had been and Neville quickly confirmed that the two girls were still holding their own against Jun'ko.

Tien was on them again at this point and Ron and Luna confidently stepped forward to take on the Night Warrior again. They'd both independently worked out where they had gone wrong last time; they'd allowed Tien to close in on them. He was a muscular man even though he barely topped five feet ten inches. He was stronger then them and they had to take that into account. So this time they used the kind of in and out attacks they used to take out larger and more powerful opponents. They also did their best to work Tien away from Harry. They had a touch more success on the former than the latter but when the fifteen minutes were up, they were still fighting and had kept the older man away from Harry.

"Time!" Nhean called and the fighters all stepped away from each other and lowered their swords.

The Night Master surveyed the scene in front of him. Neville had Harry behind him and they were over near one of the walls. Perhaps a little too close to the wall for comfort but they had enough room to manoeuvre if necessary. About six feet away were Ron, Luna and Tien. The two students had managed to hold their own against the Night Warrior after their initial defeat. Hermione and Ginny were halfway across the room from Neville and Harry and Jun'ko was looking at the two very determined girls with a hint of admiration. While Hermione and Ginny hadn't been able to

defeat her, they had been able to keep the fight at a stalemate.

"Well done," Nhean said approvingly. "Everyone sit down and get some rest."

The students and the two Night Warriors dropped to the floor where they were standing as Sirius and Tonks came out from behind the wards and handed everyone a drink.

"Hermione, Ginny, very well done," Nhean said approvingly. "You managed to keep Jun'ko at bay. What do you think you could have done to defeat her?"

The two girls were silent for a moment as they exchanged glances. "I suppose we could have pressed the attack a bit more," Hermione admitted. "I think maybe we got a little too caught up in the fact it was an exercise and not actual combat."

Ginny grimaced. "Maybe," she said dubiously. "But I think we'd have put ourselves in danger if we'd tried attacking too much harder. We would have had to sacrifice out defence a bit to do that and Jun'ko's very quick."

Hermione considered that for a moment. "Yes, you could be right there."

"We could have tried pushing Jun'ko in the way of Tien and then grabbing Harry and just getting the hell out of here," Ginny suggested with a smile.

"Excellent, Ginny," Nhean congratulated. "That is exactly what you should have done. Remember our lessons last year. Sometimes the best solution to a problem is to run."

The students nodded as Nhean turned his attention to Ron and Luna. "Now, where did you two go wrong initially?" he asked.

"We let Tien close with us," Ron said promptly. "That was a mistake. He's very strong and he used that strength against us. I wasn't quite expecting him to be that strong. He doesn't look like he should be."

Tien grinned. "Why, thank you, Ron."

Nhean chuckled. "Let that be an important lesson for all of you. Never underestimate an opponent and never judge by appearances." He then turned to Neville and Harry. "Excellent work in protecting your leader, Neville. You took strong decisive action when it was needed. You might want to be careful about getting too close to the walls next time. You had enough room to manoeuvre in this situation but be aware of that."

Neville nodded as Nhean gave Harry a sharp look. The blind boy had slid his sword back into its sheath and was clutching the sword-cane with both hands and ostensibly staring down at the floor, his face taut and unreadable.

"Well, Harry?" Nhean asked.

Harry was silent for a long moment. "That was hard and I didn't like it," he replied flatly.

"Why not?" Nhean asked.

"I felt like I didn't have any control," Harry elaborated. "I was fairly sure I knew where everybody

was and I think I could have handled anything but Neville wouldn't let me anywhere near the fighting." The last bit was said in a frustrated tone.

"That was the whole point," Neville said in a slightly exasperated tone before Nhean could say anything. "The goal of the exercise was to protect you and not let Jun'ko or Tien get hold of you. The best way to do that is not to let them near you."

Harry shifted slightly. "I know," he said shortly. "I just…" He paused and tensed, his knuckles going white so tightly was he holding his cane. His jaw clenched and his eyes blazed. "I don't like this," he ground out through clenched teeth.

Nhean walked over, understanding on his face but it didn't leach over into his voice. "You don't like what?"

Harry flinched slightly. "Not being able to see. Not having my Oversight," he said flatly. "I feel… helpless."

"But you are not," Nhean said firmly as he shot a quick warning glance in Sirius' direction. The animagus had made a move to go to Harry but stopped at the Night Master's look. "You know that. Neville did the right thing. You know that too. Harry, there are times you must simply allow others to do their jobs, no matter how that makes you feel. You know what you are capable of. Oversight or not, you are a capable Warrior. Remember that and remember to trust your Battle Guard."

Harry was absolutely still as he thought that through then he nodded slightly. "Yes, sir," he said quietly.

Nhean eyed his student for a moment then nodded. He didn't think Harry was entirely convinced but it was enough for now.

"Alright, you can have a few more minutes rest then we'll move on to the second exercise," Nhean said as he moved back into the centre of the room. "Same goal for the Battle Guard. Protect your leader. This time with the addition of Sirius and Tonks to the attackers. That increases the magnitude of the task for the Battle Guard but it does give you an advantage. What is it?"

There was silence for a moment then Hermione's hand crept into the air.

"Yes?" Nhean said.

"It's more difficult for them as well," she ventured. "They could get in each other's way as easily as work together."

"Very good," Nhean said. "While Jun'ko and Tien has some training in working together and they have been training Sirius and Tonks, your opponents do not have the same kind of experience in team work as the six of you do. That is your advantage. They are older and most are more experienced in combat than you. That is their advantage. It will be interesting to see which advantage is the key one."

The Battle Guard groaned as Sirius and Tonks went over to the warded area to fetch their weapons.

"Harry?" Neville said quietly. "Are you okay?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah, Neville. I'm fine. It's just harder than I thought to really be blind. I guess I've just gotten too used to having my Oversight."

"Did the descriptions Hermione and I were giving you help or should we just shut up?" Neville asked a little anxiously.

"No, they were fine," Harry said hastily. "They helped me get a good picture in my head of where everybody was."

Neville reply was interrupted by Master Nhean clapping his hands and ordering them up and into their positions. Harry and his Battle Guard took up their normal position in the middle of the room while Jun'ko, Tien, Sirius and Tonks spread out around the room.

Ron glanced at the four adults. "We'd better not let ourselves get split up again," he muttered to his friends. "What's the bet they'll try that."

"Head for Sirius straight off," Harry said quietly. "He's the one most likely to hesitate before he attacks us in general and me in particular. If we can neutralise him then that reduces the odds against us."

"That's mean," Ginny said with a quick grin. "Picking on your own godfather like that."

Harry gave a soft huff of laughter. "Master Nhean's always telling me to take advantage of my opponent's weaknesses, no matter what."

Soft chuckles flowed around the group briefly then they sobered and drew their swords. Master Nhean walked over behind the wards.

"Begin," he said calmly.

Harry and his Battle Guard did not wait to be attacked this time. They instead headed straight for Sirius. Neville, Harry and Ron launched an attack at the surprised man while Hermione, Ginny and Luna acted as a rear guard against the three remaining attackers. Their attack against Sirius was successful and the animagus was rather shortly, and much to his surprise, down on the ground.

"Successful strike," Nhean called out from his position behind the wards. "Sirius, you're dead. Return to the safe area."

Harry and his Battle Guard immediately turned to face the remaining three attackers who had loitered a safe distance away to watch what the Battle Guard were doing. Sirius pushed himself to his feet and walked around the wall towards the warded area, a confused and slightly disgruntled look on his face. The whole time Neville and Hermione continued their low-voiced commentary to Harry.

Jun'ko's eyes narrowed and she glanced to her left and right. "Tonks, take the left. Tien, take the right. Spread 'em out."

With those brief instructions the three adults leapt at the battle guard. That was when both Harry and Neville realised they'd gotten themselves caught too close to the wall.

"Push forward," Harry yelled. "Then break left."

The Battle Guard suddenly shifted with the Rear Guard moving up and the whole group attacking fiercely. The sudden move pushed the three attackers back and when they had enough room, Harry and Neville broke to left while the rest of the Battle Guard covered their retreat.

Once Harry and Neville worked their way free, Neville yelled, "We're clear! Fall back."

The Battle Guard staged an immediate retreat and placed themselves between Harry and the three attackers. Again Neville placed himself between Harry and the attackers and as he did this Jun'ko, Tien and Tonks again launched themselves at the group.

The attack had the desired effect. Ron and Luna got tied up in fighting off Tien while Hermione and Ginny got waylaid by Tonks. This left Harry and Neville open to the attack from Jun'ko. And attack she did. Her flurry of blows had two immediate effects; firstly it drove the two boys back away from the rest of the Battle Guard and secondly Neville became so wrapped up in countering Jun'ko's moves that he was unable to keep up his commentary.

Harry stumbled back as Neville kept pushing him between defensive moves and tried desperately to work out what was happening. He could hear the sounds of battle from in front of him and to either side but he could get no other details. A thump from directly in front of him coupled with Neville's desperate cry of "Harry!" and the sudden sound of a sword whistling through the air had him raising his own weapon. A second later he both heard and felt the impact of Jun'ko's sword on his own. He took an instinctive step backwards and twisted his sword to pull Jun'ko's sword away from him. He then danced backwards a few more steps and listened hard. A couple of light footsteps and a whistling sound had him hastily raising his sword and again rather clumsily countering the older woman's blow. Then he heard a sudden oath and a grunt from Jun'ko.

"Successful strike," Nhean called out. "Jun'ko, my dear, you are dead. Very careless of you to forget Mr Longbottom. Come and join us here."

Neville immediately came over and joined Harry as Jun'ko jogged over to the warded area.

"Well done, Neville," Harry said with a smile. "How are the others doing?"

"Thanks, Harry," Neville replied, sounding pleased with himself. "They're holding their own."

"Work them together!" Harry yelled to his friends.

Ron and the others suddenly grinned and the two pairs launched sudden offensives to drive Tonks and Tien into each other's paths. Tien was a bit better prepared for this and managed to resist Ron and Luna's attempts to manoeuvre him but Ginny and Hermione had greater success with Tonks. In a few minutes they had driven Tonks into the back of Tien, causing both to trip over each other. The four students immediately broke off their attacks and ran over to form up around Harry again. The six students watched warily as Tien and Tonks sorted themselves out and got to their feet.

They were just starting to slowly back away when they heard Master Nhean say, "Time!"

Everyone relaxed and sheathed their swords. Master Nhean walked out from the warded area with Sirius and Jun'ko.

"Well done, everyone," Nhean said approvingly. "Sit down and rest."

Everyone dropped where they were standing and this time it was Fred and George who brought drinks out to everyone.

"Well, that was much better," Nhean said to the Battle Guard. "Your tactic against Sirius was excellent. Why did you do it that way?"

"That was my idea," Harry said a little nervously. "I knew Sirius wouldn't really want to hurt any of us and he'd be more likely than the others to hesitate before attacking any of us. Particularly me. If we attacked him hard and fast he probably wouldn't react in time."

Harry fell silent as he waited for Sirius' reaction and he inwardly cursed his inability to see as now he couldn't get any idea of how Sirius felt about his admittedly dirty tactic.

He heard a low chuckle come from the warded area at the side of the room. "He's got you there, Padfoot," Remus said with amusement.

"That's it. Use an old man's weaknesses against him," Sirius replied in a voice rippling with laughter and Harry imperceptibly relaxed.

Nhean also chuckled. "I think we can set that aside then. It is highly unlikely you will ever face Harry or his friends in a combat situation. I just ask that you try and put those feelings aside in the last exercise."

"Okay," Sirius said good-naturedly.

"Jun'ko, I think you already know the mistake you made," Nhean continued.

"I forgot Neville in my eagerness to attack Harry," Jun'ko said ruefully. "And I've got a very nice bruise on my ribs to remind me of that fact for the next few days."

"Yes, well done, Neville," Nhean said mildly. "Harry, how did you feel when Jun'ko attacked you?"

"Lost," Harry replied shortly. "Uncomfortable. It was hard to determine where the blows were coming from. I could hear the sound of her sword coming through the air but it was hard to work out which direction it was coming from."

"I know," Nhean said soothingly. "And I also know that we haven't worked on how to fight without your Oversight yet."

"You're throwing me into the deep end to see how well I can swim," Harry said, unsure of how he felt about that.

"You've handled it well so far in my teaching of you," Nhean said with a hint of humour.

Harry gave a soft laugh. "Yeah, I guess."

"Don't get too concerned," Nhean said. "This is as much for me to determine how much I need to teach you as for you to discover the differences between fighting with and without Oversight."

Harry nodded and sighed. Nhean eyed him for a moment longer then turned to Tien and Tonks.

"Tien, well done," Nhean congratulated. "Tonks, you also did well until you allowed Ginny and

Hermione to manoeuvre you around into Tien like that."

"Those two are stronger than they look," Tonks said with chagrin. "And quick. I had to back off to try and work out a way of beating them. I just didn't see that they were manoeuvring me in a specific direction. Sorry about that, Tien."

Tien waved an idle hand. "Not to worry, Tonks. I should have been paying more attention to my surroundings. Particularly after Harry's order to his Guard."

"Right then," Nhean said with a clap of his hands. "Everyone up. We shall start the final challenge. Even numbers. Harry and his Battle Guard versus Tien, Jun'ko, Tonks, Sirius, Fred and George. Everyone into your places."

Harry and his Battle Guard moved into the centre of the room again though Harry was very reluctant this time. He couldn't see how they were going to get out of this one. The six attackers ranged out around the room and readied their swords.

"How do you want to handle this?" Neville asked Harry. "I don't think attacking Sirius again is going to work."

"Stay together," Ron said abruptly. "If we get split up, we're dead. Or rather Harry's dead since he's the target here."

"Stay here or put our backs to a wall?" Hermione asked briskly.

"Backs to a wall," Harry muttered. "We don't want to let them manoeuvre us around and it'll protect one side."

"Corner," Ron said firmly. "We'll back Harry into a corner. That way he gets more protection and we don't have to spread ourselves out so far."

"Which one?" Neville asked as he eyed Master Nhean warily, waiting for the signal to start.

"The one near Fred and George," Ron replied then he grinned. "I've got an idea."

"Four words that are always frightening to hear from a Weasley or Harry," Hermione said lightly.

Chuckles came from the others and even Harry managed a weak grin.

"Begin," Master Nhean said as he stepped back into the warded area to join Remus and Severus.

The chuckles ended and, with Hermione murmuring soft commentary to Harry, the Battle Guard made a determined move towards the corner that lay between Fred and George. Humour and challenge glinted in the twins' eyes as they raised their swords but before they could do anymore, Ron dug into a pocket and drew out a small, round, black ball.

He threw it to the ground at the twins' feet and said quietly but intently, "Close your eyes!"

The Guard obeyed immediately but Fred and George, surprised by their brother's actions, looked down at the small ball. Just as they did this, it exploded with a bright flare and a cloud of white smoke. The twins gave identical yells of surprise and then chagrin as Neville and Ron leapt forward to place their swords at their throats.

"Fred, George, I believe you are both dead," Nhean said with high amusement. "Do feel your way over here."

Harry's Battle Guard did not pay any attention to this. Instead Hermione and Ginny hustled Harry over to the corner and gave him a small shove, sending him into the wall with a soft thump. Luna immediately took up a position directly in front of him but with enough room for both of them to fight if it became necessary. Hermione and Ginny, along with Neville and Ron, spaced themselves into front of these two and waited for the remaining four attackers to arrive.

"Did you have to shove me into the wall?" Harry said softly though irritation traced through his words.

"Sorry, Harry," Hermione said briskly. "But we're about to be a little busy."

With that she broke off and Harry heard the sounds of swords clanging against each other. Luna swiftly took up the commentary and Harry had to bite his lip several times at her eccentric words.

"Well, Ronald seems to be handling Tonks rather well though I daresay Hermione won't like me saying that," Luna said blandly, causing Harry to snicker then she gasped. "Oh dear!"

That comment was explained when Nhean called out, "Ginny, you're unconscious or dead. Come and join us over here."

Ginny growled and Harry heard his girlfriend stomp off in the direction of the warded area. Luna took up her commentary again, describing the swift reorganisation of the Guard as they continued to fight.

"Luna, we need you up here," Ron called suddenly, sounding strained.

"Oops, must dash," the odd Ravenclaw said to Harry then she stepped forward into the fight.

Harry gritted his teeth as he lost his description of what was going on then he took a deep breath. He closed his eyes and calmed himself as best as he could under the circumstances. He then just listened. At first he couldn't really sort out what was happening then as he pictured the room and remembered all of the training he and the others had done, he began to piece together a mental picture of what was going on. He had to make mental extrapolations for the sounds he heard, based on what he remembered from the training.

Ron was battling Tonks to his far right. He could hear his best friend's laboured breathing and realised that the constant battles today were starting to take their toll. But he could also hear Tonks' quiet grunts every time Ron scored a hit on her sword. Ron's strength was starting to come in to play over Tonks' agility as the fight wore on.

Next to Ron, Luna had taken up the fight against Sirius. Harry could hear that Sirius was having to work hard. Luna had always been a bit of a surprise packet for the Guard. She didn't look like she was here enough to fight well but once the battle started, her concentration became a credit to her House and she was very adept. But Harry could hear that like Tonks, Luna was starting to suffer from Sirius' superior strength.

Hermione was battling…he paused to listen for a moment…battling Jun'ko and from what he could hear, the two women were fairly evenly matched. The sound was almost like one of their training

sessions and Harry confidently predicted that this was one fight that would last out the time limit.

The last fight, the one on his far left, was between Neville and Tien and again from the sounds he could hear it seemed to be a fairly even match. In this case, Harry predicted that Tien would get the better of his friend. Tien was deceptively devious. Harry had not won a single bout with the older man. Tien was well trained in more than one style of fighting and had no compunctions about suddenly shifting mid-fight from a style that wasn't working to one that might. That thought suddenly became prophetic when Harry heard Neville grunt and fall.

"Neville, come and join us," Nhean called out.

That was all the warning Harry got before he heard Tien's sword whistling towards his head. He opened his eyes, useless though the gesture was, and raised his sword, bracing himself for the impact. Tien's sword clanged into his and he grunted at the impact. He then pushed at the other man using their joined swords and heard Tien give way fractionally.

Their swords separated and Harry brought his back into a ready position as he listened as carefully as he could, his head weaving back and forth slightly. It was difficult differentiating between the sounds of the fights going on around him and the sounds of Tien moving. This was made even more difficult by the fact that Tien was very light on his feet.

Again it was only the sound of the sword whistling through the air that alert Harry to Tien's next attack; this one towards his side. He angled around to counter it and made a rather satisfied chuffing sound when Tien's sword clanged against his own again. Tien pulled away immediately and Harry hissed as he heard the sound of the sword whistling towards him again. He brought his sword around to try and counter it but this time his lack of any kind of vision told against him. He was slow in his reaction time; not his fault, he couldn't see what was going on after all, only hear it. And this slowed down his reactions.

He grunted with pain as Tien's sword slammed into his side, the warding spells ensuring it did nothing more than bruise, and he fell back against the wall and slid to the ground, his sword clattering to the ground as he clutched at his now aching ribs.

"Time!" Nhean called out and the sounds of battle ceased.

He heard someone rush over and kneel next to him. "Harry! Are you alright?" Sirius said urgently.

Harry nodded with a grimace. "Yeah," he grunted. "But Madam Pomfrey's going to get mad at me."

"I'm sorry, Harry," Tien said, concern lacing his voice. "I didn't mean to hit that hard."

A gentle hand against one side of his face told Harry that Ginny was kneeling on his other side. "Yep," she said with gentle amusement. "Madam Pomfrey definitely going to yell at you."

"Thank you," Harry said dryly as he pushed himself to his feet with Sirius and Ginny's help. He heard someone picking up his sword and sliding it into its sheath then it was being pressed into his hand.

"There you go, mate," Ron said and Harry gave him a quick, slightly pained grin.

"I think it might be best if you all sat down," Nhean said calmly. "Well, make this as quick as

possible then I think everyone who has been hit should go and take their berating from Madam Pomfrey."

There were quiet chuckles as everyone sat down where they were standing. Ginny wiggled over a bit closer to Harry and he wrapped an arm around her shoulders in response.

"Now, Ron, that was an interesting move you made there at the start," Nhean said as Remus and Severus walked over to join the group. Both men had winced when Harry had been hit.

"You didn't say we couldn't use something like that," Ron said hesitantly.

Nhean chuckled. "You're not in trouble, Ron. I thought it was rather clever and certainly neither Fred nor George expected it."

"Very tricky, little brother," Fred said archly.

"Using our own products against us," George completed, his expression one of amusement and a hint of pride.

Ron grinned and eyed his brothers with a superior expression that had everyone except Harry laughing.

"Ron, smugness is not an attractive quality," Hermione said dryly, catching Harry's irritated expression out of the corner of her eye. The comment seemed to be enough and Harry grinned as well.

"Yes, well done, Ron," Nhean said. "Always use whatever advantages you can lay your hands on, no matter how unusual they are. There were no set rules for these bouts, Ron. You did well."

Ron beamed then blushed as Hermione pressed a kiss on his cheek.

"Ginny, what happened?" Nhean asked.

"Sirius was too strong and tall for me," she grumbled. "I was tired and he was able to bully me around until I got caught up too close to Ron. I tried to move back out of the way but Sirius had moved in too close and he got me."

"And how could you combat that?" Nhean asked.

"More room to manoeuvre would have helped but under the circumstances…" Ginny's voice trailed off in frustration.

Nhean nodded. "Exactly. You were hamstrung by the situation you were in. The decision to put Harry in a corner like that was a good one but it did put some limits on you. Can you think of any way you could have overcome this?"

Ginny thought for a moment. "I…could have pushed him out further into the room where I could move around and use my advantage. The fact that I would be able to keep attacking him would keep him from going after Harry."

"Very good," Nhean said with an approving nod. "Now Neville, what happened?"

"Tien switched styles and I wasn't expecting it," Neville said sheepishly.

"You should have," Nhean chided. "You know that's Tien's favourite trick."

"Fair's fair, Nhean," Tien said easily. "Neville hasn't fought against me all that often. It's one thing to be told about a tactic, it's another to actually experience it."

"Well, that is true," Nhean conceded. "But you were aware of this tactic, Neville, and should have been guarding against it."

"Yes, sir," Neville said with chagrin.

"Now, Harry, what happened with you?" Nhean asked.

"Tien hit me with his sword," Harry said with a wry grin.

"Before that." Amusement coloured Nhean's voice and Harry heard snorts from some of the others.

"I could hear what was going on reasonably well and I was able to get a pretty good picture in my mind from the sounds." He shrugged. "But I could only hear Tien's sword when it got close. My reactions weren't as fast as normal."

"Do you think that would change if it had been just you and Tien fighting and the others hadn't been there?" Nhean asked.

Harry shrugged then winced as that movement jostled his new and impressive bruise. "Maybe. I don't know. But all Tien would have to do is make noise and I'd be equally handicapped."

"True but there are ways of countering that," Nhean said. "We'll work on those."

"Good," Harry muttered. "Because that was not fun."

Nhean stepped back and eyed his students with benign approval. "Well done, everyone. That was an excellent test of your abilities. Now those who have been hurt, get yourselves to the hospital wing. You especially, Harry. I'll be checking in with Madam Pomfrey later so don't disappointment me."

Harry groaned as he let himself be pulled to his feet by Sirius and Ginny then the red-haired girl leaned up and whispered something in his ear. Harry blushed then grinned at her.

"Well, in that case, I'll be good," he said. "But you better keep that promise."

Ginny blushed as well then dragged Harry out of the room as the others watched curiously, wondering what had been said.

Chapter 30

The next morning Harry received a note from Professor Snape suggesting that they attempt to read Voldemort's journal again and could he ensure that Miss Weasley accompanied him down to the dungeons after breakfast. Harry grinned sightlessly at Ginny who had read the note to him while they were sitting in the common room.

"Well, Miss Weasley?" he said roguishly. "Will you accompany me down to the dungeons after breakfast?"

"Why gladly, Mr Potter," Ginny replied with a laugh. "I suppose we'd better go down and eat then or we'll never get there."

Harry laughed and the young couple crawled out of the entrance hole and headed downstairs, Harry tapping his cane lightly in front of him. The strange magic was still lingering around him and a brief experiment at using his Oversight the previous night had failed dismally. Tomorrow night was New Year's Eve and a few days later the rest of the students would return and Harry was rather desperately hoping the magic would fade before then.

In the meantime Master Nhean had decided that they would revisit some of his earliest lessons though in a slightly grander scale. They would also start to incorporate those lessons into his combat training. Harry had mostly managed to conceal his apprehension at the continued presence of the magic. The fact that Dumbledore did not know what it was or how to get rid of it was worrying him. He hadn't realised until it was taken away how much he'd relied on his Oversight.

Ginny slid her arm through his as they walked down the stairs then pressed a kiss onto his cheek. Harry smiled at her, knowing that while she had taken his arm in order to kiss him, she had also done it to steady him down the stairs. He had mixed feelings about that; while he didn't really want to accidentally misstep and fall, he didn't like having to rely on others for help.

"None of that, mister," came Ginny's quiet voice from beside him.

"What?" he said, sounding startled. Ginny was becoming rather adept at reading him these days.

"It is perfectly alright for you to accept help from me and everyone else," Ginny said, sounding like she was warming up to her subject. "Just because those idiots you lived with for ten years didn't lift a single, lazy, stupid finger to help you doesn't mean the whole world's like that. Yes, you could quite easily get down the stairs on your own without a skerrick of help from me or anyone else. But I want to help you, I like helping you and besides…it gives me a really, really good excuse to get close to you."

"You…need an excuse for that?" Harry asked, feeling a fraction shell-shocked. He'd never thought about it all that way before.

"Well, no," Ginny replied impishly. "But it's still a good excuse." She sobered. "Harry, you're blind and you occasionally need help particularly on the moving staircases. That's not pity, that's fact."

Harry was silent for a moment then he smiled. "I guess you're right. I just…don't really like it."

"Didn't Snape once say something about your overdeveloped need for independence?" Ginny asked

tartly.

Harry laughed at that. "Yes, he did. And I think I was going to listen to him."

"Good," Ginny said firmly then they were walking into the Great Hall and they let the conversation drop.

Once they finished breakfast they headed down to Snape's office in the dungeons and Harry knocked in the door.

"Come in," Snape barked through the door.

Harry opened the door and he and Ginny walked in.

"Ah, Mr Potter, Miss Weasley," Snape said neutrally. "Good. I have set everything up in the classroom. I think it would be better to use one of the benches."

Harry took Ginny's arm and let her lead him through the office to the classroom. He hadn't been in Snape's office enough times to know exactly where he was going without Oversight and he had no real desire to walk into the doorway for Snape's entertainment, for despite their acknowledged truce, he had no doubts Snape would find it amusing. They walked around and Harry groped for one of the chairs, pulling it out and sitting down. He leaned his cane against the desk as he listened to Ginny and Snape sitting down as well.

"Shall we, Mr Potter?" Snape said abruptly.

Harry nodded then he felt Snape's mind touch his and they established the mesh. Snape let it sit like that for a moment then he deepened it. Harry had closed his eyes during this process and now he slowly opened them, bracing himself during that moment of disorientation that had come the first time they had tried this. He gasped as he once again saw through Snape's eyes.

Mr Potter? Snape asked.

I'm fine, Harry replied. **It's just a bit of a shock, every time it happens.**

Snape slowly looked around the room to let Harry get used to the sensation then with a sense of resigned impatience that flowed through their meshed minds, he turned and looked at Ginny. A broad smile grew on Harry's face as he truly saw Ginny for the first time since he'd been blinded and he brought one hand up to brush her cheek.

"Beautiful," he breathed and Ginny blushed and captured his hand, weaving their fingers together.

"You can see me?" she asked curiously.

"Yeah," Harry said. "Through Professor Snape's eyes."

Ginny's gaze flickered over to Snape who was looking at her with a neutral expression.

"Thank you, Professor," she said quietly then she looked back at Harry with a smile. "Harry, aren't you here to do something serious?"

"I am doing something serious," Harry replied then he grinned. "But I take your point. Sorry,

Professor."

I had anticipated this, Snape said with arch amusement. **Young men are regrettably predictable when young women are concerned.**

What? You never stared at a pretty girl when you were my age? Harry asked cheekily.

I did however they rarely stared back, Snape replied sourly. **I was not a promising boy in any way, shape or form. And I knew far too much about the Dark Arts to make anyone comfortable, including myself.**

Why learn it then? Harry asked as he wisely got down to business and flipped through the journal to the last place they'd been.

You are, of course, assuming I had a choice, Snape replied archly.

Oh, Harry said awkwardly.

Shall we get down to business? Snape said briskly, echoing Harry's internal thoughts.

Er, yes, Harry replied.

He felt a moment of disorientation as Snape looked down at the journal then the Parseltongue slowly coalesced in his mind. He grimaced as he realised that the page they were on dealt with some possible plans for kidnapping himself.

I think we can move from there, Snape said with distaste.

Harry nodded and quickly flicked through the journal until he found the page on crystal magic they'd been on before the poison coursing through Snape had made any further investigations impossible. He then began reading the words aloud in soft, hissing Parseltongue.

My research into crystal magic is showing some positive results. The crystals, if of a certain size and clarity, can be used as repositories for magical energy. This had led me to theorise that they could be used for something more. Could a suitable crystalline repository be used to store a person's soul? I believe it could and intend to turn my researches in that direction. I have come to the conclusion that my survival of the rebounded Killing Curse was largely due to the complex magic Lily Potter used but even in this new form I believe I am still vulnerable to the power of the Killing Curse. While the protection allowed the Potter boy to survive, it is quite likely it has been diluted now that we both share it. It is possible that I am wrong but I am not willing to take that chance. If the crystals can be used to store a soul then that will be the answer to my problem. I could use one to ensure my immortality for all time. I must research this.

16th January

Success! My theory is correct. A crystal of sufficient size and purity can be used to store a soul and furthermore it can be set up to allow the soul to possess any person who then touches the crystal. This is ideal! I have found a crystal that will work and I shall set it up to house my soul should all things go against plan. My final confrontation with the Potter boy is approaching. I can feel it. But the boy is blind so I am sure of success. But I have been sure before and been wrong. So thus my crystalline back up plan. I can only see one flaw in the plan. Once the soul has taken over a new

host, the old host cannot be completely cast out. It must remain in order to animate the body. This may be a problem depending on who is the first to touch the crystal. One can only hope it is someone competent. The only advantage to this is that only the owner of the body can cast out the soul and truly kill me. If the owner casts me out then my soul cannot return to the crystal. If the body is destroyed then my soul will simply return to the crystal and while my soul inhabits the crystal it is invulnerable. I shall record the incantation needed to cast out the possessing soul here. I believe it needs to be recorded and where better than here in my own journal in Parseltongue where none but me can understand it. The incantation is Respuoanimus.

Why would he write that down? Even here? Harry asked with disbelief.

He always felt the need to crow about his own superiority, Snape said with a sneer. **But this is useful. He has possessed Draco's body and Draco can cast him out.**

But will he? Harry said dubiously. **He's always supported Voldemort.**

I severely doubt the current situation is one he willing allowed, Snape replied. **Given the opportunity, I believe even he will cast out Voldemort.**

I hope so, Harry replied, his voice still dubious. **Because it looks like that's our only chance of getting rid of Voldemort for good.** He bit his lip worriedly. **I just wish I could use my Oversight.**

The magic still has not faded? Snape asked, concern lacing his mental tone.

I tried activating it again this morning and it didn't work, Harry replied glumly. **Master Nhean going to step up my training but this is starting to really worry me. We did a full combat training session yesterday and it was frustrating to say the least.**

Snape was silent for a moment. **I shall speak to the Headmaster. There may be a few things we can try if the situation continues.**

Harry nodded and they continued reading through the journal. They soon established that there was little else of use. Most of the rest of the journal detailed potential plans for the final battle and Voldemort's plans for Harry. More than a few of these were unpleasantly graphic and Harry quickly flipped past those pages.

There appears to be nothing else of value in here, Snape said with disgust. **I had hoped he might have detailed his research in more detail.**

Well, he did put down the important stuff, Harry said, still feeling a little unsettled by the last description of Voldemort's plans for him that they'd encountered.

Snape raised an eyebrow as he picked that up through the mesh. **I shall take what we have learnt to the Headmaster. I suggest you and Miss Weasley take yourselves off and…do whatever it is the two of you do.**

With that Snape began to dissolve the mesh. He paused momentarily and with an air of resignation he looked over once more at Ginny. Harry drank in the sight of his girlfriend then sighed as the mesh was dissolved.

"Thank you, sir," he said quietly as Ginny slipped her hand into his.

"Get out," Snape grumbled as he gathered up the journal and stalked over to his office.

The young couple quickly scurried out of the classroom and up the corridor.

"What was that last bit all about?" Ginny asked as they walked up the stairs towards the Entrance Hall.

"He relented and let me have one last look at you," Harry replied with a grin. "Guess he growled at us because he didn't want to ruin his snarky, sarcastic reputation."

"So what did you find out?" Ginny asked.

Harry was silent as they walked through the Entrance Hall and out onto the grounds.

"There wasn't much useful in there," he finally said with a shudder. "Most of it was Voldemort making his plans for the final battle and what he was going to do with me."

"Urgh," Ginny said with a grimace. "You didn't actually read that, did you?"

"Only glanced at it," Harry replied. "We moved on pretty quickly."

"So was there anything in there that was worth it?" Ginny asked.

Harry nodded. "There was some information about Voldemort's research into the crystalline magic. He'd worked out a way of…storing his soul in a crystal. He could then possess another body."

"Didn't we already know that?" Ginny asked.

"Yeah, true," Harry replied. "But it also detailed how to destroy him. You can't just destroy the body he's possessing. That'll just send the soul back to the crystal and the whole thing starts again. The owner of the body, Draco in this case, is still in there. Only he can cast out Voldemort. If that happens then the soul can't return to the crystal and it'll be destroyed. I guess a soul in that condition can't survive outside some kind of host, either human or crystal."

"Makes you wonder how he survived the destruction of his body the first time," Ginny mused.

"I don't think even he knew," Harry said. "Though the whole thing does make me wonder why he was so afraid when he first ended up in the crystal. The anger makes sense since it meant he'd been defeated again but the fear?"

"Maybe it wasn't quite what he expected?" Ginny suggested. "It's one thing to know something is going to happen, it quite another to experience it."

Harry considered that for a moment then nodded. "Yeah, I guess that makes sense. Nice to know even he can be afraid."

A comfortable silence fell between the two of them as they walked through the grounds. Harry determining by sound where they were though sometimes it was hard to tell. Finally Ginny broke the silence.

"Do you think Draco would actually do it? Cast out Voldemort?"

"Professor Snape seems to think so," Harry replied after a moment of consideration. "He says that Draco would hardly have wanted this to happen and that given a chance to reclaim his body, he'd take it." Harry gave a dubious grimace. "I hope he's right. I think we're in trouble if he isn't."

"So what do we do now?"

Harry stopped and smiled sightlessly at Ginny. "Well, Professor Snape said that we ought take ourselves off and do whatever it is we do. Sounds like a good idea to me."

Ginny leaned up and pressed a soft kiss to his lips before saying impishly, "Who says Professor Snape doesn't have any good ideas?"

The next few days passed quickly then the rest of the students arrived back and classes began again. The strange magic still lingered around Harry and by this time he was getting worried and even a little frightened about what exactly it was that Voldemort was doing. After several hours of intensive lessons with Nhean, he was able to revert back to the way he'd done things before he'd learnt to use Oversight. This made him a little more confident about moving around the castle but didn't really relieve his main worry. His friends did what they could to help with Hermione promising to copy her notes for him and Ron and Neville promising to make sure Harry didn't have any troubles with the moving staircases as he went to his classes. Harry accepted all of these offers with tight smiles and a growing frustration. That frustration peeked out every now and then and when it did Ginny was always quick to remind him of Snape's opinion of his sense of independence.

The first day of classes was almost interminable. His teachers handled it well since they'd been around to see what was happening but his classmates and the other students stared and whispered and looked confused, curious and worried. Thankfully in his current state Harry couldn't see the looks but he could hear the whispers and by the time his lesson with Nhean rolled around at the end of the day he was in a rather grouchy mood. As such he didn't notice the almost preternatural silence in the training room until he was about halfway across and then he came to sudden halt.

"Master Nhean?" he said warily.

When no response came he began edging back towards the nearest wall, one hand groping behind him. When he felt the cool stone he flattened himself against the wall and loosened his sword in its sheath as he listened intently. There was nothing but silence, no sounds of anyone breathing, not even the sounds of the rest of the school could be heard. Harry slowly came to realise that this silence could not be natural. He clicked his sword back into place and pulled his wand out of his robes.

He pointed the wand at the room in general and said, "Finite incantatem."

He listened intently but the unnatural silence did not change. He swallowed hard then tucked his wand away and decided to try something. He tranced down to the point where he could see the magical energy that swarmed through the school and was relieved to see the colours burst into life. He gave a sigh then looked down towards his feet. He was startled to see that where he could normally see his own energy colours, scarlet and silver with black tracery, there was nothing, not even at this level. He put that aside for the moment though with a mental note to himself to tell Master Nhean. He looked around the room for a moment to get used to the intense silver and gold

energy that indicated the school then in one corner he saw a collection of energy colours. He stared at them for a moment as he worked out who was there then he grinned and pulled himself out of the trance state he'd been in.

"I can see you when I trance down, Master Nhean," he said, making a calculated guess that the spell creating the silence in the room would stop them from hearing him. "And I know you're standing there with Sirius and Jun'ko."

The strange silence evaporated and he heard chuckling coming from the other side of the room.

"Very good, Harry," Master Nhean said with approval. "And it's even better to hear that whatever Voldemort is doing hasn't affected that part of what you can do."

"I can't see me though," Harry said soberly. "I can usually see my own energy colours but I can't now."

"Curious," Nhean said in a very odd tone. "What precisely do you see when you look at yourself in the trance state?"

"Black," Harry replied. "Just…black."

"And when you look around the rest of the room?" Nhean prompted.

"I see everything as normal," Harry replied. "Well, normal for the trance state."

"I…see," Nhean said thoughtfully.

"Master?" Harry asked carefully when the silence stretched out a bit longer. "Do you know what's happened to me?"

"I'm not sure," Nhean replied slowly. "There are spells that could create such a…blankness but we can't seem to detect anything on you except for that strange magic being produced by Voldemort." He paused and when he spoke again his tone was very strange. "Or can we?"

"Okay, the inscrutable act is very convincing but you're starting to disturb me," Sirius said worriedly. "What's going on, Nhean?"

"Does any of this ring any bells with you, Jun'ko?" Nhean asked, ignoring Sirius' question for the moment.

Jun'ko thought for a moment then shook her head. "No, can't say it does. I'm as confused as Harry and Sirius."

Nhean made a disgruntled noise then Harry heard him pacing quietly back and forth.

"Master Nhean, what's going on?" Harry asked firmly.

"Your description of what you see when in the trance state has rung a very soft, dim bell in my mind," Nhean explained intently. "But I cannot quite put my finger on what it is. I think I read of something like this a long time ago."

He was silent again and Harry could hear his light footsteps pacing back and forth.

"I shall have to return to the Academy," Nhean said firmly. "I am reasonably sure that if the information that is tugging on my brain came from a book that is where I read it. But I shall do that later. For now, I believe we have a lesson to be getting on with. Sirius, I thank you for your help."

"No problems," Sirius said, sounding like he wasn't entirely happy with Nhean's answer. "Listen, if Harry can see the energy colours in this trance state, why doesn't he just use that for now?"

"Because it takes too much concentration," Harry replied before Nhean could say anything. "When I'm trancing, I have to concentrate on that. I can't do anything else."

"Some people have managed to learn how to move at least a little while trancing but it has taken them years and much in the way of practice to get to that state," Nhean added. "It would be a bit difficult for Harry to attend to his lessons while he was in the trance state."

"Oh," Sirius said with realisation. "Guess that wouldn't be too useful." He ruffled Harry's hair. "Well, I'll leave you to it, Pronglet."

"See you, Siri," Harry said as he listened to Sirius' footsteps leave the room.

"Now, Harry," Nhean said briskly, regaining Harry's attention. "I want you and Jun'ko to spar. Jun'ko's much lighter on her feet that Tien. You've been doing well sparring with him, I want you to try it with someone a bit quieter."

Harry sighed as he allowed Jun'ko to lead him into the middle of the room.

"Go easy on me," he said to her a touch plaintively as he drew his sword.

Jun'ko chuckled wickedly as she stepped away. "Now, why would I do that, Harry?"

Harry groaned as he raised his sword then he fell silent, listening intently to try and pick up Jun'ko's movements, his head swaying slightly from side to side. A light patter of footsteps to his left had him turning and dancing away from the sound as he raised his sword defensively. He came to a halt and listened intently again.

Once more he heard the light patter of footsteps then he heard the whistling sound of a sword blade moving through the air. He ducked and rolled away, coming to his feet and darting backwards. He held out his off hand, the one that held the scabbard of his sword, knowing that he had to be somewhere near one of the walls after his two evasive manoeuvres. The quiet tick of the end of his scabbard hitting the wall told him he was right and he quickly pushed off it and towards the centre of the room, not wanting to get caught without adequate moving room.

He heard the sound of Jun'ko's light steps to his left and they sounded like they were coming closer. He spun towards them and brought up his sword, lashing out in a quick slash. His sword jarred in his hands as it impacted with Jun'ko's and the quiet, surprised grunt he heard told him that his fellow Night Warrior hadn't been expecting that move. He drew a sharp breath and followed the slash up with a second and third in one of the movements inspired by the katas he'd learnt long ago. His sword clashed with Jun'ko's again as she countered his moves then he brought his sword around almost automatically to counter the attack that was inevitable from Jun'ko if she followed the pattern. She almost had to; his attacks would leave her in a position where she really only had one attack option herself. Her only other choice would be to retreat and he didn't think she'd do

that.

The jarring of her sword impacting with his again told him he was right and he pushed her away with his sword, dancing backwards and listening intently for her next move. When he heard her rush towards him he decided to abandon the almost strict defensive moves he'd been using since he'd lost his ability to use his Oversight. He ducked and rolled forward past Jun'ko, hoping he'd judged his distances correctly in the darkness. As he rolled past the other Night Warrior, he whipped his scabbard around and took her legs out from underneath her. He then slapped around with his scabbard in the direction she should have fallen. When he heard the soft thumping sound of his scabbard hitting flesh and the resultant pained grunt, he dropped the scabbard and leapt towards Jun'ko in the direction of the grunt. His outstretched hand found her face and he quickly whipped his sword around so it rested on her throat.

"Yield," he said roughly.

"I could still throw you off," Jun'ko countered.

"Maybe but not before I cut your throat," Harry replied firmly.

"Good point," Jun'ko said after a moment of silent consideration. "Yield."

Harry removed his sword and moved away. He started groping around for his scabbard, sheathing his sword when he found it and standing.

"Well done, Harry," Nhean said with approval when he was standing. "Jun'ko, what happened?"

"I wasn't expecting him to attack," she said promptly and with some chagrin. "He's been mostly concentrating on defence up until now and the attacks were rather sudden. I didn't quite think he was ready."

"I didn't think I was either until we ended up using those pattern moves," Harry said, feeling a fraction of confidence ooze into him for the first time in days. "It's the first time I've felt comfortable fighting like this."

"Yes, I thought that was what had happened," Nhean said, his smile obvious in his voice. "And the rest?"

"I…kind of made that up," Harry replied a little hesitantly.

"It was very well executed," Nhean said. "Very creative, particularly your means of locating Jun'ko once she was down."

"Er, yeah, sorry about that," Harry said a little sheepishly, looking sightlessly in the direction Jun'ko's voice had been coming from.

"No problems, Harry," Jun'ko replied cheerfully. "I've had worse and it's a good technique. I'll have to remember that one."

"I should think you were taught it once," Nhean said with severe amusement.

"Probably was," Jun'ko replied blithely. "No doubt I forgot."

"Try not to this time," Nhean replied. "Alright. Off you go, the two of you. Harry, I want you to come down at your normal times for your training sessions. If I'm not here, one of the others will train with you. I hope to be back but I may have to go searching for that book I'm sure exists somewhere."

"Do you really think you know the answer to what's going on?" Harry asked hopefully.

"I don't know," Nhean replied calmly. "But I hope so. We shall see. Off you go."

Harry nodded and at Jun'ko's quiet question, he took her arm and they left the room.

Chapter 31

Voldemort/Draco eyed the tall black quartz obelisk with satisfaction. It had taken some effort to discover a crystalline deposit large enough to fashion an obelisk of the size needed but it was turning out to be well worth it. Tiny bolts of purple lightning crawled over the surface of the obelisk and after just a couple of weeks of preparation the sphere of influence the obelisk supported stood at nearly a foot. Their progress would slow as they continued to expand that sphere but he wasn't worried. He would use the time to prepare for Potter's eventual arrival.

He'd been forced to use his grandparents' manor as it was the only place where he could establish the obelisk but still have the privacy he wished. The obelisk was rooted in the centre of what had once been the main ballroom and the tip reached to about a foot below the high ceiling. The black quartz had been left unadorned and its black massiveness loomed throughout the room. He'd given some thought to using Malfoy Manor but eventually decided against it. It was a little too public for what he wanted to do. The Malfoy name, while somewhat disgraced, still had a certain amount of social power. Those in certain circles were known to drop in, sometimes unannounced. Voldemort/Draco did not want someone inadvertently stumbling over his plans. And there was a certain symmetry to using Riddle Manor that pleased him in many ways.

But for now, as they powered up the obelisk, he would have his Death Eaters concentrate on recruitment. The ranks of his followers had been greatly reduced in the aftermath of the battle at Hogwarts and he would need more to fend off the inevitable rescue mission when he kidnapped Potter. He hoped to gain another spy within Hogwarts and Pansy had been delegated to think of one who might be suitable. He did not even require it to be a Slytherin.

And speaking of those who were not Slytherin…

Much to his amusement, Wormtail had crawled back into Malfoy Manor just the other night. Somehow he had managed to escape the clutches of the Ministry. Obviously those guarding him had been taken in by Pettigrew's pathetic appearance and had not minded him as well as they ought to have. Not that the effort seemed to have been worth it. The Ministry had clearly gone to some lengths to plumb the depths of what Pettigrew called a mind and what was left was… crumbling. Wormtail spent most of his time crouched in a corner of whatever room he happened to be in, muttering incomprehensible words to himself. He responded only to Voldemort/Draco's commands, which made him valuable in some ways. He had instructed Wormtail that he was to obey Pansy as well and that order seemed to have taken root inside the pathetic rat's mind though Pansy had not been overly pleased. She seemed to find Pettigrew offensive.

Voldemort/Draco chuckled to himself as he prowled around the quartz obelisk. He could hardly blame her. Wormtail had never been a promising man and now, with his mind in the state it was, he was even less than he had been. He only bathed because Voldemort/Draco had ordered him to do so every day though he seemed inclined to eat without needing prompting. Still, in spite of his obvious flaws, Wormtail could be valuable. If he was unable to recruit anyone from within the walls of Hogwarts, Wormtail could be used as a spy. He would just have to be ordered to stay away from what remained of his former cronies. Those two would undoubtedly recognise the rat immediately.

Yes, that may be the best use for the man. Pansy had so far been struggling to come up with anyone

who might be subverted to their cause. Most of the Slytherins remaining at Hogwarts had sided with Potter in the end and were therefore useless. Crabbe and Goyle remained, of course, but they were of little use, stupid as they were. Good men for physical action much like their fathers but not ones to use for anything else.

His concentration was broken by the sound of the double doors at the end of the room opening and a group of four Death Eaters walking in. The four bowed deeply when they saw him.

"Forgive us, Lord," they murmured.

"We did not mean to disturb you," the leader, Avery, said subserviently. "But we are scheduled to continue the spell-casting. Should we do so or do you wish us to return later?"

"No, continue," Voldemort/Draco said dismissively. "The spell-casting is not to be disturbed for anything."

With that he turned and left the room through a smaller door, knowing that the Death Eaters would not disobey him.

Harry, in the form of the great Dire Wolf, Blaze, flopped down in a small clearing deep in the Forbidden Forest. He panted as he recovered his breath then changed back into his human form and rolled onto his back. He stared up into blackness as he continued to pant erratically, using the action to keep the tears that were threatening at bay. The enormous bruise that was forming on his ribs twinged at every breath but he ignored it as best as he could.

Today had been one disaster after another and the whole thing had just gotten too much for him during his training session with Tien and Jun'ko. It had started in the morning when he'd woken up tired and had therefore been working almost on automatic when he gotten up and tried to instigate his Oversight as he headed for the bathroom. Because he was working on automatic, he'd been understandably startled when the Oversight hadn't worked and then he'd stumbled over someone's bag, which had been left in the middle of the room. He'd landed flat on his face with a strangled yelp that had woken up the others in the dorm. He'd been so embarrassed at tripping like that that he'd yelled at all four of the boys indiscriminately before storming out to the bathroom as best as he could.

Ron had followed him and had wordlessly helped him as had become their ritual since he'd lost the ability to use his Oversight. Once he was washed and dressed, Harry had stumbled through an apology to his best friend, which had been quietly accepted. Ron had then apologised himself; he'd been making sure that the other boys didn't leave things out in their usual messy way but had been so tired the night before from training that he'd forgotten. That had made Harry feel even worse since he hadn't known Ron was doing that for him.

He'd then had to face the rather sheepish apologies from his dorm mates since they'd known what Ron was doing and why. Mostly they'd been doing it themselves once they'd realised what was going on and the only reason the bag had been left there was because they'd just been lazy. Neville in particular almost regressed back to old self in his apology and Harry had been forced to spend the time sorting it all out. But had still been some awkwardness left when the five Gryffindors had headed down to breakfast.

Breakfast hadn't gone that well either. Because he was a fraction tired, because he was still unsettled by not being able to use his Oversight and because of what had happened in the dorm that morning, he'd been a little clumsier than usual. He knocked over his own goblet of pumpkin juice which was bad enough but when he knocked over Ron's goblet of pumpkin juice right onto the book Hermione was reading as well as over her uniform and into her bag, he began feeling like he perhaps ought to go back to bed.

His first class, Charms, had actually been the high point of the day. Professor Flitwick had started teaching them how to use a charm that would enable them to identify people in a room. The spell worked on a number of levels depending on your skill level, with the lowest level simply telling you how many people were in the room and higher levels enabling you to determine whether you knew them and even things like their magical power. This one didn't require being able to see and as such Harry began to relax a bit, particularly when he found that he was able to get this one to work without much in the way of problems. Professor Flitwick had told him it was undoubtedly because he knew of and had used the Point Me spell. This spell was related to that one.

Unfortunately everything had just gone downhill from there. His next class had been a private Potions lesson with Snape and that had been an unmitigated disaster. He wasn't even entirely sure what had gone wrong. He'd been brewing Swelling Solution since that was one where he didn't have to rely on colour changes; he could just work on timing. Professor Snape had been marking essays at the front of the classroom but something had obviously alerted him. Harry wished he knew what it was since he hadn't known that anything was going wrong with his potion. All he'd known was that Snape had suddenly yelled out "Evanesco" and then started in on a very impressive lecture about the importance of following instructions. Harry had been stunned and more than a little hurt by this since he'd thought he was following instructions and he'd snapped back without thinking. That had led to Snape snarling at him, twenty points being deducted from Gryffindor's total, a detention on Friday evening and the order to get out. He'd obeyed, simmering with frustration and no little anger.

Lunch hadn't been much better than breakfast since he managed to knock over not only his own goblet again but also Neville's and when he was reaching for the bread, Seamus' as well. He'd then dunked his elbow into the casserole he'd chosen for lunch. Hermione had quickly cleaned off his robes and he'd given up on lunch at that point.

He had training after lunch and this time it was with Tien and Jun'ko since Master Nhean was back at the Guild Academy consulting with some of the other trainers and Warriors in a continued attempt to find the book he was looking for. His tiredness and the lack of coordination it caused had continued on here as well. Jun'ko had wanted to continue the sparring sessions but Harry hadn't been able to repeat what he'd done to her again. The three of them had gotten frustrated and without Master Nhean there to keep things calm, things had finally come to a head. Tien's frustration had gotten the better of all of them and he'd tried a move that he shouldn't have with a student of Harry's level of experience even if Harry had been able to use Oversight. Not surprisingly Harry hadn't been able to counter it and Tien sword had thumped painfully into his ribs. Jun'ko had been horrified and had yelled at Tien which had set a flare to Tien's temper. Tien had yelled a few things back at Jun'ko and then suggested Harry just wasn't trying. Harry's own temper had exploded at that and after yelling a few choice words at Tien, he'd transformed into Blaze and fled the castle.

Harry flung and arm over his eyes, rather pathetically wanting some kind of excuse for the

blackness that he could see and also wanting to hide the few tears that had managed to escape. He was getting sick of this, of not being able to use his Oversight, of having to rely on others all the time, of feeling helpless. And this day of disasters hadn't helped him at all. His train of thought was suddenly halted by the sound of snuffling and a relieved yip.

"Siri?" he said as he removed his arm and sat up.

"Nah, it's me, mate," came Ron's voice then he heard his friend sitting down next to him.

"Hey, Ron," Harry said in a subdued voice.

"Jun'ko told me what happened," Ron said in a casual tone then it became very dry. "Your day's just getting better and better, isn't it?"

The wry question suddenly seemed hilarious to Harry and he began to laugh rather helplessly, his tears flowing even as he did so. He felt Ron's wrap an arm around his shoulders and he leaned against his friend. When the tears and the laughter finally drained away, he wiped his face with his hands and sat up a bit. Ron shifted with him but did not remove his arm.

"Merlin, I hate this," Harry said quietly. "I thought it was bad before but at least then Master Nhean came along with all sorts of possibilities before it could all really sink in. But now it's real and no one knows if it's ever going to end."

"Of course it is," Ron said staunchly. "We know it's being caused by something Voldemort's doing so…eventually he's going to stop then you'll be able to use your Oversight again."

"How do you know that?" Harry demanded.

"Well…eventually you're going to face Voldemort and kill him and then it'll stop because most spells don't survive past the death of their caster," Ron replied. "Either way, it'll stop."

"Doesn't feel like it," Harry said softly.

"Why didn't you tell us it was getting this frustrating?" Ron asked with quiet exasperation. "We'd have helped you, you know? You don't have to do everything on your own. Even Dean and Seamus are willing to help however they can."

"I…just…I don't know," Harry said with resignation.

Ron sighed. "Ginny was right. You really do think you have to do everything for yourself. Hasn't all of this stuff we've been doing with the Battle Guard taught you that you can rely on us to help? And that we don't think it's a burden or a chore or a pain in the arse or anything like that. We're not the bloody Dursleys after all."

Ron sounded so indignant at that last that a soft laugh was forced out of Harry.

"I know you're not," he said with chagrin. "I guess it's just…old habits die hard."

"Yeah," Ron said on the end of a sigh. "I just wish it would die a little faster." He paused for a moment. "Has Master Nhean found anything yet?"

Harry shook his head. "That's why he wasn't there at training today. He's back at the Academy

speaking with some people there. He still can't find that book he's so sure exists."

"You don't think it exists?" Ron asked curiously.

"I'm not sure," Harry said with a shrug. "I mean, Master Nhean's so sure he's read about something similar to what's happening to me but the longer it takes the more I think he's mistaken."

"I don't think he would have got your hopes up if he didn't think there was something to it," Ron replied. "He's probably just got to figure out which of the sixty gazillion books he's read holds the information he wants."

Harry gave a snort of amusement. "Not sure he's read that many but I suppose you've got a point there. If it was something he read in passing he might have a problem remembering what book comes from."

"Exactly," Ron said encouragingly. "I'm sure he'll find it. Maybe it'll even tell us what Voldemort's doing."

"Yeah, I think that's what Master Nhean thinks as well," Harry said with a sigh.

"We ought to get back," Ron said after a short silence. "I've got no idea where we are in the Forest and if you've led me near those bloody spiders again, I'm going to kill you."

Harry laughed and got to his feet. "I don't think we're near Aragog's lair. I'm pretty sure I headed in a different direction but yeah, you're right. We'd better go back. I need to clear things up with Jun'ko and Tien anyway."

The two boys changed into their canine forms and they followed their trail out of the Forest. As they loped up towards the castle they saw the rest of the Battle Guard sitting on the steps, waiting for them. Harry and Ron changed back when they got close to the steps then Ron let Harry take his arm and led him over to the group. A few quiet words told Harry where to sit then Ginny pressed his cane into his hands.

"Okay there, Harry?" she asked softly, letting her hands rest on his shoulders.

Harry picked up one of her hands and kissed the palm. "Yeah," he said. "At least, mostly."

"Tien asked me to ask you if you'd come and speak to him sometime tonight at his rooms," she said. "He looked very sheepish and I think he wants to apologise for whatever happened in your training session."

Harry nodded. "Yeah, okay."

A companionable silence fell among the six friends and Harry felt himself slowly relax. After nearly half an hour he tightened his hands around his cane and got to his feet.

"I'd better go and speak to Tien," he said.

"Need help?" Ron asked bluntly.

Harry smiled ruefully. "No, not this time. I do know how to find my way around Hogwarts."

His friends chuckled and Harry made his way up the stairs and through the door, his cane tapping lightly on the floor n front of him. He knew where Tien's rooms were and it didn't take him long to make his way there. He paused for a moment then knocked on the door.

"Harry," Tien said with relief after Harry heard the door open. "Come in."

Harry walked in and let the Night Warrior guide him to a chair.

"How are your ribs?" Jun'ko asked, her voice coming from next to him.

"Sore. Bruised," Harry replied flatly.

"I am sorry," Tien said with deep chagrin. "I don't know what got into me."

"I was trying," Harry said in an injured tone. "I don't know why I couldn't do anything today. I've been having a really bad day all around. I woke up tired and frustrated and everything that could possibly go wrong today, has gone wrong."

"This damn thing with your Oversight has got us all on edge, I think," Jun'ko said, sounding tired. "If it could happen to you, who's to say it couldn't happen to any other Night Warrior? I think that's the thing that's really to blame for what happened today."

"It's still no excuse for what I did," Tien said guiltily. "Have you seen Madam Pomfrey about that bruise?"

"Not yet," Harry replied with a grimace. "I'll go after I leave here."

"Tell her not to yell at you," Tien said. "Tell it was my fault and she can yell at me."

"I'll hold you to that," Harry said with a small smile. "Don't worry about it, Tien. Let's just write it off to the culmination of my really horrible day. I had the thought at breakfast that I should just go back to bed. Maybe I should have done just that."

Tien made an indistinct noise as Harry got to his feet and headed for the door. As he left the room, he heard Jun'ko say something to Tien in a soft tone but he didn't try and work out what it was. His ribs were really starting to hurt now and he knew he'd better get down to the Hospital Wing. He paused just after he walked in the door and took a deep breath, letting it out slowly before speaking.

"Madam Pomfrey?"

"Ah, there you are, Mr Potter," the mediwitch said briskly from the direction of her office. "Miss Weasley told me to expect you."

Harry sighed with exasperation but, after a moment of consideration, mentally forgave his girlfriend. After everything they'd talked about, he could hardly fault her for worrying about him.

"I'm sure she did," he said ruefully.

"What happened this time?" Madam Pomfrey asked as she walked over, her voice full of brisk sympathy.

Harry groped for the nearest bed and leaned his cane against it. He then pulled his shirt up to reveal the livid bruise on his ribcage.

"How on earth did you earn that?" Madam Pomfrey asked, sounding slightly scandalised then he felt her cool hands touch the bruise gently.

From the tone of her voice and the pain that erupted at her touch, he realised the injury was perhaps a bit worse than he'd thought and that his own internal problems had stopped him from realising this until now.

He hissed with pain. "Uh, Tien got a little overly enthusiastic this afternoon."

Madam Pomfrey guided him over to the side of the bed he was standing next to and urged him to sit. He felt her touch the bruise again then she murmured a few words under her breath. The pain subsided to a mere whisper and a great deal of the discomfort disappeared as well. He heard her bustle away and then the clinking of glass. He then heard her return and she pressed a goblet into his hand.

"Drink all of that, Mr Potter," she said kindly.

Harry did as she asked, grimacing at the bitter, slightly acidic taste of the potion. Madam Pomfrey took the empty goblet from his hand and he heard the soft thunk of it landing on the nearby bedside table. He then felt Madam Pomfrey's fingers press against the bruise almost experimentally.

"How much does that hurt?" she asked.

"Not that much," Harry said with surprise. "Kind of like pressing on an ordinary bruise."

"Well then, Mr Potter, I won't require you to stay here overnight," Madam Pomfrey replied, chuckling a little at Harry's sigh of relief. "You were very lucky. Whatever it was that caused that bruise could quite easily have broken your ribs. I think I shall be having a little chat with Mr Nguyen about his training methods."

Harry swallowed a grin and groped around for his cane. Once we found it, he lowered himself off the bed.

"May I go now?" he asked as politely as he could.

"Yes," Madam Pomfrey said with amusement. "But if those ribs of yours start to hurt again, come and see me immediately. Immediately, Mr Potter. Understand?"

"Yes, ma'am," Harry said quickly then he tapped his way out of the Hospital Wing as fast as was polite.

When he walked out of the door, the sound of quiet voices alerted him to the fact that there were people waiting in the corridor. A moment later he recognised the voices and he grinned in that direction.

"She said I don't have to stay," he announced with a reasonable amount of cheer.

"We noticed," Ron said dryly. "How did you manage that? She usually likes to keep you there for at least one night."

"Tell me about it," Harry said with a groan. "But once she finished treating my ribs it didn't hurt enough for her to make me stay."

"Lucky you," Ginny said as she slid her hand into his.

"You told on me," he said to her with a small smile.

"Yes and I freely admit I had no compunctions about doing it," she said airily. "If Jun'ko was as worried as she was then I knew it couldn't have been something petty."

"Fair enough, I suppose," Harry said, sounding rather put-upon though the smile was still on his face.

"You're not upset?" Ginny asked carefully.

"No," Harry replied, giving her hand a gentle squeeze. "I'm trying to remember that whole I should let other people help me thing after all."

"Gee, not bad, Harry," Ron said with a grin. "It's only taken you seventeen years to figure that out. I'm impressed."

Harry's eyes narrowed as he judged where Ron was by the direction of his voice then he quickly lifted his cane, stepped forward so that he could get around Ginny and poked his best friend in the stomach.

"Nice one, Harry," Neville said with amused admiration as Ron complained with vociferous amusement.

"Yes, I thought so," Harry replied with smug satisfaction.

Ron snickered then reached around his sister and whapped Harry lightly on the back of the head.

"Hey! No hitting the blind, injured guy!" Harry protested with a laugh.

"I've said it before and I'll say it again…the blind, injured guy could single-handedly wipe the floor with my backside," Ron said, struggling to hold in his laughter, something that was common to all of them by now.

"That doesn't mean you can just go around hitting me," Harry protested while trying not to laugh.

"Why not?" Ron countered.

"I'll get all bruised and then Madam Pomfrey will yell at me," Harry said logically.

"He's got a point there," Hermione said with mock-seriousness. "No one wants to get yelled at by Madam Pomfrey."

"She won't be yelling at me so why should I care?" Ron asked airily.

"Because I'll tell Ginny, she'll tell Hermione and she'll get you for me," Harry replied with a grin.

"Hey! That's not fair!" Ron protested, ignoring the snickers from the others.

"And hitting me is?" Harry said calmly.

"Well…yeah," Ron said in a tone that had connotations of 'well, duh' in it.

Harry paused for a moment then said with incredible dryness, "Gee, thanks, Ron."

That was enough to set everyone off and the whole group burst out into roars of laughter as they walked into the Great Hall.

Chapter 32

Nhean stared down at the book in front of him and frowned. He was tucked in a carrel at the very back of the Academy library and he was surrounded on all sides by books, piled on the desk, the floor and a couple of chairs he'd appropriated. His search had been long and frustrating and largely unsuccessful but finally he'd managed to find the reference he'd been looking for. Nearly five hundred years ago a Dark wizard and his followers made an attempt to wipe out the Guild entirely. They had come perilously close to succeeding and it had only been due to the actions of some of the Trainers that the attempt had failed.

He leaned back in his chair and sighed. Unfortunately there wasn't much in the way of details as to just what this Dark wizard had done that enabled him to kill so many highly trained and skilled Warriors. Nor was there much in the way of detail about why the Trainers had succeeded where the Warriors failed.

"Have you had any luck in your search?"

Nhean looked up to see Ichiro Takao, the Head of the Council, standing beside him.

"Some," he said, his frustration plain to see even for a Night Warrior. "I have found the reference I remembered but unfortunately there is little detail."

"Which reference?" Ichiro said as he took the pile of books off one of the chairs and sat down.

"It dates back to just over five hundred years ago," Nhean explained. "The Dark Wizard, Nicolai Toventsky."

"Ah, the one that almost managed to destroy us," Ichiro said with understanding. "I remember. He managed to kill every Warrior that was sent against him but was eventually killed by the Trainers. Am I correct?"

"Absolutely correct," Nhean replied. "And therein lies the problem. No Warriors survived to tell anyone what happened to make them so vulnerable to Toventsky and what ever it was clearly did not affect the Trainers."

"Intriguing," Ichiro said thoughtfully. "So it must be something that affects the blind."

Nhean glanced down at the book and tapped his finger against one section. "Maybe," he said. "But I am not sure. There is a single mention of an Apprentice escaping from Toventsky."

"Did they not question the Apprentice?" Ichiro asked.

"Yes but there was little he could tell them," Nhean replied. "He was very new to the Guild. He and the Warrior that found him had been ambushed on their way to the Academy so that he could begin his training. He had gone through the ritual of acceptance but had not yet received his sword or learnt the Oversight spell. He told them that Toventsky mocked the Warrior and called him a 'blind fool' and even asked if he enjoyed stumbling around like the mole he was. The lad couldn't understand this since his parents had told him that the Warrior was quite graceful in his movements."

Ichiro froze and gripped Nhean's arm with one hand. "Nhean, could the Oversight spell have been affected? Other than skill, the only difference between the Apprentice and the Warrior was the use of the Oversight spell. It would explain the stumbling comment."

"But the spell was designed to be impervious to outside tampering," Nhean objected. "We've spent centuries experimenting to make sure that part of it is absolute."

Ichiro let go of Nhean's arm and slumped down. "Ah, true."

"But you are right," Nhean continued. "It is an explanation and certainly gives an excellent reason as to why Harry is unable to use his Oversight."

"How is he coping with that?" Ichiro asked, his concern obvious in his voice. "He is very young and I know Warriors with three times his experience who would not react well." He paused. "For that matter, I'm not sure I would react that well."

"He is…coping," Nhean said grimly. "But I would not say more than that. He grasped the concept of the Oversight spell very quickly ad as such did not actually spend that much time truly blind. He is finding that sensation to be…intimidating and distressing."

"Is there anything the Guild can do to help?" Ichiro asked plainly.

Nhean sighed. "Not really. Tien and Jun'ko are doing all they can as are Harry's friends. Perhaps the only way the Guild can help is to try and discover what is happening."

"That we can do," Ichiro said. "I shall put some of our best people on it." He paused and smiled. "You do realise I'm not just doing this for Harry's sake?"

"Of course," Nhean said with a small laugh. "If someone else can repeat what has happened to Harry and perhaps to the Night Warriors of five hundred years ago then they could attack us all."

Ichiro clapped him on the shoulder. "Good. I knew you'd understand. Look, you've found that there is an answer to what's going on…at least a possible answer. Let us get on with the actual research and you go back to Hogwarts and keep training Harry. If this is being done by Voldemort then Harry will need all the preparation time he can get."

"True," Nhean said with a reluctant nod. "Very well. You'll contact me the moment you find anything?"

"Of course," Ichiro replied.

Nhean nodded again and started to separate the books into those relevant and those that could be returned to the shelves. While he did this, Ichiro left to speak to some of those he wanted to do this research and they returned to claim the books. Once that was done, Nhean returned to Hogwarts.

The next few weeks passed with no change in Harry's ability to use Oversight and little progress being made by the researchers at the Guild. Ichiro's words about Voldemort kept coming back to Nhean and he stepped up the training of both Harry and his Battle Guard and the adults. After three weeks of this training, Harry was at least marginally comfortable with his current blindness.

He was by no means happy and everyone could see he was becoming prone to the bouts of moodiness and fits of anger that he once used to indulge in.

He was also falling back into his old bad habit of trying to avoid everyone else but this time his friends would not let him do that, even if that meant putting up with his bad moods and yelling. After Ginny tore strips off him a few times, the bouts of yelling dropped but he still remained withdrawn and depressed and the number of people worrying about him started to rapidly increase.

Harry was sitting in his Transfiguration class, surrounded by Ron, Hermione and Neville and barely listening to Professor McGonagall when there was a knock on the door. Professor McGonagall broke off in mid-sentence and walked over to answer it.

"Ah, Minerva," came Nhean's voice, sounding oddly triumphant. "I was wondering if I might borrow Mr Potter for a while."

"Certainly," Minerva said, her curiousity rising at Nhean expression of suppressed jubilation.

Harry had risen at Master Nhean's words and Ron had quickly shoved his things into his bag for him. Harry murmured a word of thanks as he took the bag and picked up his cane, quickly tapping his way to the door of the classroom.

"Come, Harry, we've had something of a breakthrough," Nhean said, the jubilation and triumph becoming more apparent in his voice as he led Harry down the corridor.

"What kind of breakthrough?" Harry asked, steadfastly refusing to allow himself to hope.

"Let's wait so that Ichiro can explain to properly," Nhean said.

Harry nodded and they were both silent as they walked along the corridors of the school. Harry firmly kept his emotions under check but he couldn't help the tiny thread of hope that wove through him as Nhean seemed to be almost radiating good cheer. Finally they reached the training room and Nhean opened the door and ushered Harry in. The first people to greet Harry were Tien and Jun'ko and then came a voice that Harry vaguely recognised.

"Ah, Harry, I'm not sure if you remember me," the voice said. "I'm Ichiro Takao."

Harry blinked then the name came to him. "You're the Head of the Council."

"Yes, indeed," Ichiro said cheerfully. "I presume Nhean told you we were going all out to try and discover why your Oversight is not working." Harry nodded and Ichiro continued. "It was a matter of some importance to us, as you can imagine, since if it happened to you…"

"It could happen to someone else," Harry finished for him. "Yes, that had occurred to me."

"We think we know what's happened," Ichiro said bluntly. "Nhean managed to find the book he'd remembered and our researchers were then able to fill in the missing pieces of the puzzle. Did Nhean tell you what he'd found?"

Harry nodded. "There was a Dark wizard who attacked the Guild."

"Exactly!" Ichiro said as he took Harry's elbow and led him over to a seat. The group sat down and Ichiro continued.

"Once we had the reference we were able to start asking questions and searching for more written records," Ichiro said, his voice sounding tense and excited. "We eventually found what we were looking for in a couple of obscure Dark Arts tomes we dug up in some unsavoury bookstores in Russia. Nicolai Toventsky, the Dark wizard in question, discovered a method of…blanking out the Oversight spell."

"I thought other people's magic couldn't affect the Oversight spell," Harry objected, his hands wrapped tightly around his cane.

"It can't," Ichiro said firmly. " And Toventsky knew that. Somehow he either found out or managed to work out how the Oversight spell works and his spell doesn't even touch the Oversight spell. Tell me, Harry, how does the Oversight spell work?"

Harry frowned as he thought back to some of the very first lessons he'd had with Master Nhean.

"It…acts similar to a dye, doesn't it?" he said slowly. "It…highlights the magical energy in the Warrior's field of vision."

"Absolutely correct," Ichiro replied. "Toventsky's spell is rather diabolical in its simplicity. The spell makes magical energy invisible to Oversight."

Silence fell throughout the room as Harry thought that one through.

"So…my Oversight is working, I just can't see it," Harry ventured. "But…how? If Voldemort is casting the spell then how is it affecting me? Is he casting the spell down the link between us?"

"That is the million galleon question," Ichiro said, sounding a bit deflated. "The spell can't be cast on an individual. It has to be cast on something inanimate. Toventsky apparently had cast it on a large basalt pillar which he and his people ended up lugging around on a large ox-drawn cart, would you believe? From what we could determine, the spell requires an enormous amount of power and numerous repetitions in order to create a wide field of effect. As to why it's affecting you…well, our scholars can only speculate it does indeed have something to do with your link to Voldemort. Some kind of backwashing effect or side effect thought that doesn't explain why it's constant…" His voice trailed off.

"Why didn't we think of that?" Nhean said with a hint of self-recrimination. "Harry, you've been disabling the Oversight when it doesn't work, haven't you?"

"Yes, the spell does draw on my magic even though it is a very low level," Harry said with a frown.

"Activate it and leave it active," Ichiro demanded. "If it is some kind of backwash effect then theoretically there should be some times when you'll be able to see."

"Voldemort must be taking the lead in casting the spell for the kind of continuous effects Harry's been experiencing," Tien observed then he paused. "Assuming it is a backwash effect of some description."

"Yes, leave it active," Nhean said thoughtfully. "Because when it comes back for good, we'll know

that Voldemort has completed the spell-casting and is ready to make an active move against you."

There was another pregnant silence at that and Harry swiftly established his Oversight.

"Is there any way of stopping this…backlash effect?" he asked once he'd done that.

"Occlumency, isn't working?" Nhean asked.

Harry shook his head. "No and I do keep my shields up all the time now. Professor Snape would have my head if I didn't."

"Hmm, maybe it has something to do with the…change in circumstances for Voldemort," Nhean mused. "Is Orinda able to do anything about it?"

Harry looked startled. "I…actually hadn't thought about asking him. I'll do it tonight."

"Do so," Nhean said decisively. "He was certainly quite helpful to Severus on a few occasions."

"This is going to sound a little callous," Tien said slowly, "but hear me out. Do we really want to stop the backlash effect?"

"Yes!" Harry said indignantly.

"What do you mean, Tien?" Nhean asked calmly.

"You said it yourself, Nhean," Tien said intently. "When the backlash effect stops then we'll know that Voldemort is ready to make his move. I think that is something that will be important for us to know."

"But that leaves me blind for who knows how long," Harry said, starting to sound upset and angry.

"So?" Tien said bluntly. "Harry, I spent nearly five years blind before I accepted what I was and what I could become. You don't think you could spend maybe a few weeks blind?"

Harry opened his mouth to object then shut it with a snap. His eyes flickered sightlessly between the directions Tien's and Nhean's voices had been coming from then dropped down towards the floor.

"I don't want to," he whispered.

"But will you?" Tien asked, his voice gentling.

Harry bit his lip as he stared sightlessly at the floor then he finally nodded once.

"Are you sure?" Nhean said. "Despite what Tien says I do think we could manage without you being forced to remain totally blind."

Harry hesitated for a long moment. "I…He's right, I guess. I don't like it very much but we need to be prepared." He paused again. "Besides if you're right about it being this spell then I guess any preparation I have at being unable to use the Oversight spell would be useful."

"Are you absolutely sure?" Nhean pressed.

Harry took a deep breath then nodded more confidently. "Yes."

None of the adults looked terribly happy at Harry's decision, not even Tien.

"I shall get our researchers to work on the effects of the spell," Ichiro said into the slightly uncomfortable silence. "Try and find out the specifics of how the spell Toventsky developed worked and try and come up with some estimates as to how long Voldemort might keep them working on this." He paused. "We'll also keep working on ways to stop the backlash effect, just in case."

Harry heard the sound of Ichiro Takao standing and taking a quiet leave of the others in the room. He then heard Tien and Jun'ko stand and leave.

"Harry, I am pleased you have had the courage to do this," Nhean said quietly once they were the only ones in the room. "But please remember that if at any time it becomes too much for you, let me know and we can see what Ichiro's researchers have come up with in terms of blocking the backlash."

Harry nodded. "I will," he said quietly.

"I must go and inform the Headmaster and various others about what we have found out," Nhean said, sounding worried and concerned. "Will you be alright?"

Harry nodded again. Nhean watched him worriedly for a long moment then walked out of the room. Harry sat where he was for a long moment then he gently rested his cane against the side of the chair. He shifted into Blaze and padded quietly out of the room.

Ginny padded quietly down the corridors of the school, following Blaze's trail. Once she'd managed the animagus transformation she'd found that the cat's sense of smell was just as good as a dog's and the trail left by Harry's Dire Wolf form was quite plain to her. As she tracked him she once again contemplated her current form. She was quite pleased with it although she had rolled her eyes more than once at the fact she was a marmalade cat rather than one of a different colour. When she'd asked Professor McGonagall, the Transfiguration Mistress said that animagus forms often tended to reflect important characteristics of the individual. She pointed out that in her cat form she had markings around her eyes that resembled her glasses and she said this was because by now they were so much part of her that she always saw herself mentally with them. Then Ginny remembered the markings on Rita Skeeter's beetle form that mimicked her glasses. Obviously she associated her mental self-image so much with her hair colour that her cat form had taken the closest possible choice. And so had Ron's now that she thought about it.

She shook her head to dismiss those errant thoughts and concentrated on following Blaze's trail. Master Nhean had asked to speak to her after he'd returned to the training room to find Harry's cane leaning against one of the chairs. He'd told her what had transpired and his suspicion that Harry had slipped off to brood somewhere. He hadn't even had to ask her to find Harry. She understood Harry's need to be alone on occasion but she was firmly convinced this wasn't one of those occasions.

She looked around the deserted corridor and wondered exactly where she was in the school. She had certainly never been in this area before though she would freely admit she'd never done the

kind of wandering around that Harry and even Ron had done. Suddenly up ahead she saw some movement and she gave an internal sigh of relief as she started padding forward a little quicker. She was halfway to where the movement had come from when she saw it again and realised that whoever was moving was nowhere near as large as Blaze. In fact the movement was coming from a much smaller creature.

She almost instinctively froze and crouched down in the shadows as she stared intently down the corridor. She was almost convinced that it was Mrs Norris when the movement suddenly stopped and a man appeared in the middle of the corridor. She crouched down even further and was forced to stifle a low growl when she recognised the man. It was Peter Pettigrew.

She twitched a little when Pettigrew jerked and shivered where he was standing then she screwed up her courage and crept closer, being careful to stay in the shadows. As she approached she realised that Pettigrew was muttering to himself.

"Must find…must find…Potter…no…no…James…my friend…my friend…" He broke off at this point and wrapped his arms around his chest, whimpering and moaning. Once he got himself under control he continued, "Killed him…didn't mean to…scared…scared…killed all my friends…kill Harry…find Harry."

Once again Pettigrew's rambling speech broke off into moans and whimpers and he slowly crouched down and began to rock back and forth. From what she could see, Ginny was fairly sure he was crying. After several minutes, he seemed to calm down a little and he raised his head and stared at the stone wall.

"Owe Harry," he muttered. "Owe him…saved my life…life debt…must obey…must obey…can't obey…must obey."

Pettigrew uttered a low wailing sound and scrambled to his feet, huddling against the wall as he rocked back and forth again.

Ginny watched this, frozen in shock and horror and tried to work out what she should do. If she left to try and find a teacher, she might not be able to find her way back and even if she did, Pettigrew would likely have moved on. But she wasn't sure she wanted to take him on either. Everything Sirius and Remus said indicated that Pettigrew wasn't much of a wizard but from what she could see, he was definitely insane right now and her father had mentioned several times in the past that insanity provided its own kind of power.

Before she could make any kind of decision Pettigrew shifted back into his rat form and to all appearances disappeared. Ginny made an odd mewling sound in surprise then leapt forward to where the animagus had been standing. There was no one there but she did find a small hole in the wall where one of the stones had partially crumbled. She nosed around the hole but apart from the smell of rat lingering around, she could neither see nor hear Wormtail.

She backed away from the hole then turned and sprinted down the corridor, following her own trail back to an area she recognised. Once there she shifted back and ran to the Headmaster's office. She came to a halt in front of the gargoyle and groaned.

"Um, cockroach clusters?" she said urgently. "Tooth-flossing stringmints, Bertie Botts Every Flavour Beans, Ice Mice."

"Lemon drops," came Snape's voice from behind her.

Ginny whipped around as the gargoyle leapt aside.

"Sometimes it is the obvious, Miss Weasley," Snape said dryly as he eyed her narrowly. "Were you planning on going up?"

"Oh! Yes!" Ginny gasped. "Er, thank you, sir."

With that Ginny ran up the stairs and knocked frantically on the office door.

"Ah, Miss Weasley," the Headmaster said when he opened the door. "Is there a problem with Harry?"

Dumbledore stood aside and ushered her in.

"Um, no…I don't think so," Ginny stammered. "Uh, that's not why I'm here, sir. Professor…I saw Pettigrew in the castle."

"Where?"

Ginny whipped around with a gasp to see that Snape had followed her into the office.

"I'm…not exactly sure," she said rather helplessly. "I was following Blaze's trail and I wasn't really paying attention to where I was."

"Could you find it again?" Dumbledore asked gently.

"Oh, yes," Ginny said with a quick nod. "I'd just have to follow my own trail." She paused. "Professor, Pettigrew didn't seem…very sane."

"Tell me everything," Dumbledore said calmly, gesturing for Ginny to sit down.

Ginny perched on the edge of one of the chairs as Dumbledore sat opposite her and Snape stood near the fireplace. She quickly told them everything that had happened finishing with Wormtail disappearing into the walls of the castle.

"Where is Mr Potter?" Snape asked after she'd finished.

"I'm…not sure," Ginny replied. "I was following his trail when I saw Pettigrew."

Snape frowned. "What is he hiding for this time?"

Ginny bit her lip. "I don't know. I didn't ask. But it was something to do with the Guild."

"I am aware of what is going on," Dumbledore said calmly. "Harry had ample reason to seek some solitude. But I think it might be best if we found both him and Mr Pettigrew. Miss Weasley, could you lead us to where you saw Pettigrew?"

Ginny leapt to her feet and shifted back into her cat form. She ran over to the door then stopped and looked back at the two men. Dumbledore chuckled and they followed her out of the room.

Chapter 33

Harry sat on the ledge of the window and wrapped his arms around his bent legs as he rested his chin on one knee. He knew it wouldn't be too long before someone came looking for him, it was just a matter of who. Sirius, Ron and Ginny would be able to track him the easiest but Ron also knew where he kept the Marauder's Map so it could be any of them really. He didn't mind that. He wasn't really upset per se so much as unsettled by the revelations Ichiro had made about what was affecting his Oversight.

A sudden scratching sound in the room drew his attention and he looked in the direction it had come from, scowling when he realised how useless that gesture was.

"Siri?" he said quietly. "Ron? Ginny?"

There was no answer. The odd rushing sound of the animagus transformation could be heard in the room then the sound of someone breathing could be heard.

"Who's there?" Harry said sharply, wishing he hadn't left his cane behind and that his Oversight worked.

The breathing increased in speed. "Potter," a vaguely familiar voice muttered.

Harry eased off the ledge he had been sitting on and quickly changed back into Blaze. He had his usual moment of disorientation as he adjusted to being able to see again then he looked over in the direction of the voice and breathing sounds. He let out a startled yelp as he recognised Pettigrew then a low growl began deep in his throat and chest.

The sound seemed to shake something deep inside the distracted Pettigrew and he whirled around, his eyes alert for the first time since he'd escaped from the Ministry. He saw the massive black canine standing in the shadows on the other side of the room and his eyes widened. Inside his abused and weakened brain something detached itself and he backed away from the canine until his back hit the stone wall of the room.

"P…Padfoot?" he stammered, fearful insanity lurking in his eyes. "Padfoot, old friend? Have you come to kill me? I…I didn't mean to betray you all. But wh…what could I do? He's s…so strong, so p…powerful."

The growling that had continued on through all of this faltered for a moment as Harry tried to work out what was going on. Then he saw the look in Pettigrew's eyes, saw the insanity lurking there and he hesitated. This hesitation seemed to encourage Pettigrew and he started to creep forward.

"P…please say you'll f…forgive me," Wormtail pleaded. "P…please say you w…won't kill me. You c…can't kill me. I…I owe H…Harry a life debt. I can't d…die with that still there. P…please."

He'd crept closer by this stage and Harry suddenly realised he was soon going to be close enough to tell that he wasn't Padfoot. He started growling again and gave a mental sigh of relief when Pettigrew squeaked and froze in place. He was still trying to work out what to do next when a small movement in the doorway caught his eye and he saw a small marmalade cat staring at both he and Pettigrew with worry and concern.

There was some more movement in the darkness of the doorway and this time it caught Pettigrew's attention. He was just about to look around when Harry growled more fiercely and let out a single angry bark. Pettigrew gave a shrill scream and immediately dropped into a crouch, huddling close to the floor.

"D…don't kill m…me, P…Padfoot," he whimpered. "P…please don't k…kill me."

Dumbledore and Snape stepped quietly into the room, sidestepping the marmalade cat that was Ginny. The Headmaster eyed the terrified former Marauder with sadness and regret while Snape looked at him with undisguised loathing and contempt. Dumbledore gave Harry a small nod then pointed his wand at Pettigrew.

"Stupefy," the Headmaster said kindly.

Pettigrew only had time to gasp and raise his head before the spell hit him. He collapsed into a boneless sprawl on the floor and did not move.

Harry stayed where he was as Ginny changed back and ran over to him.

"Are you alright?" she asked, her tone worried.

Harry made a small whuffing noise to calm her down and looked pointedly at the Headmaster.

"I believe we can count on Kingsley and Tonks to ensure that he will not escape again," Dumbledore said calmly. "And the teachers and I will look into how he managed to get in."

Harry gave a small bark and gave the Headmaster another significant look before turning that look on Ginny and Snape and returning to the Headmaster.

"Ah, I believe I understand what you're asking," Dumbledore said, his eyes twinkling. "Miss Weasley was attempting to locate you and discovered Mr Pettigrew. She returned to inform us and then led us up here where we arrived at a rather fortuitous time."

"Harry, why aren't you changing back?" Ginny asked, sounding worried.

Harry just gave her a long look.

"I believe that Mr Potter wishes to see what is going on, not merely hear it," Snape said, eyeing Harry with curiosity.

Harry gave a short bark.

"I can certainly understand that desire, Harry, but I do need to know what happened here," the Headmaster said gently.

Harry let out a gusty sigh and transformed back into his human form. The moment he did Ginny tucked her arm into his and leaned against him.

"I was up here…thinking when I heard something," Harry said, his expression rather unhappy. "A scratching sound. Then I heard the noise of someone using the animagus transformation. At first I thought it was Siri or Ron or Ginny but I didn't an answer. Then I heard someone say 'Potter' and the voice sounded kind of familiar. I changed into Blaze and saw it was Pettigrew. I…he saw me

then and he mistook me for Padfoot. He was…sort of raving. He didn't really look…sane."

"Nothing else happened before we arrived?" Dumbledore asked.

Harry shook his head. "No, he just spoke. He didn't cast any spells or anything."

"Good," the Headmaster said with relief. "Perhaps you are ready to return to the main part of the school with Miss Weasley?"

Harry hesitated then Ginny tightened her grip on his arm and he nodded. "Yes, sir."

Harry allowed Ginny to lead him out of the room, hesitating when he reached the Headmaster's side.

"Don't tell Siri until Pettigrew's gone," he pleaded quietly. "Please."

Dumbledore patted Harry's shoulder. "Of course."

With that the young couple left and walked down the corridor.

"Thanks," Harry said softly after several minutes.

"For what?" Ginny asked.

"For what you did," Harry elaborated. "I…don't know what I would have done if I'd been left to deal with Pettigrew on my own. The only way I could see him was as Blaze and I…really didn't want to attack him that way."

"It would have been very messy," Ginny said with a straight face.

"Ginny!" Harry said, sounding slightly scandalised.

Ginny laughed. "Sorry, I didn't mean it that way. I don't think it would have come to that. I think he would have run before you could have done anything and not even Blaze could follow a rat into the kind of places he could get into."

"You could," Harry said with a small smile.

"Not everywhere," Ginny corrected him. "Why do you think I went and got the Headmaster? I lost Pettigrew when he crawled into a hole in the wall."

"Good point," Harry said.

He was just about to continue when the blackness of his vision suddenly flickered. He came to an abrupt stop and gripped Ginny's arm tightly as he gasped.

"Harry?" Ginny said worriedly. "What's wrong?"

"I…I…something happened with my sight," Harry stammered as he stared intently into the darkness and willed the flicker to return.

Almost as thought it had heard him, the flickering started again and flashes of colours began to appear before Harry's eyes.

"Is whatever's happening stopping?" Ginny said, starting to sound excited.

"I…don't know," Harry said as the flickering intensified.

Just then the flickering stopped and the energy colours of the school bloomed in Harry's Oversight. He made a strangled noise and his grip tightened even further on Ginny's arm.

"Harry," Ginny said, biting her lips. "Your grip…"

Harry looked over at her, seeing her energy colours for the first time in weeks. He looked down at where his hands were holding her arm then realised how tightly he was gripping. He let go with an oath and caught her hand gently in his.

"I'm so sorry," he stammered.

"It's okay," Ginny said quickly. "Can you see me?"

A wide grin broke out on Harry's face. "Yes!" he said fervently.

Ginny gave a crow of delight and threw arms around Harry's neck in a fierce hug. Harry returned the hug then took a deep breath to settle himself down.

"There's no guarantee it'll stay like this," he said firmly as though he was trying to convince himself as much as Ginny. "We don't know whether this is just because Voldemort's found something else to do or because he's actually stopped what he's been doing."

"It's still a good sign," Ginny said firmly.

"I need to tell Master Nhean," Harry said suddenly. "He needs to know that his theory was right."

"Oh, he'll be in the training room," Ginny said with embarrassment realising she'd forgotten to return to the Night Master to tell him what was going on.

Harry immediately started down the corridor, giving his girlfriend an amused look as he did.

"He told you to go looking for me, didn't he?"

Ginny blushed. "Yes," she admitted. "He was worried. So was I for that matter."

Harry smiled wryly. "That's okay. I was kind of expecting someone to turn up eventually. That why when I heard the sound of someone using the animagus transformation I immediately assumed it was Siri or you or Ron."

"Why only the three of us?" Ginny asked as they continued walking down the corridor, their hands entwined.

Harry looked around at the energy flowing through the school and answered absently, "I knew I'd really gone deep into the school and probably the best way to find me would be to follow my scent trail. You, Ron and Siri are the best ones to do something like that."

Ginny chuckled. "I was actually doing that when I found Pettigrew." She paused. "Why didn't you want the Headmaster to tell Sirius? He's not likely to running off to try and kill him now, surely?"

"I don’t think he would but I also don’t want to take any chances," Harry replied. "I rather not tell him until Wormtail is safely in Ministry hands."

"Assuming they don’t lose him again," Ginny said sourly.

"Both Kingsley and Tonks have assured me that won’t happen," Harry said, his voice as sour as Ginny’s.

"Do you believe them?" Ginny asked.

"I believe them," Harry replied. "It’s just the rest of the Ministry I’m not so sure of."

By this stage they had reached the training room and they walked in to find Nhean waiting for them, pacing the far end of the room. He whirled around when he heard them enter and his eyes widened as he saw Harry walking across the room with confidence.

"We were right, weren’t we?' Nhean said with conviction. "Your Oversight is working again."

"It came back as we were walking down here," Harry said with a grin. "So about five or ten minutes, I guess."

"Let us hope that Voldemort is finished then," Nhean said then he paused. "That didn’t quite come out the way I wanted."

Harry laughed. "That’s okay, I understood what you were saying."

Nhean chuckled. "That’s good to hear. Now, I suggest that you and Ginny head back to your dormitories while I go and hunt up Tien and Jun’ko and send a message to Ichiro. We need to make some preparations in case this is over."

Harry sobered and nodded. "I’ll let the others know as well as the DA."

"Thank you," Nhean replied.

The Night Master then handed Harry his cane and ushered the two students out of the training room. They then separated as Harry and Ginny headed for Gryffindor Tower while Nhean all but ran towards the teacher’s rooms where Jun’ko and Tien had been housed.

Harry slowly woke the next morning and took a deep breath as he turned over. He smiled lazily as he opened his eyes and started his Oversight.

Blackness.

He sighed and closed his eyes, swallowing hard as he fought back the tears. He’d hoped this was over. As bad as that might be since it would mean that Voldemort was ready for whatever he was planning, at least it would mean that he could use his Oversight again. He let out a long, ragged sigh and groped for his cane. Once he had it in his hand, he got up and headed for the bathroom. He stood under the hot water until Ron came in and told him he’d be late for breakfast. The redhead also left a change of clothes for him and Harry slowly dried off and got dressed. Once that was done he trailed down the stairs to the common room.

"It didn't last," Ginny said sadly when he walked into the room.

"No," Harry said around the lump in his throat.

"Well," Ginny said uncomfortably. "That's…good and bad, I guess."

"Yeah," Harry said softly then he sighed and held out one hand. "Guess it's back to you leading me around."

Ginny walked over and tucked his hand in her arm. "I like leading you around," she said, her smile invading her voice. "Makes this much easier."

She leaned over at that point and kissed him. Harry was still for a moment then he kissed back.

"Guess it does," Harry said when they separated. "And I guess don't mind being led around that much after all."

"Good," Ginny said with a laugh. "Let's go down to breakfast."

Ginny led Harry out of the common room and down the stairs to the Great Hall. When they sat down at the Gryffindor table, Ginny stopped any questions with a shake of her head. The other Gryffindors in the Battle Guard nodded and Ron drew Harry into a discussion about Quidditch. Harry's answers were slightly disinterested at first then Ron made a suggestion that stood on the precipice between ludicrous and faintly possible and Harry's full attention was captured.

"What?" he said, his head whipping around to stare in Ron's direction.

"Thought that'd get your attention," Ron said with a wicked laugh. "So what do you think?"

"I think you're insane," Harry said with a shake of his head. "If you tried that on broom I think you'd fall off."

"Not of you flew fast enough," Ron objected.

Harry considered that. "Well, true but you'd have to fly pretty fast. Most brooms wouldn't be able to handle that kind of speed."

"Your Firebolt could," Ron insisted.

"Maybe," Harry said dubiously. "But I'm not sure I want to find out. If it can't I'll end up in the Hospital Wing again and Merlin only knows what Madam Pomfrey would do to me."

"Oh, yeah," Ron said with a laugh. "She'd probably kill you."

"Well, I doubt she'd do that," Harry said dryly. "She's a mediwitch after all but who knows what else she'd do to me."

"After all, those you can put you back together usually know how to take you apart," Ginny said with a grin.

"Exactly," Harry said fervently. "And considering how many times I've been in there, she's likely…"

He broke off with a gasp and closed his eyes reflexively as energy colours bloomed in front of him. He waved a hand at his friend to ward off the babbled questions then slowly opened his eyes. Once he'd gotten used to the colours he looked at his friends.

"It's back again," he said with a smile.

"Is it going to stay this time?" Hermione asked.

Harry shrugged as he looked around with relief. "I hope so. I'd better tell Master Nhean."

He got up from the bench and grabbed his cane before heading up towards the Head Table. Master Nhean was sitting next to Remus and was talking to both him and Sirius. When he saw Harry approaching with such confidence he fell silent. Remus and Sirius stared at him for a moment then turned to see what he was looking at.

"Your Oversight is back," Sirius exclaimed with delight.

"For now at least," Harry replied. "But it didn't last the night so it may disappear again."

"A pity we didn't think of this possibility earlier," Nhean said with regret. "It would be useful to know if they are finished now or this is just Voldemort taking a break."

"The question I'd like answered is why it's leaking down the link," Remus said with concern.

"I've been thinking about that," Nhean said. "If I recall correctly, no one is entirely sure how the link works, yes?"

"Correct," came Snape's voice from the other side of Sirius. "It certainly lies deeper than the level at which Legilimency and Occlumency normally work."

"Then my speculation is that the periods when Harry's Oversight doesn't work are when Voldemort is within the sphere of influence of the spell," Nhean explained. "Whether or not he is the one casting the spell is irrelevant. He is within the spell's range."

"So I could have been able to use my Oversight before this if I'd kept it active?" Harry said with chagrin.

"Well, yes," Nhean said sympathetically.

"Great," Harry muttered. "Then I've been through all of this for nothing."

"Not for nothing," Sirius said soberly. "We're pretty sure Voldemort's using this spell Nhean told us about and that means at least part of his plan becomes pretty obvious."

"True," Remus said slowly. "Voldemort's obviously heard of what happened when the spell was originally used. The Guild was nearly wiped out. He obviously intends to get you within the spell's influence somehow."

"At which point all the training you've been doing lately without using your Oversight suddenly becomes very important," Sirius finished.

"Yeah, I guess you're right," Harry said with a frown.

"What really need to know now is how long before Voldemort's finished with his set-up with the spell and how he intends to get Harry out of the school," Remus said grimly. "This isn't like…like the last time. Harry's family is here. There's nothing to lure him out."

"What about the Dursleys?" Harry said with a grimace, "I don't particularly like them but I wouldn't want either Aunt Petunia or Dudley to get hurt because of me. And they've used Dudley before."

"Damn! I forgot about that," Sirius said abruptly. "I'd better let Albus know. He'll be able to put some kind of protection in place."

"I doubt Dudley would listen to him but I think Aunt Petunia would," Harry said. "But I'm not sure Dudley even listens to his mother that much anymore, if he ever did."

"Let Dumbledore take care of that," Sirius said firmly. "And if you get any visions about them, don't go running off to try and save them. Come to one of us and let us deal with it."

"Don't worry, I won't," Harry said fervently.

Remus elbowed Sirius and gave him a sharp look. Sirius grimaced back at him and looked at Harry.

"Just don't leave the school grounds without letting someone know," Sirius said.

"Yeah, okay," Harry replied. "I'd better get going. I've got classes."

Harry turned and headed back towards his friends. He wasn't entirely sure how he felt about that conversation. He knew Professor Dumbledore would do his best to protect his Aunt and cousin, he just wasn't sure it would be enough. The blood protections wouldn't work anymore since he no longer considered Privet Drive to be home. Still maybe there was something he could do…

"Hey, Harry! Where are you going?" Ron said as Harry walked straight past them.

"I've got something I need to do," Harry replied. "I'll see you all in Charms."

With that he made his way out of the Great Hall and up to the owlery. He felt the same pang when he walked in that he always did at the reminder of Hedwig. He walked over to the small desk that held writing supplies and pulled his dictaquill out of his robes. He grabbed a sheet of parchment and positioned the dictaquill at the top. He paused to think for a moment then started talking, the quill obediently writing down his words.

> Dear Aunt Petunia,
>
> I know this is going to sound like a strange request but I just ask that you will believe me. I need for you and Dudley to leave England for a while. A few months at least, even a year. I know it seems like a bizarre suggestion but I really, really need you to do this. If you need money I can give you some. I just need you to be safe and those people who were dealing with Dudley before are after me and they may use you and Dudley to get to me. If you need to contact me, you can use this owl to reply.
>
> Harry Potter

Harry snatched the quill off the parchment and tucked it into his robes again. He picked up the piece of parchment and held it for a while as he tried to decide whether or not this was a smart idea. Finally he sighed and folded the parchment. He called an owl down and tied it to the bird's leg.

"Take this to Petunia Dursley at Number 4 Privet Drive, Surrey," he said almost reluctantly. "And wait for a reply please. It may be a while."

The owl gave a soft hoot then took off and Harry watched it fly out of the owlery, hoping he'd done the right thing.

Chapter 34

Two days later the owl Harry had sent returned and dropped a letter in front of him during dinner. Harry snatched it up and turned it over in his hands. He then held it out to Hermione.

"Who is it from?" he demanded.

Hermione took the letter and read the address on the back.

"It…it's from Petunia Dursley," she said with surprise.

Harry took the letter back and got to his feet. He grabbed his cane and turned towards the door of the Great Hall.

"Harry!"

Ginny's firm cry stopped him in his tracks. He didn't turn to look at her. His Oversight was once again not working and he didn't like just staring into the dark in the direction of someone.

"What?" he said quietly.

"I'm coming with you," she said and he felt her hand slip into his. "You'll need someone to read the letter to you."

"I have my…" he began.

"It's better this way," Ginny replied in a voice that brooked no opposition.

Harry considered that for a moment then he sighed. "Alright. And…I suppose if you're going to come, everyone else might as well come too."

"We were strongly considering doing that anyway," Ron said from beside him and Harry blinked. He hadn't heard Ron move though considering the noise level in the Great Hall that might explain it.

"Have I no privacy?" Harry demanded with returning amusement.

"When it comes to those Dursleys, no," Hermione replied tartly. "Now let's go. We're making a spectacle out of ourselves."

"What's unusual about that?" Neville asked dryly.

"Well, there are good spectacles and bad spectacles," Luna observed thoughtfully. "Then there are those horrible thick-rimmed spectacles Harry used to wear."

There was a moment of baffled silence from the group then they almost as one shook their heads and kept going. When you became friends with Luna Lovegood, you got used to the odd direction in which her brain worked and you didn't try too hard to follow her; doing that just led to confusion and headaches.

"Let's go to the Head Students' common room," Harry said into the slightly confused silence.

"Not the Room of Requirement?" Ron asked as he'd already been moving in that direction.

Harry shook his head. "I don't want anyone walking in on us and you know some of the DA like to use it for their own training."

"Fair enough," Ron said amiably.

The rest of the trip was made in silence and once the door was closed behind them and they were all sitting down, Harry handed the letter to Ginny.

"Read it out loud to everyone," he said abruptly.

"Wait a sec," Ron said. "Why did you write to her anyway?"

"I wanted to warn her that Voldemort might try something either with her or Dudley," Harry replied quietly. "I wanted her to leave for a while. Just until this is all over."

The others nodded then Ginny prised the envelope open and pulled out the letter. She opened it up and cleared her throat before starting.

> Dear Harry,
>
> You're right, that was a strange request but if I remember one thing about Lily's and your world, strange seems to be quite the norm. I hardly know what to make of your request though. I assume you are talking about those strange people who used Dudley before. I certainly don't want anyone to be hurt again so I will do what you want. Dudley will agree since I think I will suggest we go to America. He has always wanted to go there.
>
> I am afraid that I am going to have to ask you for money. What I make barely covers our day to day expenses with very little left for saving. Thankfully we had already paid off the mortgage on the house or we would no longer be able to afford to live here. In light of all that has happened, I shan't ask for a particular sum. I shall leave that to you.
>
> My only other question is this: How long do you wish for us to stay away? I can't imagine why you would want to keep us safe but I do appreciate your concern.
>
> Yours truly,
>
> Petunia Dursley

"That letter is the definition of awkward," Hermione said once Ginny finished.

"Not much of a surprise," Neville said dryly. "It's got to be a bit strange to her for Harry to actually care about what happens to her after what they did to him."

"Good point," Ron said. "How are you going to answer, Harry?"

"I'm going to send her the money," Harry replied firmly. "And I'm going to tell her to stay away for at least six months or until I tell them they can return."

"As simple as that?" Ginny asked.

"I don't like them," Harry said quietly. "But they are my family. And Voldemort knows how I'd react if they were threatened. I want to take them out of the equation."

Ginny grimaced then nodded. "Do you want me to write the letter for you?"

"Yes, please," Harry replied.

The two of them got up and walked over to Harry's desk. Ginny sat down and pulled out some parchment and a quill and ink. Harry leaned on the back of the chair and quietly dictated what he wanted to say. Once that was done, Ginny folded and sealed the letter and handed it to him.

"I'm going to go up and see Dumbledore," Harry announced. "Let him know what I've done."

"Do you want us to come?" Hermione asked.

Harry shook his head. "No…I'll be fine."

He quickly walked out of the room and the others watched him go with open concern.

The next few weeks were oddly tense. Petunia and Dudley had left the country to spend time in America. Harry had made note of the fact that neither of them mentioned Uncle Vernon. He wasn't sure what to make of that but since he actually found that he didn't care what happened to his uncle, he let it go. Once they were safe and out of the way, Harry was able to relax a bit. This was helped by the fact that his Oversight was still coming and going. So whatever Voldemort was doing was still ongoing.

Nhean had him, his Battle Guard, the four adults being trained and Jun'ko and Tien in nearly daily sessions. He insisted that Harry complete every one of these sessions without his Oversight, no matter what state it was in and he was now getting to the point where he was able to move with a fair amount of confidence. He still didn't like it. He still felt helpless and slightly unsure but he did know that he could do it. Using magic was the hardest because he couldn't see where he was aiming or whether he was having any effect. At least with the sword, he could feel the impact and know he was successful. But with magic he had to do what he could and hope for the best.

At the end of the three weeks, Master Nhean held him, along with Jun'ko and Tien, back after their training session. It had been a fairly brutal one with Nhean staging a fierce running battle and nearly everyone was heading for the Hospital Wing. Harry was one of the few who was not. Other than feeling tired and collecting some interesting bruises, he was pretty much unscathed…mostly because it had been the job of his Battle Guard to keep him that way using any and all methods possible. So he'd been shoved into corners or behind people, pulled to the floor and even jumped on a couple of times. It had been an interesting experience to say the least.

"Harry," Master Nhean said solemnly, breaking him out of his thoughts. "Ichiro contacted me last night and mentioned something I think we need to make a decision on."

"Oh?" Harry replied nervously. "What?"

"Bringing the Guild in," Nhean said. "Do you wish to formally request the Guild's aid? As a Night Warrior, you are entitled to make that request and the Council would definitely agree under these circumstances."

"Uh, I hadn't thought about it," Harry stammered.

"I would recommend that you do," Jun'ko said, all of her normal exuberance gone. "There's no doubt this is going to come down to something fairly apocalyptic in the end and you will need all the help you can get."

"Jun'ko's right," Tien added. "And the Guild also has a vested interest in making sure that people don't get ideas abut using Toventsky's spell. Calling us in formally would help with that. As a Guild member you have a responsibility on that score as well."

"What about the Headmaster?" Harry asked, stalling for time a little. "Didn't he say something about not wanting to alarm anyone?"

"I spoke to him this morning," Nhean replied. "He has agreed to allow them to come here if you make the request."

"Oh," Harry said with surprise. "He thinks it's that serious?"

"Yes," Nhean said bluntly.

"Oh," Harry said again then he took a deep breath. "Master Nhean, I would like to make a formal request for the assistance of the Guild."

Nhean bowed. "I shall pass that request along immediately. Jun'ko, Tien? I take it you will be joining me?"

"Yes," the two Night Warriors said almost in unison. "And we'll add our recommendations as well."

"We'll likely have an answer for you in the morning," Nhean said to Harry.

Harry nodded and took the dismissal for what it was. He slowly turned and walked out of the room, his cane tapping lightly in front of him. As he started up his Oversight, sighing with relief as it bloomed into being, he couldn't help but wonder what his decision was going to bring.

"My Lord!"

Voldemort/Draco looked up from the parchments he'd been perusing to see Antonin Dolohov hurrying across the room. The senior Death Eater dropped to his knees in front of his Lord and pressed his forehead to the ground.

"What is it, Antonin?" Voldemort/Draco asked lazily.

"It is done," Antonin said with triumph as he got to his feet. "The crystal cannot take anymore power and the radius of the effect sphere is just over six and a half feet."

Voldemort/Draco smiled cruelly. "Excellent! You and the rest of my Death Eaters have done well. You shall be well rewarded when I have gained control."

He rose to his feet and strode as best as he could towards the door, snarling inwardly at the limping gait that he'd inherited when he stole Draco's body. He could have done without that and the missing eye but under the circumstances he wasn't going to be overly choosy. It was certainly several steps above his last body after all. He didn't look to see whether Dolohov had followed him; he knew the other man would be obediently trailing behind him. He had them well trained this time. This body was young and full of power that he was able to add to his own. Disobedience was not tolerated and was punished severely.

He walked into the main ballroom and eyed the tall black quartz obelisk with satisfaction. Small darts of blue lightning crawled sluggishly over the quartz surface and the room practically thrummed with energy. He ignored the Death Eaters standing around the perimeter of the room and walked around the obelisk, chuckling with dark pleasure.

"Excellent," he crooned before turning and facing Antonin and the rest of the Death Eaters. "Now that it is finally ready we can proceed. Antonin, what is the situation regarding Potter's family?"

Antonin paled slightly. "Black and the werewolf have not budged from Hogwarts since Christmas and the Dursley woman and her son are gone. The people we questioned said the woman had come into some money and they had left on an extended holiday. It is impossible to reach the Dursley man. He is currently in solitary confinement in the Muggle prison he was sentenced to."

Voldemort/Draco snarled. That was inconvenient; he had hoped to use the Dursley woman and her son.

"What of Wormtail?" he demanded. "Where is he?"

Antonin paled even further and looked around. None of the others were willing to come to his aid, so he ploughed on.

"Wormtail was captured while at Hogwarts," he said with admirable calm. "The reports I have had say he has lost his mind."

"Not that he had much of a mind to begin with," Voldemort/Draco snarled. "Get him out. With the Dursley woman and her son gone, we need him to get Potter. You have two days. Do whatever you need to, use whoever you need to, just get him."

Antonin bowed deeply and hurried out of the room before his Lord could change his mind about punishing him. He gestured to a number of his fellow Death Eaters and they followed him rapidly. Voldemort/Draco watched him go then the turned to face the obelisk again.

"Get out," he snapped, not even bothering to look over his shoulder to see if the rest obeyed.

Antonin hurried along the corridors of Riddle Manor with his chosen colleagues following in his

wake.

"Who do you all know in the Ministry?" he asked grimly. "People who might be able to get us access to the little rat."

"The Aurors and the Unspeakables cleaned out their departments of anyone even remotely crooked," one man grumbled. "There's no one. And we don't have time to bend another to our will and do it subtly."

"We could use the Imperius but you're right, it's risky," another man said. "They're alert for that these days."

"I know someone."

Antonin turned to look at the speaker. It wasn't someone he'd chosen and he was surprised the man would join them

"Tybalt Parkinson," Antonin said with a lack on inflection. "I'm surprised you're willing to risk yourself on something like this."

Tybalt snorted. "This is a vital step in achieving our Lord's plans. If we succeed, we will be favoured. Always remember the overall plan, Dolohov."

Dolohov scowled. "Who is this contact of yours?"

"He's not a contact as such," Tybalt replied smoothly. "It is more a case of using the fuss that his… reappearance would cause to further our own aims."

"Reappearance?" Antonin said curiously then understanding dawned. "Fudge? You know where that useless little slug is?"

"Of course I do," Tybalt said with malicious amusement. "He has been my…guest for these last few months. You didn't think he escaped the Ministry teams on his own, did you?"

"I'd thought his disappearance was a little too clean for his level of intelligence," Antonin muttered. "So what's your plan?"

"We dump our beloved former Minister on the steps of the Ministry," Tybalt said. "In the chaos and confusion we make for the Aurors' cells. Pettigrew is still there, I can assure you. They do not wish to risk him making another escape and believe if he's right under their noses that won't happen. We grab him and floo out from the Auror Headquarters."

"Their floos are protected," one of the Death Eaters protested. "Only Aurors can use them."

"The Floo connection spells are something of a speciality of mine," Tybalt said slyly. "I can redirect them temporarily."

Dolohov thought that over for a moment. "I like it. It's definitely workable. We'll go in under glamours to give us the best possible chance." He looked over at Tybalt. "When can you be ready?"

"Tomorrow," Tybalt replied simply. "In the afternoon when most of the Aurors will be out on callouts. About 3pm?"

Dolohov nodded. "We'll meet at the Dog and Pony in Knockturn Alley at 2.45pm. Don't be late."

Tybalt and the others nodded and the group separated to make their preparations.

The next day Antonin was the first to arrive at the Dog and Pony and he casually handed over several galleons to the barman. That bought him a back room and silence and he settled in to wait for the others. Tybalt Parkinson was the next to arrive, bringing with him a dazed and cloaked Cornelius Fudge, and the rest arrived shortly afterwards.

"Give us time to get into position then you can apparate in with Fudge, Parkinson," Antonin said once everyone was present. "Apparate into a safe place and wait for the chaos. I'll give the signal to enter."

The others nodded and everyone except for Tybalt and Fudge slipped out of the room. After nearly fifteen minutes, he nodded to himself and grabbed Fudge. He pulled out his wand and pointed it at the former Minister of Magic.

"Imperius," he said firmly and then he whispered soft instructions to Fudge.

Once that was done, he tucked his wand away and pulling up the hood of his cloak. He gripped the other man's arm firmly and apparated them into the atrium of the Ministry. He then immediately apparated over to the side of the room and slid behind a large column, casting masking and notice-me-not spells as he did so. He immediately picked out where the other Death Eaters were hiding then settled in to watch the show for a while.

For a moment no one seemed to notice that Fudge was there then the portly man threw back the hood of his cloak and looked around indignantly.

"What is going on around here?" Fudge said angrily. "I am the Minister of Magic and I demand answers!"

The various Ministry workers and visitors who had been bustling around the atrium came to a halt and stared as the former Minister continued to bluster and rage. Then the shouts and exclamations started as they recognised who was standing there. Fudge looked tired and drawn under his anger and he was definitely a little the worse for wear but he was still clearly recognisable.

"It's Fudge!" an anonymous voice rang out and then the real chaos started. People rushed forward towards the former Minister while at the same time others rushed towards the lifts and the fireplaces. Within minutes the atrium was boiling with people and Dolohov chose that moment to send up a stream of green sparks. No one seemed to notice this signal in the excitement and the Death Eaters were able to make their way to the elevators without much fuss. Once there, they hurried into an empty lift and pushed the button for level two and the Auror Headquarters.

They were very careful emerging from the lift but they may as well not have been. The place was empty; clearly all of the Aurors who weren't out on calls were downstairs in the atrium. They hurried through until they reached the holding cells area. Only one cell was occupied at the moment and it took only a few seconds to blast the door open.

Antonin grimaced when he looked into the cell. Pettigrew was curled up in one corner, rocking back and forth and muttering to himself. He stepped forward and grabbed the dirty little man.

"Come on, Wormtail," he snapped with disgust.

Pettigrew looked up at him and it was all Antonin could do not to flinch away from that mad gaze.

"Potter," Wormtail moaned. "Sirius…Padfoot. Coming to get me."

"No, he's not," Antonin snarled. "Now, come on. The Dark Lord wishes to speak with you."

Wormtail whimpered but Antonin ignored him and dragged him out into the main room. Tybalt looked up from where he was fiddling with one of the fireplaces.

"Good, you got him," Parkinson snapped. "Let's get out of here."

Tybalt threw a large handful of floo powder into the fire with a brisk, "Parkinson Manor."

Antonin didn't hesitate; he simply dragged the protesting Pettigrew with him straight into the green flames. He emerged into a lavish decorated parlour and stepped away from the fire. Within minutes, the rest of the Death Eaters had arrived with Tybalt bringing up the rear.

"Well, that was smoothly done," Tybalt congratulated them all. "I thought it would be far more difficult."

"Your diversion was better than we thought," Antonin replied. "Come on, let's get this…thing back to our Lord."

Pettigrew was practically hanging from his merciless grip and was whimpering and muttering.

"Please," Tybalt said fastidiously. "He's ruining my carpet."

Antonin snickered and apparated to Riddle Manor, the others following. Once there, they found their resurrected Dark Lord in the ballroom, standing in front of the quartz obelisk.

"My Lord," Antonin said respectfully. "We have him."

Voldemort/Draco spun around and eyed them with surprise pleasure. "So you do and rather promptly too," he said with surprise. "A pity none of you were so…motivated last time."

The Death Eaters flinched and Antonin let go of Pettigrew. Wormtail fell to the floor with a thud and curled up, still whimpering and muttering to himself.

"Wormtail," Voldemort/Draco crooned. "Look at me, Wormtail."

The animagus gave a high-pitched whine then slowly climbed to his knees and looked at his Lord.

"Very good, Wormtail," Voldemort/Draco said, still in that unnerving croon. "Legilimens."

Wormtail yelped once then just knelt there and shivered violently. Nearly ten minutes went by before the Dark Lord let him go and when he did, Pettigrew collapsed to the floor again.

"He has his instructions," Voldemort/Draco told the others. "You will take him to Hogsmeade, to the gates of Hogwarts and let him go. He knows what to do." He turned back to Pettigrew. "Wormtail, change!"

Pettigrew shuddered where he was lying on the floor. For a long moment nothing happened then the little man changed into his rat form. The rat did not move, merely stayed where he was and shivered.

"You can take him," Voldemort/Draco said dismissively. "He won't do anything until you get him to the gates of Hogwarts."

The Death Eaters bowed and Dolohov bent down and picked up the almost unresponsive Wormtail. He left room and made his way back to the manor's apparition point.

"I'll do this," he said to the others who had followed him. "It seems easy enough."

"Let us hope the idiot does not fail," Tybalt growled, eyeing the rat with distaste.

"Thank you for your help, Tybalt," Antonin said with a small bow. "I owe you a favour."

Tybalt returned the bow. "We are all in this together, Antonin. And I know you do."

Antonin apparated out with Tybalt's dark laughter echoing in his ears and he shuddered, wondering what his payment for that favour would be. He dismissed that thought when he arrived in Hogsmeade and concentrated on getting up to the Hogwarts gates without being seen. Once there, he put Wormtail down on the ground and nudged the rat harshly with his boot.

"Here you are," he snapped. "Go and do what you've been ordered."

The little rat crouched there and shivered for a moment then he jerked into action and scurried up the path. Antonin watched him go and shook his head.

"What a thin branch to rest all our hopes on," he muttered before he apparated out.

Chapter 35

Harry and his friends were walking across the Entrance Hall towards the Great Hall for dinner when the doors to the school swung open. They looked over curiously and were surprised to see Kingsley Shacklebolt looking tired, frustrated and just a touch guilty. The Auror looked around and nodded grimly when he saw Harry and his friends.

"Harry," he said sombrely. "I was hoping to find you. I need to speak to you and the Headmaster. And we'd better have Black, Lupin and Snape as well as the Headmaster, the Deputy Headmistress and Master Nhean."

"This isn't good news, is it?" Harry said flatly.

"No, it's not," Kingsley replied heavily.

Harry eyed him for a moment then he sent his friends after the people needed. When they had all gathered in the Entrance Hall, Kingsley spoke again.

"I have some bad news but I'd rather tell you all privately," he said.

"Perhaps the Guild training room would be best for such a large group," Nhean suggested.

Dumbledore nodded and led them all to the classroom. When they got there, he shut the door behind them and sealed the room with wards.

"Now, Kingsley, what has happened?" he said calmly.

Kingsley took a deep breath. "Pettigrew escaped again," he said bluntly.

There was a moment of startled silence then Sirius screamed, "WHAT?"

"How could you let that happen?" Remus demanded at almost the same time.

"I should have dealt with him myself and damn the consequences," Sirius ground out in a snarling growl.

"Calm down, everyone," Dumbledore said in a voice that froze them all to the spot. He then turned back to Kingsley and continued in a calm voice, "Kingsley, perhaps you would be so good as to tell us how this happened?"

"Fudge reappeared," Kingsley said with pent-up frustration. "He just appeared in the atrium this afternoon, told everyone he was the Minister of Magic and demanded to know what was going on. Most of the Aurors were out on various calls and whatnot and those who were still there all left to deal with Fudge and the crowd that had gathered. Fudge was obviously just a decoy because when they got back to the Auror's Department, Pettigrew's cell had been blasted open and he was gone. We're still investigating to work out the whys and wherefores but I thought it was important to let you all know what had happened immediately."

"Thank you, Kingsley," Dumbledore said, overriding the fuming Sirius. "Minerva, can I ask you to do a search of the more…rat-friendly areas of the school? We must assume Mr Pettigrew is coming here."

"I'm coming with you," Ginny said firmly, blushing a little under the sudden welter of gazes that were turned on her.

"Thank you, Miss Weasley," Professor McGonagall said with a secretive little smile. "I believe that will make the task much easier."

She gathered Ginny and they left the room, shifting into their cat form almost before they got out of the door.

"Nhean, I think you need to inform the Guild that we will need their aid urgently," Dumbledore continued.

Master Nhean nodded and disappeared from the room without a word.

"Kingsley, we will let you go since I'm sure you have a great deal to do in the aftermath of today's events," the Headmaster continued.

"Thank you, Albus," Kingsley replied. "I'll get a full report on the day's activities to you as soon as possible."

With that, the tall black man hurried out of the room and no one was entirely sure whether it was to get back to his work or to get away from Sirius and Remus…or both.

Now Dumbledore turned his attention to Sirius and Remus and he became the man Harry had seen in the Ministry, the one where he had no doubts why Voldemort feared him more than any one else.

"Enough!" he said, his voice cutting sharply through the room.

Both Sirius and Remus jumped and looked mulish and frustrated.

"They let him get away…again!" Sirius almost pleaded.

"I know," Dumbledore said firmly. "But there is no point getting angry. We have other things we need to do. I need you and Remus to go with Severus and fortify the wards. If Tom is indeed making his move then we need to be prepared."

He paused to stare archly at Sirius and Remus.

"What about Harry?" the animagus demanded.

"I will personally escort Harry and his friend back to their dormitories," Dumbledore informed him crisply. "Will that satisfy you?"

Sirius backed down at Dumbledore's warning look and he nodded sullenly. Dumbledore eyed him for a moment longer then looked at Harry.

"I know you dislike being confined, Harry, but I must ask that you stay in your dormitory tonight," Dumbledore said. "With any luck we'll find Pettigrew tonight, if not we'll re-evaluate things tomorrow morning."

Harry shot a look at his godfather and guardian and any protests he'd been about to make died on his lips. The two men were looking so worried and concerned that he obediently nodded.

"Come on, Black, Lupin," Snape said briskly but not unkindly. "We have work to do."

Sirius glared at the Potions Master but finally Remus nudged him and they left reluctantly. The Headmaster walked over and joined Harry and his friends.

"Shall we go?" he said calmly.

The Headmaster was true to his word. He walked all the way up to the portrait of the Fat Lady and waited while Harry, Ron, Hermione and Neville crawled through; he then walked Luna to the entrance of the Ravenclaw dormitory.

Inside the Gryffindor common room, Ron looked at the others. "So what do we do now?"

Harry shrugged. "Wait, I guess. I'm not leaving though. After Siri's reaction tonight, it'd kill him if anything happened to me because I was stupid."

"Do you think Ginny or Professor McGonagall will find Wormtail?" Neville asked as they moved over to a quiet corner.

"I don't know," Harry said. "Pettigrew knows the castle pretty well but on the other hand, he's definitely insane so that might give them an advantage."

"I hate this," Ron said to no one in particular.

No one disagreed with him and they lapsed into a nervous silence.

Ginny returned just before midnight and reported that they found plenty of scent trails but no actual sign of Wormtail. She was a bit disgruntled that Professor McGonagall had sent her back to the dorm but had to subside when she nearly fell asleep on the couch when she was telling them what had happened.

They took that as their cue to go to bed and the three boys trailed up the stairs to their dorm. Seamus and Dean were already asleep so they were quiet as they got ready. Harry lay awake in his bed, listening to first Ron then Neville fall asleep and start snoring. He barely noticed when he too fell asleep.

It was nearly an hour later when there was movement in the doorway of the dorm. A rat with one silver paw scuttled into the room and hesitated at the foot of Harry's bed. A moment later, the rat was gone and a shabby, rat-like man stood in its place. The man rocked from foot to foot as he stared at the sleeping boy and he looked torn and slightly disorientated. Finally his body gave a large jerk and he skittered around to the side of the bed. He pulled a ratty-looking handkerchief and a small vial out of his robes. He pulled the lid of the vial off with his teeth and poured the contents onto the handkerchief. He tossed the vial on the floor then leaned forward and gently placed the handkerchief over Harry's mouth and nose.

Harry breathed in as he slept then he jerked awake as the sweet but slightly acrid odour of the potion hit home. Pettigrew clamped the handkerchief down tighter and gripped Harry's shoulder with his free hand. That was all it took, in his surprise Harry had taken a deep breath and the potion quickly knocked him out. Once Pettigrew was sure that the boy was unconscious, he tossed the handkerchief to the floor then pulled the blankets and sheets back.

After a moment of thought, he picked up the cane leaning against the bedside table and shrank it, tucking it into his pocket as he muttered, "Life debt."

He then turned back to the bed and lifted Harry up with an audible grunt. He staggered out of the dormitory, pausing regularly as he went down the stairs to check for any sound. Once he got out of the dormitory he headed for the secret passage that led to Honeydukes, apparating them both out of there as soon as he got past the Hogwarts wards.

Ron shifted and turned over as the morning light came through the window and hit his face. He'd always liked his bed because of that. As long as he left the curtains around his bed just slightly open, he got an automatic wake-up call that woke him slowly. He was tempted to burrow under the blankets and get some more sleep but now that he was awake and knew it was morning, he knew that Neville's snores would keep him awake. He stretched and scrubbed his face with on hand before pushing the blankets back and crawling out of bed.

He stretched again and glanced over at Harry's bed. The curtains were open and the bed was empty. Ron wasn't overly surprised; Harry didn't sleep well at the best of times. With the news that Voldemort was about to get serious, it was no surprise Harry was up early.

Ron ran a hand through his hair, making it stand up even more, and he staggered into the bathroom. Once he had washed, he came back into the dorm and got dressed for the day. He then yawned again and clattered downstairs to find Harry. He frowned when he got to the common room. Harry wasn't there and after what he'd said the previous night, Ron was sure that Harry wouldn't have left without them. He thought for a moment then crawled out through the entry hole and stood in front of the Fat Lady.

"Morning," he said to the portrait. "Has Harry come out this morning?"

"Not this morning, dear," the Fat Lady replied blearily. "I think he was taken down to the Hospital Wing again. He was being carried last time I saw him."

Ron froze as what the Fat Lady had just said sunk in. "When was this, ma'am?" he said as politely as he could manage.

"Ooh, very early in the morning, maybe one or two o'clock," the Fat Lady said with a yawn. "He was being carried by a short, rather scruffy-looking man."

"Thank you," Ron said stiffly then he turned and shifted into his red setter form, Rohan. He sprinted through the quiet, empty corridors of the school until he got to the Headmaster's office where he shifted back. He hesitated in front of the gargoyle as he tried to remember to password.

"Uh, lemon drops? Cockroach clusters? Blood pops? Ice mice? Bertie Botts Every Flavour Beans? Chocolate frogs?"

The gargoyle leapt aside at that last one and Ron heaving a sigh of relief as he bounded up the revolving staircase three at a time. He pounded on the door to the Headmaster's office impatiently and was surprised when it opened almost immediately to reveal Minerva McGonagall. Behind her he could the Headmaster, Snape, Flitwick, Sirius and Remus all gathered around a model of the school.

"Mr Weasley!" Professor McGonagall said severely. "What is this all about?"

"Harry's gone!" Ron blurted out. "Pettigrew got into the dorm last night and took him!"

McGonagall's jaw dropped and she grabbed him by the shoulder and pulled him into the room. The others had heard his outburst and were striding across the room towards him. Dumbledore was the first to reach him.

"What did you say, Mr Weasley?" he demanded. "Start from the beginning and do not leave anything out."

Ron swallowed hard; this was a Dumbledore that people rarely saw. This was the Dumbledore that you could really believe had defeated Grindelwald and was the man Voldemort was afraid of.

"When I got up this morning, Harry's bed was empty," he said as calmly as he could. "I didn't think anything of it because Harry's often the first one up. He doesn't sleep well a lot of the time and I didn't think it was any surprise that he hadn't slept well last night. I got up, had shower and got dressed then I went down to the common room expecting to find him there. But the place was empty. I know he didn't go anywhere after what he said last night." He looked over at Sirius. "He was worried about you, Sirius, so he said he going to obey. Anyway, I went out and spoke to the Fat Lady and she said that Harry was carried out of there at about one or two o'clock this morning by a short, shabby man."

"How could Pettigrew get into the dorm?" Professor McGonagall said, looking furious. "Has Mr Longbottom been writing down the passwords again?"

Ron shook his head fervently. "No, Professor. Harry and Hermione set the passwords and they make sure that they use passwords that he's going to remember."

"He could have got in at any time," Snape said grimly. "How many people would notice a rat crawling in at their feet? Mr Weasley, did you notice anything else? I refuse to believe that Mr Potter would sleep that deeply."

Ron frowned. "Yeah, you're right. He wouldn't, he doesn't." He thought hard then shook his head. "I don't know, Professor, I wasn't really awake when I was in the dorm so I didn't notice anything."

Ron looked over at Sirius and Remus at this point and blanched. Sirius was leaning heavily on the table that held the model of the school and his features were grey and drawn. He looked like one more blow would shatter him. Remus didn't look much better and he had one arm around Sirius' shoulders and was murmuring quietly into his friend's ear. Dumbledore followed his gaze and his face gentled into a look of kindness.

"Severus, take Mr Weasley back to the dorm and see what you can find," he said quietly. "Mr Weasley, gather the rest of the Battle Guard and head down to the Guild classroom. I shall inform Master Nhean of what has happened."

Severus and Ron nodded and left the office. Ron looked back just before he left and saw the Headmaster talking softly but firmly to Sirius and Remus. Snape's quiet call of "Mr Weasley" reclaimed his attention back to what he needed to do and he headed down the stairs.

"Where do you think Pettigrew will have taken him?" Ron asked Snape as they jogged down the

corridor.

"Unknown, though I do have some speculations," Snape replied shortly. "From the length of time Voldemort has been casting Toventsky's spell, he would need a substantial vessel to hold that much energy. He would therefore need a lot of space. Presuming he did not set things up outside that means a large room in a large house. My immediate speculation is Malfoy Manor or Parkinson Manor but Riddle Manor is also a possibility."

"Three places to search," Ron muttered. "Not good."

Snape made an indistinct, disgruntled sound in reply then they both fell silent as they approached the Fat Lady.

"Good morning, Professor," she said with a little curtesy. "Did you wish to enter?"

"Yes, please," Snape said shortly, not even breaking stride and the Fat Lady hurriedly opened for them.

They crawled into the common room where some early risers looked at them with surprise and some apprehension. Snape and Ron ignored them both and ran up the stairs to the Seventh Year boys' dorm. When they walked in Seamus and Dean were just climbing out of bed while Neville was just finishing getting dressed. The three boys looked up when they walked in and yelped when they saw who it was. Seamus and Dean grabbed their clothes and scrambled towards the bathroom at Snape's glare while Neville finished pulling on his jumper with a sharp yank.

"What's happened to Harry?" he said with frown.

Ron gave him a quick rundown of what had happened that morning as Snape searched around Harry's bed. The two boys looked around when they heard Snape make a noise of discovery and they saw the Potions Master straightening with a small vial in one hand and a ragged handkerchief in the other. They watched as Snape sniffed delicately at the vial and grimaced.

"Dormira potion," he said with frustration. "He would have been unconscious in seconds."

"He'll be alright though, won't he?" Ron asked.

Snape nodded as he tucked the vial and handkerchief into his robes. "Dormira is harmless unless swallowed. Mr Potter will be fine. At the apparent concentration, he will sleep for approximately eight to ten hours. If he was taken somewhere between one and two this morning then he will wake somewhere between nine am and midday."

"It's seven-thirty now," Ron said absently. "Which means we've got a minimum of an hour and half to find Harry before Voldemort starts whatever he's got planned."

"I believe you had a task to carry out, Mr Weasley," Snape observed as he swept out of the room.

"You do?" Neville said to him.

Ron nodded. "Go and get Luna and meet us down in the Guild classroom. The Headmaster wants the Battle Guard together."

Neville nodded and ran out of the room, Ron right behind him. When they got downstairs, Ron stopped there while Neville continued out of the common room. Ron looked around and grabbed the first girl he saw.

"Go up to the Sixth and Seventh Year girls' dorms and get Ginny Weasley and Hermione Granger for me, please," he ordered.

The girl nodded and darted up the stairs to the girls' dorms. She was back in a couple of minutes.

"They're coming," she said breathlessly and Ron thanked her absently.

When Hermione and Ginny burst out into the common room, Ron grabbed them and dragged them out of the common room. He led them downstairs at a run, explaining what had happened as they went.

"Neville's gone to get Luna and we're to meet him in the Guild classroom," he concluded as they ran down the stairs.

"Does anyone have any idea where Harry is?" Ginny demanded, looking pale but determined.

"Snape had a few suggestions," Ron replied. "Malfoy Manor, Parkinson Manor or Riddle Manor were the only places big enough to have a room the size that Voldemort would need."

Hermione grimaced. "That's not a good list."

She stopped speaking suddenly and stumbled for a moment. Ron and Ginny caught her and they kept going. They got to the Guild classroom and entered to find Luna and Neville waiting for them.

"There was a note from Dumbledore," Neville said, holding up a piece of parchment. "We're to wait here. Everyone else will be joining us here shortly."

"Good because I've got an idea," Hermione said briskly.

"What?" Ron asked.

Hermione shook her head. "I'll tell you when everyone else gets here." She paused and changed the subject. "How did Sirius and Remus take the news?"

"Badly," Ron said shortly. "Sirius looked like he was about to collapse and Remus wasn't much better. If we don't get Harry back, I don't know what they'll do."

Hermione looked apprehensive then the door opened and they all spun around. The Headmaster walked in, deep in conversation with Master Nhean and a tall, Japanese man who carried a cane similar to Harry's. Behind them were Sirius, Remus and Snape as well as Fred and George, Tonks, Jun'ko, Tien and a small group of people who were also carrying canes. When the Battle Guard gave them a good look they could see that these people all looked around the room in the same manner that Harry did when he was somewhere he didn't know well.

Dumbledore gave them a short nod. "Good. Mr Weasley, would you please tell everyone once more what happened when you woke this morning?"

Ron nodded once then launched into his tale once again. Once he'd finished, Snape took up the

thread of the conversation and explained what he'd found near Harry's bed and what that meant, including Ron's assessment of the time they had left and his own speculation as to where Harry was being held. While Snape was talking, Ron was staring at the newly arrived Guild members as something prodded at his mind. Snape had just finished when he realised what was bothering him.

"His cane is gone," he blurted out then he blushed when everyone stared at him.

The tall Japanese man stepped forward. "My name is Ichiro Takao, the Head of the Guild Council," he said sternly. "Explain what you mean."

"Harry's cane wasn't there," Ron repeated. "Whoever took him must have taken that as well…which doesn't make much sense." He frowned. "I mean, wouldn't Voldemort want Harry to be unarmed and…well, helpless?"

"Except it was Peter Pettigrew who came in and took him," Hermione said thoughtfully. "The man who owes Harry a life debt for saving him in the Shrieking Shack. Maybe that pushed him into taking the cane with him."

"Let us hope so," Dumbledore replied. "Now we need to work out how we are going to search the three manor houses in question. It won't be easy…"

"Excuse me, sir," Hermione interrupted, looking nervous and apologetic. "I think I have an idea for Malfoy Manor at least."

"And what is that?" Dumbledore asked.

"Dobby," Hermione replied. "He used to be the Malfoy's house elf. I'm sure he knows the manor well enough to search it far more quickly than we could and he'd do anything for Harry."

Dumbledore smiled for the first time since he'd walked into the room. "Well done, Miss Granger. That was a very good thought."

Hermione blushed and looked pleased as the Headmaster called out for Dobby. The little house elf popped in and looked surprised to see so many people in the room. Dumbledore called him over and quickly explained what had happened. Everyone in the room was startled when Dobby suddenly blazed with anger, something they'd never seen before from a house elf.

"Where is Harry Potter being taken?" he demanded angrily.

"We don't know but we suspect it is one of three places," Dumbledore replied. "Malfoy Manor, Parkinson Manor or Riddle Manor."

"Dobby knows all three of these places," Dobby said firmly. "Dobby has been to all three with Master Lucius. Dobby will find Harry Potter."

With that the house elf disappeared with a loud, infuriated crack.

"I didn't know house elves could be like that," Jun'ko said quietly into the silence that followed Dobby's departure.

"Dobby was freed by Harry," Hermione replied equally quietly. "He adores Harry and has protected

him before."

"Do you think he really can get Harry out of wherever he is?" Sirius asked hoarsely, his voice sounding desperate.

"If it can be done, Dobby will do it," Hermione said encouragingly. Seeing Sirius looking like that was bringing her close to tears.

They waited nervously and some people began to pace. Many of the Night Warriors began to tap or fiddle with their canes while Fred and George began to pull shrunken boxes out of their pockets and take a quick inventory. In amongst all of this Dumbledore stood calmly in the middle of the room with Snape at his side while Sirius and Remus huddled in one corner and seemed to be propping each other up.

They all jumped when a loud crack sounded throughout the room and Dobby reappeared. The little house elf looked battered and bruised and a large gash ran up one side of his head and along one ear. Hermione and Ginny immediately ran to him and caught him when he fell over.

"Dobby!" Hermione gasped. "What happened?"

"Dobby is sorry, Miss Hermy," the house elf said in a pain-filled voice. "Dobby went to the Malfoy house but Harry Potter was not there. He was not at the Parkinson house either. Dobby found him at Riddle Manor but Dobby couldn’t get near him. There were many bad wizards there and Dobby had to leave. Dobby is so sorry. Dobby did not want to fail Harry Potter and Headmaster."

Dobby burst into tears and started pounding his head against the floor. Hermione hurriedly stopped him.

"Dobby! Stop that!" she ordered as she heard the Headmaster summon some more house elves. "Nobody expected you to get Harry out of there. We just hoped you could find him. And you know Harry wouldn’t want you punishing yourself."

Dobby stared up at her, his big eyes filled with tears. "Yes, Miss Hermy."

The house elves that the Headmaster had summoned swarmed around them and gently took Dobby from Hermione before disappearing again.

"We know where he is," Dumbledore said in reply to Hermione’s unspoken question. "The house elves will take care of Dobby. We have to make some plans."

Hermione nodded absently then she got to her feet, brushing off her clothes. "I know."

Chapter 36

Harry moaned as he swam up towards consciousness. His head ached and he felt stiff and sore and he was fairly sure he was lying on a stone floor from the cold seeping into his bones. He prised his eyes open and winced when he saw nothing but blackness. He started to activate his Oversight when he realized that it was already working. That was when certain realizations hit him through his confusion. Someone else also seemed to have noticed this because he heard a low chuckle from somewhere in front of him.

"Is there a problem, Harry Potter?"

Harry frowned; that voice was…odd. It sounded like Draco Malfoy but the inflections were entirely Voldemort. That was the final piece of the puzzle that even his still-addled brain could put together.

"Voldemort," he breathed.

"Oh, yes," came the amused response. "How do you like my…present? I made it especially for you."

Harry shifted slightly and suddenly realized that his discomfort wasn't just from lying on a hard stone floor. He was also lying on top of his cane and he felt his spirits rise just a fraction. For some reason, Pettigrew, and it could only have been him, had brought his cane along when he'd kidnapped him.

"The present sucks," Harry snapped, shifting back to his original position to keep the cane hidden.

"Such ingratitude," Voldemort/Draco scoffed. "We can't have that. Crucio!"

Harry was expecting the curse; had expected it from the moment the final insulting word left his lips but it still hit him with a stunning force. He clenched his jaw on his screams and tried not to move too much. Despite the excruciating pain, the curse did have one good effect. It seemed to clear the last of the fog from his mind and when Voldemort finally ended it, Harry felt his mind working more or less as normal.

He didn't let this show however, allowing himself to remain limp and passive in the position in which he'd woken up. As he did he thought frantically. One thing he knew for sure was that the others would be trying to find and rescue him so the first thing he needed to do was stay alive. Which was an easy thing to say but unfortunately his survival largely lay in the hands of the man who'd just cursed him and his own sheer, dumb luck.

"Did you enjoy that, Harry?" Voldemort/Draco asked, his voice laced with malicious amusement.

Harry heard the sound of muted laughter in the background and realized then that this was not just something between himself and Voldemort; that the remaining Death Eaters were in the room as well.

"Oh, it was just delightful," he said rather sarcastically, wondering why he seemed to be channeling his inner-Snape right at this rather inappropriate moment.

"Then perhaps you would like some more," Voldemort/Draco snarled. "Crucio!"

Harry gasped as the pain from the spell ripped through him and made a mental vow not to provoke Voldemort anymore. He needed to stay alive after all, not get killed because he kept opening his big mouth. The curse finally ended and Harry lay there, limp and gasping for breath and ignoring the snickers coming from the Death Eaters.

As he tried to recover he made his first move, he carefully tranced down to the point where he could see the energy colours again. Energy bloomed into life and he studied where he was. He seemed to be in a large room and the area around him was pulsing with a blue-white energy that he suspected was the indication of Toventsky's spell. He looked over his shoulder to see a massive pillar of the same blue-white light and that confirmed it in his opinion. He then looked around the room.

Standing just outside the range of the blue-white energy was Voldemort. Or at least he thought it was Voldemort. The energy colours were a little different from the last time he'd seen the other wizard. It took a moment to realize why. Voldemort was inhabiting Draco's body and Draco wasn't dead, merely shunted to some distant part of his own brain. That explained why Voldemort's colours were…different; the Black and Red-Brown were still there but Draco's Burgundy/Yellow/Blood Red-Brown were entwined with them. More importantly, he also remembered Voldemort's journal and the spell that Draco could use to cast out his…guest.

He glanced around the rest of the room and saw that there were about twenty Death Eaters in the room, including the energy colours that he recognized as Pansy Parkinson and Bellatrix Lestrange.

Pain lanced through him again, throwing him out of the trance, and he suspected that Voldemort had been talking to him. He became unaware of a lot of extraneous things when he tranced and obviously his lack of response had angered Voldemort. He was a bit startled though when the curse ended abruptly and he listened intently to find out why.

"Well, Fred, isn't this a sight to behold!"

Harry's eyes widened and his jaw dropped. That was…George! What was he doing here? He heard gasps from the surrounding Death Eaters. Obviously they were as surprised as he was.

"Indeed it is, George, old boy," came Fred's amiable reply. "Old friends, old foes and hey, look! Harry! There you are. We've been looking everywhere for you. So have the others but they're just copycats."

"So are we, Gred. So are we."

Harry frowned at the odd emphasis on that last word of Fred's comments then he had to work hard to swallow his grin.

Copycats.

Copies.

Illusions.

"What is this?" Voldemort/Draco demanded incredulously then he snarled. "Kill them!"

In an instant, Harry heard at least six different voices shout "Avada Kedavra" then there were even

more gasps. He tranced down as quickly as he could but saw no sign of the illusions of the twins. Obviously the power of the Killing Curses had dispelled them. He quickly broke the trance and tried to look innocent.

"Where did they go?" Voldemort/Draco demanded.

Harry heard the other wizard striding towards him then grunted in pain when Voldemort's boot connected solidly with his ribcage.

"Answer me, Potter!" Voldemort/Draco snarled. "How did they do that?"

"Magic," Harry gasped then instantly regretted his answer when Voldemort turned the strongest Cruciatus on him that he'd ever felt.

"Get away from my godson," came Sirius' snarling voice and the curse abruptly ended again.

Harry lay their gasping and shivering but he retained enough sense to hope like hell that that was an illusion of his godfather speaking and not the real thing. He heard Voldemort stalk away from him and he eased himself over onto his stomach, grimacing as his body protested the movement. He snuck one hand underneath his chest and got a good grip on his cane.

"What is going on?" he heard Voldemort snarl angrily. "How are they getting through? Get rid of it."

"Don't even think about it," came Remus' voice and Harry's eyes widened. He'd never before heard that level of anger and hatred in the werewolf's voice.

"Get rid of them," Voldemort screamed and once again the Killing Curses rang out.

Harry didn't bother to check whether the illusions had been dispelled. He had to assume they had been since the sheer power in those spells had been obvious even without his Oversight or trancing down. He used the distraction however to push himself up into a crouch and to draw his sword and he whispered a quiet word of thanks to Master Nhean for his insistence on getting him used to moving and fighting without his Oversight.

"Harry! Move!"

"We're here!"

"Quick! Surround him!"

The shouts came from his Battle Guard and then Harry heard the voices of Jun'ko, Master Nhean and Tien. He had no idea whether they were the real thing of more illusions but he took the opportunity they had provided and threw himself away from the pillar, trying to get outside the area of influence of Toventsky's spell.

"Keep him close to the obelisk!" Voldemort screamed, over the sound of the Battle Guard and Guild members.

Harry dodged to the side, hearing the expected spell whistle past his head then he dived forward and rolled, determinedly ignoring the complaints from his body. He could worry about how much he hurt later; his rescue party was here so for now all he had to do was survive.

As he rolled his Oversight suddenly bloomed into life indicating he'd past the limits of the spell sphere and he let the roll continue as he got over the sudden shock. He then let the roll end when he was on his feet and he immediately darted to the left, hearing a spell crash into the wall behind where he'd just been. He glanced around the room and saw the perfect images of his Battle Guard, Nhean and the Night Warriors and knew then that they were just illusions. This was emphasized when two Killing Curses hit Hermione and she just faded from view with a surprised look on her face.

His attention as diverted when he saw a Death Eater throw a spell straight at him and he raised his off hand with a shouted, "Protego!"

The spell bounced off the hastily raised shield and Harry knew he'd better start moving. He looked around the room and made a cool decision. Voldemort. That was his target. He just had to hope the illusions could distract the Death Eaters long enough to allow his friends to get here.

He found Voldemort watching him with malignant amusement, something was truly unusual to see on Draco's face then Voldemort calmly raised his wand.

"Avada Kedavra!"

Harry ducked under the Killing Curse and rolled up onto his feet. He raised his off hand, the one holding his scabbard, and yelled, "Stupefy!"

Voldemort/Draco calmly dodged the spell then raised his wand again. Harry didn't allow him to settle into a duel. He ran towards the other wizard, bringing his sword up and around in a fierce swipe. Voldemort/Draco's eyes widened and he staggered away just in time, throwing an Impedimenta jinx at Harry. It caught the side of Harry's foot and he stumbled and nearly fell, allowing Voldemort/Draco to hit him with a cutting hex.

Harry yelled in pain as the hex sliced deep into his left arm and he dropped his scabbard. He retained enough presence of mind to kick it away to the side of the room then he swallowed hard and went back in for the attack. After several minutes, he found that while he was quicker than Voldemort/Draco due to the other wizard's bad leg, he was restricted in his spell casting now. The wound in his left arm was deeper than he'd first thought and his sleeve was soaked with blood and he was struggling to raise it enough to cast spells. He now also had to be more aware of the other Death Eaters since more spells were coming from that direction and a quick glance showed him that the illusions were nearly all gone; only the ones of Nhean, Jun'ko and Tien remained and as he watched Jun'ko faded from view after being hit with three Killing Curses.

Voldemort/Draco took advantage of his momentary distraction and launched a series of spells that he easily blocked but which forced him back into the magically dead area around the obelisk. The moment he realized where he was Harry threw himself to one side and then scrabbled backwards until found the pillar of crystal. He darted around the opposite side to where he'd been and made a break for the edge.

"Impedimenta!"

The hex caught him square in the back and sent him flying. While that left him lying outside the dead zone, it also left him flat on the floor, gasping for breath. His only saving grace was that he'd managed to hold onto his sword. Unfortunately he'd also ended up right near the largest

concentration of Death Eaters and several of them turned from their fight with the illusions and trained their wands on him. Harry glanced over at the illusions and saw both Nhean and Tien suddenly fade from view and then Voldemort/Draco strode into his line of sight. He looked around desperately for some way of escaping but the Death Eaters had him surrounded and his heart sank.

"Very invigorating, Harry," Voldemort/Draco sneered. "But your fake friends are gone and now I am going to do what I should have done so many years ago. Any last words?"

Harry opened his mouth, not sure what he was going to say, but his reply was drowned out by the sound of a massive explosion. The Death Eaters swore almost as one and Voldemort/Draco looked around in confusion, his wand dropping to point towards the floor.

"Where did the light go?" came the voice of a nervous Death Eater and Harry's eyes widened.

"I don't know. I can't see anything," came an equally nervous reply.

"Welcome to our world."

Harry recognized that voice instantly. Nyugen Dinh Tien. And through his Oversight, he could still see. And he could see that more than just Tien had crept into the room in the cover of darkness. There were nearly twenty people with Tien and Harry knew that the Guild had arrived.

He quickly rolled onto his hands and knees and as silently as he could, he crawled out of the circle of Death Eaters. A fairly easy task as they'd started to spread out in confusion in the darkness. Once he was clear he got to his feet and started circling towards Voldemort, his sword raised in one hand, the other arm hanging near useless at his side.

"Ready, Harry?" came Tien's faintly amused, faintly superior question.

The Death Eaters stirred at that and some started groping around the floor where he had been.

Harry forced himself to chuckle at this, knowing the effect it would have on the confused Death Eaters.

"Whenever you are, Tien," he replied lightly. "But Voldemort's mine."

"But of course," Tien replied. "Ready, Warriors?"

There were muted words of assent from the Night Warriors.

"Be careful of the spell sphere," Tien warned. "Attack."

It was beautiful to watch in Oversight. The Night Warriors leapt forward in their varying combat styles, their blades flashing and spells firing. Nearly half of the Death Eaters fell in that first sally; some of them having been targeted by more than one Night Warrior. Of those that were left standing, most broke and ran, putting up powerful shields as they groped their way along the walls until they found the doors and flooded out. Light swept in when the doors opened and Harry could see not only Tonks, Sirius, Fred and George and his Battle Guard waiting outside but also a fair number of the Night Warriors following those escaping. The doors slammed shut behind the last of the following Night Warriors and Harry watched for a moment as those that remained began to methodically deal with the Death Eaters who had stayed.

It was Bellatrix who first thought of the survival tactic, running around in the dark until she found the obelisk in the middle of the room. She planted her back against it and started firing spells in random directions as she screamed with insane laughter. The other Death Eaters quickly followed her but the Night Warriors had found a tactic to use against that. They staged darting runs into the dead zone. Running straight forward and lashing out with sword and magic then running straight back on the path they had taken until they could use their Oversight again. Harry could see that the tactic was slower than normal combat but it would work. Once he was sure of that he turned back to Voldemort.

The Dark Lord was standing to one side of the room, his wand raised. He was staring vainly in the dark and clearly listening intently. At every slightest sound, he darted around, trying to find and identify it. Harry grinned mercilessly to himself. That was a futile tactic in a room where a fight was going on; all you did was exhaust yourself trying to listen for everything and anything. You had to be selective in your hearing, learn to discriminate between what was important and you should pay attention to and what was irrelevant and you could ignore.

"Voldemort," he whispered before moving on silent feet to the other side of man.

As he did Voldemort/Draco whipped around in the direction he had been, his wand up and ready.

"Playing games, Harry," he taunted.

Harry was silent as he considered what he needed to do. From what he remembered from the journal he and Snape had read, he couldn't kill Voldemort while he still inhabited Draco's body. Doing so would only return Voldemort's soul to the crystal he had used to contain it after the battle last year. While this would keep Voldemort safely confined and out of trouble, it was also insanely risky. All they would need was for someone else to touch the crystal and the whole thing would start again. And the last thing Harry wanted was for this to keep going on and on. The prophecy was pretty clear on that; neither can live while the other survives. So he needed Draco's help. Only Draco could cast Voldemort out his body. His only problem was he didn't really know what to do once that happened. If he could get it to happen.

"Well, Harry, what are you waiting for?" Voldemort/Draco sneered, obviously taking Harry's silence for fear or doubt.

"Draco," Harry said suddenly, taking a risk and hoping that his blind, dumb luck would let it be the right one. "I know you're in there and I know you can hear me. You can get rid of Voldemort. You can cast him out and get your body back. You need to cast a spell and do it wordlessly and wandlessly. Use the spell Respuoanimus, Draco. Do it!"

"NO!" Voldemort/Draco screamed. "Do not listen to him! He lies!"

The Dark Lord suddenly froze and his scream became louder and more desperate. Magic shimmered around him and a low wailing began to emanate from the immobile body. The wailing intensified and the magic began to become a dark greasy smoke-like cloud that oozed out of Draco's body. It swirled faster and faster around Draco and then suddenly pulled upwards and started circling towards the ceiling, the wailing continuing unrelentingly.

Harry looked at Draco as he collapsed unconscious to the floor and saw that the boy's energy colours were back to normal. He then looked up at the swirling, pulsing greasy smoke cloud that

was coalescing near the ceiling. On an impulse he didn't quite understand, Harry dropped to his knees, sword still in his hand, and tranced down quickly. He saw the energy colours in the smoke and saw that they were reaching out to the magic in the room, in particular that of the obelisk in order to…feed, to provide energy to maintain the soul's current form.

Harry reached out and grabbed one of those feeding strands, gripping it tightly. He followed it back to the main mass and was able to see that it was part of the whole and anything he did to the strand would feed back and affect everything. He thought back to what he'd done with Pansy's trap and he examined the strand. It was very similar, certainly similar enough for him to do what he'd done then.

He grabbed the strand more firmly and instigated the shielding Master Nhean had taught him that would ward off the worst of the odd side-effects that had battered him last time. Once that was done, he worked at the strand until he'd formed a rupture in it. He grabbed at the leaking magic and began feeding it into the stone of the house. Although barely any magic flowed through this house, the stone itself was strong enough to absorb the magic Harry was feeding it. He quickly realised that this magic was different from last time. It was…thicker, more substantial and harder to manage. It took more concentration. He wondered if it was because this magic was the essence of a person rather than that used to create a spell. He quickly dismissed that thought; partly because it was disturbing and if he thought about it too much he might falter but mostly because he needed all the concentration he could muster.

As he worked the greasy smoke seemed to realise the danger it was in and it swirled around him, looking for a way to attack him. But his shields held against it. It then began to try and insinuate other threads through the shields. This was more successful since the shields had been constructed to allow the thread he was holding to pass through. He flinched as the first thread groped at him, wincing at the icy, slick feel of it but he did not stop. The smoke that was Voldemort's soul produced more and more threads, pushing them through the shield and wrapping them around whatever part of him they could reach.

When the first one wrapped itself around his injured arm, Harry grunted. He closed his eyes and steadfastly ignored the renewed rush of pain and the trickle of blood he could feel running down his arm. He had to finish this. He kept feeding the thick magic into the walls of the house, trying to work faster. But when the first thread wrapped itself around his throat, he knew he had to throw caution to the wind. He looked around frantically for some inspiration as the single thread tightened fractionally and started to be joined by others.

The obelisk.

It fairly reeked with magic and Harry reached out to it. In an act of desperation he placed the ruptured section of thread he held in his magical 'hands' against the magic within the obelisk and watched in awe as the obelisk flared once then began to drain the energy from the thread at a rapid rate. The wailing increased in volume and intensity, sounding desperate and wild, and the threads tightened their grip on Harry, making him struggle for breath.

But this was one battle the obelisk would win. Within seconds the last of the magic drained out of the threads and the mass of smoke, the wailing petering off into nothing as it did so. But there was still something lingering there and Harry knew he needed to complete the task. He took the strand back from the obelisk and began to unpick the fabric of it. As it was the last time he'd done this,

once the process was begun it did not need any further help, it continued like a chain reaction.

With his attention so firmly on monitoring the final destruction of Voldemort's soul, Harry did not see two things.

The first was the ominous pulsing of the obelisk. The crystal that formed it could only take so much energy and it had been filled to capacity by Voldemort and his Death Eaters. The additional energy Harry had just fed into it had overloaded it and it was rapidly becoming dangerously unstable. The very structure of the crystal was starting to unravel and once it reached a critical mass the entire structure of the obelisk would collapse and explode.

The second thing Harry did not see was Draco Malfoy regaining consciousness and pulling himself to his knees. The blond wizard quickly looked around in the darkness, trying to assess what was going on. Although he had been able to dimly see and hear what was going on while Voldemort owned his body, he'd still missed a great deal of the details. But he'd heard Potter. He'd heard him say that he could have his freedom and he'd heard the crucial incantation.

And he knew Potter was somewhere nearby and where his former master had failed, he, Draco Malfoy, was going to succeed. And in defeating the Boy-Who-Lived he would be able to raise himself as the new Dark Lord. But first he needed to get rid of this debilitating darkness. He couldn't see his hand in front of his face and he needed to find Potter.

He found his wand after a moment of groping and snapped, "Lumos."

Nothing happened and he snarled angrily. He groped through his mind to find another spell and he smiled unpleasantly.

Draco held his wand with the tip pointing up and said firmly, "Solis!"

A light as bright as the sun burst out of the tip of his wand and shot towards the ceiling. It lit up the entire room and Draco could see that the remaining Death Eaters were faring very poorly against the Night Warriors. In fact there were only two left standing; the others were dead or unconscious. Draco smiled evilly to see that the two remaining were Bellatrix Lestrange and Pansy Parkinson. He then looked around for his own target and found him kneeling less than a metre away. Potter looked like he was in a trance of some kind.

Draco was forced to let the light fade at this point as he felt the spell pulling on energy he didn't want to waste. He didn't care though, he knew where his target was and that was all that was important. He pulled a slim, sharp knife out of his robes and crawled forward until his hand bumped against Potter's side. Much to his surprise, Potter did not move or even acknowledge his presence. He chuckled nastily then he drew back the knife and drove it into Harry's side through his ribs.

Harry gasped and lost track of the decaying thread as a sharp burning pain bloomed in his side and knocked him out of the trance. Now that he was out of the trance he realised there was someone kneeling right beside him and chuckling in a manner that made him shiver. As he tried to orientate himself the figure beside him withdrew whatever it was that was causing the pain then stabbed him with it again. Harry yelled as the knife cut into his side and he fell away from the figure that he was sure was Draco. As he did so, he brought the sword he was still holding up in a sideways sweep that made the pain increase. As he swung he felt something tear in his side and blood welled in the

back of his throat. He ignored it all in favour of completing the stroke; at the last minute turning his head enough to see the figure in Oversight and raising the angle of the blow. This caused the tearing in his side to increase but it meant that his sword cut smoothly through Draco's neck.

Harry collapsed to the floor, feeling blood flowing from the wounds in his side. He could see Draco's head rolling away then the decapitated body collapsed near his feet.

"DRACO!" came a desolate scream from the middle of the room.

Harry blinked dully. That was Pansy's voice but how did she know? Had the lights come back on? He didn't care, he felt tired and cold and just a little bit cheated. It was supposed to be neither can live while the other survives, he thought muzzily to himself, not even noticing Pansy come running over to fall to her knees next Draco's headless body.

He did not see Bellatrix size up the situation in an instant, her insane mind making decisions others might not have. He did not see her throw a multitude of spells at the Night Warriors or come running over and grab Pansy by the arm. And darkness had claimed Harry before he saw the two women apparate out.

Chapter 37

Sirius brought his sword down in a vicious blow that nearly severed a Death Eater's arm from his body as he tried to ignore the spinechilling wailing that could be heard coming from the room Harry was in. He kicked out with one foot, connecting with the Death Eater's head then turned to find his next opponent. He'd been using his sword more than his wand in this fight and it was doing his frustration, his anger and his worry a world of good to hit out like that. The Death Eaters that had run from the room had quickly realised they were caught between two immovable forces and had reacted like most people do when they find themselves in a no-win situation. They threw caution to the wind and did their worst. Killing Curses were flying and they were having to duck for cover on a regular basis. Already the Night Warriors who had followed the Death Eaters had lost six of their number though Sirius wasn't sure if they were dead from a Killing Curse or simply unconscious from catching a lesser curse.

As he ran over to help Ginny, the horrible wailing faded into nothing and Sirius grimaced. He needed to know what was happening! His desperation gave him an edge that the Death Eaters lacked and he quickly pounded the one threatening Ginny into submission. He then turned towards the doors to the ballroom and had just wrenched them open when he heard a woman scream "DRACO!" He took that for a good sign and ran in just in time to see his cousin Bellatrix apparate out with a young girl who looked vaguely familiar.

The two women slipped from his thoughts when he saw his godson. Harry was lying on his back and there was blood flowing out of a wound on his side. At his feet lay a headless corpse and one hand gripped his sword tightly. Sirius gave a low moan as he dropped his own sword and he sprinted over to his godson's side.

"Harry!" he whimpered as he fell to his knees.

He got no answer and he quickly felt for a pulse. It was there but it was weak and thready and he saw that Harry had a bleeding wound in his arm as well.

"Ginny!" he screamed over his shoulder. "Did you bring your medical supplies?"

"No, I didn't have time," Ginny yelled back as she ran towards him.

Sirius turned around and Ginny staggered to a halt when she saw his face.

"Get Snape," he said in a grim voice. "Then get Poppy. Hurry!"

The quiet grimness in his voice was more of a motivator than any screaming he might have done. Ginny paled then turned on her heel and sprinted out of the room. Sirius turned back to his godson and ripped off his shirt, bundling it up and pressing it against the wound in Harry's side.

"Don't do this to me, Pronglet," he whispered, his voice breaking. "Please don't die. Please."

He felt someone stand behind him and he briefly glanced over his shoulder to see Harry's Battle Guard standing there, looking pale, scared and so very young. Behind them he could see the Night Warriors starting to examine the obelisk while Fred, George and Tonks ran over to join the Battle Guard. Sirius turned back to Harry, he didn't care about the others. Only Harry mattered to him now and he couldn't lose him. Not now.

"You have to live, Harry," he whimpered. "You can't leave me. I couldn't…I couldn't bear it. And you can't leave Moony either. What would we do without you?"

A dark presence knelt down on the other side of Harry and Sirius looked up through tear-filled eyes to see Snape. The Potions Master was pulling vials out of his robes, keeping some and returning others.

"Severus, please," Sirius choked, the tears starting to fall.

Snape shot him a single glance. "I have no intention of allowing Harry to become a martyr to the cause," he said stiffly. "Has he woken?"

"No," Sirius stammered.

Severus pulled out his wand. "I am sorry about this, Harry," he murmured as he pointed it at Harry. "Enervate."

Harry's eyes flickered open and he moaned piteously before coughing. Sirius sobbed when he saw the blood appear on Harry's lips.

"Do stop snivelling," Snape snapped, his voice taut and full of worry. "Hold his head up."

Sirius couldn't summon any anger at the insult and merely did what had been asked of him.

"Swallow as much as you can, Harry," Snape ordered as he poured the contents of the first vial down Harry's throat.

Both men winced when Harry choked and spluttered. Most of the potion dribbled out of his mouth but Snape was relieved to that at least some of it stayed down. The same thing happened with the next two potions he gave Harry but what little had stayed down had made some difference. The blood flow from both wounds had slowed to nothing more that a sluggish seeping and Harry's breathing was slightly stronger as was his pulse.

The sound of footsteps caught their attention and they looked around to see Poppy Pomfrey running across the room, a large bag clutched to her chest.

"What took you so long?" Snape snapped. "Harry has three stab wounds. One in the left upper arm, which is irrelevant for now. But he was two in his right side, well placed through the ribs. One lung has definitely collapsed and he's been coughing up blood."

Poppy paled then her lips thinned and she pulled out her wand. "What have you given him?"

"A blood replenisher and two potions to help his breathing and heart rate," Snape replied. "I wasn't able to get much into him though."

Before Poppy could say or do anything, Tien ran up to them looking rather alarmed.

"We have to get out of here," he said tightly "Right now."

"Impossible," Poppy snapped. "Mr Potter cannot be moved until I have stabilised him."

Tien looked frustrated and torn. "We have to move him anyway. That obelisk is about to explode.

There’s just too much energy contained in it. We can’t even siphon some of the excess off. The thing is just too unstable."

Poppy looked aghast and she glanced at Harry before returning her gaze to Tien. "I wasn’t just being obstreperous, Tien. We cannot move Harry. If we try we could make his injuries worse and he’s lost too much blood to allow for that."

"What if we shield them?" Hermione asked. "All of us. The Battle Guard, you and Jun’ko, Fred, George, Tonks. Anyone else who can help."

Tien glanced at the Obelisk then down at Harry as he thought frantically. "I don’t know if it’ll work," he said helplessly. "But we’ll have to try it. I’ll see if I can get more people to help."

"Keep everyone as close to us as possible," Snape said tersely though his attention remained on Harry. "The smaller the area you have to shield, the stronger it will be."

Poppy had immediately turn back to treat her patient once Hermione stepped forward. "Just don’t get too close," she snapped. "I’m going to need room to work."

"Yes, of course," Hermione murmured then she turned to those who were already there and started organising them.

They were quickly joined by half a dozen Night Warriors and finally by Tien, Jun’ko and Remus.

"Dumbledore’s busy dealing with the Ministry," Remus reported breathlessly. "He doesn’t want to let them in until we get Harry out of here." Remus looked around curiously. "Speaking of Harry, where is…"

The werewolf’s voice trailed off as he caught sight of Harry lying on the floor, bloodied and barely conscious.

"Harry," he breathed, his voice almost a moan.

"We need you to help shield," Hermione said with a sharp yank on his arm. "Harry’s got Sirius, Madam Pomfrey and Professor Snape looking after him. We need your help to protect him."

Remus tore his gaze away from Harry and looked at Hermione. He saw then that she was as worried, as distraught and as torn as he was. He then looked over at the black quartz obelisk and saw it was almost pulsating with energy now; in fact it almost seemed to be moving in and out. It looked alive, as though it was breathing its last breaths. Remus looked back at Hermione and took a deep breath.

"What do you need me to do?" he said as calmly as he was able to manage, the tremor in his voice soft but audible.

"Can you take the north cardinal point?" Hermione said quickly. "I want to put a dome shield over all of us. It’s the strongest type."

Remus nodded and moved over to his position.

"Let’s get this done," Tien said, his voice tense. "That obelisk isn’t going to hold much longer."

Hermione nodded and took her position. She told everyone the shielding spell they were going to use and then gave the signal. In almost perfect unison using wand or hand, everyone cast the spell, blending it in with everyone else's. The resulting shield was actually visible, a thick shimmering dome arcing over them.

They completed it just in time. Just the shield settled into place the pulsations of the obelisk became stronger and faster then with an earsplitting sound, it exploded, sending crystal shards flying throughout the room. The wave of energy hit the shield first, pounding into it like a hammer blow. It visibly bowed under the impact and everyone holding it in place physically braced themselves, their forehead creased with frowns as they fought to hold it. Seconds after the energy hit, the crystal shards slammed into it as well. Many of those powering it flinched and winced away from the lethal projectiles but once again the shield held. The whole thing took only minutes to end and the shielders looked around warily before letting the shield down.

"Move out of the way!" Snape snarled at them.

The shielder turned to see the Potions Master getting to his feet. He was holding Madam Pomfrey's bag and pulling the mediwitch to her feet. Sirius was already upright and he was cradling his godson gently in his arms. The crowd parted with alacrity and Sirius all but ran towards the door with Snape and Pomfrey hot on his heels.

"Couldn't they apparate from here?" Ron asked as he and the rest of the Battle Guard started to follow.

"Honestly, Ron," Hermione said with exasperation. "There's an anti-apparition ward on the room and we haven't been keyed to it."

"Oh," was all the answer Ron gave, saving his breath.

Sirius headed straight for the kitchen and out the back of the house and when they got out there the Battle Guard saw why. The back yard of the manor was empty, obviously all of the Ministry officials were out the front with Dumbledore. They arrived just in time to see Sirius apparate away with Harry and Snape and Pomfrey followed.

"Apparate or Portkey?" Hermione asked crisply as she pulled a wooden ruler out of her robes.

"Portkey," Ron said decisively. "The Headmaster set it up to return us to the Guild classroom. Apparition'll leave us outside the gates. Classroom's closer to the Hospital Wing."

The others immediately held out a finger, placing it on the ruler when Hermione held it out in front. The bushy-haired girl then spoke the key word and the Battle Guard were yanked back to Hogwarts. They stumbled into each other when they arrived back in the classroom but managed somehow to keep their feet. Hermione quickly discarded the ruler and the five friends set off for the Hospital Wing at a run.

They got there just in time to see Sirius and Harry, Pomfrey and Snape disappear inside and they followed.

"Out, all of you!" Pomfrey snapped.

"Poppy!" Sirius protested.

"No!" Poppy said with exasperation. "Out!"

Snape grabbed Sirius' arm and dragged the animagus out of the hospital wing, using just a glare to get the students to do the same. Once they were out in the corridor, Sirius shook of the Potions Master and glared at him.

"What are you doing?" he snarled.

"Think, Black!" Snape snapped, his eyes full of worry. "She needs to treat Harry properly and some of it probably won't look very pretty. She doesn't want any of us in there overreacting and getting in the way. He is not going to die."

Sirius' anger fell away and he looked almost desperate. "Are you sure?" he asked almost plaintively.

Snape was still for a moment. "Yes, I am sure," he replied firmly. "The wounds are serious but between the potions I gave him and what Poppy was able to do at the manor, he has been stabilised. The rest is simply a matter of healing. Poppy will be able to do some now, the rest will take time."

Sirius stared at him for a long moment then he nodded once and started pacing. Snape watched him for a moment then, once he was sure that the animagus wasn't going to do anything stupid, he leaned heavily against one wall. After a few minutes, Ron joined Sirius in his pacing while Ginny and Hermione stood next to Snape and stared at the doors to the Hospital Wing as though willing them to open. Luna sat down cross-legged on the floor, her face calm and patient while Neville looked liked he wasn't sure whether he wanted to join Ron and Sirius or Hermione and Ginny. As they stood there, Remus ran up and joined them.

"Harry?" he demanded breathlessly.

"Poppy is working on him," Snape said calmly. "We don't know anymore."

Remus nodded, his eyes full of worry and he quickly joined Hermione and Ginny.

"They found all the Death Eaters except for Bellatrix Lestrange and Pansy Parkinson," Remus said after several minutes of silence.

"They…apparated out," Sirius said absently. "I saw them do it when I got into the room. Who was the headless body?"

"Draco Malfoy," Severus replied grimly. "He must have been the one who stabbed Harry."

"Why?" Hermione said curiously. "If I remember correctly what Harry told us, the spell you found in Voldemort's journal should have freed him from Voldemort. Why would he then kill Harry?"

"Because he is a Slytherin, not a Gryffindor," Snape said sourly. "Even though Harry freed him, he was still thinking of his own aims. Killing the Boy-Who-Lived would be quite the cachet for a new Dark Lord."

"He did have delusions of grandeur, didn't he?" Neville said dryly.

"Not quite delusions," Ron replied, his voice as sour as Snape's. "He nearly succeeded, didn't he?"

Just then the door to the Hospital Wing opened and Poppy Pomfrey stuck her head out.

"You can come in if you're calm and quiet," she said severely though there was a light in her eyes that put heart into all of them.

They group nodded and Madam Pomfrey let them in. She led them back over to the bed Harry had been placed in and they were delighted to see he was awake. He looked pale and tired and there were hints of pain in his eyes but he was definitely alive and well.

"Harry," Sirius said in something close to a sob as he sat down on the side of the bed and took Harry's hand.

"Hey, Siri," Harry said in a voice barely above a whisper as he looked blindly in the direction of his godfather. "Where's Remy?"

"I'm right here," Remus said moving to sit on the other side of the bed.

"Ginny?" Harry whispered.

"I'm here," Ginny said, a tear smile on her face. "And if your great oaf of a godfather will move for a minute I'll give you a kiss to prove it."

"Move, Siri," Harry whispered with a hint of a smile on his face.

Sirius chuckled and smiled, feeling his worries slide away. "Well, I can see where I stand," he joshed as he got up and let Ginny through.

"Some things…are more important," Harry joked weakly.

"Very true," Ginny said as she leaned over and kissed him gently.

Harry's smile was much more genuine when she pulled away and the others all smiled in response. Sirius moved back to where he had been sitting and took Harry's hand again.

"Voldemort's dead," Harry whispered. "Really dead this time. I can feel it. The link's gone. Can't feel him in my head anymore."

"Thank Merlin," Sirius breathed. "It's over."

"Finally," Remus said, a smile ghosting over his face.

"I killed Draco too, didn't I?" Harry asked, the words dropping from his lips like stones.

"I am afraid so, Ha…Mr Potter," Snape said calmly. "But as I gather he stabbed you twice in the chest, I would call it self-defence rather than anything else your ridiculously Gryffindorish brain is currently coming up with."

Harry breathed a nearly silent laugh.

"That's enough," Madam Pomfrey said, coming forward and starting to shoo them towards the door. "Mr Potter needs rest now. You can come back later."

"I'm staying," Sirius said firmly.

"So am I," Remus added, equally firmly.

Poppy eyed them for a moment then she nodded. "Let him sleep," she said with emphasis. "No messing around."

"I don't think that's a problem," Remus said with an indulgent look, gesturing towards the boy in the bed.

They all looked down at Harry and saw that he was fast asleep, his face peaceful and calm. No one had any desire to change that so they crept out as quietly as they could.

"The Ministry wants to throw a big party in his honour."

"I think I know how he's going to react to that idea."

"Yeah, Albus already said something along those lines but they want to do it anyway."

"He's not going to like it."

"I know that, Remus. I don't think he's going to be able to get out of it though. Voldemort's dead and gone. For good this time. That is something worth celebrating."

"I agree," Harry croaked out as he opened his eyes.

"Harry!" came the mutual yelp from both Sirius and Remus before Sirius continued, "How are you feeling?"

"Water?" Harry asked as he gingerly instigated his Oversight.

Much to his relief the energy colours he was expecting to see bloomed into life around him and he looked around to see Sirius offering him a glass. He took it in one shaking hand, not arguing when Sirius helped him take a several long sips. Sirius then put the glass back on the bedside table and sat on the side of the bed.

"How are you feeling?" he asked again.

"Tired. Kind of sore," Harry replied. "My side hurts a bit and so does my arm."

Remus came around and poured something from a large flask into a goblet. "Poppy said you should have some of this if you were still feeling sore when you woke up."

He offered the goblet to Harry and he drank it down with a grimace at the taste. The pain started to recede almost immediately and Harry leaned back into his pillows with a relieved sigh.

"Where is everyone?" he asked.

"Probably lurking outside the door of the Hospital Wing," Sirius said with a laugh. "You were the only one badly hurt. The Death Eaters weren't kidding around. They were using Killing Curses if they could manage it." He sobered. "There were a fair few deaths. Mostly among the Night

Warriors."

"Anyone I know?" Harry said with trepidation.

"No," Remus said firmly. "Tien and Jun'ko are fine. So are Nhean, Tonks, Fred and George as well as your Battle Guard. Sirius was right when he said you were pretty much the only one badly hurt. Everyone else was released yesterday."

"How long have I been asleep?" Harry asked with a frown.

"About two and a half days," Sirius replied. "I was a bit worried until Poppy assured me that you were fine, just very, very tired."

Remus snorted with laughter. "You mean until Poppy threatened to throw you out of the Hospital Wing for being a panic merchant."

"Thank you, Moony," Sirius said wryly. "Like you were any better."

Harry chuckled then he sobered again. "Did any of the Death Eaters survive?"

Remus and Sirius were silent for a moment.

"Bellatrix and Pansy Parkinson apparated out just after you killed Draco," Sirius admitted reluctantly. "There's been no sign of them anywhere but the Ministry's got everyone it can looking."

Harry grimaced. "Wonderful. It would have to be those two." He paused. "What about Pettigrew?"

Again there was silence from the two men.

"He was found in a room upstairs," Remus said quietly. "He's…completely insane. He didn't even recognise Sirius or I nor did he recognise Padfoot. They've taken him to St Mungos. The Healers think he's…irretrievable. He just sits in the corner of the room they've got him in and rocks back and forth."

"The lights are on but there's definitely no one home," Sirius added sourly.

"They know he's an animagus, don't they?" Harry asked.

Sirius nodded. "Yeah, don't worry. They've got the room warded so deeply it practically makes your hair stand on end. He's not going anywhere. Except maybe Azkaban if he ever regains his sanity."

"Good," Harry said firmly. "So…when can I get out of here?"

Both Sirius and Remus roared with laughter which brought Madam Pomfrey out of her office. She smiled to herself at the sight in front of her then cleared her expression and bustled over to the bed.

"Well, it's good to see you awake, Mr Potter," she said briskly.

"Thank you," Harry replied. "Can I go?"

Poppy gave him a stern look. "Certainly not," she said in a scandalised tone. "That chest of yours needs bed rest. You had a collapsed lung and lost a great deal of blood. You are staying right where

you are for at least the next three days."

"What?" Harry grumbled. "Three days?"

"Three days," Poppy replied firmly.

"I thought a hero was supposed to get rewarded, not punished," Harry muttered under his breath, causing Remus and Sirius to snicker.

"I heard that, Mr Potter," Poppy said with stern amusement. "Be careful or I'll make it four."

With that the mediwitch walked back to her office, allowing her laughter to emerge after she'd reached her sanctuary. If that last exchange was anything to go by, Harry was going to be fine.

Epilogue

Three days later a very disgruntled Harry Potter was released from the Hospital Wing. His friends and even many of teachers had visited him regularly but none of them had told him anything about what had happened, under the strict orders of the school mediwitch. Finally the Headmaster had promised to tell him everything once he was out. He walked down the corridor holding hands with Ginny, with Sirius and Remus walking behind them.

"Where to?" he asked as they climbed the stairs.

"The Headmaster's office," Sirius replied from behind him. "He thought that might be the best place."

Harry nodded they walked the rest of the way in silence. Once they got there, Harry had to endure a round of hugs from most of the people in the office before he could sit down. He looked around and saw that apart from Sirius, Remus and his Battle Guard, the others in the room were the Headmaster, Professor McGonagall, Professor Snape, Tonks, Nhean, Jun'ko, Tien, Ichiro, Fred, George and Tonks.

He sat down with a sigh on the couch next to Ginny and leaned back.

"So can I get my questions answered now?" he said with exasperation.

Chuckles ran around the room and the Headmaster looked at him with his eyes twinkling.

"Of course, Harry. Where would you like us to start?"

"Hang on," Sirius objected before Harry could say anything. "I want to know what happened to Harry first."

"As do I," Snape said archly.

Harry sighed. "I was hoping you wouldn't ask that. Okay, I suppose that's a bit more important, isn't it?"

"Only if you wish to tell us, Harry," Dumbledore said calmly.

Harry was silent for several minutes as he marshalled his thoughts then he spoke quietly.

"I have a vague memory of waking up in the middle of the night with Wormtail leaning over me then I smelt something kind of sweet then I…I think I fell asleep again."

"Dormira potion," Snape said neutrally. "Very similar in action to the Muggle drug chloroform."

"Oh," Harry said. He was silent again for a moment then continued. "I woke up in that room you found me in. I think I was lying pretty close to that pillar thing and…well, this is the odd thing. Pettigrew had brought my cane along and he'd placed it so I was lying on it and no one else could see it."

"The life debt," Hermione said quietly. "He still owed you a life debt so he obviously brought the cane along to try and help you as best as he could."

"Yeah, that's kind of what I guessed," Harry said with a quick look at her. "Anyway, Voldemort…or Draco…or…well, both of them…started…taunting me. I knew you'd all be looking for me so I decided all I really had to do was try and stay alive. He…used the Cruciatus on me a few times and then…" Harry paused and shot a look at the Weasley twins. "Then Fred and George came in."

"You saw them?" Tien asked curiously.

Harry shook his head. "No but I heard them. And I understood the message. Copycats."

"That was a stroke of genius, if I do say so myself," Fred said smugly, burnishing his nails on his shirt.

"Of course it was," George replied. "I thought of it."

"You?" Fred said indignantly. "I think you'll find it was me."

"It was both of you," Ron said with a roll of his eyes. "Now shut up and let Harry get on with it."

"Yes, O honourable ickle brother," Fred and George said in unison with wicked grins.

Harry laughed then continued. "So that was when I knew you were all there. The Death Eaters used the Killing Curse on the illusions of Fred and George and that seemed to dispel them."

"It was an interesting experience," Fred said sotto voce.

"Tell me about it," Hermione said dryly.

Harry flashed them a grin and continued. "Voldemort seemed to think it was something I did, maybe because of the last time, when I was using the illusion. Anyway, he tried the Cruciatus again then the illusions of Sirius and Remus and then my Battle Guard, Master Nhean, Jun'ko and Tien arrived. I was able to use the distraction to get away from the spell sphere and then Voldemort and I duelled for a little bit. But when the illusions all got destroyed I got a little outmanoeuvred. Then Voldemort got me with an Impedimenta and the Death Eaters surrounded me." He shuddered. "I thought I was dead until Tien arrived with the other Night Warriors." He looked over at the Vietnamese man. "How did you do that? I gathered that it went pitch black in there just before you arrived."

Nhean, Jun'ko and Tien all laughed.

"An old trick, Harry," Nhean replied. "And one you'll learn in the next few years. It's a simple but effective spell that induces darkness. Unfortunately it only has a limited life. I think it failed shortly before Sirius got into the room."

Harry thought for a moment. "Yeah, I think so. I remember thinking Pansy could see us just after I killed Draco."

"So what happened after the Night Warriors arrived?" Dumbledore asked.

"They took the Death Eaters and I took Voldemort," Harry said grimly. "Voldemort was at a bit of a disadvantage because he couldn't see but I still could with the Oversight. But I knew I couldn't kill him. That only Draco could cast him out. I…kind of took a risk that Draco could hear me and I told

him what he needed to do. I guess he heard me and cast the spell because he suddenly stopped moving and in the Oversight I saw this black, sort of oily smoke ooze out of Draco. He collapsed to the ground and I…well, I tranced down." He shrugged. "I'm not sure why I did that except it felt right."

"You've made quite the career of relying on sheer, dumb luck," McGonagall said with amusement.

Harry smiled wryly. "I guess I have. Anyway, when I tranced down I could see these…threads reaching out from the cloud towards any magical source they could find. I grabbed one and realised they were very similar to the ones that made up that trap of Pansy's so I figured I could do the same thing with these ones as I did with those. So I put up the shielding Master Nhean taught me and started. Voldemort must have realised what I was doing because he tried to stop me. The…cloud itself couldn't get through the shield but more of those tendrils could get through. They started choking me so I kind of made a desperate move. I put the end of the thread I was working with near the pillar and saw that the pillar just sucked the energy right out of it. It only took seconds."

"And overloaded the obelisk," Tien murmured. "I'd wondered how that happened."

"What?" Harry said.

"Nothing," Tien replied quickly. "We'll tell you in a minute. So what happened next?"

Harry gave him a look then continued. "I was in the middle of monitoring the last part of the process when my side started really hurting. It pulled me out of the trance and I realised Draco was right next to me. He stabbed me again and I brought my sword around as hard as I could. I…think I made the injuries worse doing that but all I could think of was protecting myself." He shrugged and looked slightly uncomfortable. "Then I collapsed and passed out. I just remember thinking it wasn't fair that I'd actually managed to kill Voldemort and both of us weren't meant to die."

"I think that if Draco attacked a Night Warrior…and he must have had some idea of what you are and what you're capable of…then he deserved his fate," Nhean said quietly. "You defended yourself instinctively. You were perfectly entitled to do so."

"Yeah," Harry breathed, nodding slowly. "Yeah, I know. I just…wish I hadn't had to do it."

"Mr Malfoy chose his own path," Snape said soberly. "He made his own choices."

Harry considered that for a moment then nodded. "Yeah. So what happened with all of you?"

There was a moment of silence as they all looked around, trying to work out where to start.

Finally Ron rolled his eyes and explained about how he'd woken up to find Harry gone but had thought he was merely downstairs. But when he'd gotten down to the common room to find it empty, he'd known something was wrong. He'd then told how he'd gone immediately up to the office they were currently in and told the Headmaster as well as Professor McGonagall and Snape. He told how Snape had worked out about the Dormira potion and that everyone had gathered in the Guild classroom to try and work out what to do next.

"We had three likely places you could be but didn't know how to find out which one was the right one," Ron continued. "Then Hermione worked it out."

"Dobby," Hermione said, picking up the thread of the story. "He was the Malfoy's house elf so he'd know Malfoy Manor. I thought that he'd at least be able to either confirm you were there or rule one option out. But underestimated how much he likes you. When he heard what had happened he took it upon himself to go to all three. He said he knew them all. I guess Lucius Malfoy must have taken him. He came back and he'd been hurt badly. He said you were at Riddle Manor."

"Is he alright?" Harry asked urgently.

Hermione smiled. "I've been down to see him everyday. He's fine. He's thrilled that he was able to help and that you're okay. The other house elves have been having a difficult time keeping him in bed."

"He's as bad as you, Harry," Sirius said roguishly.

Harry mock-scowled at his godfather then asked, "So what did you do next?"

"Once we knew where you were, the planning wasn't that difficult," Dumbledore said. "I suspected that Tom would be too distracted to notice us coming through the wards but we still had to find you in the house. Dobby was merely able to tell us you were there, not your precise location. That's why we sent the illusions in first. As I'm sure you remember from when you used it, I made an alteration that allows you to see and hear what your illusion sees. Fred and George were able to locate you and the rest sent their illusions in to distract Voldemort and to give us time to get to you. I kept Remus with me to protect me while I dealt with the wards. I didn't trust Tom not to have some kind of traps in the area and I needed full concentration to deal with the wards so that the Ministry would be able to get through. The others went after you."

"We went in first," Tien said. "Nhean cast and held the darkness spell and the rest of us went in. Your friends weren't too happy about that but they had to admit that in the dark we have the advantage. You reacted well when we came in. We weren't sure what kind of condition you were in but you could see how easy it was to deal with the Death Eaters when we change the odds a little."

"The rest of us waited outside," Sirius picked up the story this time. "So we were ready when those Death Eaters came running out. They were caught because of the Night Warriors behind them, so they fought pretty hard. That's why it took the rest of us so long to get to you. I was the first to get to the doors and I came in just as Bella and Pansy Parkinson apparated out. I'll admit I didn't much care about them. You…you were in a pretty bad way. I sent Ginny to get Severus and Poppy."

Harry stared at his godfather. Sirius had called Severus by his first name. What was going on here?

Sirius apparently ignored his reaction as he continued. "That's when we ran into another problem. We couldn't move you until Poppy could stabilise you. You'd lost a lot of blood and your lung had collapsed."

"And by feeding all of Voldemort's life force into the obelisk, you'd badly overloaded it," Tien added. "It was a good solution to the problem. You couldn't have known how close to the edge that obelisk was. We had to get everyone out of there but you couldn't be moved. Hermione suggested we shield you. All of us all at the same time. With any luck the shields would hold."

"Good one, Hermione," Harry said with a smile and Hermione blushed. "I take it the shield worked."

"Yes," Tien replied with relief. "I wasn't sure they would but they held…just."

"Once that was over, we brought you back here and …well, I think you know the rest," Sirius concluded.

Harry nodded and silence fell in the room and everyone considered the stories that had been told.

"So what now?" Harry asked, feeling a little lost. "I…I don't really know what to do with myself. It sort of feels like my whole life has been about Voldemort."

"I believe you have NEWTs to prepare for and a Tyro to consider," Snape said in reply. "I would think that was enough for now."

"We still have to do our NEWTs?" Ron asked with a tragic expression.

"Of course, Mr Weasley," Professor McGonagall said in a scandalised tone as the others laughed. "You have your future to consider."

Ron sighed miserably. "I was hoping they'd be called off in the celebrations."

Harry laughed at his friend then gave Sirius a curious look.

"Why are you suddenly calling Professor Snape by his name?" he asked bluntly.

Sirius shrugged uncomfortably. "He saved your life. I didn't know what to do and he did. I guess it's hard to hate a man who saves your family."

Harry nodded and smiled at his godfather. "Good." He then looked over at Snape and grinned impishly. "And I distinctly remember you calling me Harry. What's going on there?"

"I believe you must be mistaken, Mr Potter," Snape replied, amusement gleaming in his eyes.

"Oh no, I remember that much," Harry said. "You called me Harry. And more than once."

"You are definitely delusional," Snape replied with arch amusement. "Harry."

The others laughed as Harry looked triumphant.

"So…NEWTs and the tyro," Harry said comfortably when the laughter died down. "I guess I can handle that for now."

"Yeah, NEWTs, the tyro and Ginny is enough to keep any sane person busy," Ron said with a grin.

Ginny leaned over and whacked her brother on the arm as Harry laughed. It was over and he'd won. Voldemort was dead and so was Draco. His family was intact and it seemed he had a future to look forward to. Life had never been better.