

Harry Potter and the Years of Rebellion Through The Looking Glass

One
THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

July 9, 1996

A lean young man with round dark-rimmed glasses ran steadily along Magnolia Road. He wore baggy grey sweatpants and a dark boxing singlet. His dark thick black hair stuck out the back of a faded and sweat-stained sporting cap. This year's trainers were better than the last, but still a size too large. He was rangy and he had longer hair than many of the boys. There had been a time not so long before when would have sought to be invisible to passers-by; hiding in the shadows had been well learned at Number Four Privet Drive. He was still in hiding, but no longer from the Muggles of Little Whinging.

There was a certain pleasure in the panting and gasping that came from his invisible minders as they tried to keep pace. He'd warmed to the idea of protectors, albeit reluctantly; it was the occasional sense of others that now gave him pause—the flash of black robes at the corner of his eye, the rustle of a cloak for which he couldn't account. He unpredictably changed his routes, his habits, and the times he ventured out. A new and deadly seriousness hung over everything like a fog that wouldn't lift.

He'd been more ignored by his relations than berated thus far. Uncle Vernon avoided him and Aunt Petunia regarded him with a strange almost-sad look in her eyes. They didn't even ask that he mow or weed or plant; instead they'd taken on a service. When he'd asked about it, she had told him that he wasn't good enough at his tasks to meet the neighbourhood standard, but there had been no real malice in her voice.

Aunt Petunia sat alone at the dining table as Harry returned from his run. "Clean yourself before you set foot in my kitchen," she said.

Harry returned, "Yes, Aunt Petunia." He stopped at the first step and added, "I, er, forgot to thank you for the artwork in the bedroom."

"You like it, do you?" she asked.

"Especially the painting beside the window," he said.

There was a long pause before she said with a catch in her voice, “Dudley painted it, and all the rest. He... well, he’s taken up the arts since last summer.”

Harry was gob-smacked. “Honestly? It... it’s quite nice.”

“Be certain you make mention of that to your cousin,” said Aunt Petunia.

“Erm... I’ll do that...?” he managed.

“Run along,” she said briskly. “Vernon will be expecting his dinner.”

After a week's time at Privet Drive, Harry was beginning to wonder whether the Dursleys had been bought off or even cursed by someone. By the time he finished his three-minute shower, dried, dressed and made his way to the kitchen, he managed to once again shake off Aunt Petunia’s odd behaviour.

Uncle Vernon was already an unattractive shade of puce when Harry began to place the meal. There was a crumpled letter and a torn envelope at the centre of the table. Uncle Vernon pounced on his roast; his flatware clattered loudly against the plate. Even after her food was brought out, Aunt Petunia sat with her head angled down. She picked idly at her food. Dudley was quiet; he ate quickly, efficiently. Harry took his place at the table. He started on a full serving to no complaints, as had been the case for every meal since returning from his fifth year at Hogwarts.

Not a moment after Harry sat, Uncle Vernon slammed his fist against the table. Harry flinched but Uncle Vernon’s waggling index finger jabbed toward Dudley. “A qualification in bloody – effing – ART!” he bellowed. “Imagine my pride, Petunia, that our ickle *Duddydums* is now qualified to become a lazy penniless queer when he grows up!”

“Here it comes...” Dudley muttered.

“Why didn’t you take up knitting instead?” Uncle Vernon spat. “Turning you into a Nancy-boy, they are! What sorts of trainers tell a boy to take up art? *Pathetic!*” Harry squinted at the crumpled letter; it was Dudley’s O-level results.

“Two hundred for each competition, five hundred a month for trainers and ring time, extra from the market for that ridiculous diet they set for you, call after call to those fools at the sport federation – it’s expensive and it’s a burden. The sacrifices I’ve made for you...” Uncle Vernon ploughed on; “Well, I won’t have you throwing away my money. Do you want to be a bloody freak like the Potter boy?”

“There wasn’t a single disciplinary note from Smeltings this last term, Vernon; not a note, not a call,” Aunt Petunia said.

Uncle Vernon’s chest puffed. “That’s because our boy’s finally intimidating the right people, I expect,” he said.

Dudley set down his fork and said, “It’s because I stopped throwing punches outside the ring.

Coach Crosby –”

“– Should be struck with a knobbly stick until he acts like a man,” Uncle Vernon cut him off.

“It isn’t just Coach who said I needed to change. It’s Mr. Melton, Mrs. Withers, Mr. Sutterby –”
Dudley started.

“Then I should have some of my old house-mates come around and we’ll all bring our sticks,”
Uncle Vernon snapped. “Smeltings is being held hostage by a pack of soft-headed –”

“They were right, the lot of them,” Dudley protested; “I could be banned from the federation for getting in a scrape now that I’m registered.”

“Smeltings boys mark their place in the world. It’s not a scrape when you’re marking your place,”
Uncle Vernon growled.

“Let it go, Vernon,” Aunt Petunia said.

“I certainly won’t let it go! I’ll have you know I’ve called Headmaster Edgerton,” Uncle Vernon said as he wiped at his brow. “You’ll be sitting a second time for this Food and Nutrition business – stupid as it may be – and for Latin as well. Somehow you nearly passed that one. It’s not Business, but it’ll have to do. The exams are set for the first week of August.”

“I’d have done better if you hadn’t put me into competition right before the bloody exams!”
Dudley snapped.

“Mind your tongue, boy!” Uncle Vernon shouted. “You’re sitting for Mechanical Drawing as well. At least you could work as a draughtsman. I’ll not have a son of mine on the dole!”

“But... but I didn’t take the course!” spluttered Dudley.

“Then you’d best start revising,” Uncle Vernon said with an entirely false smile. “If you don’t pass Mechanical Drawing and at least one of the others, then returning to Smeltings will be the least of your worries. Do we understand one another?”

“Vernon!” Aunt Petunia shouted. Dudley noticeably paled. He left the dining room and made for the cellar without a word. Harry followed him as soon as he had cleared the table, out of morbid interest in the new-and-evidently improved Dudley.

The speed bag thump-thumped as Dudley gave it a pounding. “Don’t talk to me, Dad – I’m warning you!” he snapped without turning around. He gave the bag two furious shots before he brought narrowed eyes to bear on Harry.

“And what do you want – a good laugh at the ‘queer’? Take your shot, Potter,” Dudley grunted, moving to the heavy bag.

“He’s being a stupid git,” said Harry. “You could stay at your school or something, right? I’ll bet

your mum would pay for it behind Vernon's back."

Dudley kept pounding away. "They're better to you than to me this summer! If I didn't know better, I'd say it was your hocus-pocus—" His hands fell to his sides like stones and he added in a whisper, "That bloke with the crazy eye... did he...?"

Harry said, "I don't think so. I don't understand what's going on around here, honestly. You could have done better on your OWL – er, O-levels, I mean. The rest of it though... seems like all you've done is listen to your professors."

Dudley sat down heavily; he explained, "Coach Crosby, he said I'd fight better if I kept it in the ring... said I needed to find something else for myself, right? So he sent me to Mrs. Withers and she said I was being who Piers and Gordon wanted me to be, not who I wanted to be. I don't know about that, but it wasn't getting me what I wanted, you know? So the second week back to Smeltings, Piers is pushing around this first year and the kid gives me this look and he says 'help me' but the words don't come out... and so I tear Piers loose and then lay him flat. You know what happens? This first year, he says I'm his hero, and the other midgets all come 'round to thank me for it, and this other one gives me his lunch!" He shook his head. "I didn't take it, he gave it to me! Makes a fellow think, right? Well, Piers and Gordon, they came for me a few days after that... they shouldn't have done that. Now they just stay clear and I'm done with them. I haven't hit anyone else since then – 'cept in the ring, of course. So I go back to Mrs. Withers and I ask her, what do I do now? That's when I started painting – been doing it for a while now."

"You're good at it, I think," Harry said honestly.

"Yeah, right... so everything's hung in the small bedroom. Mum figured Dad wouldn't bin them if he didn't see them. Mr. Sutterby, he thinks I could probably sell some of it. He says I have a 'gift', whatever that's about. Dad, he just figures I've gone soft in the head." He stood up and gave the heavy bag one crushing blow after another. "I'm doing everything Coach says... I fight better now – I'm faster on my feet, and it's like I can see what's coming... I'm going to keep my title... more than that, I hope... people like me now ... the teachers like me... girls like me more, and I expected they'd think I was a poof... so what did I do that was so – bloody – wrong?" Dudley wondered.

Harry shrugged. "It seems like you did a lot of things right."

Dudley harrumphed, and then started his ordinary routine again – left, right, left, right. "You know those demented things...?" he asked.

Harry hesitated. "The Dementors? Yeah... I know them better than I'd like."

Dudley mumbled, "They can't come here, can they? I mean, er, that's why you stay here – isn't that it?"

"It's something like that," Harry said.

Dudley switched to staccato jabs. “This Lord Whose-its of yours, he can’t come here either – right?”

Harry thought for a moment about what to say, and decided on the truth: “I don’t know. I don’t think so.”

Dudley gave the bag a last shove, and then began to take off his gloves. “He killed everyone in Mum’s family?” he asked.

“He killed my parents at any rate,” Harry told him. Dudley lost his colour again; Harry thought he looked like a Dementor was within reach.

After the gloves were put away and the elastic wraps rolled, Dudley said, “I’m not that smart, you know?” Harry bit his lip as Dudley went on, “I’m smart enough to know that I don’t want to get thrown out of somewhere safe from those dementle things and your Lord Nutter. I have to pass these exams.”

Harry said flatly, “I have to kill him.”

Dudley backed away a step. “Kill who?”

“Him. Lord Voldemort. You see, there’s this ... oh, never mind. Point is, it has to be done and I’m the one to do it,” said Harry.

“Crikey... actually kill him?” Dudley asked.

Harry nodded. It felt good to tell someone what he had to do, even if it was out of context, but he felt a wave of everything come at him – especially Sirius. He cleared his throat. “I’ve a suggestion for you... I’ll study with you for your O levels, and you teach me how to box and what to do with those weights.”

Dudley shot him a dubious look. “What good is that? You know Latin, do you?”

Harry started, “Well, wiz... that is to say, I’ve picked up quite a lot for spell... I mean, uh, not properly.”

“Better sweeten the deal, then,” Dudley said. “You know how to draw?”

“Er, no... but I have an idea on someone who does,” Harry said.

“What else?” Dudley demanded.

Harry thought for a bit, and then added, “I’ll take over the cooking and the marketing entirely from Aunt Petunia.”

“You’d get the training diet right at least – I’ll give you that – and I suppose you could revise for Food and Nutrition,” Dudley said. He quickly regained his colour and bluster. “Well, I’m well

trained in the sweet science, you know, and I suppose I could show you the ropes, so to speak...
how to give old Lord Whoop-dee-doo the old one-two, and all that.”

Give Voldemort ‘the old one-two’ – please! he thought. I just need to pound the stuffing out of something.

July 28, 1996

Harry settled into his bed after a nasty bit of weight training in the cellar. He knew he should work on his summer scroll for Snape but he didn’t care a whit. I’m living like a Muggle, it occurred to him, and the idea was more comfortable than he would have guessed. He’d avoided a single coherent dream about Voldemort all summer– certainly, he hadn’t felt any sort of crawling about in his mind – and all of his studying and training and cooking and reading left little time to dwell on anything. He dreamt regularly of Sirius falling through the veil in the Department of Mysteries, the look of wonder and shock frozen on his face. Sometimes Sirius would fall through the veil over and over. Other times, Harry would dive after him and then wake up in a sweat. Even so, he hadn’t once screamed in the night.

He gave a telephone call every two or three days to Arabella Figg, the Squib who lived two streets away. She passed along to the Order of the Phoenix that he was in good health and that the Dursleys were not mistreating him. That was all Dumbledore and the others really cared about, he supposed. The telephone call was a compromise, as he’d neglected to send an owl after four days on Privet Drive. Lupin had shown up in a panic with Dumbledore in tow. He had felt badly for Lupin, who looked a mess, but the sight of him had been a living reminder of the loss through the veil.

Harry had made his feelings perfectly clear – he wanted no owls, no visits, and no bother from the minders. Thus far, his wishes had been respected. He assumed that Dumbledore had held everyone back. *They certainly hang on his every word*, Harry grumbled to himself. Hedwig was nonplussed at having no post to carry and responded by disappearing for days at a time.

The large screech owl that chose to peck on Harry’s window was thus an unwelcome surprise. It perched on the ledge and displayed a large and floridly addressed envelope. Harry took the envelope, gave over a few Knuts with a sigh, and shooed the owl away.

A scarlet and gold border formed from two illuminated dragons and a capital “G” framed the address. It didn’t take him long to guess the sender. The envelope opened of its own accord when he absently dragged a fingertip across the seal, and the parchment inside leapt into his free hand:

*Mister Harry James Potter
The Smallest Bedroom
Number Four Privet Drive
Little Whinging
Surrey*

Mister Potter:

Mister Sirius Black entrusted Gringotts Wizarding Bank with the disposition of his estate per his Last Will and Testament entered into record on February 27 of the current year.

The Trust Department demonstrated the validity of the late Mister Black's Last Will and Testament to the satisfaction of the Contract and Administrative Services Office of the Ministry for Magic of England and Scotland. Gringotts has settled any and all outstanding debts and tariffs and is prepared to distribute the corpus, including all remaining personal and real property, in accordance with the terms of the aforementioned Last Will and Testament.

The Last Will and Testament names you as the late Mister Black's heir and principal beneficiary. Contact the Trust Department of Gringotts Wizarding Bank in order to accept the terms contained therein and arrange for a public reading. Mister Dedalus Diggle, Esq., the late Mister Black's solicitor of record, has been appointed as executor. You are allowed to retain your own solicitor of record in this matter.

Respond by August 16 unless you prefer that the Ministry for Magic sticks its snout into your business.

Peninukk

*Head Goblin, Trusts and Investment Schemes
Gringotts Wizarding Bank*

He tried to crumple the post but it sprang back, as flat and smooth as when it left the envelope.
“Stupid letter! Stupid goblins!” he shouted.

“Shut it, boy!” Uncle Vernon bellowed from down the hall.

Harry muttered under his breath and sped down two sets of stairs to the cellar. He wrapped elastic around his hands and then pulled on Dudley's spare pair of boxing gloves. They were stuffed tightly with foam to fit Harry's smaller hands. He worked the speed bag as Dudley had shown him. Harry was a good student when he wanted to be.

He switched to the heavy bag, hitting it stoutly. Pound. *I don't want your money or your things, Sirius* . POUND-pound. He saw Bellatrix Lestranger, as though she were before him in the cellar.
Pound-pound-POUND.

“Bitch!” he cried out. The word tasted like blood in his mouth. POUND-pound-pound-pound.

He thought about Dudley's fear of the Dementors, his fear of leaving Privet Drive. Pound-pound. *He's right, of course; nowhere else is safe, not really* . Pound-pound. *Voldemort will come anywhere, do anything to get at me* . Pound-pound-pound. *He'll take away everything and everyone I've ever cared about* . Pound-pound-pound. *The Dursleys – well, Dudley and Aunt Petunia at any rate; they're all the family I have, and they've not been so bad this summer* . Pound-pound. *He'll kill Dumbledore, I suppose, if he can manage it* . Pound-pound. *Lupin,*

definitely . POUND-POUND. And Hogwarts; he'll destroy Hogwarts.

Harry felt quite odd. Pound-POUND-pound. *The Order – he'll kill them all to get at me . Pound-pound. The Department of Mysteries weighed upon him. Neville. Luna, too. They were brave, the both of them, and they'll be killed for it . POUND-pound-POUND. A draft blew upon him, almost a light wind. The whole of the D.A., probably – Dean, Seamus, Katie, Alicia and Angelina...Susan Bones and MacMillan and the other Hufflepuffs, Cho and Corner and the Ravenclaws...and all the Weasleys, every last one of them. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, and Bill and Charlie, even Percy the Prat . POUND-POUND. And the twins . Yes, a wind definitely blew – a hot wind. And Ginny, poor Ginny – she's already suffered Riddle once. Pound-POUND-POUND-pound.*

The heat burned the sweat from him. *RON! I won't let him get to Ron! I WON'T! POUND-POUND-POUND-pound. Something creaked. Harry could feel bits of ... something... flying around. His eyes squeezed shut as he pounded away. Pound-POUND-POUND. HERMIONE! NO! POUND-POUND-POUND-creak! He saw Ron beside him, bruised but defiant. Hermione was forced to her knees before Voldemort; his Death Eaters jeered and called her a worthless Mudblood and worse. The wind roared in Harry's ears. He'll kill my best friends! He'll destroy everything and everyone I've ever cared about if I don't stop him first . POUND-creak!-POUND-creak! He couldn't shake Ron and Hermione from his mind's eye. I have to kill him – I have to end this! Voldemort sneered, spoke the curse, and shot flashes of light, first red and then green. Ron was face down in a spreading pool of blood. Hermione's eyes were wide and empty. Harry shook her and she didn't stir, didn't blink; a burning rage filled him. Everything around Harry and his two oldest and dearest friends erupted into inextinguishable green fire. POUND! POUND! POUND! CRASH!*

Harry gasped for breath. He reached for the wall to catch himself and instead caught the floor. There were soft bits of something beneath his hand. He looked around the room through a greenish haze, struggled to focus, and recognised the problem – no glasses. His fingertips only found more soft bits here and there. He could hear bangs and thumps, growing closer. Bumps and thumps echoed from the stairwell. His hand closed on his glasses; the frame was askew but they were otherwise undamaged.

Foam, elastic and leather were strewn all over the cellar. Remnants of Dudley's boxing gloves hung from his wrists. That wasn't the worst of it, though. The heavy bag was in five pieces. One small piece swayed crazily from the chain that had held the bag from the ceiling. Three small pieces lay about the room. The fifth and largest piece stood across the room from Harry. It was – melted? – and embedded firmly in the concrete wall.

Thump... thump... thump... THUMP... THUMP. He heard panting and wheezing. "WHAT IN BLOODY HELL IS GOING ON DOWN HERE?" His last thought as the room spun and he passed out was, Oh, well; it was too good to last...

...Harry's head slipped under the dark waves. Long white fingers clutched at his throat, slitted red eyes burned at him, and a cold laugh haunted him. He gasped for air and took in sea spray. A woman's shrill voice called out "Let go of him!" The voice was far away or perhaps right next to him. "For God's sake, let go!" Yes, the voice was definitely close. Harry raised his hands to his

throat and felt thick-fingered hands.

“*Look – at – my – wall!* I’ll dump him on the corner so his freak friends can fetch the body!” Through the rippling dark waves, Harry made out a purple face with spit bubbling at the corners of its shrieking mouth. Then there was a second pair of large hands and then – air! Fresh air seared his chest. Darkness resolved to reveal Dudley pushing Uncle Vernon back against the wall to one side of the molten punching bag. Harry tried to speak but only managed a few raspy crackles that made him cough.

There was an insistent rapping from upstairs, a loud tapping on glass. Aunt Petunia, as distressed as Harry had ever seen her, told Dudley, “Keep your father off him, however you have to do it,” and then shouted up the stairwell, “What is that racket about? I’m coming!”

An owl hurtled down the stairs into the cellar, swooped over Harry’s head and dropped a parchment envelope at his feet. It took a graceful turn and then shot back up the stairs.

“OWLS! AAAHHHH!” shrieked Uncle Vernon; he slid slowly down the cellar wall onto his ample backside. Harry tore at the envelope and wondered what sort of punishment the Ministry for Magic dispensed to under-age wizards who destroyed the cellars of their Muggle relatives:

*Mister Harry James Potter
The Unintentionally Damaged Cellar
Number Four Privet Drive
Little Whinging
Surrey*

Dear Mister Potter,

The Ministry of Magic detected an indeterminate emission of magical energy within the confines of Number Four Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Surrey, at nine minutes past eleven this evening. This energy emission did not correspond to any known spells or potions, and is therefore outside the scope of the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Under-age Sorcery.

Though uncommon, it is not without precedent for young wizards to experience nocturnal energy emissions or other episodes of unintentional wand-less magic. We believe that this incident was most likely a consequence of your natural development, although the amount of energy detected was rather more substantial than normally observed.

It is important that young wizards affected by such circumstances learn to control nocturnal emissions and similar episodes, and to constructively channel their pent-up energy. Accordingly, we have notified the Headmaster, your Head of House, and the Matron of the Hospital Wing at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry of your suspected condition. They are well prepared to assist you in the selection of effective methods and learning materials, and will guide you in the development and maintenance of appropriate control.

Yours sincerely,

Mafalda Hopkirk

Improper Use of Magic Office Ministry for Magic

Harry looked up at the Dursleys. Aunt Petunia stood at the foot of the stairs, ashen faced. Dudley watched him with a glare and a scowl. Uncle Vernon, still purple though a shade or two lighter now, closed the distance between them much faster than a man of his size had any right. He whipped his arm toward Harry before either Dudley or Aunt Petunia could react and seized the letter.

“From your ruddy Ministry, is it? You should get the gallows for this!” Uncle Vernon bellowed. He read the letter from the Ministry, shook his head, and read it a second time before his brow beetled. “What are they playing at? Nocturnal emissions...? Natural development... appropriate methods... maintain control... pent-up energy?” He snorted and then began to laugh. His beefy torso rolled in waves. Just as Harry thought he was going to stop, he burst into hysterical cackles.

“Give me that!” Aunt Petunia snapped, snatching the letter from Uncle Vernon. She, too, read the letter twice, and then sniggered, “Goodness... when this happens to Dudley... heh, heh... I just have to... ha, ha, ha... wash the sheets!”

Dudley flushed beet-red and angrily seized the letter from his mother. He read the letter very slowly. After a second reading he thrust it back at Harry and then began to rummage through his mangled equipment.

Harry read the letter again. ‘Unexpected nocturnal emissions’... ‘a consequence of natural development’... ‘constructively channel pent-up energy’... no, they couldn’t think that! His face burned and his insides plummeted. Uncle Vernon tried to speak, waggled his index finger at Harry, and again burst into laughter. Harry wanted to dash up the stairs, burst through the front door, and run south-eastward until he fell into the sea and drowned, but his feet were rooted to the floor.

He jammed the letter back into its envelope but the corner hung up on the inside of the envelope, which left only a single line below Madam Hopkirk’s signature visible:

cc: Profs. A. Dumbledore & M. McGonagall, Madam P. Pomfrey, HSWW

A one-way journey to the sea sounded better to Harry with each passing moment. After a very long time - Harry was sure it was in the vicinity of a week - Uncle Vernon calmed down enough to say, “YOU – clean this up! Stay up all night if it’s required. I expect you to figure out how you’re going to repair my wall, and you’ll start at it tomorrow. I know you people have your ways, and I don’t want to hear a word about it. That wall will be repaired before we’re rid of you. Is – that - understood?”

“Yes, Uncle Vernon,” said Harry.

Uncle Vernon muttered, “Shame about the equipment,” at Dudley, whose jaw dangerously tightened. Aunt Petunia gave a baleful shake of the head as if Harry was a pet who had wet the carpet. Uncle Vernon sniggered as he followed her up the the first flight of stairs and then laughed all the way to his bedroom.

Dudley crossed his beefy arms, clenched his fists, and stood silent until his parents could no longer be heard. He reached down and picked up a twisted and battered ten-pound dumbbell. “My bags... my gloves... my weights... all – ruined! RUINED!”

Harry said quietly, “I’ll buy you new equipment.”

Dudley eyed him like a predator scouting for a live meal. “With what? You wear my hand-me-downs, you don’t get an allowance... steady on – you don’t get an allowance, right?”

“I’m receiving an inheritance,” said Harry. “You remember my... godfather?” Dudley gave a nervous nod.

“He was killed this spring by one of Lord Voldemort’s followers,” said Harry matter-of-factly, even though there was nothing at all matter-of-fact about what had happened or the churning in his stomach every time that he thought of it. “There should be enough to take care of everything.” *And if not, there’s surely enough in my vault to cover it several times over*, he knew.

“When?” Dudley asked menacingly. “I won’t miss training over this.”

Harry trudged up the stairs to gather up supplies. “Tomorrow, then,” he croaked, his throat still burning. “Time to start cleaning, I suppose.”

July 29, 1996

Harry sat bolt upright in his bed, dizzy and disoriented from yet another Sirius dream. He fumbled for his glasses. It was half past six and he’d had a little more than three hours of sleep. He tugged on his jersey and sweatpants, crept down the stairs, and prepared the morning meal. It struck him that Uncle Vernon would as likely laugh at him as shout. When Dudley made his way down, he slipped past and back to his small room.

He quickly leafed through stacks of books and papers. At last, he found the scrap of parchment that he was looking for. He tucked the scrap in his pocket along with a Muggle biro and a handful of Muggle coins from the small cache of money tucked away in the bottom of his trunk.

“I’m taking my run early,” he called out to Dudley, and set out the door into a fifth day of mist and drizzle just as his uncle lumbered down the stairs for breakfast. Near the end of his usual hour and a half he stopped at a telephone box across from the market. He fished out the coins and the scrap of parchment and dialled the number written there.

After several rings, a woman answered, “Hello?”

“H-Hermione? Uh, Hermione Granger, please?” Harry stammered.

“May I ask who is calling, please?” The voice took on a suspicious tone.

“This is Harry Potter,” he said.

“Ah! This is Mrs. Granger speaking,” the woman said. “Hold while I fetch Hermione, would you? No doubt she’ll be pleased that you’ve called.”

There was an interminable silence, and then... “Harry? Is that really you?”

“Hello, Hermione,” he said. There was a long silence. “Hermione?” he said again. “Hello? Are you still there? Erm... how has your summer been?”

“Harry Potter!” Hermione erupted. “I hear from you for the first time since King’s Cross - on the telephone, no less – after no letters, no owls, not a sign of you all summer long, and you have the NERVE to ask me that? ‘How has your summer been?’ You could have been dead for all we knew, and you call me to ask ‘How has your summer been?’ You are a PRAT, Harry – a great PRAT, that’s what you are!”

“Look, I...” Harry tried to interject.

She blustered on, “I’ll tell you how my summer has been – rotten to the core! Everyone’s a wreck, for goodness’ sake, what with all the attacks–”

Harry cut in, “Attacks? What attacks? I haven’t seen anything on the news that would have -”

“There’s another one in the *Prophet* every single day. It’s even in the *Quibbler*, for goodness’ sake!” Hermione fumed.

“I meant the news on the telly, Hermione,” Harry said. “You know I don’t take either of the papers.”

“You’re not watching very closely, then!” snapped Hermione. “You mean to tell me that you don’t know anything? I expected that Professor Dumbledore would have kept -”

Something inside Harry flared. “What, that Dumbledore would have kept me informed? Like he’s kept me informed for the last five years, do you mean? No, Hermione, there’s no risk of that. I don’t know a thing about anything that’s happened this summer – not one thing!”

There was silence again for a moment, before Hermione shouted, “For the first time in this conversation, I completely agree with you! You don’t know a thing!”

Harry took a few calming breaths. “I don’t want to fight with you, right? I’ll leave it to you and Ron.” He hesitated for a few moments and then added, “An owl came yesterday.”

Hermione asked quietly, “Was it from Gringotts?”

“How did you...?”

“I received a letter yesterday evening. Harry... are you all right with this?” Hermione asked.

Harry said flatly, “He’s dead. They have to do something with his things, I suppose.”

“Are you ready to; you know... talk about what happened? I mean, if you are, then you can talk to me,” Hermione told him. “You know that, don’t you? You can always talk to me.”

The telephone receiver shook in Harry’s trembling hand. He knew that she meant well, but he also knew that he wasn’t ready. For that matter, he doubted that she was prepared for what he might have to say. He wondered what she would think of him if he recounted his last meeting with Dumbledore.

“Do you have a number to ring Dean Thomas?” he asked abruptly.

“Wha...? For Dean? I have tried to collect numbers from the Muggleborns I know... why would you want to contact him?” Hermione asked.

“I need someone who can draw,” Harry said.

“Someone who can draw...? I’ll see if I have it, then,” she said in an odd pitch. A minute later, she returned to the telephone and he scribbled down the number.

“I need to get to Diagon Alley, as well,” Harry said.

“On account of the letter?” she asked.

“That and some other business,” he said.

“I’m sure that if you owl Professor Lupin, then the Order can make arrangements for you,” she said. “I imagine that Professor Dumbledore might even have Gringotts call on you.”

“Oh, I’m sure Uncle Vernon would love that,” Harry laughed. “‘Uncle Vernon, let me introduce you to my personal goblin banker.’ Can you imagine it? I could sell tickets.”

Hermione said flatly, “I rather imagined they would send a human employee?”

“I’m joking, obviously,” Harry told her. “I was actually hoping that you could help me with directions to the Leaky Cauldron. I mean, I’ve ridden there, but I didn’t pay any attention. Will I come close on the Underground from King’s Cross?”

The line went silent for a few moments, and then Hermione thundered, “Are you completely MAD? If you really must go there, then you owl Professor Dumbledore right -now and he’ll arrange an escort! You’ve no idea who might be listening to this call!”

Harry snarled, “I can take care of myself! I imagine the Order has better things to do than baby-sit me if things are as awful as you say. Just give me the directions, would you?”

“Fine! I don’t need to get them from my parents. This is a horrible idea, Harry!” Hermione barked place names and turns at him. Harry barely managed to put biro to parchment in time. When she finished, she added sarcastically, “Anything else I can do for you, mi-lord?”

Harry snapped, “That’s quite enough, thank you. I don’t want to be a bother!”

There was another long pause on the other end of the line, and then Hermione said with a trembling voice, “You’re not a bother, Harry. I just... I just... well, I just worry about you constantly. Can you blame me? It’s not as though you don’t attract trouble. I mean, if anything... anything at all...”

“I’m sorry,” Harry said; “Please don’t cry.”

“I’m not crying,” she sniffed.

Harry said, “I’m sorry all the same. It – it’s good to hear your voice, Hermione.” He felt a wave of sadness from somewhere; he needed to comfort her and to show that he was sorry. The telephone box was positively stifling. Even the receiver was hot to the touch. He opened the door a crack and a warm draft blew in. There was an odd popping and grinding sound on the other end of the line, followed by a strange sound from Hermione and a resonating *whump!* The line went dead.

Harry raced for Privet Drive. Hedwig had been gone for days. He hadn’t been able to reach Mrs. Figg for two days, and he didn’t know who else might be watching him or how to contact them without using an owl. He couldn’t yet Apparate and of course the Dursley house wasn’t connected to the Floo Network. Hermione was in trouble, and his chest was pounding, and... and he forced himself to think. *That’s what she would do if she were in my shoes*, Harry thought. She would stop and think on what happened.

If the phone had died because of a Death Eater attack, then the Dark Mark would alert the Order long before he could reach her home. If she was being watched, then she was probably safe. He decided that his best option to connect with the wizarding world was to get to Diagon Alley as quickly as he could.

Ten minutes later, Harry ran into the house. “Dudley!” he shouted.

Dudley grumbled, “I’m busy, Potter,” from the sofa. He was still sulking over his weights and punching bags, but the old Dudley would have assembled his friends for a round of Harry Hunting – or worse.

Harry grabbed him by the arm and pulled without effect. “Have you ever taken the train?”

Dudley still didn’t look up. “The train?”

“You do want me to replace your things?” Harry snapped.

Dudley perked up. “My things...? Oh! So you want to fetch your money?” He sat up, but Harry was sure he was moving slowly on purpose. Harry tugged at his arm, and he snorted, “Where’s the

hurry, what?"

"I thought you wanted new equipment straight away," Harry said quickly.

"Doesn't mean you had to cut into my programme. If I hadn't thought you were good for it, I would have taken payment from your hide," said Dudley. He strolled to the kitchen and rummaged until he found a train timetable. "All right, where do you need to go?"

"King's Cross, or near to there, actually," Harry told him.

Dudley's eyebrows lifted. "London? You need to go to London?"

Harry cleared his throat and explained, "You can't exactly use the normal places when you're on the run from the law. I mean, he was wanted for a dozen murders, after all. He made some private arrangements, then, with some of his associates in London, and..."

"I'm not spending half the day on a train, not today at least," Dudley said firmly.

"Forget it, then," Harry huffed. "We have our own ways. I'll just get my wand and –"

Dudley crossed his arms and blocked Harry's way. "You're not going anywhere unless I come with you, and I'm not going to London today."

"You don't need to come along," Harry snapped. "You already said I'm good for it." He headed toward the door.

Dudley planted his hand on Harry's chest. "That's nothing to do with it. Mum told me you can't leave unless she says so, or unless one of us is with you – Mum or me, I mean; even Dad can't allow it without Mum's say-so. It's to do with whatever keeps us safe. She isn't here and I've got other things planned. We'll do it tomorrow or the day after."

Harry skirted around Dudley and made it as far as the front room before Dudley again blocked him. "A friend of mine may be in danger," Harry insisted. "If you don't want to help me, just say it. I shouldn't expect help from you, anyway."

Dudley's eyes narrowed. "Are you taking the mickey out of me?"

"I wouldn't joke about something like this," Harry said.

"What sort of friend, then?" Dudley asked.

Harry demanded, "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, come off it. I said, 'what sort of friend'? It isn't one of those red-headed sods with the awful candy, is it?" Dudley grumbled.

Harry tried to summon a neutral expression but couldn't keep himself from fidgeting. "No, it's not

one of the Weasleys. Look, I'll ask one more time. Are you going to help me, or not? After this, I won't be asking again!"

Dudley gave Harry a knowing look. "Ahh, I see. It's that sort of friend. There's only one reason for the red face and all this wiggling about, I figure: Potter's got himself a girlfriend!"

Harry steamed, "I do not have a girlfriend. Hermione and I have known each other since our first day at Hogwarts, and I think she's in danger. I don't have time to waste on – what are you laughing at?"

Dudley hooted, "Hermione? That sounds like somebody's grandmother. Oh, your girlfriend must be a prize!"

Dudley proceeded apace with insults, and Harry seethed. He could feel Dudley's hot breath blowing on his face, and he could almost hear his self-control cracking and popping into useless bits. He seized the front of Dudley's shirt and shouted, "Shut it! Why, you're not worth a tenth of her! You're not good enough to clean up after her!"

He shouted so hard that the room was swimming and his own ears were ringing, before he realised that Dudley was laughing at him. "Oh, definitely a girlfriend!" Dudley howled. "This is brilliant! I wish I hadn't broken my camera, because this would be smashing – "

CRASH!

Dudley pulled away from Harry's grasp and spun around. Harry didn't have to move at all to see that Aunt Petunia's prized vase was no longer on the mantle.

Both of them gaped at the pile of porcelain bits on the carpet. Dudley shrieked, "Oh, God! Mum loves that vase! It's the one Dad brought her from China, or – er - Canada, or somewhere..." He settled himself, glared at Harry, and added, "Point is, she's going to kill you!"

The room instantly stopped swimming before Harry's eyes. "Kill me? I didn't do anything! It must have been tipsy or something!"

Dudley shook his head. "How thick are you? It's broken. You're – well – you know... you. As dodgy as this summer's been, that's still how Mum will see it."

Harry fished around a bit, and produced his wand.

Dudley backed up quickly. "I'm just telling it like it is. Don't point that thing at me!"

Harry sighed. "I'm not pointing anything at you. Do you think all the pieces are there?"

"Looks like they are," Dudley said tentatively. "Why?"

Harry replied, "I don't want to leave it chipped; Aunt Petunia would take notice."

Dudley's eyes grew wider. "Steady on! You're not fixing it, are you?"

"That's my plan – *lumos!* " said Harry, frustrated with Dudley's inability to grasp the obvious. Dudley flinched when the spell was cast. Harry ran the lighted tip of his wand along the edges of the carpet and along the fireplace masonry, hoping to spot any shiny bits.

"You should put that thing away before one of those birds comes... er... what if those dementey things come looking for you?" Dudley whimpered.

"First of all, I don't think the witch who sent them in the first place is in any condition to do it again – aha, there's one. Second –good, there's another – the Dementors aren't working for the Ministry any more – glad that I took a glance beneath the stones – and third –" Harry blustered as he deposited the bits of vase into the rest of the pile, "– let the Ministry come. I honestly don't care any more."

Harry pointed his wand at the pile of porcelain and said, "*Reparo!* " Two more stray bits jumped off the carpet to join the rest of the vase as it reassembled itself. "I guess there was no need to look closely," he said sheepishly.

Dudley goggled at him with a mix of awe, fear and jealousy. Harry fetched a cloth and quickly dusted the entire mantle, rather than take the chance Aunt Petunia would notice that the vase had moved. He sat down and waited for Dudley to say something, or for an owl with an official envelope to arrive. Dudley went from whimpering to scowling to silence and there was no sign of an owl.

Finally Dudley crossed his arms stiffly and said, "Okay, Potter... you fix my camera and I'll come with you to London. You'd best decide now, and there'll be no lingering."

Harry only thought about it for a moment. "If one repair spell didn't earn a letter, what harm can there be in another?" he figured.

"Fix the camera and then we're off... but wash first – you smell," Dudley said.

"We should have stayed on the Underground another two stops or more," Dudley whined; "we've walked a half an hour at least. I don't think you've any idea of where you're going."

Harry ignored him and squinted for a moment. "Finally! It's right there," said Harry, waving his hand toward a record store and a bookshop.

Dudley looked, and then squinted, then put his hands to his hips and leaned forward intently. He said impatiently, "So... does your sort keep their money in record stores, or do you stuff it behind books?"

Harry said matter-of-factly, "You can't see it... or you're not seeing it, at any rate. It's between the two stores."

Dudley's eyes crossed for a moment. "Between the...?" He recovered himself and snorted, "Sounds like codswallop to me. 'Course, so does putting back together broken vases and blowing up the cellar and those dementles. So, then – how do I get inside a place that I can't see?"

Harry thought about that as they crossed at the intersection. He stopped in front of the record store and said, "All right, put your hand on my shoulder and I'll lead you in like a blind person. Close your eyes – I think that will be easier."

Dudley said, "That's odd... I know I smell food... and beer, I think?"

Harry said, "Open your eyes."

If anything, the Leaky Cauldron looked a little more downtrodden than Harry remembered. The biggest difference between this visit and his last, however, was that he was now staring at two dozen wizards and witches with menacing expressions and pointed wands.

"Tom," a warlock Harry didn't recognize shouted, "you need to see about your Notice-Me-Not!"

A bald old man hobbled from behind the bar. "What's the kerfuffle... more Muggles? How're they finding the sodding door? Right then, who has a cracking memory charm?"

Harry was thankful Dudley was silent. He chose not to speak, and instead drew his wand. This one should be all right, at least – *definitely self-defence*, he thought. "*Expelliarmus! Accio wands!*" he shouted. A pile of wands formed at his feet.

He smiled at Tom the innkeeper, and said, "Shall we start again?" Looking to the mass of shocked faces, he added, "Sorry about all this."

Tom looked at him apprehensively. "You do have a familiar look about you... Merlin's ghost, you remind me of Sirius Black..." Harry afforded himself a slight smile. True, his hair was somewhat longer and a small growth spurt had left him lankier... *Sirius would have a laugh over this*, he decided.

"I guess I've changed a bit since you've last seen me," Harry said. He shifted to one side so no one else would see, and then drew back his fringe.

Tom raised his hand to his mouth. "Bless my soul; it has been a long time!" he said, and then stepped forward with surprising speed to pull Harry into a vigorous handshake.

The innkeeper looked around the room and then announced loudly, "Right, then – show's over. Don't leave your wands lying about." He turned to Harry and added, "I'll arrange food and drink for you and your companion. Follow me."

The three of them entered a private parlour. Tom flung the door closed, quickly cast an Imperturbable Charm, and then demanded, "What in the name of Godric Gryffindor and all that's holy are you doing here alone, Mr. Potter – and with such an obvious Muggle in tow?"

Harry said, “This is my cousin, Dudley Dursley” – Dudley offered a limp handshake and a squeak – “and I need to get to the Alley as fast as possible.”

Tom pursed his lips in thought for a moment. “You shouldn’t take the Mu... er, your cousin. Trust me on this.” He turned his attention to Dudley, addressing him like a small child, “Mr. Dursley, you may stay in this room until Harry comes to collect you. I’ll bring you something to drink and eat. Can I trust that you will stay out of trouble?”

Dudley was sufficiently cowed that he responded in kind, “Yes, sir. I’ll be good.”

“Hurry along, then, and do your business,” said Tom.

“A moment with my cousin and then I’ll be off,” Harry said firmly. Tom frowned but stepped out.

Harry set down his knapsack and drew out his Invisibility Cloak. He didn’t want to leave it with Dudley, but it seemed the right thing to do. He waved his hand in front of Dudley’s face.
“Dudley?”

Dudley flinched. “This is all very dodgy,” he said quietly.

Harry shook him by the shoulders. “Dudley! I need to leave you with something; this is very important. It belonged to... Dudley!”

Dudley looked at Harry with unfocused eyes. He came back like a boxer shaking off an unexpected blow. “Sorry, it’s just – I mean – this is how you live?”

“Not really, no. The Leaky Cauldron is just a gateway of sorts to where I’m going. Now, I need to show you something.” Harry spread the Invisibility Cloak across the table before Dudley, which promptly vanished.

Dudley flinched, but then broke into a smile. “Blimey, the fun a bloke could have with this!” he said.

Harry couldn’t help but grin, even though Dudley’s idea of fun was probably quite different than his own. “This was my father’s” – he hesitated, and quickly decided what to tell Dudley and what to keep to himself – “and you might need it while I’m gone. If anything happens that’s too much – and I don’t mean wands or owls or the like – you throw this over yourself, head straight out to the front door and don’t look back. Understand?” Harry knew Dudley didn’t like being ordered around, but he seemed nervous enough to comply.

Dudley nodded and responded, “If something mad happens, go straight through the pub and outside.” Harry instinctively patted Dudley on the shoulder and then made his way out of the parlour. Tom was waiting for him just outside, with a nondescript black cloak in his hands. “Take this,” he insisted; “Best that you don’t pass through the gate without one.”

Harry nodded and put on the cloak. He walked briskly through the bar and into the tiny courtyard, eager to tap the bricks and enter Diagon Alley. What he saw in the alley stopped him cold. Where

there had been a trash bin and tufts of weeds, there was now a gatehouse with a barrier. Harry thought it looked like a border crossing from one of Uncle Vernon's history programmes on the telly. One security wizard was sitting in the gatehouse, and a second stood before the barrier. Both wore peacock-blue robes emblazoned with the letters **D.F.D.L.** and an eagle clutching a snake in its talons. The wizard standing before the barrier immediately drew his wand, and Harry responded in kind.

The wizard asked, "Would you please step over here?" and pointed toward the gatehouse. Harry was checked front and back with the same kind of golden rod used at the Ministry for Magic.

"Wand, please?" asked the wizard sitting in the gatehouse. Harry produced his wand. His wand lowered from view for a moment, and then the security wizard quickly moved to hand it back. He extended a hand in greeting. "Mr. Potter, what a surprise! Sorry about all this – the times we live in, and all that?"

The blue-robed wizard appraised Harry. "So you're Harry Potter? I expected you'd be bigger."

The wizard in the gatehouse cut off his colleague curtly; he said, "Thank you, Mr. Potter. Enjoy your time in Diagon Alley." The barrier floated upward, and the brick wall reorganized itself to reveal the cobblestone street beyond.

Harry Potter and the Years of Rebellion

Strange Bedfellows

Two

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

It was drizzling in Diagon Alley just like the rest of London, but the weather didn't fully account for the gloom. Harry instinctively raised the hood of his borrowed cloak. The alley was far quieter than he recalled it – a cluster of wizards here, a gaggle of ancient witches there, a knot of children and parents looking in the windows of Quality Quidditch Supplies, pairs and groups of witches and wizards coming in and out of Gringotts. He searched for Fred and George Weasley's store front – surely they would know what had happened at the Grangers' home. Harry heard a sound behind him and spun, wand drawn and a curse on his lips.

“What in Merlin's name are you doing here alone?” Bill Weasley whispered forcefully. He had the same long hair and fang earring that Harry remembered but was robed in a very traditional style.

It suddenly struck Harry – he's part of the Order. He grabbed Bill by the sides of the arms.
“Hermione! Oh my God! I–”

Bill gently pushed him away and said quietly, “She's been with her parents all summer, closely watched. I take it you know that she had a bit of a fright this morning?”

Harry staggered forward, and counted out ragged breaths. He stammered, “It's – just – telephone – we were – arguing – and –pop – and – the line died and – I didn't know – and –”

“Calm yourself – quickly,” Bill said. “The whole thing was passing strange, but she's fine. Ron was on edge about it as well. You three certainly are tight, aren't you?” He let Harry settle himself for a few moments, and then pressed, “So... why are you here?”

“Mrs. Figg's away, and I didn't know how else to find out whether Hermione was safe,” Harry admitted.

“You surely could have stepped outside and whistled for someone,” Bill frowned.

Harry shrugged. “I also need to see about Sirius Black's will.”

Bill's face froze. “I see... well, it's best we get you off the Alley at any rate. I'll come with you.”

Harry continued toward Gringotts with Bill close at his side. He didn't like being handled but he let Bill walk him past the uniformed goblin, through the bronze doors, and into Gringotts.

Bill steered him to one side of the lobby, looked around, and began quietly, "Look, I know that he was your godfather and that he was important to you. I'm really very sorry about, well... everything... but please tell me you're not going to get crossed up in Black family affairs."

"He's left me something," Harry shrugged. He handed the Gringotts letter to Bill, who gave it a quick reading

"You're the principal beneficiary? You shouldn't go in there without a representative of some sort, Harry," said Bill. "I'm surprised that they sent this letter to you at all, as opposed to your legal guardian."

Harry laughed. "Uncle Vernon could have received a hundred owls and every post would have been burned."

"I meant your wizarding guardian," Bill said; "Surely you have one? There are a number of issues where your aunt and uncle couldn't hope to manage. When you were called before the Wizengamot last year for that Dementor business, who stood for you?"

"Dumbledore came at the last minute," said Harry.

Bill pondered that for a moment. "He must be your wizarding guardian, then. I suppose that most of the decisions where the Dursleys couldn't weigh in have probably related to Hogwarts... you really should speak with him before you go in there."

Harry's mouth tightened into a thin line and he snatched back the letter. "Thank you for the advice," he said sharply.

"Harry, are you certain about this?" Bill asked, sounding more than a little nervous. "If I were to owl Dumbledore, I imagine he'd arrive within the hour."

Harry set his jaw. "I don't have a lot of time. I need to finish this," he said firmly.

"I was six years behind Sirius at Hogwarts, but I knew him by reputation – every Gryffindor did," Bill said forcefully. "It was... well, it would have been difficult not to. He was terribly popular, and a notorious prankster of course. But this is the important part: *everything* he did seemed inches from dangerous. He really ruffled my dad in the old days, and you know that would take quite a lot. Now, add in a dozen years with Dementors having at you –" Bill put his hand on Harry's shoulder to keep him from jumping in, before continuing, "– and who knows what you'll get as a result? Everyone can tell you that Sirius was impossible this spring. You should also remember the history behind his family. This isn't going to be as easy as signing for his trunk."

Harry's eyes narrowed and he said through clenched teeth, "Thank you for walking me here. I'm going to take care of my business now."

Bill took his hand off Harry, frowning. “A pleasure, Harry,” he said stiffly. “You know that I have to take care of mine as well – I’m sorry for that.” Harry edged around him and headed directly for the tellers. A free goblin at the long counter motioned to Harry.

“Good afternoon,” said Harry, “I’m here to visit the Trust Department.”

The goblin’s eyes narrowed. “Do you have an appointment?”

Harry held out the letter and said, “It’s to do with an inheritance.” He suddenly felt very conspicuous.

The goblin examined the letter closely. “This is in order. I will have someone from the Trust Department collect you shortly. Do you have other business to conduct?”

“Not yet,” Harry said.

The goblin wagged its long fingers toward a line of benches near some of the many doors leading off the main hall. Harry left the counter to find a seat. He spotted a familiar elderly woman and a stout young man in a queue before the next counter.

Harry blinked twice, to be sure he was right, before he said, “Oi, Neville!” He noticed how quiet and anxious the Gringotts great hall became and winced.

The young man drew his wand and instinctively moved in front of the old woman and called out boldly, “Who’s asking?”

Harry smiled; Neville lowered his wand slightly, and Harry said, “Don’t lower your wand so easily. I should think we covered that in the D.A.?”

Neville cocked his head and then broke out in a big grin. “I don’t believe it! Er... that is, what are you doing here? I scarcely recognized you.” He gave Harry a firm handshake.

Harry found Neville’s grin infectious. He said, “Likewise, Neville. Confidence looks good on you,” and drew Neville into an awkward embrace, adding, “don’t you agree, Mrs. Longbottom?”

Neville’s grandmother sized up Harry with her eyes. She still seemed very formidable, although standing there in her rain-matted fox fur she looked much older than the previous Christmas. “You look familiar to me.” She peered intently through Harry’s wet bangs. “Ah, of course. I want to thank you for saving Neville’s life. I would like to see you thrashed for risking it as well, but that is not my place.”

Neville frowned. “Harry doesn’t deserve that. I decided to help him, he didn’t ask.”

Mrs. Longbottom shot Neville a stern look. “Yes, and I would expect better judgement on your part – ah, if you would just show your parents’ good sense now and again?” Neville glowered at her.

Harry was taken aback; Neville didn't break eye contact with his grandmother, or stammer, or even flush. He rewarded Neville's new resolve. "I think that Neville may have left out some of the details from the Ministry. You should know, ma'am, that Neville saved me from a Death Eater –"

Mrs. Longbottom clutched a shrivelled hand to her chest and insisted in an exaggerated whisper, "Keep your voice down, boy! Neville, is this true?" Neville at last looked at the floor, but he nodded. She composed herself and said quietly, "I had no idea that Neville could be so reckless. You've been good to him in the past, I understand? I hope that you will help him learn to protect himself."

"Mrs. Longbottom, Neville is loyal, honest and brave. He's brilliant in Herbology – knows almost as much as Professor Sprout, I reckon – and his defensive skills are really quite good. I would trust him with my life." Harry deliberately looked into her eyes. "I think his parents would have been proud of him that night, ma'am."

Neville gaped at Harry, and watched his grandmother for a reaction. "I suspect that you give him too much credit at your own expense, but I suppose I must take you at your word," she said at last. "What are you doing here by yourself? It's simply not safe these days."

Neville chimed in, "And where have you been all summer? I mean, I've wanted to owl you but... er..."

Mrs. Longbottom cleared her throat. "Neville! Stop pestering for a moment." She turned her attention back to Harry. "Young man, why are you here?"

Harry said, "I'm waiting on the Trust Department."

"I see. Neville, wait with your friend; I've no time to fret about losing you in the vaults. The Daughters are meeting about the cotillion at three o'clock." Mrs. Longbottom sighed and added to Harry, "See that he doesn't wander, would you? I shan't be long." With that, she turned her attention back to the queue as though Neville had disappeared. Harry and Neville found a free bench in the area where the goblin at the counter had pointed.

"Trust Department, eh?" Neville said.

"Uh-huh," Harry replied, not wanting to discuss it. "So, who are the Daughters?"

Neville looked distracted. "Huh? What, the Daughters of the Goblin Wars?"

"Let me guess, it's in *Hogwarts: a History*," Harry scowled.

Neville shrugged, "I suppose it's in there somewhere. You've never heard of the Daughters? It's no big deal; it's just a lineage society."

"I've lived with Muggles for most of my life," said Harry.

"Oh, right then," explained Neville. "Well, to join the Daughters of the Goblin Wars, you have to

be a witch who can trace her lineage directly to someone on the registered list of combatants from the Goblin Wars. That's why it's called a lineage society. They have parties and dances, raise money for charities... that sort of thing. That big, ugly pin on Gran's robe – that's her Daughters pin. I can't believe she wore it here. The goblins still have hard feelings, you know?"

Harry asked, "Why take the chance of making the goblins angry, then?"

Neville flushed, looking anywhere but at Harry. "Well, er, mind you, I don't think that it's right... I mean, it's a bit cowardly, although I'd never say that to Gran –"

"Neville, out with it," Harry pressed.

"It takes four centuries of wizarding lineage to belong. You could as well write 'I'm a pureblood' on her cloak," Neville told him.

"Why would she care about that?" Harry wondered aloud.

Neville's eyes widened. "You don't know what's been happening?"

Harry left out what he'd learned from Hermione. "I've been at the Dursleys all summer, and they don't tolerate owls and wizarding and all that, so I've been a bit isolated," he said. "I've been watching the BBC... you know, the Muggle news, looking for signs."

Neville asked, "Then why did you tell Professor Dumbledore that you wanted to be left alone, no letters, no visitors?" in an accusing tone.

Harry thought, *Dumbledore's thorough – I'll give him that*. He began, "Now, look here, I –"

"I hope you had a grand time," spluttered Neville nervously, "a smashing good summer. From the look of it, you were off pretending to be someone else –"

"It's – just – *hair*," Harry said dangerously.

Neville gulped, "I'm sorry, Harry. Anyway, V- V- Volde – well, you know who I mean, he –"

"Say the name, Neville," Harry seethed.

"He and his supporters have been killing all summer," Neville went on. "You wouldn't have seen anything from the Muggles; the Ministry's been working overtime to keep it quiet."

"Who's being killed? Is it random? Are there targets...?" Harry demanded.

"So far it's been Muggleborn wizards and witches, their Muggle families, and, and... and squibs," Neville sniffed. "If you hadn't started the D.A., and if I hadn't come to the Ministry with you... people were still wondering about me."

"So Hermione's being looked after, then," Harry realised.

A little blond girl tugged on Harry's pant leg. "You wear funny clothes," she announced in a high-pitched voice. Harry looked down and saw that his cloak was wide open, revealing his Muggle outfit.

"Elise!" a woman at the next bench shouted.

"It's all right," Harry said, keeping his attention on the little girl. "I live with Muggles, and this is how they dress."

She looked at him intently. "You have a funny scar there," she said matter-of-factly and pointed, "on your head."

Harry nodded. "I know I do," he said, "I've had it since –"

The girl kept talking as though Harry hadn't spoken. "My mum told me about a boy named Harry Potter with a scar on his head," she said, "and he got it from a very bad man. What's your name, mister?"

"My name's Harry, and your name's Elise," Harry said.

The little girl's eyes widened. "How'd you know that?" she asked. "Is that a trick?"

The girl's mother had moved to stand behind her, without Harry noticing. She had a strange look on her face, nervous but faintly reverent. "I apologize for my daughter, Mr. Potter," the woman said. "Come along, Elise; don't be a bother." Harry noticed two older people – probably the girl's grandparents – watching the scene nervously.

Harry insisted, "She's no bother, honestly."

The woman asked, "Are you sure? I should think it would get old, always being pestered."

Harry laughed. "I don't get out much," he said. "Muggles and school mates aren't impressed by me, I guess." He winked at Neville.

The girl looked at her mother with disbelief. "Mum, this can't be Harry Potter. He's *old*." Her mother winced.

"I'm Harry Potter, all right; I grew up, you see?" Harry said gently.

The girl pointed at his scar. "Does it hurt?" she asked.

"Not very often," Harry answered.

The girl's mother said, "We never believed the *Daily Prophet*, you know – all the rubbish that they wrote about you. Would you...? It's just that we have a camera, and...?"

Harry hesitated for a moment, and then nodded. He said to the girl, "Why don't you sit between

my friend and me? Elise, this is Neville. He's one of my friends that help me, uh, fight the bad people." She shyly greeted Neville.

Neville squirmed in his seat. "Harry, are you certain...?"

Harry grinned. "Absolutely, unless you're worried about being seen with me?"

Neville spluttered, "Certainly not!"

The woman took two pictures, and then the grandparents took one of Harry with the little girl, and another of Harry with the girl and her mother. Harry squinted from the flash and realised that they were drawing a crowd. He quickly found himself standing in a crush of people and shaking hands.

Neville moved in behind him and warily watched everyone who drew close.

He shook a hand here, signed something there, and found himself receiving an unexpected kiss on the cheek from a girl who looked vaguely familiar. He was pulled one way and then the other for impromptu photographs. After what seemed like an eternity, he was saved by two security goblins that waded into the crowd. He waved to Neville and mouthed "Thank you" in appreciation for how Neville had quite literally watched his back.

The goblins led Harry to one of the endless doors branching off the great hall. Beyond the door was a small room, surely an antechamber for another office. A middle-aged witch stood behind a desk crowded with papers and files. A broad and forbidding witch sat on an adjacent chair, talking animatedly to a familiar-looking wizard with a violet top hat.

The standing witch sighed, "Mr. Potter, we've been expecting you for several minutes."

The seated witch rose smoothly and regally, gazing firmly at Harry through a monocle. She extended a hand. "My name is ..."

Harry took her hand firmly. "I remember you, Madam Bones. Please call me Harry. Oh, and be sure to say hello to Susan for me."

Madam Bones looked at him, puzzled, and then said, "No, I'm not on my way out. I'm on my way in. In this instance, I have been named the Ministry's –"

Dedalus Diggle cut in excitedly, pumping Harry's hand. "Delighted to see you again, Mr. Potter – you can't imagine!"

"Yes, of course," said Harry. He avoided acknowledging Diggle further, to avoid anything that might bring up the Order of the Phoenix. The standing witch motioned to a door that had abruptly appeared; it slowly creaked open.

The room beyond was more dungeon than office. The walls were rough-hewn. Stalactites descended here and there. Magical torches in wall sconces filled the space with flickering light.

Instead of a desk, there was a stone slab balanced on rocks. Three crowded bookcases were squeezed along one of the irregular walls. Three chairs were set before the stone slab, and a fourth

to one side. There was a large rock behind the slab. On another wall were three curio cases that contained things Harry preferred not to see clearly. He sensed something behind him and turned to see a purple head with two horns that loomed over the door.

“That *has* to be a graphorn,” Harry observed.

“Hogwarts still teaches of magical creatures, it seems, though the teaching is most likely inaccurate. You are correct in this instance,” hissed a corpulent goblin from behind the stone slab, with an ear-to-ear grin that easily contested with Mad-Eye Moody’s smile. The goblin closed his eyes, took in a deep longing breath and added with a growl, “I enjoy the hunt.”

Madam Bones and Dedalus Diggle took seats, apparently seeing no need to wait for the goblin to direct them. The goblin kept his full attention on Harry. “Welcome to my office, *Mister* Potter. I am Peninukk; the Trust Department of Gringotts is mine. I would not ordinarily be bothered with such a matter as this, but the circumstances are unique and you are the sole remaining beneficiary of one of our larger trusts.” The goblin sat abruptly on the rock behind the stone slab. “To business,” he said.

The bored witch entered from the antechamber as Harry took his seat. She took out a quill and parchment and sat in the fourth seat. Peninukk reached down and lifted a wooden box onto the slab.

“Trust meeting, July the 29th,” said Peninukk in an imperious voice as the bored witch took notes, “concerning the execution of the Last Will and Testament of Mister Sirius Orion Black, as it relates to Mister Harry James Potter – fill in the details, Wolfingham. In attendance, in addition to myself and Mister Potter, are Madam Amelia Bones, representing the Ministry for Magic in this matter; Mr. Dedalus Diggle, Esquire, who has been retained by Gringotts for transactions relating to the Black and Potter Trusts pending the outcome of this meeting; and my personal scribe, Frida Wolfingham. The Last Will and Testament of Sirius Orion Black was ruled as valid and enforceable by the Prerogative Court as valid and enforceable on July the 16th, officially unsealed by the Wizengamot on July the 18th, and accepted by the Ministry for Magic of the ruling on the day following. The Prerogative Court ruled on a vote of... Mr. Diggle, the vote?”

Diggle awkwardly thumbed through a lap full of papers before muttering *A-ha* , and said, “6 to 3.”

Madam Bones added, “With a rather stern minority opinion.”

Peninukk smiled his awful smile. “Duly noted. In any case, the execution of this will sets into motion some... changes of what sort, would you say?”

“Confusing?” offered Diggle.

“Perilous,” sighed Madam Bones.

“Complicated,” muttered the scribe.

Peninukk nodded. “Yes, *complicated* ... some *complicated* changes in Mr. Potter’s custodial status.” He turned his attention back on Harry. “Previous to July the 19th, under the common laws of the United Kingdom, you were in the custody of, er... Durkley, is it?”

“Vernon and Petunia Dursley,” Diggle piped up.

“Yes, yes... *Dursley*. Simultaneously, under the decrees of the Ministry for Magic of the United Kingdom, you were a ward under the protection of Mr. Albus Dumbledore,” Peninukk said. Harry scowled at that but no one took any notice. The goblin continued briskly, “It was decided that Mr. Potter’s blood relatives would be allowed to maintain primary custody. Is that an accurate description?”

Diggle said with a nod, “It is within the facts, yes.”

Peninukk went on with his explanation, “The reason for this arrangement was that Mr. Black’s incarceration in Azkaban nullified the original arrangements stipulated in the Last Will and Testaments of James Potter and Lily Evans Potter. The original arrangement provided that Mr. Black would maintain sole legal custody of the younger Mr. Potter in all jurisdictions. However, the restoration of legal rights granted to Mr. Black eliminated this nullification, thereby restoring custodial rights to Mr. Black, now deceased.”

Harry blinked hard and then squinted uncomfortably.

Peninukk asked, “Are you attempting to gain my attention, *Mister* Potter?”

Harry said, “Sorry, sir. I thought I heard you say that Sirius has custody of me. But he’s –” He couldn’t bring himself to say ‘dead’ without emptiness washing over him. “What I mean to ask is, who has custody of me now?”

Madam Bones frowned and said, “Therein lies the problem.”

Dedalus Diggle jumped in, “What Madam Bones means to say, Mr. Potter, is that Mr. Black opted for a highly unusual arrangement.”

“Highly unusual?” snapped Madam Bones. “It has been decades since this was invoked!”

Diggle frowned. “The underlying principle is generally accepted under American law, and is also surprisingly common in countries where the legal system is based on Roman civil –” he began.

“*Mister* Diggle!” All eyes turned to the displeased goblin, who continued, “Must I impress upon you the value of my time and the cost of yours? To business!”

Diggle sighed, “Now then, Harry... I have here a series of documents, signed by Mr. Black as an addendum to his will. In essence, he has chosen to adopt you and then to free you. Writs of *parens patriae* are actually legal under wizarding code, though – as Madam Bones pointed out – they are rather rare. Technically this does not apply under the Muggle common law in England. The Scots approach matters somewhat differently, so Mr. Black’s Muggle propers were re-established in Scotland. The relevant portions of his Will are being executed through the Scottish courts.”

Peninukk tapped his long fingers on the stone slab. “Potter’s eyes are crossing; explain it in practical terms,” he grunted.

“May I?” asked Madam Bones. Peninukk nodded.

Madam Bones said, “Harry, Sirius Black did something very rash in his Will, something to which you do not have to agree. He has emancipated you. If you sign these documents, you will become a legal adult in the wizarding world and will be subject to all the responsibilities that come with adulthood. You will also become a legal adult in Muggle Scotland in certain respects but not in others. Technically, you will not be a legal adult in Muggle England for another two years in some respects, and another five years in others. The Will appoints a conservator for your Muggle-related affairs in England, but most of the Muggle assets are in Scotland... oh, this has so many implications, I don’t even know where to begin. My research unit struggled even to identify the last time that this was done.”

“It’s not so rare as all that,” Diggle countered. “Emancipation occurs every time minors are allowed to marry, for one. Have you not read the reports regarding Mr. Potter’s treatment by his Muggle relations? Outrageous! It is simply unthinkable that *anyone* should treat the Boy-Who-Lived as a slave or a common criminal, let alone Muggles!”

Peninukk cleared his throat; the sound reminded Harry of a stuck garbage disposer. “*Mister* Potter, I shall cut to the quick. If you sign this addendum to Mr. Black’s Last Will and Testament, then his wishes regarding your custody will be binding. The remainder of the arrangements relate to the disposition of property and are relatively straightforward. I shall leave that to you and Mr. Diggle or whomever else you choose. If you do not sign the addendum, then no changes shall occur in your custody. The personal and real property assigned to you in the will would be held in trust until you reach the normal age of majority.” The goblin glanced at a mantle clock atop one of the curios. “I have four minutes remaining for this matter. If you have questions, ask them now.”

Harry’s mind raced. “What would a conservator do? You said I would have a conservator for my affairs in England?”

Diggle said, “Under the Muggle common law, you can enter into several types of contracts as a minor. However, there are some actions that require the approval of a conservator, mostly to do with real property and marriage.”

“You said one was named for me in the will. Who is it?” asked Harry.

Madam Bones looked as if she had happened upon an unpleasant Bertie Bott’s flavour. “The will names Remus Lupin as your conservator, Harry. I am aware of the man’s relationship to your family, and thus I persuaded my colleagues to allow this despite his status. He seems to have a thorough understanding of the Muggle world, which is necessary in this instance. However, the Ministry requires that you appoint a second witch or wizard to provide additional oversight. Until you make an appointment, I have been given that responsibility.” she said.

Harry pursed his lips for a few moments before he said. “I’d like you to do it going forward, then.”

Madam Bones arched a single eyebrow. “Why would you entrust me with this?” she asked.

“Firstly, if I can’t trust you, then whom can I trust?” he said, which provoked a faint smile from the witches and wizards in the chamber. “Secondly, Susan says good things about you and I expect she’s a good judge of character. Thirdly, you were fair during my hearing last year. Besides all of that, I figure that if you work with Remus for a while, you won’t wrinkle your nose that way when I say his name.”

Madam Bones silently regarded him for a time, then removed her monocle and slowly cleaned it with the edge of her cloak. “Perhaps,” she said; “I accept.”

“Noted,” Peninukk said as he gestured to the scribe.

“Of course that comes to naught if you wait to sign the will until you reach your majority,” Madam Bones added. Harry gritted his teeth at that.

Peninukk cleared his throat and said, “Additional questions? No? *Mister* Potter, you have until the sixteenth of August to sign this addendum if you so choose. You should also know that some elements of the Will do not take effect until the thirty-first of July. If you sign now, you may do so before Wolfingham and Mr. Diggle. If you sign later, make arrangements accordingly. In any event, my time for this matter is about to expire –”

“I’d like a quill,” Harry decided.

Madam Bones advised him, “Please take some time to think on this. Arrangements can be made for you to sign at another time.”

Harry closed his eyes in thought. “Is this why I didn’t get a letter today? I used a repair spell, you know?” he asked.

“I’m aware of that; you did so twice. You also cast *Lumos* as well as two spells at the Leaky Cauldron. I have been personally attending to your affairs at the Ministry since Black’s will was upheld. Getting out of a trifle is no reason to sign this, Harry; I hope that’s not what you’re thinking,” Madam Bones said with a scowl.

Harry felt like he couldn’t draw in enough air. He didn’t know how to get his arms around what was happening, but he knew what he was going to do. He drew himself up and asked, “Madam Bones, how much do you know about what happened at the Department of Mysteries last month?”

She said curtly, “The things I know should not be discussed here.”

Harry nodded; that was answer enough. “Then you know that I am already an adult.”

Madam Bones closed her eyes. “I know that you have seen things most of us will never see, and have dealt with matters that most adults will never face. That does not mean that you are prepared for this manner of freedom.”

“You sounded like Dumbledore just now,” Harry said bitterly.

Madam Bones stiffened for a moment and then said in clipped tones, “I am no one’s lackey, Mr. Potter. If Susan found herself in a similar situation, I would provide the same counsel.”

“*Mister* Potter, do you intend to complete this transaction today, defer it until later, or walk away? This really must end,” Peninukk said.

“We can finish outside, sir,” Harry said, adding, “Thank you for your time.”

Peninukk nodded curtly. “Mind your box,” he said, motioning to the box still sitting on the stone slab. “The Trust Department of Gringotts is at your service.”

Once back in the antechamber, Harry set the box on the desk and motioned to the scribe for a quill.

Diggle placed the addendum on the desk beside the box, and said excitedly, “Now, there are a number of technical items to be addressed, but we’ll begin with the Will itself.”

Harry rolled the quill in his fingers. “What about it?”

Diggle’s top hat shook as he bobbed his head in excitement. “The Will consists of a general document, personal letters to each major beneficiary, and a series of addenda and appendices – most concerning you, of course.”

Harry shook his head. “I didn’t even ask what he left me.”

Diggle said, “Oh, I think you’ll be pleased. He’s been arranging things for quite some time,” as Harry glanced at the box.

“Here, here, and here,” the scribe said absently.

Madam Bones placed her hand atop Harry’s writing hand. “Harry, I can’t prevent you from accepting Black’s terms. I wouldn’t do so even if I could; the decision is yours to make. Headmaster Dumbledore can’t compel you in this matter, as technically you’re not his ward at the moment, but I will say once more—”

“Madam Bones, I respect you – honestly, I do – so I’ll put this as politely as possible. I want this,” Harry said, nodding at the box, “and I don’t much care what Dumbledore thinks. I’ve had my fill of his games, and his *lies*. If he wants me to save the world, then I do it on my terms.” Madam Bones raised an eyebrow and Diggle took a surprised step back. Harry lowered the quill to the parchment.

Pounding on the outer door became more and more insistent. There were muffled cries as Harry affixed the third signature, and then the door flew off its hinges and into the room. Harry and the scribe dove behind the desk. As he peered around the desk Harry heard a familiar and unwelcome voice.

Dumbledore entered the office along with two very agitated goblins. “Good afternoon! Terribly sorry to startle everyone,” he said genially. “Dedalus Diggle, how did you become ensnared in this? I must agree with Minerva on this account – no sense whatever. Amelia, are you all right? I am pleased that Harry was assigned as your charge; I hope that you were able to talk sense at... where is Harry? Amelia, tell me that you were able to make him understand? Harry? Where are you, Harry?”

A potent mix of anger and embarrassment coursed through Harry. “Dumbledore,” he acknowledged, the signed copy of the will gripped tightly in his hand. The box on the desk shook slightly, and a wax seal between the lid and the body of the box evaporated into wisps of red smoke.

Dumbledore’s face sank and he whispered, “Sirius, what have you done to us?”

As the red smoke rose and dissipated, Dumbledore asked Harry, “Why?” Harry glared back; he gripped the signed Will and said nothing.

Dumbledore turned from Harry and sighed deeply. “I fear we shall have to interfere in the Dursleys’ lives,” he said.

Harry scowled. “You think they’ll allow you to muck about with their lives? You know what they think of –”

“As we speak, I expect that the protections at Privet Drive are giving way – and this when they were stronger than they have ever been. And so I ask again: *why?*” For a brief instant, Harry felt a flash of the power and righteousness that Dumbledore had displayed at the Ministry for Magic.

Harry refused to wither. He snarled, “Because it was Sirius’ right to give this to me, and it’s my right to claim it.”

“Did you consider the cost?” Dumbledore asked. “Is it worth the pain and suffering of others? The protection afforded you – the protection your mother gave her life to provide – was sealed when her sister took you in. Your willing acceptance of this emancipation may have been enough to unseal the charm, to lift the shield around you... the same shield that has been around the Dursleys.”

“Dudley!” Harry exclaimed. Dedalus Diggle looked excitedly around the room and the scribe looked as though all of this was an everyday occurrence.

Dumbledore crooked an eyebrow. “What of your cousin? Is he in danger? Have you had a vision? Do you know something that would help him?”

A blush spread across Harry’s cheeks. “He’s at the Leaky Cauldron,” he said.

“I am certain that I failed to hear you properly,” said Dumbledore. “You brought your Muggle cousin here with you, and left him at the Leaky Cauldron?”

Harry nodded. “He insisted on it; he wouldn’t let me leave Privet Drive without him.”

“I credit him with some measure of good sense, then,” Dumbledore said. “I presume this means that you left without explicit consent from your aunt?” He pulled his peculiar pocket watch from his robes. “I’ve not seen a Muggle train timetable in many a year, but I suspect some of our mutual friends are more familiar. As soon as they arrive, you may be on your way –”

“I’ll be on my way now, I think,” Harry said.

“It is not safe –” Dumbledore began.

Harry cut him off, “It’s never been safe. I’m going to collect Dudley and we’re going back to Surrey.”

“I say this for your own good: you will wait for protection before leaving Gringotts. We will see to your cousin, I promise you,” said Dumbledore.

“My department is responsible for the protection of Britain’s magical citizens,” Madam Bones said sharply. “Would you care to explain yourself, Albus?”

“Very well, Harry; it seems that you prefer to handle things in your own fashion.” Dumbledore looked to his pocket watch again and added, “Do not linger... and be sure to mind the contents of that case. They may prove quite costly.”

“Are you in actual danger?” Madam Bones asked Harry. He shrugged; danger was nothing new to him. He set the signed copy of Sirius’ will on the desk next to the box.

Harry looked to Diggle and said, “I need money – Muggle money. Is it possible to...?”

“Mr. Black was always prepared to, er, relocate without notice,” said Diggle. “Unless he changed the contents of the box since I last met with him, I believe that you’ll find your needs addressed.”

Harry fumbled with two catches, one on each side of the nondescript wooden box. He looked inside, and then looked again to be sure of what he was seeing before he quickly closed the lid.

Diggle took off his top hat and dabbed at his brow with a violet handkerchief. "Satisfactory, Mr. Potter?" he asked. Harry nodded. Dumbledore gestured to his pocket watch, still frowning.

The hidden door clicked open just then and Peninukk called out angrily, “Did my ears deceive me, or did a wizard just destroy the entrance to *my office*? Wolfingham, call for Security!” Madam Bones crossed her arms and tapped her foot, and Dumbledore appeared abashed. Harry edged out of the office just as a half-dozen security goblins entered the corridor.

To his credit, Dudley was not in hysterics when Harry returned to the parlour at the Leaky Cauldron. Tom gave him a mild tongue-lashing for taking so long, to which Harry didn’t object. Neither Dudley nor Harry spoke until they had reached King’s Cross and boarded the train to Surrey.

No one took a seat within a dozen rows of him, which Harry thought highly unlikely amidst general seating at the close of business. He let his eyes sweep the car and saw a flicker of Auror's robes for an instant but no black robes or white masks. There was some sort of Muggle aversion charm that didn't affect Dudley; Harry was impressed and curious.

"How's your friend?" Dudley abruptly asked.

Harry, lost in thought, said, "What?"

Dudley rolled his eyes. "Your friend, the one in trouble – how is she?"

"Fine... frightened but fine," said Harry.

They were silent a while longer. As the train cleared the centre city and began to accelerate, Harry said, "I've made a mess of things."

Dudley's small eyes narrowed. "Damn right you did, you git! You left me in that loony bin with those nutters for nigh on *two hours*! Some of 'em were going spare, I tell you, talking about killing mutts or mingles or something!"

Harry shook his head. "Not what I meant, though I'm sorry for taking so long – I meant the business at the bank."

Dudley's hands tightened. "Are you telling me you're not good for it?"

"No, no, I signed the will. I have enough money to replace everything, more than enough," said Harry. "That's not the problem. I signed the will, Dudley. I'm sorry. I'm really, *really* sorry." He opened Sirius's box and took out one of a half-dozen tan envelopes marked *Pounds* that were stuck to the inside of the lid. After thumbing through the contents, he tossed a wrapped bundle of bank notes onto Dudley's lap.

Dudley glanced down, then back up, and then back down again, and then slipped out a note to hold it against the sunlight that streamed through the windows. "These are real fifty-pound notes! A whole bundle of ... that's *five – thousand – bloody - pounds*!" None of the Muggles took any notice of Dudley's shriek.

Harry saw the Auror's robes again for a moment. He set the box on his lap and let his chin rest against the edge of the open lid. "I hope that will cover it," he said softly.

Dudley laughed, "Cover it? Yes, that'll cover it! I guess you do keep your word, Potter."

Harry took a deep breath and felt like he was about to be sick. He realised that he looked it when Dudley said, "If you're going to spew up, then head for the loo!"

Harry squirmed in his seat. "I've been emancipated."

"Emanciwhatted?" Dudley asked.

“Emancipated,” Harry repeated. “It means I’ve been made a legal adult because of the will... and I signed it.”

Dudley pulled a pained face that Harry recognized from their revising sessions. “So what’s the problem?” he asked. “Congratulations, I suppose – you can do whatever you want, isn’t that it?”

“Dumbledore has probably sent people to Privet Drive. He said it wasn’t safe any more. You might have to be moved. Do you understand, Dudley? I’m an *adult* now.”

Dudley’s eyes widened and his eyebrows rose as it sunk in. “How... how long until we’re to Little Whinging?” he asked.

“I don’t know; I didn’t keep the timetable –” Harry started.

Dudley grabbed Harry by the front of his shirt. “How long? We need to get there NOW!”

The Auror’s robes came into plain view next to Dudley. The man wearing the robes looked vaguely familiar to Harry, which was enough for him to slip away his wand; he remembered seeing an Auror sometime or another with thick tawny hair and golden eyes. “Is there a problem here?” the man asked.

“My aunt and uncle may be in danger,” Harry admitted.

The Auror nodded slowly. “How long will this train take to reach your destination?”

“It took more than an hour on the way in – that’s too long!” Dudley snapped.

The Auror sat down across the aisle from Dudley and extended a hand. “I’m Rufus Scrimgeour, boy. I work for Amelia Bones... which means nothing to you, I know, but young Potter here understands.” Dudley managed to take Scrimgeour’s hand but only gave a strangled sound in reply; it seemed that only then had he noticed Scrimgeour was clad in robes.

“Scrimgeour... wait... you’re the Head Auror, aren’t you?” Harry asked. “Why are you here?”

“Amelia asked if I might fancy a train ride,” Scrimgeour said. “She wasn’t in a trusting mood after crossing Dumbledore at Gringotts. I have faith in her moods. Do you honestly believe that your relations are in danger?”

Harry tried to explain without really explaining. “They’re... protected... or they have been, and... er... I did something and they might not be protected any more...”

Scrimgeour gave a faint smile. “The old man did some ward work, did he? Amelia did tell me of your change in status...” He ran long fingers through his beard several times before he said, “Blood wards... he must have laid blood wards of some sort – that would explain a great many things. I’d send someone or give a look myself, but we don’t know precisely where you live; we know the general vicinity of course, owing to owls and such. The best thing for it is Apparating to the area. I’ll side-along you and then have you point me in the right direction. If there’s been a

ward collapse of some sort, we can either remove your relations from the home or leave a contingent while we arrange protection.”

“Sorry... ‘side-along’?” Harry asked.

Scrimgeour’s brow creased. “Side-along Apparation – you’ve not heard of it?” When Harry shook his head, the Auror explained, “It’s possible to take along another person when Apparating. Most wizards can’t manage it, and a specialised license is required. A few of us can take two in a single go. I’d rather not attempt to side-along a Muggle, though – no offence, boy, but it would put you at some risk.”

Harry blurted out, “What name does the Minister call his personal assistant by?”

Scrimgeour chortled, “Checking for Polyjuice? Good on you! Such a question, though... I know his assistant is Arthur Weasley’s boy –couldn’t tell you his given name – but the Minister does call him by the wrong surname, as I think on it... ‘Wolstenby’ or something of the like? Leave it to Cornelius – I’d feel sorry for the Weasley boy actually if he weren’t such an uptight priss. He’s nothing at all like Arthur, not in the least.” He searched Harry’s face. “Do I meet with your approval?”

“Dudley? He can get me there in seconds,” Harry said.

Dudley nodded. “I’ll be there straight away from the station,” he said.

“I don’t want to see them hurt, honestly,” Harry said.

Dudley responded solemnly, “I believe you, Potter.”

Harry once again left his Invisibility Cloak. “Just in case, right?”

Dudley ran the Cloak through his hands and smirked. “I wouldn’t want to be you, but this would be dead useful.”

“Look after it carefully, boy,” Scrimgeour warned; “Those are quite rare and there’d be a good deal of trouble if you let it stray. If there’s any sort of problem, you’ll be met at the station either by myself or another man called Williamson. He’ll be wearing similar robes.” He broke a glittering metallic circle in half and handed one portion to Dudley. “If the person who meets you doesn’t present the other half of this, run as fast as you can and hide yourself with that Cloak – understood?”

Dudley pocketed the half-circle and said, “Just get to my mum and dad, please?”

Scrimgeour patted Dudley on the shoulder and then turned to Harry. “Obviously you’ve never Apparated before. It’s not the most pleasant thing you’ll ever do. Close your eyes now – it’s for the best,” he said as he grabbed Harry’s arm.

There was a faint *pop!* and then Harry felt as though he was being squeezed through a thin, hollow

tube. He couldn't imagine that anyone would welcome the feeling. There was no sense of time – the squeezing might have lasted a second or a year. At the end, it was as though he was spat from the end of the tube. His eyes crossed. He and Scrimgeour were behind a tree along Magnolia Road.

Scrimgeour gave him a quick once-over. "You don't seem to have left anything behind. So... are you game, Potter?"

The meaning of emancipation dawned on Harry, and he drew his wand. "I... I can use it now, right?" he said excitedly.

"I wouldn't go throwing magic about if I were you, but yes, you're allowed," Scrimgeour said. "Did anyone remove the monitoring charm from your wand? I take that as 'no'. Hold the wand at arm's length, would you?" Harry did as he was told, and Scrimgeour waggled his own wand oddly; there was a brief flash accompanied by a hum.

"Congratulations, you're a man now – don't squander it," Scrimgeour said. "When we get in sight of the house, I'm going to Disillusion you. Keep a distance and I'll signal you if it's secure. Before all of that, though, you need to get us there." The Auror waved his wand at himself and his robes and cloak were transfigured into a Muggle business suit that seemed slightly out-of-date to Harry.

Harry glanced down and winced. "Erm, Mr. Scrimgeour, your boots...?"

"Blast!" Scrimgeour waved his wand a second time and black formal shoes replaced his boots. He grumbled, "I despise Muggle footwear."

When they reached the corner of Privet Drive, Scrimgeour scratched his head. "Why are all these wizards about? That's Minerva McGonagall... that couldn't be Filius Flitwick, could it? What is that he's wearing on his head?" He turned to Harry. "Unless someone brewed a dozen cauldrons of Polyjuice, I'd have to say that the area is secure. I don't see a need to Disillusion you just now, but I'll want an explanation for this."

Professor McGonagall was clad in a very plain dress that fell to the tops of her very sensible shoes, and her hair was pulled tightly into its usual bun. She walked slowly along the drive of Number Four with her right hand extended and moving from side to side. Professor Flitwick was dressed like a young boy; he wore denims, a sporting shirt of some sort and a Man-U cap pulled low on his head. Bill Weasley was there as well, with his long hair tucked up in a cap and looking rather like a handyman with coveralls and a tool belt. Aunt Petunia sat on the stoop and hawkishly watched the proceedings.

McGonagall looked up and gave a start. "Rufus? What in Merlin's name are you doing here?"

Scrimgeour frowned. "Who's Merlin, madam?" he said loudly. "I believe I've heard the name in some fanciful tale or another."

McGonagall quickly recovered. "We've cast a Muggle aversion charm as well as an obscuring ward. The clothing is merely a precaution," she said.

“I’m rather surprised to see you here,” Scrimgeour went on. “This is a matter for the DMLE. I can’t imagine how this interests a group of educators...” His eyes lingered on Bill Weasley for a moment before he finished sharply, “...and others?”

“The staff of Hogwarts holds a great interest in the welfare of our students,” McGonagall said briskly.

Scrimgeour’s eyes narrowed. “In some more than others,” he said. “Are you certain that your aversion charm was strong enough for the job?” With a wave of his wand, the air around the front yard shimmered. A clutch of Muggle children playing down the drive looked around in confusion and wandered away.

McGonagall’s lips thinned. “The charm was sufficient, and Hogwarts pays special mind to Muggleborn students given the times in which we live.”

“I agree with the sentiment but young Potter isn’t Muggleborn, is he?” Scrimgeour pointed out. “If you explain to me why the old man sent you here, then perhaps I won’t have to send for an Auror squad... which would require me to send for the Muggle Artefacts office, and someone from Magical Mishaps... and that would require others, naturally...”

“I remember you well from your school days, Rufus. Have your transfigurations improved with time? I’m certain you learnt a good deal at Hogwarts, but coercion and disrespect were not amongst the tuition,” McGonagall said coldly. “You know who we are, why we’re here and what we represent, so may we dispense with further pleasantries?”

“The position on You-Know-Who for the last year was absurd – I’d swear an oath to that,” Scrimgeour snapped; “Delores Umbridge used my Aurors to stage an attack on you and I shan’t forget it. I was sickened, the men involved have been disciplined, and you have my sincere apology. That aside, you can’t expect the Ministry to condone vigilantism! The D.F.D.L. were little more than vigilantes twenty years ago, and that’s why they’re being brought into the fold this time. Wizards need to speak with one voice on this –”

“– And when that voice is ready to speak in something more than empty-headed nonsense, perhaps I’ll feel differently?” McGonagall returned. “I’d like to speak with my student, if you please?”

Scrimgeour looked to Harry. “I’ll fetch your cousin, Potter,” he said. “Keep your wand in hand. Feel free to cast anything short of an Unforgivable to protect yourself – from anyone.” He stopped a few paces away, and added, “This isn’t finished, Professor.”

“I feared as much,” McGonagall said under her breath, before she turned her most formidable glare on Harry.

Harry winced. “Good afternoon, Professor McGonagall,” he managed.

McGonagall snapped, “Did the consequences of your actions occur to you for even one moment, Potter?”

“I – I – I –” Harry began, uncertain what to say.

“Have you anything intelligible to offer?” she asked coldly.

Harry cleared his throat and asked, “If the wards fell, shouldn’t you have left here with Aunt Petunia?”

“The wards haven’t fallen,” McGonagall said. She wiped her brow in consternation. “We have thoroughly examined this entire property. Despite the expectations of myself, Professor Flitwick and Professor Dumbledore, the protections remain intact.” She leaned in, a griffin prepared to pounce. “What do you think is at work here? An answer, now, if you please.”

Harry thought for a while before he began to stumble through an explanation. “The protections were built on blood ties. The blood ties haven’t changed, simply because of the will. So...” The professor shook her head. “So ruling that out... the protections weren’t up to me. I’m in the blood line, but the seal was between my mother and Aunt Petunia...” He hesitated, before seeing the answer. “...and now it’s between the Dursleys and me. The protections are still in place because I want them to remain.”

Professor McGonagall nodded. “That strikes me as the most likely explanation, although Professor Dumbledore will surely weigh in.”

Aunt Petunia, who had left the stoop, cleared her throat. “Are – are you saying that... I, I don’t understand... I...”

Harry said, “I can’t be protected any more. Dumbledore...”

“Professor Dumbledore,” McGonagall interjected.

Harry scowled. “*Dumbledore* knows it. He tried to protect me for five years, and it all came crashing down. It’s finished now.” Turning to McGonagall, he added, “It was finished whether or not I signed Sirius’ will. You know that.” The professor said nothing.

Harry continued, “You have to be protected, though. You can’t defend yourselves against the Death Eaters or Voldemort –” Aunt Petunia flinched at that, and Professor McGonagall breathed in sharply. “He will use anything or anyone to get at me, including you. Thank your son for this. A year ago, I might have walked away without a thought.” His aunt’s mouth opened but no words came out.

“I know that you hate what I am, Aunt Petunia, and I’m sorry for that,” Harry said, trying to assume the bearing that came naturally to his Head of House. “I don’t know if I’ll be back next year, or for how long. It’s possible that this will be the last time you ever see me. There are things I have to do–”

McGonagall said, “You’d best stop at that, Potter.”

Harry nodded but never took his eyes away from his aunt. “It will be very dangerous for me from

now on,” he said.

Aunt Petunia closed her eyes tightly. She said, “I was so jealous of her – always the pretty one, the smart one, the popular one. If I’d any idea how it would turn out, I would have... but I didn’t know – well, I knew it was freakish and wrong, but the danger – I really didn’t know... what I’m saying is, be safe if you can.” She reached out and clasped his hand. “Harry –”, Aunt Petunia said, her voice reduced to a strangled whisper, “I want revenge... for my parents... and for my sister.”

Harry reeled – acknowledging his mother was odd enough, but what did she mean by asking revenge for her *parents* ?

“MUM!”

Harry spun to see Dudley running well ahead of Scrimgeour, who moved with a loping, limping gait. His aunt’s face lit in a way that he had rarely seen. Dudley clasped her hands as he caught his breath.

Dudley looked to Harry with wide eyes. “The other fellow, he said everything’s fine. Is that true?”

Harry nodded. “Nothing happened, nothing at all.”

“What on Earth were you thinking, Dudley?” Aunt Petunia scolded.

Dudley shrugged. “Potter was making good on my training equipment, Mum. I took him to his bank.”

Aunt Petunia’s eyebrows rose. “Bank? The boy has his own account with a bank?”

“My godfather left me an inheritance,” Harry said. “I couldn’t leave Dudley without his weights and the rest – it wouldn’t have been right.”

“Well... *well* ... I see... that’s for the best, I suppose...” Aunt Petunia stammered.

Harry reached out to shake Dudley’s hand. “You have the money?” he asked.

Dudley quickly nodded. “Uh – yeah! It’s in my pocket.”

Harry nodded. “Good. If you need to reach me – if anything happens, you can send post through... err...”

“I know how to send post to... that place,” Aunt Petunia said.

Harry asked McGonagall, “Professor, will the Order maintain watch on this house?”

“At your request, I suspect that they will,” she replied.

“Good. I’d like a small watch at Dudley’s school, as well,” Harry added.

McGonagall told him, “The protections move with your relatives, Potter – at least they did. Failing that, your uncle couldn’t have worked and your cousin couldn’t have attended school.”

There was a thump and a loud *crack!* as Harry’s own school trunk bounced on the stoop. Tonks bounded down the stairs after it. She was dressed in such a way that even Uncle Vernon wouldn’t have been flustered – her hair was black and straight, and she wore clothes suitable for Fleet Street. “Wotcher, Harry. Long time between owls,” she said. Her head cocked to one side, and she looked him up and down. “Filled out a bit, I see,” she added. “Your fan club should be in a flutter, eh?”

Scrimgeour arrived at last, breathing heavily. He crossed his arms and said, “Good afternoon, Miss Tonks.”

Her eyes went wide. “Auror Scrimgeour! I didn’t –”

“Expect to see me?” Scrimgeour finished for her. “I see we have evidence of your membership in Dumbledore’s organisation?”

Tonks stood up straighter. “I never denied it,” she said.

Scrimgeour pursed his lips. “Yes, you were nearly forthcoming – *after* you were caught out. You could have retained your commission in a trice, Tonks. All you had to do was renounce your membership and offer a public apology –”

“ – And I’ve repeatedly refused, sir,” said Tonks. “I can’t take the easy choice, not this time.”

“To your credit, Tonks... to your credit,” Scrimgeour allowed, and he extended a hand. “I do believe we’re still on the same side of things, even if I disagree wholeheartedly with the old man. If we should ever have need of your talents... on an unofficial basis, of course...?” Tonks took his hand lightly and gave a slight nod.

He returned his attentions to McGonagall. “You have thirty minutes to finish whatever it is you’ve started here. Beyond that time, this is a DMLE matter,” he announced.

“It was a pleasure, Rufus,” McGonagall said tightly.

“Professor,” Scrimgeour returned.

Tonks broke the long silence after the Head Auror reached the corner of Privet Drive and disappeared into the shrubbery. “We should move along,” she said to Harry.

“You lost your job?” Harry confirmed.

Tonks waved him off. “Later,” she said.

Aunt Petunia put her hand on Harry’s arm, which startled him. She said, “It would be best if you weren’t here when Vernon returns. Dudley, there is a small trunk in the kitchen; bring it to Harry,

please.”

Dudley returned with a worn wooden trunk, unmistakably marked with the crest of Gryffindor house. Aunt Petunia looked around at anything but Harry. “This trunk does not belong here... best that it leave with you,” she said.

“Professor McGonagall, I need to repair the cellar,” Harry said. “It’ll only take a moment.”

McGonagall said, “If you’re referring to the damage caused by your unfortunate emission, I have already resolved that.”

Tonks grinned and asked, “Having control problems, Harry?” Dudley instantly snorted.

“Yes, and that will have to be addressed firmly. You need to learn patience, Potter,” said McGonagall firmly. She crooked an eyebrow at Dudley, who had his hands over his mouth to hold in the howls. “It’s really not funny, young man. Uncontrolled nocturnal emissions can indicate a serious problem.” Dudley squeezed his eyes shut, and Aunt Petunia’s cheeks reddened.

“May we go now?” asked Harry through clenched teeth. Dudley half-waved and Aunt Petunia nodded curtly as Harry and Tonks made their way down the drive to the road. Each step took Harry further from Privet Drive and closer to the wizarding world. He didn’t find that as reassuring as in previous years.

"You're all right coming with me?" Tonks asked.

Harry said with a shrug, "I've nowhere else to go just now. Where are we headed... not Grimmauld Place, I hope?"

“That’s not somewhere for either of us, eh? Not yet, at least,” Tonks said with a frown.

She led him to the strangest looking vehicle he had ever seen. It had only one door – set in the front, no less – and two seats. “There’s no boot, but we’ll make do,” she said. There was a metal rack attached to the back of it, and she lashed Harry’s trunk into place.

“Er... what is this?” Harry asked.

“It’s a car,” Tonks snorted. “You’ve heard of those?”

Harry scratched his head. “But it’s... it’s... er...”

Tonks patted the side of the thing lovingly. “It's wicked, don't you think?”

“And you... um... you drive this yourself?” asked Harry nervously.

“Quick today, aren’t you?” Tonks said; “My dad gave it to me when I finished the Auror program.”

The car looked quite old, he thought, but well cared-for. He squinted at the front door. He searched it for dents and creases, and wondered aloud, “How well do you drive, then?”

She elbowed him and said with a saucy grin, “I thought you were always one for an adventure?”

Harry Potter and the Years of Rebellion Into The Lion's Den

Three
INTO THE LION'S DEN

Harry quickly decided it was better to keep his eyes fixed on the floor than to close them. Tonks was fond of quick lane changes despite the fact that her car – and it was quite a stretch to call it that, he thought – groaned and creaked every time she took to the accelerator pedal. She had a colourful vocabulary and no patience whatever. They were caught on a roundabout for several minutes before she fought her way off by tearing across three lanes of solid traffic. As they pressed deeper into London, the ancient streets lost their grid.

“Should I double park or triple park, I wonder?” Tonks snapped at no one in particular. Harry hadn’t the faintest idea how to help. The roads were a crazy quilt of red lines, double yellows, bus lanes and parking restrictions.

Tonks began to mutter, “Nothing there... no, nothing there... blast, that one’s for disabled... residents only... has to be a bloody meter around here...”

“There’s one!” Harry said excitedly.

Tonks shook her head. “Uh-uh. Can’t use that colour... I don’t think that... THERE!” She trumped on the accelerator, the car spluttered and puffed, and she veered across the road to a symphony of horns. Harry wished for a braking charm and settled for silent prayer as the car slid sideways into a metered spot and stopped with a hard thump against the kerb. He tore off his belt before Tonks cut the motor and scrambled out the door as if the car was cursed.

Tonks stumbled out and growled at the meter, “A quid for twenty minutes? That’s theft, that is!”

“Where are we?” asked Harry. He hadn’t bothered to look around until just then. They were on a street of what looked to be grand old houses turned to businesses.

“My place,” Tonks said, and then added, “Well, strictly speaking it’s my parents’ place... ehh, you’ll see. Let’s fetch your trunk, then. Wouldn’t want it to be nicked, eh?”

Three doors down, a modest sign in front of a three-storey home said:

Astonbury, Grendel, Tonks & Levy, LLP

General and Commercial Law – Wealth Management

“My Mum and Dad live above, and I’m back in the mews,” Tonks explained, but Harry wasn’t certain what she meant by that.

Before Tonks could open the front door, Harry stopped her. “Isn’t it dangerous, you know... to bring me here?” he asked.

Tonks shrugged. “It’s unexpected, and that makes it a bit safer. At any rate, you’ll not be here long,” she said.

The front door whipped open and Harry had his wand half drawn before Tonks seized him by the shoulder. Mad-Eye Moody peeked out the opening. “Coming in, or would you rather stand there as live targets?” he grunted. Tonks rolled her eyes, even as she shoved Harry through the doorway with the help of his own trunk.

“You’re fifteen minutes late,” Moody said. “I suppose it’s the fault of that fool’s contraption of yours?” Harry nearly agreed aloud with Moody’s assessment of the car until Tonks’ eyes narrowed.

“They’ve arrived, have they?” a pleasant voice called from just beyond the entry hall.

The voice belonged to an unmistakeable Black. “You must be Tonks’s mum?” Harry said.

She came forward and extended her hand even as she looked him up and down. “Andromeda Tonks... Nymphadora was right – you do resemble your father, as I recall him,” she said. She was tall and slim and her features were more like Narcissa Malfoy than Sirius, but her hair was brown with tracings of grey.

“Er... people do say that,” Harry offered. “Look, it’s not really safe for me to be here. It’s all right if you –”

Mrs. Tonks gave a wan smile. “We avoided most of the first war, but I doubt we’ll be out of the fray this time around,” she said with a meaningful glance toward Tonks. “Honestly... may I call you Harry?”

“Uh, of course,” Harry said quickly.

“Honestly, Harry,” she repeated, “you’re welcome here. Nymphadora, would you rather he stay here or in the mews?”

“Anywhere is fine, Mrs. Tonks,” Harry insisted. “I wouldn’t want to be a bother to you, or to the other people on the sign.”

“Other people...? Oh, you’re referring to Astonbury and Grendel? This is a very old firm, Harry. Mr. Astonbury founded it in the 1890s and the brothers Grendel joined him in 1914 and 1921, respectively,” Mrs. Tonks explained. “Tenbrooke Grendel is still alive – he was the magical one of

the two – but he rarely stops in. Gabriel Levy is our other partner; he ran the firm entirely whilst we were abroad. He’s working in Golders Green this week, so I wouldn’t expect to –”

“You’re babbling, Mum,” Tonks cut in, drawing a frown from her mother. “There’s no need to put Harry up; we won’t be long. Is Remus out in the mews?”

“He’s in the kitchen, taking tea with your father,” Mrs. Tonks said. “He doesn’t seem well, dear...”

“He’s rarely well,” Tonks sighed.

The kitchen was pleasantly messy, Harry thought – more Burrow than Privet Drive. Remus Lupin sat with his back to the entry. The man across the table squinted and stood. “Harry Potter, we meet at last,” he said. “Ted Tonks; I’m Dora’s father.”

Lupin spun awkwardly in his chair. His face was weathered and hard, and Harry felt a confused rush of emotions at the sight of him –sadness, guilt, anger, and regret. “Hello, Harry,” he said, his voice faint and hollow.

“Professor –” Harry began.

Lupin waved him off. “Just Lupin, Harry, or Remus if you like,” he said.

“Er... Remus... I –” Harry started again.

“We’ll have time to talk later,” Lupin said. “We should be on our way. Ted, I thank you for your hospitality.”

“No worries, Remus,” Mr. Tonks said. He turned to Harry with an appraising eye. “I understand from Remus that you may be facing quite a complicated inheritance, Mr. Potter. He didn’t know whether you had representation in place.”

“I’ve been to Gringotts already,” said Harry. “They had Dedalus Diggle there. Madam Bones was there, too.”

Lupin’s eyes widened. “Amelia Bones?”

“Diggle?” Mr. Tonks snorted. “The goblins hired Diggle? I wonder what they’re up to. Dedalus is a nice enough fellow but he can be a bit, eh, imprecise. If it were me, I wouldn’t set him to address something as important as the Potter estate.”

“This wasn’t about my parents’ will,” Harry said. “This was about Sirius.”

Mr. Tonks’s eyebrows shot up. “Sirius? Sirius *Black* ? ”

Mrs. Tonks pulled at Harry by the shoulder. “Get out,” she said firmly.

“I... I don’t understand...” Harry said.

Tonks snapped at her mother, “Mum, there’s a lot you don’t know.”

“I know enough, thank you!” Mrs. Tonks shouted. “When your sisters and your closest cousins all join with the Death Eaters, then you can tell me what I know and don’t know!”

“Sirius was many things, but he was no Death Eater,” Lupin said calmly.

Mrs. Tonks railed onward, “If you’ve anything to do with my cousin, then you’re surely not Harry Potter! Get out! Get out, all three of you!”

“You never told them?” Remus asked Tonks.

“I know how to keep a secret!” Tonks shot back. She stared at her mother, then scrunched up her face and let her hair turn violet and long; “It’s me, Mum – I’m no impostor,” she said.

Harry insisted, “Sirius didn’t give up my parents. Peter Pettigrew did!”

“Pettigrew? Isn’t that the chap your cousin was supposed to have blown up?” Mr. Tonks asked.

“I’m afraid it’s true,” Remus said sadly. “Sirius was wrongfully imprisoned for twelve years.”

“But... it couldn’t... how...?” Mrs. Tonks stammered.

“We were wrong,” said Remus. “I thought him guilty, even Albus Dumbledore thought him guilty, but it was Peter all along. He was the betrayer, not Sirius.” Tonks guided her mother to a chair at the table.

“This... it’s a lot to take in...” Mrs. Tonks managed.

“Obviously you’ve been in contact with Sirius. Dora, have you been helping him hide away?” Mr. Tonks asked; his daughter quickly looked away.

“A group of us, including Dumbledore, helped Sirius evade the Ministry for two years,” Lupin explained.

Mrs. Tonks wiped at her eyes. “I want to see him,” she said.

Harry and Lupin both froze. “So do I,” Tonks choked out.

Mr. Tonks said, “Oh, dear” a moment before Mrs. Tonks began to shake.

“I’m sorry,” Harry managed to say. Lupin took an uncomfortable look at his watch and gave Tonks a glance.

“I think I’ll be staying for now,” Tonks whispered.

Lupin nodded. “You know where to meet us,” he said. Harry returned to the entry to collect his

trunk. Somehow it had come ajar - *probably from the bumping around on the back of that stupid car* , he thought - so he forced his clothing back into place and applied a locking charm this time.

This time, it occurred to him that he could shrink the trunk himself; he slipped it into a pocket and silently followed Lupin to the mews behind the house. There was a fireplace inside, and they spun their way to a scruffy-looking pub in Manchester, and then what looked to be a manor house, and finally to a seaside inn. From there they hired a car – Harry paid, as Lupin had left the necessary pounds with Tonks – and rode for an hour into the countryside. The driver left them at the end of a drive that disappeared into deep woods. Lupin paid the fare and a healthy tip before he Obliviated the man, who cheerfully drove off.

Harry followed Lupin down the drive. The trees were so dense that they needed a light spell to cut the darkness, even though it was still two hours to sunset. After a few minutes, Lupin held up a hand to stop Harry.

“We’ve reached the ward perimeter,” Lupin said. “Let’s be certain that they’re tuned properly before we go on, right?” He gave his wand a complicated waggle and a hazy yellow light shimmered across two of the trees. Apparently he was satisfied, as he waved Harry forward. The ward pressed in on Harry for a moment and he struggled to take a breath; just as quickly it let him free.

Lupin noticeably relaxed. “Welcome to the Lion’s Den,” he said. There was a cottage before them set in a clearing; both cottage and clearing had completely escaped Harry’s notice. “We’ve set up safe houses around Britain these last weeks,” Lupin went on. “The old place sealed itself after Sirius... well, it had been compromised in any case. Tonks and I are the only ones to know of this one, and Dumbledore of course. There are facilities for me here, and... and let’s get you inside. You’ve had a long day, apparently.”

As Lupin opened the front door, he added, “Ahh, there are two others who are in on the secret – I nearly forgot.”

Harry nearly lost his balance as a small blur struck his lower legs. “Dobby?”

Dobby let go and gave a little skip. “Dobby is so very happy to see Harry Potter! Harry Potter is a grown wizard, so Dobby can now serve him!” Dobby bowed down to Harry and his face nearly dragged the floorboards. The two hats he was wearing both slipped off.

“A grown wizard? Harry doesn’t reach his majority for another year,” said Lupin.

Dobby crossed his arms and shook his head. “Harry Potter is a grown wizard. He has the wand of a grown wizard. He has the mark of a grown wizard. Mister Wolf cannot see this?”

Lupin’s brow furrowed. “Might we discuss what happened at Gringotts, Harry?” he asked.

Dobby’s eyes lit. “Oh, Dobby forgets his manners! Welcome to the home of Harry Potter, sir,” he announced; “May Dobby receive your cloak and provide refreshment?”

“This isn’t exactly my home,” Harry said with a chuckle.

“Harry Potter is in this home and this home is for Harry Potter, so this is the home of Harry Potter,” Dobby said firmly.

“This isn’t a cloak, Dobby – it’s a jacket. Still, you may hang it if you like,” Lupin said. He took off his tweed jacket and rolled up the sleeves of his Oxford.

“I’d take a butterbeer,” Harry said.

Dobby winced and said, “I am sorry, but there is no butterbeer in the home of Harry Potter. It has been removed. I would offer pumpkin juice, if it does not offend?” Harry nodded and the house-elf disappeared with a snap.

Harry looked around the cottage. It was small and spartan in decor. The narrow entry opened into a small living room with a few bookshelves and stairs that went up to sleeping rooms on the first floor.

Dobby reappeared by his side. “Pumpkin juice and a snack have been set out in the kitchen for the sirs,” he said, bowing again.

“Dobby, there’s no need for that, honestly,” said Harry.

Dobby gave a fierce shake of his head. “Dobby may be a free elf but he is still a proper servant.”

The kitchen was large enough for a rough-hewn dining table and a hutch. Juice, glasses and two plates of small sandwiches and cookies were set out. Harry wasted no time fetching a glass.

“I hope this is to your liking, Master Harry, sir,” a very high squeaky voice quivered. Winky was clad in a skirt and blouse as at Hogwarts, though they were cleaner than Harry recalled. *That explains the lack of butterbeer*, he thought.

“Very much so, Winky,” Harry said with a smile.

The house-elf looked down at the floor. “Dobby thought I should come with Dobby to work for Harry Potter, sir. Dobby told Professor Dumbledore we was quitting Hogwarts, but didn’t tell Winky. Dobby often thinks above his station.” The house-elf’s huge brown eyes began to water. “I don’t want paying, sir. If Winky’s presence displeases...”

Harry slipped from his chair and knelt in front of Winky, who took a startled step backward. “Welcome,” he said. Winky curtsied and looked away.

Dobby re-entered the kitchen. “To your liking, sirs?” he asked.

Lupin nodded and Harry asked Dobby, “I don’t understand why you’re here. I mean, you had a job at Hogwarts, and how did you find out about this place, anyway?”

Dobby tapped his index finger to his forehead. “Dobby is always thinking these days, sir. Dobby heard from Professor Dumbledore that Harry Potter would be coming to this house, on account of what happened to Mister Sirius Black. Dobby is so sorry, sir. Harry Potter must be very sad!”

Harry cut him off firmly. “Go on,” he commanded.

“There was quite a commotion at Hogwarts this day, sir,” said Dobby. “Much unpleasantness, very upset people... Dobby brought tea to Professor Dumbledore in his study, and overheard...” The house-elf went rigid, then quivered and banged his head repeatedly against the side of the table. “Bad Dobby! *Bad Dobby!*” Harry grabbed Dobby by the arm and pulled him back; the house-elf took a moment to regain his footing.

“I don’t need to know what you heard at Hogwarts, Dobby,” Harry said. “I was interested in how you came here, that’s all.”

“Dobby asked Professor Dumbledore if he could serve Harry Potter, told him he would work for free just to have the chance. Professor Dumbledore told Dobby this would be a good idea, if Dobby were willing to bind to Harry Potter and not to a house. Dobby reminder Professor Dumbledore that he is free and can only bind hisself.” The house-elf bounced up and down like a child before a stack of Christmas presents. “Dobby chooses Harry Potter!”

“What about Winky?” Harry asked.

Dobby looked down at his socks. “Winky needs Dobby, Master Harry, sir. Winky is better, but Winky is not strong. Winky needs Dobby, sir.”

Harry couldn’t resist teasing. “Does Dobby need Winky?” he asked.

“Dobby... does not have an answer, Harry Potter,” Dobby said uneasily, “but Winky and Dobby will make this home worthy of Harry Potter – Dobby promises that.”

“I’ll be in the living room,” Lupin said abruptly. “Why don’t you find a room and put your things away?”

When Harry returned to the living room, he found his former Professor looking out the window, deep in thought. He wasn’t certain if he should speak, but Lupin turned and motioned for Harry to sit.

“Would you tell me about Gringotts now?” Lupin asked.

Harry recounted the day’s events and Lupin listened impassively. When he finished, he went quiet for a long while and then added, “I miss him.”

“I miss him as well,” Lupin said, “even though he’s just pulled the biggest prank of his life – and believe me, Harry, Sirius pulled some whopping pranks in his time. It’s just like him, to stir up everything and then walk away.”

Anger lit inside of Harry and rage swelled, filling the empty places. “*He didn’t walk away!* That – that *bitch* LeStrange shoved him through the veil, in case you’ve forgotten!”

Lupin said calmly, “I know very well what happened. I’m simply telling you that Sirius enjoyed setting up pranks that came to fruition after he left the scene. Most of the time, your father was his partner in crime. I remember once, after the Halloween Ball, the two of them –” He stopped, gazing across the room at the mantle as though it were a pensieve.

“Where is this going?” Harry asked wearily.

“I loved Sirius like a brother – we all did. But he was a child trapped in an adult body. He was selfish, judgmental, impetuous, demanding... and when he wrote his will, he was trapped. Dumbledore wouldn’t let him leave, not even for a moment. He hated that house with every fibre of his being. I imagine that in some ways, it was worse for him at Grimmauld Place than in Azkaban. He didn’t trust Dumbledore at all on matters that concerned you. I think he felt that Dumbledore was doing the same thing to you – trapping you in a horrible place, because he felt it was for your own good.”

“So you think that Sirius did this to get back at Dumbledore?” Harry asked. “You don’t think he might have done this because he thought that I was ready for it?” The rage still flickered inside of him, waiting for Lupin to provide it a window of escape.

Lupin sighed. “Harry, you have been Sirius’ opposite in so many ways. You’ve been a man trapped in a child’s body. No child should have had to face what you have; yet you’ve managed it. I think Sirius saw that in you, and yes, I suspect he thought that you were ready to govern your own affairs. I also suspect he remembered James, and remembered how strong he was. Your father did have an old soul, Harry, but he didn’t face anything like you have until he was in his seventh year. You’re not your father, Harry. At least, you don’t have to be.”

Harry said dangerously, “What do you mean by that?”

Lupin looked at Harry for a long time. Harry couldn’t remember ever being so unnerved by someone’s eyes – they were sad and happy, judgmental and forgiving all at once. Finally he said, “Your father was capable of cruelty. You haven’t shown that trait – at least not regularly. He could be terribly judgmental. Goodness, he could hold a grudge! He could be rash, although not as rash as Sirius. He didn’t trust easily, either, and his trust could be quickly shaken. That cost him dearly, Harry. He – he paid a terrible price, as terrible as any person could ever pay. You’re not your father, Harry. Don’t make his mistakes.”

Harry stood bolt upright. “What gives you the right to talk about my father that way? I don’t need to hear this!”

“Yes, I think you do,” said Lupin calmly. “You’re so angry, Harry. Most of the people around you can see that, even if they haven’t experienced it. My kind... we can sense anger and pain more acutely than humans. I can feel it, Harry, the pain inside you. I felt that same anger, that searing sense of betrayal inside your father, when his parents were killed. It clouded his judgement, ate

away at his trust, and drove people away. It started James on a path. Other events fed that path, as well, but you know where it ultimately led.”

The rage in Harry began to melt into something else. *I won't cry in front of him*, he thought.

Lupin moved to sit next to Harry and awkwardly put an arm around his shoulders. “I’m not your guardian, Harry. It seems as though Sirius has asked me to shoulder some responsibility for you, but I can’t compel you to do anything. I’d make a poor father figure, so I won’t even try. I only ask that you listen to me, not that you do what I say. What Sirius has done is done. I just want you to make the best of it, instead of the worst.”

Harry struggled for control. “I don’t understand why it’s so horrible for me to be free. I just – is it wrong for me to want something for myself, for a change?”

Lupin shook his head. “No. It’s best when freedom comes in stages, though. Most of us get to try freedom on for size during our school days – we make a decision here, or have a choice there. You haven’t been afforded that chance. I imagine that you must feel trapped by fate, Harry.”

Harry took a few rapid shaky breaths. “Remus,” he whispered, “there’s something I have to tell you. I have to tell someone. I don’t know if I can –”

Lupin tightened his grip on Harry. “Harry, whatever it is, we’ll deal with it. You can tell me anything, of course.”

Harry began, “I heard the whole prophecy. I –”

Lupin closed his eyes. “Dumbledore told me that there is more to the prophecy than the Order has been told. I’m going to ask you to listen to me now, Harry. I want you to be very careful with whom you share what you know about the prophecy. Voldemort surely remains interested in the details.”

“Then you know...?” Harry asked.

“I don’t know the words, but the gist of it isn’t hard to guess,” Lupin said. “I will do everything I can to help you. I owe it to your father and mother. I wasn’t there for you when I was the only one left, Harry; I truly owe this to you.”

Harry stiffened; he quickly changed the subject. “Dumbledore said something about Mr. Diggle having to go over the will with me...”

“I’ll enquire with Dumbledore,” Lupin said. “I do need to be a part of the discussion when Diggle visits.”

Harry returned, “I’m glad for that.”

Dumbledore brought Diggle blindfolded to the Lion’s Den an hour later, to Lupin’s surprise. The Headmaster looked as though he wanted to converse with Harry but instead took a deep breath and

left. Lupin sat with Harry for hours while Diggle walked through parchment after parchment describing Harry's inheritance from Sirius. Then, he explained about the Potter Family Trust in excruciating detail – the money, the investments, the rights of inheritance, and restrictions on the use of funds, and on and on. It was like listening to a History of Magic lecture at the bottom of the ocean. At a quarter past one, Lupin opened the front door and cast a silvery spell of some sort. Not more than a minute later, Dumbledore entered. He quietly conferred with Lupin, and then covered Diggle's eyes once again before the two of them left.

"Hello, Professor Dumbledore, and how was *your* day?" Harry snapped to no one in particular.

Lupin sighed, "He's accustomed to getting his way, Harry, and he's quite unhappy that you've signed off on all of this."

"And you...? Are you unhappy?" Harry asked.

"I'm concerned," said Lupin.

"I didn't understand most of what Mr. Diggle was saying, you know?" admitted Harry.

"You weren't alone at times, I assure you," Lupin said. "I'll be seeking assistance in a number of areas. Madam Bones may have useful contacts, and this is what Ted Tonks does for a living... Harry, about Madam Bones... I do appreciate what you were trying to do..."

"There aren't many people I can trust," said Harry. "She's tough but she seems fair. It feels right."

"I'll work with her, of course, provided that she'll work with me," Lupin allowed. "It's far too late an hour for me, Harry. We should both try to sleep."

The three bedrooms on the first floor were all simple. Harry had chosen the one with the most light. There was a bed and a small desk with a shelf. His trunk was open and emptied into a bureau and a small cupboard. Harry sat wearily at the desk. All the papers Diggle had left were neatly stacked on the desk, and the wooden box from Sirius took up most of one shelf.

A voice squeaked behind him: "Dobby wishes to know if Harry Potter is ready for bed."

Harry almost fell out of his chair. "Dobby, don't sneak around like that!" he snapped.

Dobby nearly jumped into the corridor. "Dobby is so sorry, Harry Potter, sir! Dobby did not mean to cause a fright!"

"I see that all of my papers are here," Harry said idly.

Dobby puffed up at that. "Dobby knows how to run a household, Harry Potter, sir," he sniffed.

Harry smiled and said, "I wasn't criticizing, Dobby. I was just surprised. I'm not used to having someone else do things for me."

Dobby looked away. “Dobby can leave well enough alone, if that is what Harry Potter prefers,” he offered.

Harry shook his head. “No, I mean, it’s really nice. Thank you, Dobby,” he said. Dobby beamed, and his eyes filled with tears. The house-elf’s roller coaster of emotions nearly made Harry sick to his stomach; he wondered if all house-elves were that way.

“Dobby is so happy, sir, to be serving the great Harry Potter,” the house-elf gushed. “He is too kind and too generous for Dobby to understand!”

Dobby skittered to the bed, and drew down the sheets. He laid out Harry’s worn T-shirt and boxers that he used for pyjamas. “Dobby thinks that Harry Potter should buy new clothes,” he muttered. Dobby went into the cupboard and fetched a pair of Harry’s heavy woollen socks.

Harry laughed, “What are those for? It’s the middle of the summer.”

Dobby looked at Harry with life-or-death seriousness on his face and said, “Dobby does not think that Harry Potter should sleep without socks. He can never know when he might need them.”

Harry shook his head. “I’m going to read for a while, Dobby. Good night,” he said.

“Dobby wishes Harry Potter good night and good rest, sir.” said the house-elf, who closed the door behind him.

Harry pulled Sirius’ box off the shelf and set it atop the papers on the writing desk. *I think I’d even sit down with ‘Hogwarts: A History’ at this point*, Harry thought. He wanted – no, he needed distraction.

He opened each of the envelopes attached to the inside of the lid, and counted the money inside. *He was certainly ready to run*, thought Harry, *and apparently in style*. He wondered how Sirius had managed to accumulate nearly a hundred thousand pounds. *It wasn’t like he could walk into Gringotts, and his vault must have been sealed, or watched, or something*, he figured.

There were two bundled stacks of photographs, a mix of Muggle and wizard. Some looked to be duplicates of pictures in the album that Hagrid had given to Harry. Next to the bundles was a small box in gold wrapping paper with a scarlet bow. Harry set that aside.

Beneath was an envelope hand-addressed to him. On another envelope Sirius had scrawled “Orion’s Belt”. Sirius’ Hogwarts ring sat in a small open box. At the bottom of the box was a thick, leather-bound book. Harry flipped it open and realised that it was a journal. He wasn’t up for a letter, a journal, or anything more from Sirius – not right then. He felt the same way about the mystery trunk on the floor; he just couldn’t bring himself to open it.

He placed everything back in the box except the hand-addressed letter and the gift-wrapped package, and returned the box to its shelf. He was tempted to open the letter, but his eyes closed before he could follow through...

It seemed to take Sirius an age to fall. His body curved in a graceful arc as he sank backward through the ragged veil hanging from the arch...

And Harry saw the look of mingled fear and surprise on his godfather's wasted, once-handsome face as he fell through the ancient doorway and disappeared behind the veil, which fluttered for a moment as though in a high wind and then fell back into place.

Harry heard Bellatrix Lestrange's triumphant scream, but knew it meant nothing – Sirius had only just fallen through the archway, he would reappear from the other side any second. But Sirius did not reappear.

"SIRIUS!" Harry yelled, "SIRIUS!"

He had reached the floor, his breath coming in searing gasps. Sirius must be just behind the curtain, he, Harry, would pull him back out again...

But as he reached the ground and sprinted toward the dais, someone grabbed him around the chest, holding him back.

"There's nothing you can do, Harry –"

"Get him, save him; he's only just gone through!"

"It's too late, Harry –"

"We can still reach him –"

Harry struggled hard and viciously. "Let me go – let me go through!" he shouted.

"Why would you want to do that?" Sirius said, tightening his hold around Harry's chest. "I'm not lonely, Harry. I've plenty of company."

Lupin poked at the veil. "Good-bye, Harry," he said mournfully, falling through.

Dumbledore laughed, "Time for the next great adventure, Harry," winked at him, and dove head-first through the veil.

Ron clutched Hermione's hand. Ron said, "See 'ya soon, mate," and walked into the veil.

Hermione cried, "I'm so sorry, Harry," as Ron pulled her through.

Ginny said brightly, "Can't be late! 'Bye, Harry!" Then she was gone along with Luna, Neville, and the rest. The arm around Harry's chest pulled away.

"It's just us now, Harry," Voldemort hissed. "Time to truly live."

July 30, 1996

Harry woke up flailing at the air. The room was blurry, and he found himself crouched on the floor. A soft grey glow came through the windows. He stumbled to the bed, sat down on its edge, and sighed. Yet another variation on his summer-long dream churned in his mind. *I want you out of my head, Sirius*, he thought.

He felt like he hadn't slept at all and his attempts to shake off the dream failed. It wasn't exactly reassuring to end with Voldemort, whose absence had been the only satisfying part of Harry's nights since leaving Hogwarts.

He's out killing Muggles, but he's not in my head – that's strange. My scar hasn't even hurt, Harry thought, as he drifted off to sleep again...

Harry stood in a familiar room, dark save for a few flickering candles. Wormtail attended him.

"His anger has faded away," Harry said in a chilling voice. "How disappointing."

"Master, forgive me for my failures," said Wormtail, trembling.

Harry sneered, "Your existence is itself unforgivable; however, you have not failed. You brought me the runes I sought. Your reward is that you may remain at my side."

"Anything for you, My Lord," Wormtail whispered and he prostrated himself on the floor.

"It is time to attempt the curse. If it is successful, then I will start the path to my final success – I will rule forever," Harry declared, very pleased with himself. "Stand before me, my slave." Wormtail scurried forward in haste.

"He must feel pain. He shall hate me more than he has ever hated, and I shall own his rage," said Harry. "Now I shall put the runes to good use. Bring my new friend."

Two cloaked Death Eaters dragged in a bound figure, obscured by shadow.

"Have the preparations been made?" Harry snapped.

"Yes, My Lord," said one of the Death Eaters.

"Very well; leave me. Wormtail, tell Malfoy to continue his efforts," Harry ordered. "Remind him of the consequences should he be foolish enough to cross me. I want you to accelerate the plans for Potter – begin with the last. I will glean the most important information myself, but you will bear the lesser details. Do this for me, and I shall reward you in ways beyond your understanding. Fail me, and you shall wish that you were never born. GO!"

Wormtail left, bowing and scraping, and Harry focused on his bound victim.

Harry walked in a circle around the figure writhing on the floor. He waved his wand in complex

patterns. “I know exactly what you want,” he said. “I can feel it, you weak-minded fool. You want it so badly, don’t you?”

He stopped and read aloud from symbols carved on a small stone. “Together, we can have it,” he told his victim. “***Phasma transtuli!*** ”

...Dobby tugged at Harry’s shirt. “Harry Potter, sir, Dobby is waking you up, sir! Harry Potter was screaming so! Dobby and Winky thought there was danger!”

The door flung open. Lupin rushed in, clad in his bedclothes. “Harry, are you all right?” Harry murmured, “Fine. Where are...?” Dobby handed him his glasses. The sun shone brightly through the windows.

Lupin pressed the back of his hand against Harry’s forehead. “You’re warm and peaked,” he said. “What were you dreaming about? Was he there?”

Harry said weakly, “He fell through the veil, but he didn’t... it was strange.”

Lupin’s voice turned misty. “Oh... I didn’t mean Sirius.”

Harry struggled for focus. There had been Sirius, and then Voldemort, and then a curse he’d never heard before and couldn’t clearly remember. He said in a jumble, “Voldemort was – there were two of them, and – I couldn’t see the person and – the orders for Wormtail –”

Lupin’s face reddened. “*Wormtail* was there? Where was he? Tell me!”

“I don’t know,” Harry told him, “it was dark –”

“I have to know where he is!” Lupin shouted. “Where is he? Tell me where he is!”

“I don’t know!” Harry snapped. “Don’t you think I want to know? I want to kill him, too!”

Lupin shrank back. “I want justice, Harry,” he said firmly. “I want justice. I’m sorry, I shouldn’t... I’m sorry I shouted at you.”

Dobby stood very still on the end of the bed. He asked fearfully, “He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named was here?”

“No, Dobby,” Harry said. “It was a dream, that’s all.”

“I need to owl Dumbledore. You’ll tell him everything?” Lupin asked.

“Fine,” Harry said flatly. “I’d like to be alone.”

“Albus cleared Fred and George Weasley to know this location,” Lupin said. “I expect them to make an appearance this morning. I won’t mention you unless they ask, and you’re not required to see them.” He paused for a moment and added with a catch in his voice, “The will’s to be read this

evening at ten o'clock. We'll have to see about some proper clothing for you." With that he left and closed the door behind him.

Harry moved to the desk and picked up quill and parchment. He jotted a few notes about what he could remember from the dream, in hopes that the information might keep Dumbledore from sifting through his mind later. Dobby brought breakfast and Harry nibbled at it. He slowly looked through the photos from Sirius's box. They were filled with familiar people who looked so different; Moody was more or less intact, Sirius's face wasn't hollow, Lupin's hair was entirely brown and his face unblemished by scars. These were people who smiled and laughed, people Harry didn't know.

"Fred and George are good for a laugh, at least," Harry said aloud. He put aside the photos, slipped on a cleaner shirt and denims, and made his way downstairs. He picked a book off the living room shelf at random and sat. His choice turned out to be as dry as a desert, but it did keep him from thinking thoughts best left aside. Lupin saw him sitting there; he said nothing, but gave a hint of a smile.

Not long after that, Lupin let Fred and George Weasley through the front door. They exchanged large envelopes and quiet mutters, and Lupin disappeared into the kitchen. George's eyes stopped on Harry as soon as they entered the living room.

"Look what the kneazle dragged in, brother," George said.

Fred grinned. "This must be the house for irritable bachelors, brother."

"Too true, too true; do you suppose that's why His Nibs put us on the list?" smirked George.

"Oh, please do call Dumbledore that in a meeting," Fred snorted. "You're looking fit, Harry. Your uncle must have given you the heavy lifting this summer?"

"You've obviously been fed for once. You're not our ickle Harrykins any more," George added.

Fred's eyebrows furrowed. "Oi, you do remember our little brother and little sister – don't you, Harry? They'd be the ones running the owls ragged?"

"Er... I'm surprised they didn't come along with you," Harry said.

George shook his head. "This place is on a need-to-know basis only," he said officiously. "We're on grown-up business... hard as that may be to believe."

"Doesn't mean we're grown-ups, of course," Fred said quickly.

"Certainly not!" agreed George.

"Sides, Ron's a little tired, you know?" Fred said.

"He's down in the dumps lately... decided to stay in bed this morning," George added.

Fred sighed, “Ginny says he’s nothing but a great wanker.”

“The Lovegood girl’s staying with the family right now – her dad’s off after something or another,” George said. “She doesn’t think Ron could be a wanker because he doesn’t look like one.”

“We’re not sure how she’d know what a wanker looks like, mind you,” Fred said as he wiggled his eyebrows. Harry nearly choked at that.

“At any rate, our Ronnie has been a bit off,” George said.

Fred explained, “That brain business did something to him. He’s made the rounds, but no one’s certain what happened.”

Harry managed to get in a word at last. “I thought Madam Pomfrey treated him,” he said.

“She treated the scars,” Fred replied. “She didn’t fix his fool head.”

George scowled. “We’re not getting any sleep this summer. We sort of hoped you might talk to him. You have some experience with this sort of thing, after all.”

“You know, the voices-in-the-head, screaming-through-the-night sort of thing?” Fred added.

George sighed. “Problem is, Ron doesn’t want to see you.”

Harry tried to ask “Why?” but couldn’t push the word out of his mouth.

George added, “It might have helped a bit if you’d answered a post or two.”

Fred jumped in, “But Ginny’s right in one – he *is* being a wanker.”

“He’s just overly sensitive when it comes to you, Harry,” qualified George.

“No,” said Fred, “he’s a jealous prat. He has a problem with your good press, among other things.”

Harry looked at the twins blankly. Fred fished inside his lurid jacket and drew out a folded section of newsprint. “I was using this to toy with Ginny and Luna – well, mostly Ginny. Look below the fold,” he told Harry, handing him the paper.

It was the front page of that morning’s Daily Prophet. There were two pictures beneath a modestly sized headline:

OUT OF THE SHADOWS AT LAST!

The Boy-Who-Lived appears at Diagon Alley

One picture was of Harry sitting with Neville and the little blonde-haired girl at Gringotts. He was talking to the girl. Neville looked anxious. It was taken from an odd angle with Harry in the

foreground – the girl’s mother couldn’t have snapped the picture. The caption read: **Harry Potter [left], sitting at Gringotts with a friend from Hogwarts and a young fan .**

The other picture was of a vaguely familiar teenage girl kissing Harry on the cheek. The photographer had managed to catch him after the initial shock had worn off, and had instead captured a trace of a smile on Harry’s face. The caption read: **Potter fan Gretchen Hargrove [right] takes a quick smooch .** Harry’s stomach rolled, but he pressed on through the article:

Seldom seen in public, Harry Potter had an opportunity to savour his popularity yesterday. Whilst visiting Gringotts, the Boy-Who-Lived greeted more than one hundred fans and well-wishers. He posed for several photographs and gave a few very rare autographs. “I can’t believe he asked my name, and he signed my copy of Witch Weekly!” gasped Ethelyn Griswold, of Marsdon.

His younger fans were equally smitten. “He’s brilliant at Quidditch, and absolutely gorgeous, too,” gushed Gretchen Hargrove, of Lower Gatwick, who recently completed her fourth year in Hogwarts’ Hufflepuff House, “and I love what he’s done to his hair!” Hargrove managed to sneak a kiss from Potter, who appeared to enjoy it; and several other young witches managed hugs and autographs.

There were critics on hand as well. “It’s shameful he’s made to live with Muggles,” opined Esmeralda Gobstopp, of Birmingham; “They’ve ruined him with their slovenly dress and lack of decorum.” A few organizations – notably the Daughters of the Goblin Wars – have objected to Potter as a role model, citing his upbringing by Muggles.

Potter was whisked away by Gringotts security goblins after a few minutes. An anonymous Gringotts employee told the Daily Prophet that Potter was visiting the bank in regard to his family trust, which is reputedly amongst the largest in Britain.

“I’m going to stay in this house for the rest of my life,” Harry said in a dazed monotone. He held the paper with his fingertips, arm extended, as if it were a dangerous snake.

Fred snatched it away from him. “It’s not that bad,” he offered, “and we promise not to rub your nose in it.”

George said, “Not today, at least, but that isn’t the point. Think on this this from Ron’s point of view –”

Fred cut in, “Ron’s jealous, delusional point of view?”

George nodded. “Right-o, brother mine. Harry, you get all the attention. Being Harry Potter’s friend from Hogwarts is a step up for Neville. Ron aims a bit higher, you know? The *Prophet* never mentioned anyone but you by name, not once. It was always ‘Harry Potter and his friends’.”

“Let me, George – I’ve got one,” Fred said, rubbing his hands together excitedly. “You get all the girls.”

Harry started, “That’s ridiculous! No one but Cho Chang has ever –”

Fred slowly shook his head from side to side. “Sorry, Harry, but you may as well have a Sticking Charm on you. It doesn’t matter what you actually *do* with your power; it only matters that you have it. This is Ron’s point of view, right?”

“Can’t leave off the money, Fred,” George chimed in. “Ron’s never had two Knuts to rub together. You’re rolling in Galleons, Harry.”

“But I’ve never –” Harry wailed.

George cut him off. “You’ve never lorded your money over Ron, not as far as we’ve seen. It’s just like the girl business, Harry – you have it and he doesn’t. He thinks his life is one giant hand-me-down.”

Harry looked to his shoes. “Is it that bad?”

“It was always there, I suppose,” Fred said, “but everything’s been different since the Ministry. He’s just, I don’t know... dark?”

George nodded. “Dark and cranky and picky. Nothing’s right for that one.”

“The first two weeks back, he was obsessed with making Head Boy,” Fred cringed. “Rules, rules, rules – he made Hermione seem a pushover!”

George whispered conspiratorially, “We were afraid he was becoming...”

The twins shivered and exclaimed in horror, “*Percy!* ”

Harry gave them a gimlet eye. “Why are you telling me all this?” he wondered. “Ron’s your brother. Shouldn’t you stand with him?”

Fred put his arm around Harry’s shoulder. “Harry, you’re more than just a friend and business partner. You’re like the brother we never had.”

“Fred, we have four brothers,” George pointed out.

“Right, then – you’re like the brother we *should* have had,” Fred added. “Percy is a genuine wanker, Charlie’s never around, Bill’s all about the shagging lately, and Ron’s gone ‘round the twist.”

George stared daggers at Fred. “Harry,” he said, “what Fred *should* be saying is that Ron needs his friends just now. Ron doesn’t see it that way –”

“ – But we’re right and he’s wrong,” Fred cut in.

“We’re asking you to stick it out with him,” said George.

Fred said with a frown, “We think Ron could get himself in trouble, acting like this. Here’s hoping that you can stand him.”

Harry asked, “What about Hermione? She’s been keeping up, right?”

Fred rolled his eyes. “She’s not exactly a prize, is she?”

George scowled at Fred. “Let up on her a bit. She’s practically a prisoner in her own house. How would you be, stuck there with Mum for a month?”

“Bleagh,” Fred said.

“My point exactly,” George continued. “She’s been to the Burrow once, and poor Errol’s been kept busy. She thought this Head Boy business of his was, what did she say, a ‘healthy coping mechanism’? Thank Merlin he’s given up on it.”

“Hermione’s as far ‘round the twist as Ron,” Fred said. “Tonks says she’s ‘fragile’ right now and that we should shove off. Of course, George hangs on every word that Tonks says –”

George crossed his arms. “I’m wounded, really I am.”

“You can listen to her all day long for all I care,” Fred said, grinning, “as long as she never, ever sets foot in the store or the lab – unless we set out to blow up half of Diagon Alley.”

Harry imagined Tonks dropping or stumbling over some of the twins’ more interesting creations. He was about to ask them about the store when Lupin returned with a small crate. George traded a solemn look with Lupin and took it in hand.

Fred shook Harry’s hand in formal fashion and tried not to laugh. “Always spiffing to see you, partner. Hopefully we’ll talk again tonight.”

“Tonight...?” Harry said blankly.

“We received letters from Gringotts,” George explained. “The reading starts around ten, right?” Harry’s neck twitched and the twins quickly let it drop.

After Fred and George left, Lupin suggested to Harry that they go to a market. This made little sense to Harry, as Dobby and Winky were taking the kitchen duties. He was surprised to find that they could leave the Lion’s Den by Floo; Lupin explained that the fireplace only allowed for outbound travel.

A few moments later, Harry found himself in the back room of a bookshop, which led them to an ancient building that Lupin called a priory, and then to an abandoned house in what was surely London. They walked until Harry was able to hail a taxi, which let them out on the edge of several blocks crowded with stands, tables, and throngs of people. It appeared to Harry that a person might buy anything in the world right there on kerbside.

Harry was immediately attracted to a rack of waist-length coats made mostly of leather. The vendor proceeded with a meandering tale about their history as aviator jackets during the Second World War. Lupin whispered in Harry's ear that this was an obvious tactic for driving up the price. Harry had never before haggled and he decided that it was rather fun. Lupin told Harry that he did a fair job of it, but warned him to be more cautious about flashing around fifty-pound notes when it was time to pay. The next purchase was a wallet.

He found denims, and shirts, and other necessities – anything and everything to rid himself of Dudley's awful hand-me-downs. He tried on a vividly coloured pair of trainers made for running, and took those as well. One stand extended from a store front that sold formal clothes. Lupin suggested to Harry that he purchase a suit for the evening. After much prodding, he settled on a dark grey and black three-piece that needed alterations. Lupin whispered to Harry that Winky could surely take care of that. One of the salespeople tried gamely to match ties to the suit but Harry had no interest in them; he settled on two banded-collar dress shirts, one white and one black. Formal shoes were even worse than ties as far as Harry was concerned. He had never worn shoes other than trainers for any length of time, and the stiff leather pinched his toes and chafed his heels. At length, he settled on a pair of black slip-ons that weren't completely irritating.

Lupin and Harry bought food from carts. Harry avoided anything that seemed familiar; according to Lupin, that was what Sirius would have done. He wolfed down something called 'vindaloo' that lingered in his mouth and made his eyes water. Lupin said that eating from the carts was suicidal but went along just the same. There were performers everywhere, it seemed; Lupin called them "buskers". Harry managed to talk two of them into showing him how to juggle, while Lupin looked on in amusement. Harry was able to briefly manage four balls at a time. He wanted to learn how to eat fire after that; Lupin gave a discreet reminder that the buskers were using Muggle fire, which was quite hot. Harry shook his head at Lupin for stating the obvious, but moved on nonetheless.

It was a fine evening, and they walked for a time before hailing a taxi and launching into another circuit of Floo stops followed by another long ride from the seaside to the woods. Winky did indeed know how to alter clothing, and soon the suit fit Harry as if it were made for him. She also made changes to his school cloak that sharpened it up considerably.

Lupin wanted to leave for the reading no later than a quarter past nine. Harry fussed with his hair at the last moment. It was as thick as ever, though a bit more manageable with the extra length. He tried sweeping it back but that made his scar stand out. He settled on combing the sides back and leaving the top to its own devices.

Harry and Lupin found themselves ejected from a fireplace in the great hall of Gringotts, which was echo-filled and a bit sinister when the bank was otherwise closed. Peninukk, the goblin who Harry had met the day prior, met them there. They were directed to one of the many doors off the hall. A short corridor took them to a large and ornate room with a dark table at the far end and a few rows of heavy wooden chairs. Harry's mood – the sense of the room itself, in fact – was as dark as the table. He said and heard nothing until a hand gently set down on his shoulder. His wand was in hand before he turned his head.

“Good evening, Harry,” Dumbledore said, “you cut a dashing figure in that suit.”

“Thank you,” Harry said grimly as he returned his wand to his sleeve.

The man with Dumbledore was fully cloaked and Harry felt a surge of dark anger. The man’s hood lowered and Harry instantly spat, “What are you doing here?”

Dumbledore said calmly, “Harry, please be civil.”

Severus Snape sneered, “If you confer with the goblins, Potter, you will see that I’m on the list of attendees. Black arranged for me to receive a letter; only Merlin knows why. I have come against my better judgement.”

“I can’t imagine Sirius left you anything other than a good hexing,” seethed Harry. He noticed that two of the three goblins in the room were taking close notice, but couldn’t bring himself to care.

“Undoubtedly,” Snape sneered, “but Professor Dumbledore will surely administer the necessary counter-curses.”

Harry moved toward Snape until they were a few inches apart. “I won’t let you ruin this,” he growled. “I’m of age now, and I won’t hold back any longer.”

“Are you actually threatening me, Potter? Oh, help, please, I’m so frightened. Save me from this whelp of a schoolboy,” Snape mocked.

“Severus –” Dumbledore warned.

“You won’t be treating me or my friends badly any more, Snape,” Harry said firmly. He was dimly aware that there were several more goblins in the room now. Snape glared at him, but Harry noticed with some satisfaction that he took a small step backward.

“Or what?” taunted the Potions Master. “What recourse exists in your foetid imagination?”

Harry set his jaw. “Or there won’t be enough left of you to boil in your cauldron,” he said through clenched teeth. “I will *never* forgive you for what you did to me last year – never! Your so-called lessons left me defenceless, and that helped get Sirius killed. You remember that, when you’re ... GET OUT OF MY HEAD!”

Harry quickly focused on the feeling of Voldemort’s Cruciatus Curse. He summoned up the torture that had racked every muscle in his body, the nausea so powerful that spewing up was no longer an option, the longing for an end - any end at all. Snape fell to his knees and his eyes went out of focus; he made a kind of grunting sound.

Harry felt Dumbledore’s hand on his shoulder. “Enough, Harry,” the Headmaster said. Harry didn’t want it to be enough. He pictured Cedric’s death and the horror he had felt, the heavy responsibility for a life lost– and then the responsibility for the pain in the lives of everyone close to him. Harry thought about how he’d been robbed of any chance at a real life, as long as

Voldemort was alive.

“Harry, you’ve made your point – stop this now,” Dumbledore said firmly, and his hand squeezed harder.

It wasn’t enough. *I want you to know, Snape*, he thought; *I want you to know what it really means to be me*. He recalled the prophecy, all of it.

Snape’s eyes snapped open. His face was devoid of expression, and his eyes bored into Harry; his head wobbled and his breathing became ragged.

“Harry, you must release him! Now, please!” Dumbledore exclaimed. He gave Harry a rough shaking.

Harry heard what was surely a snarling argument carried out in the goblin tongue. He closed his eyes and tried to think a good thought, and then settled for thinking of nothing at all.

“I - told you - my - methods - would be – effective - Albus,” Snape managed to say between gasping breaths.

Dumbledore snapped, “I expect far better of you, Severus. Your hypothesis might have been demonstrated in the proper time and place and under proper conditions. I believed that Harry had overstated his experiences with you, but I can see that he did not. You do not teach Occlumency by violating your pupil!”

Snape still breathed hard. “As I have told you for five years, the boy has no capacity for theory. The only way he could possibly learn Occlumency was by experiencing intrusions for himself.”

“Did you teach Harry how to strike back?” Dumbledore asked.

“Not intentionally,” Snape scowled. “He is clearly incapable of subtlety as well, although that is no surprise.” His face became expressionless again, as he turned to face Harry.

“Why, Potter?” he asked in a low voice.

“I wanted you to know,” Harry hissed. “I wanted you to try carrying it around for a while, and see how it feels, how it burns at your insides. Besides, I know that you can keep it from Voldemort.”

Snape put on a faint version of his cruel smile. “How very calculating – and in the heat of the moment. That was almost worthy of *my* House.”

Peninukk strode imperiously into the room. “*Mister* Snape, do you seek to be expelled from Gringotts or are you merely a fool?”he demanded.

“This is a simple misunderstanding; no harm was intended,” Dumbledore said genially. Harry glared at him.

“Mr. Potter disagrees,” said Peninukk. “We offer a single warning. There will be no offensive wand work or mind magics performed within this room or in these halls. I was told that Mr. Potter was defending himself. For defence – and that alone – we give allowance.”

Snape said in his silkiest tone, “You would do well to listen to the Supreme Mugwump. The Potter boy has always easily offended.” Harry counted a dozen goblins in the room now, some with swords in hand. For the first time, his History of Magic classes took on substance.

“There are no Mugwumps here, wizard. Gringotts is the territory of the Goblin nation,” Peninukk spat. “Under the old ways, wand work on our territory without permission was punishable by death. Under the old ways, becoming the thrall of a dark wizard was punishable by death.”

A wizened voice cried out from the door. “You must remember, my young friend, that under the Treaty of 1806 the old ways were set aside for the sake of the wizards. They do not see a Goblin nation now. You will stand down.” Peninukk turned – unwillingly, Harry thought – and bowed.

Dumbledore removed his hat and gave a respectful nod. “Ragnok, I am at your service,” he said.

The goblin at the door was clad in fine robes and so many medals and decorations that it looked as if the sheer weight should pitch him over. “We are too old for ritual greetings, Dumbledore,” Ragnok said. “This is your second disturbance in my halls in less than two days. Do you miss the impetuosity of youth so much?”

“I believe we are both too old for that,” Dumbledore offered.

Ragnok gave a toothy smile. “For this I am glad,” he said; “I am already surrounded by enough impetuosity. I can ill afford more. Peninukk, son of Maajumalad, we will speak of this in my chambers.”

“It will be so, Ragnok, but it is we who have been offended,” Peninukk said. Several of the goblins in the room let out a hiss; it was clear that Peninukk spoke out of turn, but he ploughed on, “This wizard is a thrall of their Dark Lord. He stands here, in *our* hallowed halls, and attacks –”

Ragnok cut him off. “– and such attacks, however offensive they may be, are an internal matter for the wizards. However, the Gringotts Rules of Conduct apply whether these halls are open or closed to the public. A simple conjuring or repair is one thing. The unsanctioned offensive use of wizarding magic within these walls remains punishable, though in these modern times we use the purse rather than the sword. Make this clear to your underling, Dumbledore: if I must mete out punishment, there shall be no charity.”

Ragnok’s robe dragged the ground; it looked as though the elderly goblin floated across the floor as he walked slowly toward Harry. “Mr. Potter, we have not been introduced,” he said. “I am Ragnok, son of Baldrick the Brutal. Gringotts Wizarding Bank and the Guild of Finance are mine.”

Harry bowed his head, which brought a bemused look to Ragnok’s countenance. “Erm... I’m Harry Potter, sir... son of James and Lily...?” Harry ventured.

Ragnok said gravely, “For most, ‘son of James’ would suffice. For Harry Potter, it is right to recognize a mother’s sacrifice, is it not? Sad tidings bring you to our halls this evening. I hope that this shall not always be so. A contingent of my men will remain just outside during the proceedings – for the sake of security, of course. Now I shall take my leave. It is not right to detain the other beneficiaries any longer. Peninukk, follow.” Peninukk came to heel like a scolded puppy.

“Thank you for your time, Ragnok,” said Dumbledore.

The ancient goblin stopped just short of the door and said, “Ah, lest I forget, the door you destroyed yesterday was crafted by a long-dead master artisan of my clan.”

“That is most unfortunate,” Dumbledore said carefully.

“Peninukk will forward the invoice for its restoration; expect a lengthy and terribly labour-intensive project. Good evening, Dumbledore,” said Ragnok.

Dumbledore returned his hat to his head. “We will speak later of Professor Snape’s actions toward you,” he said to Harry. “This evening was to be about Sirius, and thus it shall be so. Come, Severus.” It was Snape’s turn to come to heel, and the two men retired to the back row of chairs as Harry returned to Lupin’s side.

“Are you all right?” Lupin asked. He reached out and smoothed the collar and lapel of Harry’s jacket, even as Harry tried to pull away. It was a parental gesture and Harry was in no mood for it at all.

Harry Potter and the Years of Rebellion

Sirius Matters

Chapter Four

SIRIUS MATTERS

Harry turned and found another commotion. Dobby stood near the doors, hands on hips and foot tapping, locked in a furious exchange with two goblins as Dedalus Diggle looked on. The house-elf wore something made of denim swatches with a shiny trim; it looked rather like a tuxedo, but the bright orange socks and argyle fisherman's cap pushed aside the image.

Dobby turned his attention away from the goblins as Harry approached. "Is this suitable, Harry Potter?" he asked brightly. "Winky tells Dobby that the servants of such an important person as yourself, sir, must make the proper impression."

Harry shook his head. "You're not my... never mind that, why are you here?"

"It is Dobby's job to greet Harry Potter's guests, even if Harry Potter's guests are at Gringotts Bank," the house-elf explained.

"Your elf was not on the approved list," one of the goblins grunted.

"Dobby doesn't belong to me," Harry said; "he's a friend. I want him here, so you can change your list."

"It is a house-elf," the other goblin said. "House-elves are property. Is the elf your property or not?"

"Dobby is a free elf, and he's my friend," Harry insisted. "Er, I could ask Ragnok about changing the list if you like?"

"A free elf?" the first goblin said incredulously, even as the second quickly added, "Ragnok will not be needed – the elf remains."

Dobby grinned and then bowed to Harry. "Dobby will take his station at the entry," he said. "Will Harry Potter receive his guests at the front of the room?"

"Receive my...? Uh, I'll just stand here, I suppose," Harry managed.

The doors slowly opened and Dobby began to say, “Welcome to the reading of Sirius Black’s –” The house-elf’s eyes bulged; he crossed his arms and squealed, “Dobby does not care about the list; you may *not* enter! Dobby will not let you harm Harry Potter!” In the open doorway stood Narcissa Black Malfoy and her son Draco.

Harry felt the rage flood back into him, into every chasm – into every empty space inside. His wand was out in an instant. “YOU!” he exploded, “How dare you show your faces here, you – you – MURDERERS!” The goblins looked around uncertainly, weighing whether to protect Harry or the Malfoys.

Lupin said calmly from behind Harry, “Lower your wand; you heard what Ragnok said just now.”

“Why should I? You KNOW what they did!” Harry shouted, waving his wand wildly.

Lupin pulled Harry back a few steps. “Harry, they were invited here by Sirius,” he said.

Harry’s jaw clenched. “He wouldn’t... what was he thinking?”

“They’re Sirius’s cousins, of course,” Lupin said. “This is your first opportunity to act as an adult. Put it to good use.” He made Harry take a few slow, deep breaths before moving away. Dobby still stood before the Malfoys with his arms sternly crossed; he wouldn’t let them move beyond the doors.

Harry said to Dobby in a forced way, “Would you please take our guests’ cloaks? Perhaps you could arrange for some refreshments?” Dobby hesitated, his mouth drawn into a snarl.

Narcissa Malfoy coolly raised an eyebrow. She showed no trace of having even seen Harry’s outburst. “I will not leave my cloak with this creature,” she said. “Why is it here?”

Harry replied as evenly as he could manage, “Dobby has chosen to work for me, Mrs. Malfoy. Keep your cloak.”

Mrs. Malfoy slowly surveyed the room before she returned her eyes to Harry. “Come, Draco,” she drawled.

Harry watched and waited for the slightest excuse to hex Draco – the first sign of any threat at all, even a cutting remark. Malfoy didn’t react beyond a simple smirk. The Black family tapestry had been hung near the table at the front of the room. Mrs. Malfoy headed there and Draco followed; she peered closely at the entries near the bottom and visibly recoiled. Snape moved quickly to acknowledge them and Harry’s rage continued to mount.

Dumbledore watched Harry with clear curiosity. Harry decided to take charge of his relationship with the Headmaster for once; he stalked across the room like a sleek predator.

“We need to talk, and now is as good a time as any,” Harry said quietly after he drew close.

Dumbledore slowly nodded. He casually waved his hand and Harry heard a faint buzzing. “It is a

simple muffling charm, one too weak for detection by goblins,” he explained.

“Snape was the eavesdropper, wasn’t he?” Harry blurted out.

Dumbledore pursed his lips for a moment and then said, “I am surprised that you revealed your... information... to him, although you were correct that he can conceal it.”

Harry ignored the attempt at diversion. “Well? Was he the eavesdropper or not?” he demanded.

“Severus was still serving Voldemort at the time,” Dumbledore said. “It was shortly after that event when he first sought me out.”

Harry was suddenly struck by a horrible thought and it burst out of him. “He could have saved my parents! He was inside the Death Eaters – he had to know about Wormtail! That...!” He balled his fists and exploded into a stream of cursing that made his Headmaster faintly blush.

Dumbledore cupped his hand over Harry’s and said, “He did not know.”

Harry stopped in mid-curse. “Wha –?” was all he managed.

“Severus was hardly within Voldemort’s inner circle; he was far too young at the time,” Dumbledore explained. “He was not privy to all the Death Eaters’ undertakings, and I did not expect otherwise. He shared what intelligence he could glean. He confirmed that Remus was not a Death Eater, but your father was beyond listening by then. I received an owl from Severus almost at the moment that your parents were killed. He chose to accompany Voldemort, hoping to reach your mother first.”

“He had to know about Wormtail, then – he *had* to!” Harry insisted.

Dumbledore’s face sank, adding years to his eyes as he spoke. “Pettigrew’s treachery was carefully concealed from us all. None of us knew the truth for more than twelve years. As for Professor Snape, he... oh, Harry, Severus chose the wrong door. He went to the bedroom instead of the nursery. By the time he reversed course Voldemort was ahead of him. Professor Snape witnessed the death of your mother. He has never fully recovered from that.”

“I don’t believe you,” Harry spat. “How did he get out of the house, then? It was destroyed, or was that a lie as well?”

“I taught Occlumency to Severus,” Dumbledore told him, “and thus he is unable to easily hide anything from me. I probed his mind in the aftermath. I was... I am not proud of my actions toward him, and I shall leave it at that. In order to be cleared, the Ministry ultimately required him to take Veritaserum. I was able to privately question him afterward, and confirmed everything that I could see in his thoughts and memories. I ask you to believe what I am telling you. I ask you to believe, and to attempt to understand. Professor Snape is not evil, Harry. He is capable of great cruelty and he harbours terrible anger, but he is not evil. He is... broken.”

Dumbledore watched Harry and awaited a response. Harry struggled for calm but couldn’t find it.

The whole room – all of Gringotts – seemed awash in so much emotion that he thought he might drown in it. He thought hard about what to say and settled on the truth. “I’m not ready to hear this now,” he said.

“I respect your response,” Dumbledore said with a faint smile. “Now then, how have you been sleeping? I understand that you had an unpleasant night this morning.”

“My notes weren’t enough?” Harry sighed.

“They were most thorough,” Dumbledore assured him. “I have but a few questions, for the sake of clarity. Voldemort’s curse was performed using a wand?”

“Yes; I... erm, I mean, he was moving it around in different patterns,” Harry said.

“I see... can you recall the incantation?” asked Dumbledore.

“It was –” Harry stopped. The end of the vision suddenly seemed quite fuzzy. “I’m... I’m not certain. I know I heard it; it was clear in my mind.”

“Relax for a moment, and then try once again to recall it,” Dumbledore suggested.

“It was – ouch!” Harry clutched at his temples. “I don’t understand... I can’t seem to think on it at all!”

“Voldemort must have realized that you were present and attempted to confound you,” offered Dumbledore. “The pain is an illusion, my boy. Find your relaxed state, and think on the incantation one word at a time.”

“I don’t have a relaxed state,” Harry grumbled. “It was only two sodding – er, that really hurts! – two sodding – oh, bollocks!”

Dumbledore laughed, “I have never heard the word ‘bollocks’ used in an incantation before; this must be something quite special indeed.”

Harry laughed with him and the pain relented – even the wave of emotion receded a little. He heard an echo of the spell in his head and quickly shouted out, “*Plasma trans-tulley!* Or... uh... something like that, I don’t know. Does that make any sense to you?”

Dumbledore mouthed the words silently and a faint look of recognition came over him. “It is vaguely familiar... quite old, I believe. That may explain the incorporation of runes. It surprises me that Tom would dabble in the old magics when he has shown such disregard for them in the past. Some research is required to be certain. Now, could you offer an explanation as to how Sirius figured into the vision?”

“Sirius wasn’t in the vision,” Harry returned. “Did Lupin mention that to you?” Dumbledore nodded.

“I had a dream before the vision,” admitted Harry. “It wasn’t important. I’ve been having dreams about Sirius since it happened.”

“Do you mean to say ‘nightmares’?” Dumbledore asked.

“I meant ‘dreams’, and they’re not important,” Harry said. “Voldemort hasn’t turned up in any of them until now, and this was the first vision I’ve had since the end of the school year.”

“Excellent, Harry – this is an indication that you have made great progress, perhaps despite your instruction. Still, nightmares will threaten your control,” Dumbledore warned. “They open your mind to influence and penetration. A small amount of Dreamless Sleep potion may be in order, or perhaps someone with whom you might discuss your dreams?”

“I’ve had enough taken from me,” Harry snapped. “Dreams, nightmares – I don’t care. They’re as close as I’ll ever get to Sirius again, and they’re *mine* .”

“These were merely suggestions for –” Dumbledore began.

“*I’ll handle it* ,” Harry said firmly.

Dumbledore watched Harry for a while. Harry for his part was unwilling to let his eyes waver, even when he began to feel like a participant in an awkward staring contest. Finally, Dumbledore suggested, “Perhaps you should greet the other beneficiaries?”

Mad-Eye Moody was hobbling around the hall, though Harry noticed he never moved more than ten steps clear of the door. “Hello, boy,” he growled by way of greeting.

Harry was still fuming. “Why are you here?” he snapped. “Did you get a letter?”

Moody smiled his disturbing smile. “Black and I weren’t what you call close,” he said. “I’m extra security for the Weasleys and the Granger girl – Dumbledore’s request. You can never be too careful.”

“Right... constant bloody vigilance,” Harry muttered.

With one eye on the door, Dobby walked amongst the small knot of goblins who had not yet left the hall; he offered them something red and bubbling in stone mugs on an iron tray, which they took without acknowledgement. In a flash he was at Harry’s side. “Dobby thought it best to keep the goblins well watered. Dobby hopes that Harry Potter is satisfied with Dobby’s service,” he said.

Harry didn’t want to smile but he couldn’t help himself. “You’re doing a fine job, Dobby, but you’re not a servant. You work for me, right?”

“There is no need for the insulting, Harry Potter,” Dobby huffed. “Dobby serves, and Winky serves. This means we are servants – end of discussion, sir.”

Harry shook his head. “I’m not letting up on this, you know?”

“Dobby is needed at the door,” the house-elf said quickly. He ushered in Tonks and her parents, who waved to Harry as they passed. Harry watched Dedalus Diggle wander the hall, oscillating between excitement and nervousness. Diggle ended up in a sharp-looking exchange with Ted Tonks and Harry looked on from the corner of his eye until Professor McGonagall came into the hall. He hadn’t expected to see her but Dobby was trying to attend to everyone all at once and she was moved along before he could speak with her. The door had closed of its own accord and someone began to knock loudly. *I’m hardly royalty*, Harry thought; *I can answer the door myself, for goodness’ sake*.

Molly Weasley stopped at the threshold and looked at him blankly for a moment before recognition set in. “Harry, so nice to see you!” she said. “Bill told us you’d changed a bit, but I had no idea...” She gave him a light hug, then stepped back to examine him. “It looks as if you were fed this summer. I suppose it paid to give your uncle a talking-to.” She seemed subdued to Harry, a state he had never before associated with Mrs. Weasley.

Arthur Weasley was right behind his wife. “Hello, Harry,” he said. “We’d like to offer our condolences – should have done it weeks ago.” Harry thought Mr. Weasley looked as if he’d aged five years in five weeks.

Harry stepped to one side and insisted, “Come in, please! I didn’t mean to block your way.”

“Dodgy time of day for a party, isn’t it?” Ron said. He was still taller than Harry, though the gap had closed an inch or two over the past year. Under the bright gaslights of the hall, there were dark circles under Ron’s eyes.

Ginny budged Ron aside. “Hi, Harry,” she said with a curious smile. Harry wondered what she was playing at. The twins waited for the others to clear the doorway.

As the other Weasleys moved toward McGonagall, Harry pulled Ron aside. “Nice to see you, mate,” he said.

“Glad you’re okay, I suppose. An owl or two wouldn’t have been too hard on you, eh? Hope you’ve had a cracking good time,” Ron fired back.

“Ron, I –”

Ron’s face exploded in a full-out flush. “ ’Course I know you’ve been really busy lately – everybody knows that, what with the whole world coming to a halt. So how’s it feel being a big man now?”

The last thing Harry wanted was to handle a jealous rant. “Save it for Malfoy,” he snapped.

“Malfoy... he’s here?” Ron snarled. “He’s a relative and all, but I didn’t think the slimy git would dare show up. I figured he’d be too busy kissing his daddy’s backside.”

Harry was confused. “Kissing his... pardon?”

Ron gaped at Harry. “What, you don’t know?”

Harry shook his head. “No owls and no Daily Prophet this summer,” he said. “I saw Neville at Diagon Alley and he told me about the attacks on Muggles. Come to think of it, I heard about them first from Hermione on the phone but she didn’t have a chance to explain...”

Ron’s eyes lit up. “You talked to Hermione on the fellytone?” he asked. “How did she sound? Did you talk to her before or after the scare they had?”

“During, actually,” Harry said. “I was talking to her and she had to leave in a rush.”

Ron said with a shudder, “It had to have been V-Voldemort. Professor Dumbledore was right to post a watch with the Grangers.”

“What was it – I mean, what did he send her?” asked Harry.

“A book and a rose!” Ron huffed. “A bloody rose just shows up in mid-air, right next to her. I mean, they’ve got wards on top of wards – no Floo, no Apparating in or out, nothing. Then the book and the rose, they go all fuzzy and fall apart – bam! – nothing left but dust. Who else would have done that? I’d have been a lot happier if she’d gone somewhere else – maybe the Burrow – but Professor Dumbledore thought they’d be more comfortable there.”

Harry began, “I’m sorry –”

“That won’t scratch with Hermione,” Ron said. “She was going spare, thinking you were dead or something. I heard she made them give her Mrs. Figg’s fellytone thingy so she could be sure you were checking in.”

Harry changed the subject. “What’s this about Malfoy and his dad’s backside, then?” he asked

“He got off; not a grand surprise, I suppose,” Ron grumbled.

“How could he get off? How? He was there – people saw him!” Harry demanded.

Heads snapped around in their direction, and Ron answered in a low voice, “It isn’t hard to figure. People listen to Galleons, right? He claimed the Imperius Curse and Fudge came out in favour of him.”

“He claimed the curse again – of course he did,” Harry sneered. “Fudge... if anyone’s under that curse, it’s him.

Dedalus Diggle called out, “Attention! Attention, everyone! Thank you for coming, though I dare

say, I didn't expect that so many of you would arrive early. Mr. Black stipulated that the reading of the will should conclude at midnight, which forced me to guess as to how long the reading would actually take. We may as well begin now, on the change that I've guessed wrongly. Take a seat, if you please!" Ron drifted off to his family and Harry took a seat next to Lupin at the front of the room.

Diggle took off his top hat and ruffled through a violet valise. He took out pince-nez glasses and a thick sheaf of parchment. "Now then," he began, "I am Dedalus Diggle, for those who do not know me, and I was charged to represent Mr. Black's interests in the event of his untimely passing. Let me begin by expressing my deepest sympathy to all of you. Mr. Black was a friend to many of you and a relative to others. I met him more than twenty years ago and I consider it an honor to serve him now –" He stopped and shot a pointed but nervous look at Dumbledore, before continuing, "– despite how some may feel about the decisions he has taken." After some more ruffling of parchment, he added, "Mr. Black made more than one interesting decision, as you will all soon discover."

He adjusted his glasses and looked up and down the top sheet of parchment. "Let me confirm that all concerned have arrived before going further. Harry Potter is here, of course. Andromeda Black Tonks, Theodore Tonks and Nymphadora Tonks are here. Narcissa Black Malfoy and Draco Malfoy are here; I do not see Lucius Malfoy...?"

"He will not be attending," Mrs. Malfoy said.

Diggle nodded and went on, "Arthur, Molly, Ronald, Ginevra, Alfred and George Weasley are all here. I do not see your other children here, Molly...?"

"Bill couldn't attend and Charlie is in Romania," Mrs. Weasley said. "Arthur and I are representing them."

"And Percival...?" Diggle asked.

"That would be a matter for Percy," Mr. Weasley said sharply.

"I see," Diggle said. "Albus Dumbledore is here, of course.... Hermione Granger?"

"She will be here presently," Dumbledore said.

Diggle pulled at his collar and Harry thought that the room felt a little too warm. "Minerva McGonagall is here..." Diggle said. "I see Severus Snape... Kingsley Shacklebolt?"

"I'm here, along with the Grangers," Shacklebolt said from the doorway.

Harry turned quickly. Shacklebolt was standing behind Mr. and Mrs. Granger. Next to him, Hermione pulled back the hood of her dark cloak. Her hair was less bushy than Harry recalled it – more a mass of curls and waves. Dobby discreetly took her cloak. She wore a long-sleeved black dress. Harry hadn't really paid any mind to what others were wearing; now he noticed that

everyone was dressed rather formally. *Thank goodness Lupin made me buy a suit* , he thought.

Hermione caught Harry's eye, looking at him with – sadness? Sympathy? She mouthed “*I'm so sorry*” to him. He motioned to an empty chair between him and Lupin, but she inclined her head toward her parents. The three of them moved into the row of chairs behind the Weasleys. Shacklebolt remained at the back, near Dumbledore.

Diggle pulled out a quill and handed it to Lupin, along with a blank piece of parchment. “Before we begin, I have a document that I am required to distribute. It has been reviewed by Gringotts for safety and authenticity,” he said. “Mr. Lupin, Mr. Black told me that either you or Harry would understand.”

Lupin's lips twitched. He touched his wand to the parchment and said, “I solemnly swear that I am up to no good.” Tonks snickered and the Weasley twins openly gaped at Lupin. Dense rows of text appeared on the parchment.

Lupin passed the parchment back to Diggle who squinted at the text. “This document is a confidentiality charm,” he said. “In order to remain here and participate in the reading, you must first sign this. The document limits that which you can discuss with anyone other than those who sign the document and remain present during the reading. Some of them... er... do not strike me as things that would come up in a civil conversation...” Diggle reddened to the sound of mild laughter. “I would say that the terms appear reasonable. I advise you to read thoroughly before signing, however. If you do not wish to sign the parchment, then I must ask you to leave the room before we continue.”

He signed the document himself and then passed it back to Lupin, who shook his head as he read and then laughed loudly as he took the quill in hand and signed his name. He passed it back to Tonks, who laughed and cried all at once as she looked it over and signed, before she passed it to her parents.

Andromeda Tonks said, “Sirius, you dog!” in a way that left Harry with more than a few questions. She nudged Mr. Tonks, who leaned in and then snorted. They both signed and passed the parchment and quill to Harry. He noticed that the text swam and shifted as he took the parchment in hand.

I, Harry James Potter, solemnly swear that I will not divulge to anyone other than those present and signatory to this agreement that Sirius Orion Black thinks Draco Perseus Malfoy is a pathetic, spineless, spoiled git who deserves nothing in life. Knowing this, I nonetheless promise that I will only do lasting harm to Draco Perseus Malfoy by accident or in self-defence.

I further swear that I will not divulge the whereabouts of the eighth passage from Hogwarts to Hogsmeade to anyone other than those who swear their allegiance and their lives to me, unless I have a damn good reason than I know without a doubt Sirius Orion Black would understand.

I solemnly swear that I will listen to Remus John Lupin, even against my better judgment, because he deserves my respect and is more often right than wrong.

I solemnly swear that I will hear what Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore has to say, at least from time to time, though I would be wise to doubt his intentions and it may be necessary for me to tell him to get stuffed.

I solemnly swear to stick by my friends, even if they forsake me from time to time, for true friendship is worth that price.

I solemnly swear that I will find time and opportunity to enjoy my freedom, in the best spirit of Messrs. Moony, Padfoot and Prongs – to hell with Wormtail.

I solemnly swear that I will keep true love at any cost, should I stumble over it, for this is the best way that I can honour my parents.

Finally, I solemnly swear that I will play by Sirius's rules tonight, certainly against the better judgment of all those assembled, and shall refrain from cursing Sirius Orion Black's name until tomorrow.

This I so swear before all authority, both civil and supreme, on this 30th day of July, Anno Domini Nineteen Hundred and Ninety-Six.

Harry didn't know what to think – it was funny, bitter, strange, inviting and dangerous all at once. It occurred to him that perhaps he didn't know Sirius very well at all. He didn't know whether to laugh or cry, though he knew that he didn't want to cry in front of a room full of people. He scrawled his name on the parchment, quickly passed it along and then leaned forward in his chair to collect himself.

When he at last sat up, he saw Hermione's eyes upon him. She looked sad and concerned and something else that he couldn't place. There were so many emotions flying about the room that it was bewildering. Harry wanted to talk to her, to ask how she was really faring. Ginny was also watching him with a sort of concern, but it seemed lighter somehow.

"A Knut for your thoughts, Harry," Lupin said.

Harry was still somewhere else. "Wha...?"

Lupin said in a near-whisper, "You're the only one to this point who hasn't laughed."

"What did yours say?" Harry asked.

Lupin raised an eyebrow. "Do you suppose...?" He turned to face the row behind. "Andromeda, why *did* you call Sirius a dog?"

She blushed and gripped her husband's hand. "I don't think that's for public consumption," she said. "Let's call it a private joke and leave it at that."

Lupin nodded, smiling. “The text must fully conform to the reader,” he said. “Sirius was terribly creative with parchment enchantments.”

Ron had the parchment just then. His brow beetled in confusion, and then his eyes narrowed and jaw tightened. “I’m not signing this,” he said flatly.

Mr. Weasley took the parchment from Ron. After a moment, he said, “Ron, I’ll let you be of your own mind on this, but I don’t understand the problem.”

Ron’s eyes nearly bugged out. “You don’t see the problem? I can’t sign that! The things he said... how can you not see the problem?”

Hermione put her hand on Ron’s forearm and he pulled away as though stung. “I won’t do this for you,” he spat at Harry. “You have everything anyone could ever want – he had no right!” Both Mr. Weasley and Dumbledore sprang to their feet, but Ron brushed past his family and hurried out of the room.

“Ronald Weasley, come back here at once!” Mrs. Weasley shouted after him.

Mr. Weasley hurriedly signed the parchment and said, “Dedalus, I’m going after him. I trust that I can leave and then return?”

Diggle fanned himself with a stray parchment. “Goodness, I’d not expected something like this! Yes, of course – but do hurry back!”

“What gives?” Fred said, glancing at the parchment. “Merlin! George, get a look at this!” George leaned in and his eyes grew wide. They both stared intently at Lupin and quickly signed.

Mrs. Weasley took the parchment and quill from her sons. “Leave it to Sirius to stir up trouble... oh... oh, my...” She fumbled for a handkerchief. “Oh, dear... but why would this upset Ron so? This can’t be what he read...” She dabbed at her eyes and asked Ginny, “Would you take a look at this, dear?”

Ginny took the parchment without acknowledging her mother. She read it through, and then seemed to read it a second time, this time with one eyebrow raised. “I... I don’t see anything to make Ron go off...” she said haltingly. Her eyes never left Harry as she handed off the parchment to Hermione.

Hermione froze before her eyes reached the bottom of the sheet. Harry knew terror when he saw it. He was halfway to his feet when Lupin grasped him by the shoulder.

“This is between Hermione and Sirius,” Lupin whispered. “You ought not interfere; honestly, I don’t know what might happen if you did.”

“Hermione? Hermione, say something,” her mother said.

Hermione lowered the parchment to her lap and looked directly at Harry. He felt like her eyes were boring through him, but he could read nothing in them – it was almost as if she was watching something well behind him. He began to doubt that he would keep his oath not to curse Sirius’s name.

“Let me have a look,” Hermione’s father said, pulling at the parchment. She wouldn’t release it so he leant over to read it. “What’s all this?” he exclaimed. “What are you people playing at?”

“I do apologise, but you’re not addressed in Mr. Black’s will. Miss Granger is the beneficiary. You are here as an allowance to her age.”

Mr. Granger turned crimson. “She won’t be signing anything without our consent, and certainly not this. I suggest that you –”

Without a word and without taking her eyes off Harry, Hermione pulled the parchment free of her father’s grasp, signed it and handed it to Professor McGonagall. “Mr. Diggle, may I be excused for a moment?” she asked in a toneless voice and without awaiting an answer.

“Hermione, wait!” Mrs. Granger said, following her.

“I’m not going anywhere until I have an explanation,” Mr. Granger said sternly. Lupin rose from his seat and made for Mr. Granger. Harry used the opportunity to move quickly for the door.

Ron and Hermione stood a few paces into the corridor, arms crossed and exchanging glares. Mrs. Granger had stopped just beyond the door. She saw Harry and demanded, “Explain this. Tell me anything, for God’s sake! We’ve endured a 24 hour guard for the last month and all Hermione gives us is silence. Dora and the others have explained more than she has, and we’re left with more questions than answers – and now this! Perhaps now that you’re here, she’ll feel that she has permission to speak.”

Hermione’s head whipped around. “I don’t need permission to speak, not from Harry or anyone else,” she sniffed.

“Hermione, we’ve been more than fair with you –” Mrs. Granger started.

Harry felt Mr. Granger behind him before he heard a voice. “Yes, more than fair!” Mr. Granger growled. “I’m a prisoner in my own house because of these people. We... we should have followed our better judgment and ignored that Hogwarts letter in the first place!”

“Thomas, enough!” Mrs. Granger shouted. “Hermione, did this Mr. Black ask you to do something? Did you just agree to involve yourself in this conflict that’s happening?”

“It’s not a conflict, Mother; it’s a *war*. You don’t agree to participate in a war. It’s unavoidable – the entire wizarding world has to take sides,” Hermione said.

“This is absurd!” Mr. Granger said. “You’re sixteen years old, for God’s sake! That’s it, we’re going through with the move. We’re – not a *word*, young lady, *not a word* – we’re going to sell what remains of the practice and move on. Australia, Canada, America... anywhere but here.”

Ron’s arms fell. “M-move? What do you mean?” Harry didn’t say it – he couldn’t seem to force a word out – but he was just as startled.

“I haven’t agreed to any such thing,” Mrs. Granger said angrily. “I’m going to speak with my daughter now. Go out into the hall and pace, or sulk, or whatever it is you do – I honestly don’t care at the moment.” Mr. Granger clenched and unclenched his fists, harrumphed, and began to stomp away.

“I... I’m sorry. This is my fault, really,” Harry managed to say.

“We agree on something, then. Stay away from my daughter, Mr. Potter,” Mr. Granger stormed as he left. Mrs. Granger studied Harry and he squirmed, waiting for her to say something.

Hermione broke the silence. “I need to speak with Harry and Ron,” she said.

“I see,” Mrs. Granger said.

“Alone.”

Hermione’s mother kept looking at Harry. “I’m not comfortable with that,” she said.

“After that, I’m going back into the room and I’m going to finish this. You can wait with Dad, if you like,” Hermione went on.

“No,” Mrs. Granger said in a way that brooked no argument.

“You can drag me to Antarctica if you like, and it will change nothing,” Hermione said. “I don’t know what else I can say to make you understand.”

“You could consider confiding in us!” Mrs. Granger pleaded.

“Perhaps I could confide in you, Mother,” Hermione said, “but if Dad was there, we’d be on the first plane to anywhere. I need to speak with Harry and Ron – now, please.”

“She says the two of you are her best friends. I hope you’re ready to act the part,” Mrs. Granger said to Ron and Harry before she headed after her husband. As soon as she was gone, Hermione began to quietly sob.

“Hermione –” Ron started.

“Don’t,” she said between ragged breaths; “*not either of you!*”

“I wanted to tell you how sorry I am about that telephone call. I was being cruel; I wasn’t thinking. I’ve been doing that quite a lot lately: not thinking,” Harry said.

“Cruel? What do you mean, you were cruel?” Ron snapped.

Tears welled along Hermione’s eyelashes. “That call doesn’t seem so important just now,” she said.

“It is to me,” Harry told her. “I was trying to hurt you, I think. I can’t imagine anything more awful. I thought – I thought I couldn’t hurt you. Chalk up another mistake for Harry Potter, intentionally making his best friend feel horrid... wha...?” Hermione enveloped him in a brief but firm hug; waves of her hair flowed across his face. Rage and frustration flowed out of him.

“I think I know what you saw on the parchment, Ron,” she said.

Ron began to flush. “You’re wrong,” he said. “If you signed it, then you have to be wrong.”

“Obviously we all saw something different from one another,” Hermione said. “Sirius must have charmed the parchment. What did you see, Harry?”

“Yeah, I’d like to know that myself,” Ron huffed.

“He had quite a lot to say,” Harry ventured. “I wonder if it’s okay for me to say anything now, or if we have to wait until afterward? I don’t think any of us want to be hexed.”

“Hadn’t thought of that,” Ron admitted.

“It’s a fair point,” Hermione said. “But we have to talk later, then. I have to talk to you about this – *please* don’t walk away.”

“I promise that much,” said Harry.

“Am I going to be a part of this, then?” asked Ron.

“If I’m right about what you saw, then I’m ashamed of you, Ron Weasley,” Hermione fumed. “I can’t speak to him, Harry. You tell him – you tell him that if he won’t sign, I may never speak to him again!”

“Well, you tell her that if she signed what I read, then I don’t care if she never speaks to me again!” Ron blustered.

“Oh, no, you aren’t putting me in the middle of this!” Harry snapped. “Here we stand, arguing about something we can’t even talk about. Do either of you think that Sirius wanted to set us against each other? Well, do you?” When both Ron and Hermione half-heartedly admitted the point, he went on, “The thing to do is set this aside until afterward, right? We all sign the bloody

thing and then we'll work it out."

"Language!" Hermione said absently. Ron snorted and Harry started to laugh. "Just because we're fighting doesn't mean that we should be coarse... stop that!" she huffed. "It's not funny!"

"Dunno... er... it's rather funny, I think," Ron said.

"And you?" Hermione asked Harry piercingly.

"Erm... it's a little... amusing? Just a tiny bit," Harry offered.

"I'm returning to my seat," Hermione said. "What are you doing, Ronald?"

"I'll sign the parchment – the *bloody* parchment," said Ron.

Hermione growled at him and then said, "When you finish whatever bonding ritual boys use to settle their disagreements, I expect to see both of you in there." She left them there, head held high.

"Ahh, I missed that walk of hers," Ron said, "the one that says 'I'm better than the rest of you'."

"Look, I didn't mean to make everyone angry by not answering posts," Harry offered.

"I suppose you didn't," Ron said with a shrug. "I would like to have gotten away from all of this, too – not much choice in that, though." He rolled back his sleeves to reveal a number of green-tinged welts.

"Merlin! They look worse now than they did in the hospital wing!" exclaimed Harry.

Ron let his sleeves down. "Thanks for that," he said. "There's a bonus, too. The brains showed me... things." He shuddered. "I don't know how you've managed it, having him in your head. They only let me have Dreamless Sleep for the first two weeks. I've been to Madam Pomfrey, three mediwizards and a mediwitch. I'm not spirit possessed, I'm not carrying some sort of evil parasite, and I don't have the Dark Mark – other than that, they don't know a lot." Harry went very quiet.

"Say something," said Ron. "I can't stand this, you know?"

"I figured that maybe we needed something else in common, right? We've got Quidditch and food, sure – " Harry managed a hollow laugh, then went on, "This isn't what I had in mind. I do know what you're going through and I wouldn't wish it on anyone. I just... look, just being around me hurts people. I figured that if I was alone..." His eyes watered and he wiped at them.

Ron pressed his hand awkwardly against the back of Harry's shoulder. "Harry? Don't – stop that, now, you don't need to – it's not your fault, for goodness' sake!"

"Not my fault? If I'd left well enough alone, you and Hermione and everyone else wouldn't have

been hurt, and Sirius – oh God, Sirius... I may as well have killed him,” Harry said bitterly.

“Aww... did the Weasel say nasty things to ickle Potter?” a silky voice drawled from the doorway. “And to think I thought this little party was going to be a bust!”

Ron snapped, “Sod off, Malfoy!”

“Ha – I know what this is about! The green-eyed witch rears her head, eh? Jealousy’s unbecoming, Potter, although I’d expect it from the Weasel and his sort.” Malfoy looked gleeful. “This will make for all manner of fun. The Quidditch Jester and the Boy-Who-Shouldn’t-Have-Lived squabbling over the whiny bookworm – ”

“Don’t insult her,” Harry snarled.

Ron was right behind him, and added, “I’d watch myself if I were you, Malfoy.”

“Touching, isn’t it?” sneered Malfoy. “Of course that’s exactly what you want to be doing, isn’t it, Potter?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Ron growled.

“Don’t make me angry, Malfoy,” Harry said darkly. “It’s not a good idea.”

“So it’s true, Potter?” Draco purred as a smile spread across his face. “A little owl told me that you’re having control problems.”

“All the more reason to sod off,” Harry said as calmly as he could manage. He gritted his teeth and added, “I don’t want to hurt you,” even as he screamed the opposite inside his head. A warm draft began to blow through the corridor, adding to Harry’s tension. He wiped sweat off his brow with one hand.

Malfoy wouldn’t leave it alone. “Best you get a handle on it, then, before you and your Mudblood princess decide to, you know...?” he said, and then made an obscene and very obvious gesture with his hands.

Harry felt as if he was about to explode. “WHAT DID YOU CALL HER?” he screamed; his voice sounded like it came from a supercharged *Sonorus* spell. Harry kept screaming at Malfoy, spewing out five years’ worth of hatred. Malfoy spewed a string of profanity back at him, with his hands clapped over his ears and through a grimace of pain. There were angry voices in the background, voices that Harry could barely make out.

“Stop it, mate – take a step back!”

“What’s happened here? Harry, calm yourself. Mr. Malfoy, why must you always

antagonize?”

“Harry, don’t! I don’t know why he needs to use that awful name, but he’s not worth this.”

“Why is it so difficult for you all to understand the meaning of ‘no wizarding magic’?”

Harry’s head throbbed and he felt like he was moving in thick syrup. He was surely on fire, the room was so hot. A hand touched him and he heard the last clearly: “Harry, don’t. Please!”

“NEVER CALL HER THAT AGAIN!” Harry shouted. Draco clutched at his head, his eyes squeezed shut; something reddish seeped between his fingers. Harry took deep burning breaths. It was hard to find a calm place, but somehow the hand touching him made it easier. Then there was agony...

“Don’t stop now, Harry Potter!” Harry shrieked. “I want your rage – it’s so delicious!” He swept around the candle-lit room, looking for Wormtail, but then realized that the rat had already gone to make preparations. His balance was improving as he recovered from the phasma transtuli ritual, and the pacing seemed to help.

“Hello, boy,” Harry said; It’s so nice of you to come visiting. Let me leave you something more to remember me by.”

Harry couldn’t see or hear anything, and for an instant he didn’t know where he was. He took a step and fell to the floor.

The hand stroked his hair. A voice echoed in his ears, through deep water. “Harry! Harry, can you hear me? Are you all right? Someone fetch a towel!”

He wanted to shout, but the shout emptied out into the same deep water. He heard his own voice in the distance, hoarse and ragged. “Someone help me! I can’t get out!”

He struggled to swim, but it was so hard. He wondered what Hermione would think if he drowned. *She’d probably go running off with Ron*, he fumed. His feet pushed off the sandy bottom, and he dashed for the surface as hard and fast as he could...

“Potter! Time to wake up, boy! I don’t care if he’s unconscious; smear the chocolate in his mouth if you have to. You’d think none of you had ever been in combat. Stop coddling him, Granger. And you – if you’re going to cry, go in the other room. Potter! Snap out of it, damn you!”

Harry's eyes flickered, letting in searing white light. "Am I dead?" He blinked rapidly, his eyes watering.

"Do I look like a ghost?" Mad-Eye Moody was glowering over him.

"Urgh... uh – demon, maybe?" Harry managed, his voice strained and weak.

"He's awake," Moody announced. A crowd of people seemed to materialize around Harry, and the corridor began to swim. He rolled to one side and violently spewed up.

"Whoops – back up, everyone. Give 'im some room," Moody said. Harry saw a flash of movement in the corner of his eye, as he rolled to his back again. Harry sat up, very slowly. Everyone seemed to be clustered around him, excepting Snape and the Malfoys.

"Harry, I was so worried. You scared me half to death," Hermione said. She knelt next to him, a tea towel spotted with blood in one hand, and chocolate held out to him with the other. "Did you see – ?"

Harry nodded and took the chocolate. He tore off a bit, and let it linger in his mouth until he decided that swallowing wouldn't make him spew up again. "It was like the time in the spring. I was him."

Dumbledore bent down, his head next to Hermione's. "This may not be the proper time or place, Harry."

Harry reached out and grasped Hermione's hand. "You saved me," he said.

"I – I don't understand."

"You saved me," Harry repeated. "I was lost and you saved me."

Hermione looked away. "I'm glad I signed the parchment," she said.

Harry didn't know what to say. He didn't like feeling nervous around her. It didn't help that her father was fifteen feet away, trying unsuccessfully to burn Harry to a crisp with his eyes. Harry just wanted everything to feel like his first and second years at Hogwarts again, before all the secrets, when he could tell Hermione and Ron anything in the world. *I have to talk to Dumbledore*, he thought, *like it or not*.

"Hermione," Harry said, "Dumbledore and I need to talk, and I don't know if I can stand. Could you...?"

Hermione stood up and said in a firm, loud voice that rivalled McGonagall, "Harry would like us all to get on with the reading. That is why we're here, after all. He'll be joining us presently, so why don't we all return to the room?" It was clear that she was not making a request. Harry gave her a wave of thanks.

Dumbledore asked gently, “May I help you up?”

Harry waved him off, but Dumbledore conjured a small mauve sofa and carefully manoeuvred Harry onto it before conjuring an armchair for himself.

Dumbledore looked at Harry intently. “Did you see Voldemort again, Harry?” he asked.

Harry nodded. “He was in the same place as before, I think. It’s difficult to know for certain, since there’s so little light. He was angry; he said he wanted my rage. He said...” Harry choked on the words.

Dumbledore asked, “What? What did he say?”

The words tumbled out. “He said that it was delicious.”

“I see.” Dumbledore looked troubled. “What else, Harry?”

“He knew I was there... said he’d give me something to remember him by,” Harry told him.

Dumbledore pulled a light blue handkerchief from his robes, giving it to Harry. “You might want to hold that to your forehead. Kingsley and Moody were able alternatives to a mediwizard, but Voldemort does not leave ordinary wounds.”

“What, is my scar bleeding?” Harry asked.

“No, Harry,” Dumbledore said. “He apparently tried to mark the other side of your forehead. It should not form a scar, although I will ask Madam Pomfrey for an appropriate unction just to be sure.”

“Why –”

Dumbledore brought Harry’s hand and the handkerchief up to his forehead. “Try not to think about it anymore, at least not tonight. Would you like more chocolate?”

“No.”

“Lemon drop?”

Harry snapped impatiently, “I thought that you were finished mothering me.”

Dumbledore looked at Harry sadly. “Is that what you took away from our last conversation in my office? If it is, then I am sorry. Why is it that we can not seem to get through to each other, you and me?”

Harry felt the same combination of anger and embarrassment that filled him at Gringotts. “Let’s just finish this, all right? Why did he cut me?”

Dumbledore sighed. “I imagine that he wounded you in order to discourage you from entering his mind. I do not believe that Voldemort intended to let you in, now or this morning. You may be overwhelming his efforts at Occlumency. I can think of nothing to be gained by revealing his plans or telling you that he desires your rage. Why would he give you an opportunity to thwart his plans or to control yourself?”

“He didn’t know I was there until the end,” said Harry. “He wasn’t deceiving me.”

Dumbledore looked at Harry with obvious interest. “What makes you say that, Harry?”

“I – I don’t know. It’s just something I could feel. He wasn’t lying. He wasn’t telling the truth, either. It was all just, I don’t know. . .”

“Factual?” asked Dumbledore.

“Uh-huh. He was just stating facts, or believed that he was.”

“Interesting. Your Legilimency skills are also developing. These are good signs, Harry. Very good signs.” Dumbledore smiled at him.

“There’s something else. I –”

Dumbledore shook his head. “You have had enough for tonight, Harry, especially if you truly wish to attend the reading. Perhaps tomorrow –”

“This shouldn’t wait,” Harry insisted. “He didn’t sound the same.”

Dumbledore said, “Explain this to me.”

“Even though – you know – he’s me, I sound like him,” Harry tried explaining. “I hear his voice speaking, not mine. It sounds a little different than in person. I’ve wondered before if I hear his voice the way it sounds to him. Anyway, I – erm, I mean *he* sounded different tonight. The voice was deeper.”

“Curious,” Dumbledore said. “I will need to think on this. Thank you, Harry.” Dumbledore extended a hand to Harry, who only accepted it because he couldn’t stand on his own. The Headmaster continued to support him until he reached the door. Harry found his footing and then strode into the room unaided to face whatever Sirius had wrought.

Harry Potter and the Years of Rebellion

Sirius Meddling

Chapter Five

SIRIUS MATTERS

Inside the room, most of the beneficiaries were looking at parchment envelopes emblazoned with their names as written in Sirius' loopy handwriting. Diggle stood next to Narcissa Malfoy, wildly gesturing and whispering. Hermione was having something of a row with Ron, who had apparently signed the parchment. Harry stumbled once, waved off Dumbledore, and lurched to his seat. Hermione started to come to him but Ron seized her by the hand. She sat back down – Harry thought reluctantly, but he wasn't certain – and Ron kept hold of her hand. Mrs. Granger had returned to the room, and seemed torn between staring at Ron's handholding and glaring at Harry. Ginny gave Ron a strange look, and she moved to sit in the empty seat next to Harry.

Dumbledore said, "Excuse me," and everyone in the room stopped what they were doing. "I will see what is keeping Professor Snape and Mr. Malfoy. Dedalus, I believe that you should move along. We will join you shortly."

Lupin asked, "Are you sure you should be here, Harry? That was quite an ordeal." Tonks leaned forward in her seat and patted Harry on the shoulder.

Harry said quietly, "I'll get through it." He felt reasonably sure that was true.

Diggle twittered at Harry, "So glad to see you're up and around – gave us a bit of a fright, young man! I can scarcely take all this excitement! I don't suppose that was Sirius' intention, but then again, who can be sure?" He retrieved the violet valise from the table, and rooted around inside of it for something. "I believe everyone has their envelopes. Mr. Black left each of you a letter, some of them rather lengthy. Harry, your letter was in the box that you received. As for the actual will..."

He pulled a stone bowl from the valise, and then a smaller silver cylinder with intricate engraving. Diggle placed the cylinder on one end inside the bowl. He raised his wand, muttered under his breath, and pressed the tip of the wand hard against the exposed end of the cylinder. The cylinder split in the centre and disgorged shining silver threads that filled the bowl.

Lupin whispered to Harry, "It's a Solicitor's Pensieve – very little capacity, but it holds the

thoughts much more securely... still quite rare, though.”

Diggle tapped several times in a pattern, muttered another incantation, and grazed the tip of his wand through the silver threads. A wave of silver rose from the bowl, spread out, and slowly resolved into a glittering Sirius Black seated on the edge of the table. Ginny tightly squeezed Harry’s hand; she was as startled as he was, he figured.

“Welcome, everyone,” he said. “For those who haven’t seen me in many years, I’m Sirius Black and I’m dead. Isn’t that a kettle of fish? I imagine I’m not terribly happy about it, you know – the whole death thing. Then again, being trapped in Grimmauld Place has been a bit like death. Thank you so much, Albus, for arranging my second captivity. What else should I say...? If you’re seeing this, it must be summertime. I’m planning to update around the time that Harry returns from Hogwarts. Sixteen is an important milestone, Harry, and I have arranged quite a surprise for you! Of course, since you’re watching me from Diggle’s pensieve, I missed it. Sorry, Harry, I’ve always been the last one to the dance and the last one home.”

The silvery Sirius stood up. He wore a simple cloak, plain shirt and trousers, and boots that looked a lot like Bill Weasley’s dragon-hide pair. He thrust his hands into his pockets and shuffled while he talked. “I’ll have a bit to say to all of you before I’m finished. But first, my ground rules – I have the gold... for now... so I make the rules. If you’re seeing this, then you’ve already signed a little bond just between us. It’s some of my best work, if I do say so myself. If you don’t play by the rules, or if you curse my name tonight, then there will be consequences... nothing fatal or long lasting, but certainly worthy of my reputation. Moony, my old friend, here’s hoping someone cheats or curses me – you’ll be proud, I just know it.” Fred and George gazed at Lupin worshipfully.

Harry noticed that Dumbledore had re-entered the room along with Malfoy and Snape. Clearing his throat, silver Sirius said, “Now that you’re all about to be related by money, it’s important that you get to know one another. One big happy family, that’s what I want. The Black family could never get it right, so I’m going to help you along. Remember: my gold, my rules... and you did agree to follow the rules. Ah-ah-ah, no cursing – most of you won’t care for the result.”

He sat back on the edge of the table again, and rubbed his hands together vigorously. “Now then, here’s your first task. I want you to find the person in the room who you find the most intriguing – no spouses allowed! Be true to yourself, or you might find you’re speaking with a voice that’s not your own. Remember – the most intriguing. I want you to ask that person one question. That person must answer the question truthfully. If they don’t then I’ve a really great trick up my sleeve, out of a Muggle children’s book that Lily once mentioned – the image stuck with me for some reason. Some of you may have to answer several questions, so I’ll allot ten minutes for this task. Don’t just sit there like great lumps – get up!” The silver Sirius glanced at a ghostly pocket watch and then crossed his arms.

Lupin laughed, “This is too much, Sirius! Right then, Harry, I’ve come up with a question for you.”

Harry smiled. “What, me?” he asked.

Lupin said, “You have to admit, Harry, that a great many people find you intriguing.”

Harry blushed. “Well... you don’t sound like a troll, so I suppose you mean it. Ask your question, then.”

Lupin’s expression suddenly became very sober. “How many times have you slept through the night since Sirius died?”

Harry hesitated before he answered, “All but three nights, including last night. I’ve had dreams, but they haven’t woken me for the most part.” He waited for a moment, and then added, “No extra head for me - I must have counted right.”

Ron spoke to Dumbledore, and Malfoy and Mr. Weasley waited behind him. Andromeda Tonks tapped Lupin on the shoulder, and Fred and George queued behind her. McGonagall chatted with Mrs. Weasley, to Harry’s surprise. Hermione stood next to Snape. Must be a coincidence – she’s looking for someone else, he thought. She definitely asked him a question, though, and Snape appeared to mull over an answer. Harry wondered if Ron had noticed.

“Hello, Harry –”

“Hello, Mr. Tonks,” Harry shook Ted’s hand.

“I must admit that I’ve been caught up by your story,” Mr. Tonks said.

Harry had the feeling that he was going to be blushing quite a lot. “I hope you’ve been hearing it from your daughter, and not the Daily Prophet.”

Ted laughed. “I’m familiar with the fickle press, thank you. My daughter has quite a lot to say about you. She was very distressed by the treatment you’ve received from your relatives. I work with Muggles quite a lot, you know? Most are good sorts; it’s just like us – a few bad apples. Enough of that, however – we should get to Sirius’ little game. What I’m curious about is how you handle it all... all the attention, the public opinion, the danger?”

Harry really didn’t want to answer. “Is that your question, then?” he asked, stalling.

Someone in the corner shrieked then started laughing hysterically, and others began to join in. Hermione said, “Oh my goodness! It must have been Pinocchio!”

Dumbledore’s nose stretched out a full six inches from the rest of his face; he shook with laughter. “My apologies, everyone,” he said between chortles. “I just had to find out what Sirius had in store for us. Mr. Malfoy, what was your question again? Let us hope that a correct answer will return my nose to something less pronounced!”

Harry turned back to Ted and said, “I don’t handle it well, I suppose. I hate the attention mostly, and it’s not fun to be targeted in the press. The danger... I probably handle that the best.”

Ted nodded. “Interesting. You didn’t really want to answer, did you?”

Harry forced a smile. “I think you’ve used your question. Will you excuse me?” He crossed the room to stand before the person who intrigued him the most.

“Good evening, Mrs. Malfoy,” Harry said.

“Mr. Potter,” she said coolly.

He said, “I believe I have a question for you.”

Narcissa Malfoy hesitated. “I’m sorry, I must have misheard. You wish to ask me a question?”

Harry steadied himself. “That is how the game is played.”

“Fine,” she snipped. “Ask.”

“Why did you betray Sirius to Voldemort?” he asked. He realised that he’d asked at full voice when some other conversations stopped.

Malfoy snarled, “Why are you speaking to my mother, Potter?”

Mrs. Malfoy stared her son down. “This is none of your concern, Draco. Return to what you were doing.” The rest of the people in the room also seemed to accept that as a command, although Harry thought that Dumbledore might still be watching.

She looked at Harry with venom at first, then something else. He knew she was calculating an answer – he could feel it. At length, she said very quietly, “I didn’t betray him. Are you satisfied?”

Harry was determined to look her in the eyes. “I’m sorry. I was told that you did.”

“You should apologise for asking such an impertinent question!” she whispered angrily.

Harry kept looking at her. “I’m not sorry for asking. I’m sorry I was led to ask.” Her mouth opened as though she was going to retort, but simply stayed open. Harry turned to walk away.

“Wait,” Mrs. Malfoy said quietly. “I haven’t asked my question.”

Harry turned back. “Pardon?”

“I haven’t yet asked my question,” she said hesitantly.

Harry couldn’t imagine why she found him intriguing, or what she would possibly ask him. “Ask away,” he said, waiting for the other shoe to drop – for Death Eaters to burst in or something along that line.

Mrs. Malfoy had slowly manoeuvred around Harry until he was near a wall and her back was to the rest of the room. She spoke so quietly that she was almost mouthing the words. “If my son

was in peril and you were the one who could save him, would you do it?"

Now Harry found himself making a calculation. He responded slowly and hoped to dodge hidden dangers. "I need you to explain yourself," he whispered. "Are you asking if I would be willing to save Draco, or are you asking if I would be willing to put myself at risk to do it?"

She let out a breath very slowly. "He's a difficult boy to like, I know that about him – so judgmental, so cutting with his criticism... so like his father. He does most of it without even thinking." Her voice remained very low. "I'm asking you whether you would save him."

Harry hesitated again, before replying, "I don't know. I won't hurt him – not willingly. If he were hanging from a cliff, I'd pull him up. There are other circumstances where... I don't know... I don't know if I could trust him enough to save him. I'm not certain that he would want saving if I were involved. Are you satisfied?"

"I'm sorry," she said, and walked away.

There was a quick tap on his shoulder. "Wotcher, Harry."

"Hey, Tonks."

"Why do you shut everyone out?" she blurted.

Harry was startled. "Wha... wait a minute! Are you just curious, or is that your question?"

"It's my question," she said, twirling her hair into ringlets around her finger. "You've got walls higher than Azkaban. Why?"

"Uh..."

"Come on, then, unless you want a foot-long nose," she teased.

Harry realised she wasn't going to give him the space to couch his answer. "To keep other people safe," he answered.

"From what?" Tonks asked.

"Sorry, no follow ups," Harry said, heading for his seat. He didn't make it there. Hermione's mother stood in his path.

"Hello, Mrs. Granger," he said, shifting nervously from one foot to the other.

"Hello, Mr. Potter," she replied sternly.

"Is this going to hurt?" he asked, hoping she would laugh.

She didn't laugh, but she did smile a little. "I hope not," she said, "but let's find out, shall we?"

“Right, then... ask away,” Harry said, closing his eyes.

“What are your intentions toward our daughter?” she demanded.

He stood very still, and turned the question in his mind like he was handling a cursed artefact. “I don’t understand,” he finally said. “What do you mean by ‘intentions’?”

“I mean exactly what I asked,” she said firmly. “I don’t intend to make the question easier to answer.”

Harry let out a trace of a smile. “I think I see where Hermione gets it. My intentions... well, she’s been my best friend for five years. I care about Hermione very much, ma’am. I suppose my main intention is for her to be safe... I would give my life to save hers.”

Mrs. Granger’s eyebrows rose.

“Did I answer your question?” Harry asked.

“Yes... but it’s not the answer I expected. I believe you’re being truthful but incomplete,” she said.

“All right, now I know where Hermione gets it,” Harry laughed.

“Well?” Mrs. Granger crossed her arms.

“I’m sorry?” Harry said.

“Are you being incomplete?” she asked, tapping her foot. He concluded that Mrs. Granger was rather like Hermione fused together with Mrs. Weasley.

“I don’t have any other intentions,” Harry said carefully.

Mrs. Granger’s eyes narrowed. “You’re dissembling,” she accused.

Ginny tapped him on the shoulder. “Excuse me, Harry.” She told Mrs. Granger, “I’m sorry but I need to get in my turn.” Mrs. Granger unhappily let Harry go.

Harry said to Ginny, “All right, I’m ready,” and flopped down in his chair.

She sat next to him and then whispered in his ear, “You’re intriguing, but not that intriguing. I just thought you needed saving.”

The silver Sirius twirled his pocket watch on its chain. “Well then, that’s ten minutes. Wasn’t that ripping good fun? Assuming the room is still intact and you haven’t all hexed each other from here to Hogsmeade, let’s press on to the second task. This time, I want you to find the person in the room for whom you care the most – once again, no spouses! I want you to tell that person why you care for them, and why they should care for you. Remember... tell the truth! I’ve

concocted something unique for any liars; don't press me on this. This will be difficult for some of you, but you get the same ten minutes. Go forth! Mingle!" He began to lazily twirl his pocket watch again, and looked positively smug. Ginny slid away from Harry and quickly dashed across the room.

Harry slumped in his chair. What in the hell are you trying to do to me, Sirius? he wondered. He didn't want to watch Ron, but couldn't help himself. Straight for Hermione, Harry thought, I knew it. Why doesn't he let go of her hand? Mrs. Granger watched Ron with great interest. Harry forced himself to look elsewhere. Mrs. Malfoy made a beeline for Snape, and it seemed that Snape had chosen her as well. Malfoy sat stiffly in his chair with a careful eye on his mother. Mrs. Weasley appeared to be waiting for Ron. Mr. Weasley talked to Dumbledore; Harry figured he had assumed his wife and children were all out-of-bounds. Ted and Andromeda Tonks quickly spoke with their daughter, who then headed for Lupin. George flitted around them, and Fred looked rather lost.

As soon as Mrs. Weasley occupied Ron, Dumbledore suddenly struck up a conversation with Mrs. Granger. Harry saw an opportunity, and zigzagged his way across the room to Hermione.

"Hi," he said.

"Hello, yourself. Do you, erm, have something to tell me?" she asked, her hands fidgeting.

"You're the one, of course," Harry blurted out.

" 'Of course'? What does that mean?" she asked briskly.

"I – I – didn't mean – that is to say, I wasn't trying to imply – uh, surely you –" He knew he was beet-red, and there was nothing whatsoever he could do about it.

She grinned at him. "I was teasing you – relax!"

"Oh," Harry said, having absolutely no idea what to say next.

"Come on, then," she told him, "spill it. You know – why you care about me, why I should care about you, that business?"

Harry looked around the room. Ron had malice in his eyes, but no one else seemed to be taking any notice of he and Hermione talking. "I'm not sure that I should say. I think Ron's going to murder me in my sleep, first chance he gets."

Hermione sighed. "He's being so, I don't know..."

"Smothering?" Harry offered.

She laughed. "I was leaning toward 'protective', but you're warm."

"Yes, I am," Harry said. He wiped his brow.

She laughed again. “The sooner you say it, the sooner you’ll be finished.”

“Such a flair for the obvious!” he mocked.

“You’re evading me,” Hermione said. “Why do you care, Harry?”

“Because you’re so easy to care for –” As soon as it came out of his mouth, he felt his hair grow warm and start to move. Hermione’s jaw dropped and she stifled a laugh. He was painfully aware that Mrs. Granger had taken notice.

“S-s-s-shouldn’t fool around with Sirius Black”, a reedy voice hissed, and Harry immediately realised what had happened.

“Because you’re the smartest witch I know,” Harry said quickly. At least it isn’t getting any worse, he thought.

“A little more honest with yourself, I see,” Hermione said, “a little better. I have to hand it to Sirius; this must be more dramatic than Veritaserum.”

Harry’s breathing was uneven. He was sure his voice was quivering, and he hoped that it didn’t crack. “Okay, because you’re brave?” There was less movement now. “Because you’re a good person?” He struggled for something else ambiguous. “Because you’re loyal.” No change. “Because you’re a wonderful friend – the very best friend I could ever hope for.” He ran his hands carefully through his hair, and it felt normal.

Hermione smiled at him. “That’s wonderful, Harry,” she said, and gave him a chaste hug. Thank Merlin I didn’t have to come up with anything else, he thought. She released him, and said firmly, “Now the rest.”

“Wha...”

“The rest, Harry. You know, why I should care about you.”

He didn’t hesitate for a moment. “That’s easy. Because I would do anything for you – help you in any way that I can, protect you from anything. I would give my life for you.”

He didn’t expect the response he received, not at all. Her jaw tightened. “No,” she said.

“What? I don’t –”

“No, Harry,” she said. “No. Let’s finish Sirius’ stupid game, Harry. Let me tell you why I care for you.” She wiped at her eyes with the back of her hand. “I am so tired of crying. It seems like it’s all I’ve done this summer.”

Hermione sniffed, and wiped her eyes again. “Harry, I care for you because you put the needs of everyone around you ahead of your own, even when it’s foolish to do so. Even when people don’t deserve it... when they don’t deserve you. Everyone else comes first, don’t they? That’s why I

care for you. That's why I worry about you. Why should you care for me? You shouldn't!" Her hair was replaced by thin, writhing snakes worthy of Medusa, and her face went from pink to red. "Er – I mean, because I want you to be happy?" The snakes stilled. "Because that's what best friends do?" She flicked her fingers across her hair, and a few stray snakes still snapped at her.

Hermione fidgeted with her dress, and shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot. Finally, she said, "Because I need you... to care for me! Because I need you to care for me." She shook her head, and her hair instantly returned to normal.

Mrs. Granger quickly walked up behind Hermione. "Good Lord, Hermione," she said, "that was frightening! You look as if you could use some air. Excuse us, would you?" Harry looked to Ron, who made no effort to hide his feelings. If Ron were a wand, Harry thought, I'd be dead.

"Hello, Harry. How are you faring with Sirius' little diversions?" Dumbledore's eyes had their familiar twinkle back.

"Of my two best friends, I can't seem to manage talking to one and the other wants to kill me," Harry said dejectedly.

Dumbledore nodded thoughtfully. "I noticed that you and Miss Granger were talking quite a while. I gather Mr. Weasley is being difficult?"

"She was the one he cared most about," Harry said.

"And she apparently cares the most for you," said Dumbledore. "That is rather inconvenient for Mr. Weasley, is it not? It looks as if you may have to face some uncomfortable choices. By the way, Harry, in case you were wondering, I care for you because in the ways that truly matter, you are the strongest person I have ever known. You should care for me because no matter what you may believe, I have your best interests at heart." Dumbledore smiled, patted Harry on the shoulder, and promptly struck up a conversation with McGonagall.

Harry walked back to his seat. As he passed Ron, Ron said, "I don't know what you've said to her, but you'd better not hurt her. I mean it – you'd better not!"

Harry said, "I would die first," without stopping or looking at Ron. Lupin had only just finished talking to Tonks, who was quickly conversing with George. That took a long time, Harry thought, I wonder what that's about.

Ginny sat down beside him again. "I don't know what to do," she squeaked.

Harry grinned. "You sound like a house-elf – what happened?" he asked.

"I talked to Dad instead," she said glumly. Her screechy voice made the hairs on the back of Harry's neck raise. He scanned the room, trying to figure out whom Draco Malfoy had sought out.

She continued meekly, "I heard – I mean, I saw you and Hermione. Okay, I heard a little as well. I don't want to be hexed twice."

“I’m sorry,” Harry said, “I must be a little slow. Where are you going with this?”

“Harry, help me out here!” Ginny pleaded.

Harry suddenly understood, and felt himself blushing yet again. “I care about you, too – honestly,” he insisted. “I promise I won’t make fun. Are you shaking?”

“I want to curse him so badly,” she managed, clearly on the edge of tears. Her voice had returned to normal.

“Just tell the truth, and everything will be fine,” Harry encouraged her. He borrowed Hermione’s turn of phrase. “The sooner you say it, the sooner you’ll be finished.”

Ginny nodded, squeezed her eyes shut, and blurted out in one high-speed burst, “The truth is that I care about you because you’re the bravest person I’ve ever known, and you’ve made my stomach do loops since I first met you, and I don’t have the faintest idea why you should care about me because I have a pointy nose and big ears and a flat chest and I’m completely unimportant, and I can’t believe I just told you that, I’ve never been so embarrassed in my entire life, so I’m just going to crawl in a dark corner and die now – I hate you, Sirius! I hate you!”

The words NO CURSING! erupted on Ginny’s forehead and her face turned sickly green. She dashed to an empty seat behind her parents, and buried her head. Harry sat stunned as Dumbledore quickly moved to attend to Ginny. Mrs. Weasley glared at him without mercy, and Harry briefly contemplated the relative virtues of Privet Drive.

Mrs. Granger and Hermione came back into the room. Neither of them looked pleased, Harry thought. Mrs. Granger returned to her seat but Hermione stopped at the back of the room. Mrs. Weasley looked back and motioned to the seat next to Ron, and Hermione responded by sitting down in Dumbledore’s armchair.

The silver Sirius put away his pocket watch. “Well, that’s more than ten minutes, but I didn’t want to interrupt your fun. There will be no more tasks tonight; now you just have to listen to me. I’ve written letters for most of you, some longer than others. There are a few things I want to get off my chest, but I’ll try to manage that as I discuss the bequests. There are handouts – no need for note-taking, class.

“I am the custodian of two piles of money and property, my own and the Black Family Trust. Now, I imagine you’re wondering how an escaped prisoner has control of the Trust? Strictly speaking, I don’t, but I shall. This will isn’t worth the pensieve it’s sitting in, unless my rights are restored. If you’re watching this, I’ve been pardoned or forgiven or something along those lines. In that event, the frozen assets in the Trust revert to me unless the next male heir in succession reaches adulthood first. Special thanks should be extended to my dear mother, by the way, for going batty before she could restructure the Trust. Some of my money has been frozen, and some has not. If this will is being read, then everything has been freed up again. Let’s start with the Trust, shall we?”

The silver Sirius produced a piece of flickering parchment and a pair of wire-rimmed glasses. I never saw those before, Harry thought. With the small glasses perched near the end of his nose, Sirius began to read from the document.

“I hereby divide the monetary assets of the Black Family Trust into twenty-two shares of equal size, to be distributed as follows: two shares each to Andromeda Black Tonks, Nymphadora Tonks and Theodore Tonks; four shares to Narcissa Black Malfoy, with two of the four shares accruing to Draco Malfoy upon reaching his majority; four shares to Arthur and Molly Weasley, with one share each accruing to Ronald and Ginevra Weasley upon reaching their majorities; one share each to William, Charles, Alfred and George Weasley; one share to Harry James Potter; one share reserved in the trust for the future spouse of Harry Potter, whom I hope will be worthy of him; and two additional shares to be reserved in the trust. Narcissa Black Malfoy will receive one reserved share should she divorce and formally forsake Lucius Malfoy. Draco Malfoy shall receive one reserved share should he formally forsake Lucius Malfoy. To Percival Weasley, I leave a rubber Galleon and a swift kick in the arse as a reward for turning his back on his family.” Sirius looked up again, and added menacingly, “I have no other living family members. I want that to be perfectly clear.”

He paused before continuing, “The secondary lines of inheritance are complicated. It’s all been written, witnessed, and so forth. If anyone I name at any time during this business is already dead, then first, my condolences, and second, call Diggle and have him straighten it out.”

From the document in his hand, he read, “The Black ancestral property shall be sold, and the proceeds divided as stipulated in the Trust charter.” He glanced up and smiled faintly. “That should put quite a bit of cash back into the Trust. Your shares should be generous if Diggle does his job.”

Looking back down, he continued, “Ownership of the property at 12 Grimmauld Place is retained by the Black Family Trust until Harry Potter reaches the age of seventeen. Upon reaching the age of seventeen, Mr. Potter shall take ownership of the property. There are two conditions of ownership, applicable both to the Trust and to Mr. Potter. The first condition is that the owner must afford Remus Lupin lodging for the remainder of his natural existence, should Mr. Lupin so choose, for the sum of one Galleon per year. The second condition is that the owner shall provide safe haven to Narcissa Black Malfoy and/or Draco Malfoy, at any time that either may seek it. Lucius Malfoy is not welcome at 12 Grimmauld Place under any circumstance.”

Sirius stopped and looked up, took off his glasses, and sneered. “A friend has helped me prepare something very special for dear Lucius. If he ever enters the house, it will be an experience he’ll never forget.”

With his glasses replaced, he continued, “Now, to my own possessions. To Harry Potter, I bequeath all of my personal monies, including those found at Gringotts Wizarding Bank and those on my person, and all of my personal effects not otherwise specified. In addition, I bequeath to him the other property that accrues to me via the Trust.” Sirius looked up from the parchment. “Diggle has all of the information for you, Harry.”

He continued reading, “As my ward, Harry Potter inherits the rights accorded to my eldest heir with respect to the Black Family Trust, and any titles or other hereditary privileges afforded to the primary heir of the House of Black. However, I voluntarily terminate any parental rights over Harry that accrue to me, and oppose the assumption of those rights by any other.”

Sirius lowered the parchment. “Harry, I’m going to catch a cauldron of hot oil for doing that. Remember, all of you, no cursing my name tonight! I’m no father, Harry. I thank you for humouring me now and again, but it would have been an injustice to you – trifling, perhaps, but an injustice all the same. There’s great injustice in what Peter allowed to be visited upon you and your parents, but there’s worse to be found than that. The greatest injustice I have ever known is found in what the adults in your life for the past fifteen years have done to you, Harry.”

“Shame on you!” Sirius shouted, pointing randomly around the room. “Shame on everyone who could have done better! You let Lily’s accursed relatives abuse Harry for ten years! It’s amazing that he wasn’t destroyed! Since then, you’ve alternated between treating him like a spoiled child and a common criminal, and you’ve stuck him back in that hell every summer! Shame on you! Shame on you, Dumbledore!”

The silver Sirius threw his parchment down. “I’m freeing him from you. How do you like that? If he wants to serve you, he can do it with his eyes wide open. How dare you hide things from him and deceive him! How dare you condemn him to death! His fate is his to decide, not yours, and certainly not some bloody seer.” Harry heard a few sharp intakes of air at that.

Sirius stooped to pick up the parchment, and adjusted his glasses. “Harry, life is so precious, and it’s so short. Dumbledore’s the oldest person I know, and I’d wager even he would agree that it’s too short. Don’t waste it. You know *carpe diem*, right? Seize the day? Not good enough. *Carpe momentum*, Harry. *Carpe momentum*. Enjoy your friends. Spend some money. Find love; if you’re lucky, you’ll make out as well as your parents in that department. Life is so short, Harry, but your parents – they lived, lad. This is all I can do to help you on your way, and I’m so sorry for that. Shame on the adults, Harry. Shame on Dumbledore. Shame on me, Harry.”

His voice faltered. “Shame on me. I wasn’t there, and in that, I failed you just as surely as everyone else.” He stopped to wipe at his eyes with his fingers. “Now... uh, right. Make sure you go and pick up your birthday present at the appropriate time - it’s a corker. Diggle, be sure the little package is in the box. That’s all, Harry. The rest is in the letter and my journal.”

Reading from the parchment, he went on, “Sufficient funds shall be withheld from my personal accounts to provide Remus Lupin with a salary of 2,500 Galleons per annum for the remainder of his natural life. In exchange, Remus will serve as conservator for Harry Potter’s affairs in Muggle England as may be required until Harry reaches the age of twenty-one. Remus will also serve as life trustee for the reserves held in the Black Family Trust.” He looked up, a wistful expression on his face. “Moony, my old friend, you’ve made your feelings clear. This is as close as I can come to honouring them. Watch over him, please.”

He glanced at the parchment, and said, “Ah, here it comes. I love this one... sufficient funds shall be drawn from my personal accounts to establish the Sirius Black Memorial Quidditch Trust. The

sole beneficiary of the Trust will be the Head of Gryffindor House at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and the sole purpose for which the funds may be used is the biennial purchase of international standard brooms for the use of the Gryffindor Quidditch team. McGonagall, run Slytherin into the fucking pitch.” Professor McGonagall gasped and Mrs. Weasley let forth an outright shriek.

He looked up with a smirk and said, “It’s in writing just that way, as a matter of fact. That also provides a nice segue to the good Professor Snape, don’t you think?” Sirius lowered the parchment. “Severus,” he said, “I’m leaving you the potions portion of the Black family library. Not only do I think you’ll find it useful, but some of the books would be dangerous in less capable hands. The other thing I offer you is my forgiveness. I mean that, and I hope you can find your way to do the same for me. It should be easier for you now that I’m dead. I know that I find it easier this way.”

He returned to reading. “I bequeath my personal collection of books and all contents of the Black family library with the exception of the potions section to Hermione Granger, as well as sufficient funds to provide her with a perpetual annual book allowance of 500 Galleons.” He stopped reading, and looked out toward the audience that had been imaginary to him. “Hermione, you may want to hand some of the books straight off to Pince, so that they’re properly binned or tossed into the Hogwarts Restricted Section. I know this bequest is a trifle when compared to everything you’ve done for Harry. I’m struck by your love of books. We have that in common – or had, is it? Tenses are so hard to keep straight when you’re dead.”

The silver Sirius smiled and added, “I’ve got a few things for the Weasleys, as well. Ron, an old friend left something in my possession quite a long time ago and I don’t know of anyone else who would appreciate it as much as you. You’ve been there whenever Harry’s needed you, and you deserve this. I leave you a Quaffle signed by all the players and reserves from the 1892 Chudley Cannons, along with an authentic season programme and team roster.”

Ron burst out, “Bloody hell!” which was immediately followed by a remonstrance from Mrs. Weasley and a scattering of laughter that drowned out a few of Sirius’ words.

Sirius kept talking, of course. “...and George Weasley are the only rightful heirs to Messrs. Moony, Padfoot and Prongs that Hogwarts has known. I can think of no one else more deserving of my remaining supply of enchanted parchment, and my numerous journals detailing parchment charms, hexes, and other marauding mischief. Sorry, Moony, but you’re not quite as much fun as you used to be. Boys, be sure to misuse them wisely.”

Fred and George fell all over themselves, laughing, crying, pointing to Lupin, and bowing and scraping to Sirius’ ghostly image, as he continued, “As for Ginny Weasley... Ginny, thank you for sharing your musical abilities with me last summer. You’re a natural secret keeper, so I’ll wager that you haven’t told a soul. Musical passion has to be indulged, and you shouldn’t keep it bottled up. You have great potential, and you can still live up to it if you start now. I’ve never regretted lending you the Black family violin, and now I leave it to you along with all the sheet music that goes with it. It’s very, very old – in the family for over 150 years, you know – so it needs tender care, but I’m certain you can handle it. It may yet have a few surprises for you, Ginny, but I

promise with all my heart that it's not cursed."

"Shacklebolt, old boy," Sirius smirked, "I begin by extending my eternal gratitude to you for constantly missing your target. I'm sorry to say this, but I was very glad not to see you. I'm also leaving you... let's get it right..." He peered at the document. "I bequeath to Kingsley Shacklebolt my collection of personal arms and defensive gear. In addition, sufficient funds shall be withheld from my personal accounts to provide Mr. Shacklebolt with a one-time stipend of 5,000 Galleons, in exchange for providing Harry Potter with regular personal training in the use of arms and defence against the Dark Arts."

He replaced his glasses and scowled. "To Albus Dumbledore, I place in your hands sufficient funds to provide for the remaining education of Harry Potter, Hermione Granger, Ronald Weasley, and Ginevra Weasley. Teach them what they need to know. Protect them within reason. Free them to find their own way.

He flung away the parchment. "Diggle, I'm sure you've already set my instructions for Grimmauld Place into motion. While you're at it, be sure to set Buckbeak free. If there's a body, burn it and toss the ashes anywhere you like. I've become accustomed to travelling light, so no memorial, and certainly no sending. I never believed in any of that rot – sorry, Lils. If you want to slide off to the nearest pub and get good and pissed, that's all right by me. Well, that's everything. Be seeing all of you soon enough." The silver Sirius bowed. The room remained still and silent as the flickering apparition of Sirius Black sank into itself and faded into nothingness.

The moment that Sirius was gone, Draco Malfoy jumped from his seat as though he had sat on a tack. "That man was a raving lunatic! I can't believe this is happening!" He jabbed his finger toward Diggle. "We will protest this – this – outrage!" The room erupted.

Ron turned on Malfoy, shouting, "It's fair and square, you bloody ferret!" Draco lunged, his mother clung to the back of his shirt, and Mr. Weasley interposed himself.

Snape and McGonagall moved quickly toward the developing melee. McGonagall snapped, "Boys, stop this at once! Show some reason!"

Snape hissed, "I agree – let's all be reasonable. That would be a welcome antidote to Black's folly."

McGonagall turned on Snape, "What folly would that be, Severus?" she demanded.

Snape snarled back, "You must have loved all this, Minerva; looking forward to running us into the pitch, I imagine? I wish that Draco were right about Black, but he is not; Black was no lunatic. He was simply cruel. He couldn't help himself – it was an accident of birth."

Narcissa Malfoy and Andromeda Tonks exclaimed as one voice, "Excuse me?"

Snape said, "I am sorry, Narcissa – Draco, sit! – I am sorry but I am also correct. Perhaps it was different in your household, but I had the misfortune of meeting Black's parents. He was born to

be calculating and cruel, and he died that way. Look at what he has accomplished!”

Ron yelled, “Sod off, Snape! You hated him, he forgave you, and you can’t handle it!”

McGonagall’s eyes became saucers. “Mister Weasley! Sit down now! You will not speak to Professor Snape that way!” Hermione, who had also moved toward the fray, pulled hard on Ron’s arm.

Snape turned on Ron, and shoved him down into his chair. “Anything between Black and me is none of your damned business, boy!” he raged.

Molly Weasley bumped Snape back with her chest, hands on hips. “Don’t you handle my son that way, you insufferable git!”

Ron said darkly, “I can handle myself, mum.”

Molly barked, “Be quiet and stay in your seat!” without looking at Ron, and then bumped Snape again. “I’ve had it with you! Why they have allowed you to poison an entire generation of Hogwarts students with your...”

Arthur Weasley said gently, “Molly, please calm down, and –”

Snape cut him off. “This is between me and your pushy, overbearing wife –” Arthur swung and his fist connected with Snape’s nose. Snape stumbled backward, clutched at his face, and muttered, “Blood...” Arthur lunged for him.

Ron shouted, “Get him, Dad!” as Mrs. Weasley tried to restrain her husband. Lupin rushed across the room, and Dumbledore rose from his armchair.

“Enough!” Harry had seen Dumbledore rise, and assumed that he was now putting a stop to things, but it was Narcissa Malfoy who had screeched as loudly as she could. “I said ‘enough’!” Everyone and everything seemed to stop in mid-sentence, mid-swing or mid-stride.

“Severus,” Narcissa said, her quiet voice rebounding in the stilled room, “Sirius didn’t accomplish this; we’ve done it on our own. Look at us!” She looked to her sister, and said firmly, “There will be no protest,” before she turned to her son and repeated with force, “No protest.”

Draco began, “But –”

His mother cut him off firmly. “Think of your own reaction if one of your cousins chose to interfere with a decision that should have been left to you. This was Sirius’ decision to make. Be grateful and be quiet.”

“But what he said about Father, he had no right –” Draco whimpered.

Narcissa Malfoy stopped her son with a wave of her hand. “I’m tired. Mr. Diggle, I shall be in touch. Come, Draco.” She swept from the room without another word, followed closely by her

son.

Dumbledore said, “It is growing late. Dedalus, let us finish any other business that may be required this evening. Would everyone please take a seat?”

Snape fled the room and Mr. Weasley sat down, which was accepted by everyone as an invitation to do the same. Diggle sat behind the table and twitched.

“Dedalus, other business?” Dumbledore prompted.

Diggle patted at his brow with a brightly coloured handkerchief. “Yes – yes, of course. Are there, er, does anyone have specific questions?”

Ron asked eagerly, “How big is the Trust? What’s a share?” Harry felt a flicker of irritation; Ron would be the one to ask about the money, wouldn’t he? he thought.

Diggle rifled through parchment. “An excellent question, one for which I should have an answer... Most of the corpus was spent, prior to the disposal of property... and there were expenses related to the reinstatement of certain titles and privileges... ah, here it is. As of this morning, the monetary proceeds in the trust totalled... hmmm; carry the four... uh... four hundred and sixty-three thousand, three hundred thirty two Galleons and change. That would leave a share value of, what, around twenty-one thousand Galleons?”

Ron let out a low whistle. “We’re rich,” he said nervously. Harry heard Ted Tonks clear his throat. He turned slightly and noticed that Mr. Tonks’ brow was furrowed.

Mrs. Weasley said to Ron, “We’ve always been rich, Ron. Now we have some money to go with it.”

Ron asked Diggle, “What about the other pot of money?”

Mrs. Weasley snapped at Ron, “Don’t be impertinent!” Harry shook his head in frustration.

Diggle looked at Ron suspiciously. “Mr. Weasley, I really don’t believe that’s your concern. The lion’s share of Mr. Black’s assets goes to Mr. Potter. I really don’t see –”

“Tell him,” Harry snapped. “It may as well be in the clear. I wouldn’t want Ron to fester over it.”

“I don’t fester,” Ron retorted.

“If you insist, Mr. Potter,” Diggle said nervously. “Mr. Black’s assets come from a wider variety of sources than the Trust. I’ll have to calculate... I hope you’ll be satisfied with an estimate... subtracting the amounts for the Quidditch trust and Mr. Lupin’s support... and the funds for schooling... less unpaid taxes... I think I can provide a rough estimate. I am withholding enough for the Quidditch Trust to earn 5,000 Galleons per year in interest, and I am setting aside enough reserve to pay Mr. Lupin for 75 years –”

“Quite an optimist,” said Lupin.

“Just being prudent,” returned Diggle. “Another 20,000 Galleons to perpetuate Miss Granger’s book buying, 55,000 Galleons for Ministry back taxes, and around forty percent of Mr. Black’s Muggle funds to cover taxes and other legal matters. The remainder amounts to the additional Trust property in Scotland to which Mr. Black referred... and about 4,000 Galleons... and somewhere in the neighbourhood of two-and-one-half million pounds.”

Ron asked Hermione, “What, is that a lot?” She nodded, and Ron’s mouth hardened into a thin line.

Harry decided he’d had his fill of Ron for the evening. “Mr. Diggle,” he said, feigning innocence, “why don’t you tell Ron what’s in my vault as well?”

Hermione snapped, “Harry!”

Harry stared at Ron, unflinching. “Come on, Ron, I know you’re dying to know. It’s burning a hole in you, isn’t it?” Ron turned red; Harry knew it was from anger, not embarrassment.

Diggle fidgeted. “I don’t really... I’m not certain that...”

Harry said, “You must know; we just went over my assets last night.”

Dumbledore said from the back of the room, “Harry, do not do this.”

Diggle was still fidgeting. “Well, um, Harry, uh, are you just interested in your vault... er, the money set aside for your current use? The Potter Trust is a large and complicated...”

Ron said through clenched teeth. “I want to know.”

Hermione glared at Harry, then at Ron. “Let it drop, both of you,” she warned.

Ron stood up. “You wanted to dangle this in front of me, eh, Harry? What, so you could be big and important? Fine, then – show me how little I am, Harry. I’m nothing next to you, am I?”

Harry wavered. “Ron, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said anything. That’s not what I meant to –”

“Spill it!” Ron snapped.

“Ron, I don’t even know,” Harry said. “I mean, I was just briefed for the first time on the Trust...”

Ron exploded. “I – want – to – know!”

Hermione pleaded, “Please let this go, Ron. Please.”

Harry knew he’d taken things too far. “Ron, I’m sorry I baited you, mate; it was wrong. If you let

this go, I'll ... I'll give you anything you want. I'll... I'll give you fifty percent, sight unseen – fifty percent of whatever's in my personal vault. The money has never mattered to me, Ron – you know that.”

Ron hesitated. “You'll give me anything I want?”

Harry said, “Name it.”

Ron nodded. “Stay away from Hermione.”

Harry and Hermione both froze.

“Did you hear me? I said stay away from Hermione,” Ron repeated.

Hermione turned on Ron. “Am I your property, Ronald? You prat!”

“That's not something I can give you. I'm sorry,” said Harry.

Ron's fists were tightly balled. “You said you'd give me anything I ask. So now you're a liar, too.”

“RONALD WEASLEY!” Hermione shouted.

“I couldn't have imagined you'd ask me to stay away from my best friend,” said Harry. “I don't know you. I hope the real Ron comes back from wherever you've stashed him.”

“Your best friend, is she?” said Ron, with ice in his voice. “I used to think that was me. At least I know where I stand. I don't want anything from you, not your filthy money, not your pity – not anything.”

“You know what Sirius had me swear?” Ron asked Hermione. “He had me swear that I would stand by Harry, just as he would stand by me. I signed it, just like the two of you said I should. I swore an oath that if the time comes, I'll protect Harry at all costs, above everything else, including you. He mentioned you by name! How do you feel about your precious Sirius now, eh? Do you suppose he figured you'd live long enough to enjoy the books?”

Before Mrs. Weasley managed to rebuke Ron, Hermione's open hand made a loud crack! against his cheek. “You don't know anything!” Hermione shrieked. Ron cringed and ran out of the room.

Mr. Weasley said meekly, “Terribly sorry, everyone,” before hurrying after Ron.

Mrs. Weasley stared at Hermione for a moment, and then said, “He'll calm down, dear.” To the rest of the stunned room, she said, “We'll be going now. Good night.” George and Fred meekly walked out. Ginny – her face returned to normal by Dumbledore – hissed at Harry, “You shouldn't have pushed him,” as she passed.

Harry moved to comfort Hermione, reaching out for her. She jerked her arm away from him.

“I’m so tired of all this!” she snapped.

Dumbledore extended his arms and enveloped Hermione into a gentle embrace. He said, “Kingsley, would you and Mr. Moody be so kind as to escort the Grangers home?”

Harry said his goodbyes to the Tonks family. Lupin and Dumbledore followed them into the corridor. Hermione lingered by the doorway. I can’t let her leave like this, he decided, and he stood beside her.

Once he started talking, Harry couldn’t stop. “Hermione, I’m so sorry about, well, everything. I know I’m responsible. I stirred him up and I knew I was doing it. It was so foolish. The things he said, they’re so hard to forgive. But I’ll try, Hermione, I swear I’ll try. I swear I’ll –”

“I was here,” she said, “I saw what happened. I – I still need to talk to you, soon.”

Before he could register what she was doing or what was happening, she darted forward and kissed Harry on the cheek; she pulled back with a startled look on her face. “Happy birthday, Harry,” she said. Harry’s watch showed five minutes after midnight. Hermione walked out to meet her parents, and Harry understood that he wasn’t supposed to follow.

Diggie reminded Harry to open the birthday package from Sirius. Dumbledore was the last to leave Gringotts. He promised to send unction for the cut on Harry’s forehead, and gave Lupin and Harry a portkey that took them within a modest walk of the Lion’s Den.

Harry dashed to his room upon returning, rifled through the box from Sirius and found a small package. Inside was a splinter of hardwood, and loopy writing on a small scrap. The note said:

Happy sixteenth birthday, Harry! This portkey can be used only once. It will activate at eight o’clock on any morning after you open this package. I’ve been arranging your gift for over a year, so at least pretend that it’s smashing. Be sure to show it off – I guarantee that some people won’t approve.

- S.B.

Harry wasn’t sure whether to be excited or concerned. He knew that if the will were an indication, any gift that Sirius Black had spent more than a year concocting would surely be interesting. He asked Dobby to rouse him by seven o’clock.

Once in bed, Harry played back the evening in his mind. Over the course of a few hours, he had found out that Snape was the eavesdropper at the Hog’s Head; had made Snape suffer for launching an Occlumency attack; had made up with Ron, and then broken off again; had made Draco Malfoy’s ears bleed; had been sucked into Voldemort’s mind and then attacked; had been driven into multiple conversations with Dumbledore; had found out that Mrs. Malfoy didn’t betray Sirius to Voldemort, and that she apparently wanted him to save Draco from something; had discovered that Ginny loved music, thought that she loved him, and apparently didn’t love herself; had nearly been eaten alive by Mr. and Mrs. Granger, and had been alternately fussed-over and reviled by Mrs. Weasley; had told Hermione how much he cared for her, and had found

out that Hermione cared for him; had received a year's worth of hugs; and had received one kiss on the cheek that he didn't fully understand and couldn't shake off. He had to will himself to sleep.

Harry Potter and the Years of Rebellion Birthday Gifts

Chapter Six

BIRTHDAY GIFTS

July 31

Fawkes flashed into Harry's room at a quarter past seven . The phoenix bore a letter and a small package.

Harry –

I offer you my best wishes upon your sixteenth birthday. The Hogwarts Board of Governors has requested a meeting that will take up most of the day. If all goes as expected, I shall find you this evening. I bid you an excellent day. After last evening's events, some enjoyment is well deserved.

Please do employ the enclosed salve. Madam Pomfrey advises that it be applied twice daily for a period of three days.

Fondly,

Albus P.W.B. Dumbledore

Harry couldn't fathom Dumbledore – furious when Harry signed the will, doting after the will was read. *I don't understand your master – do you, Fawkes?* Harry wondered as the phoenix disappeared.

There was a small silver bottle inside the package, labelled as 'Phlostion Philligree's Scar-Away Salve'. Harry went into the bathroom and stood before the mirror. He dabbed the thick concoction onto the fresh cut at one side of his forehead, and frowned at the lightning bolt scar on the other side. On a whim he smeared the excess salve on his finger across the vivid scar; it bubbled and then disappeared in a wisp of vapour. With a sigh, he turned away. Harry was marked and nothing could change that. He readied himself for the day and then headed for the front door.

Lupin looked up from papers strewn across the dining table just as Harry's hand touched the doorknob. "What's this?" he asked.

“Sirius left me a portkey set for eight o’clock,” Harry said.

“He... what?” Lupin burst from his chair. “A portkey? Are you mad? How do you know who actually created it?”

“It was in a package he left for me. Here – I’ll show you the note,” Harry said.

Lupin held the note at arm’s length and squinted at it. “It’s Sirius’s handwriting, at any rate – oh! Of course – it’s about the birthday gift.” He shook his head. “Setting a portkey with a timed trigger based upon opening of a package... he did have his talents, didn’t he?”

“So you knew about the gift?” asked Harry.

“Sirius lacked the patience to hold secret a gift; I’m surprised he didn’t give it up months ago,” Lupin said with a soft laugh. “I have a rough idea where you’ll be headed. Would you agree to meet me in front of Flourish and Blotts at, say, eleven o’clock? If I can’t be there, I’ll send the Weasley twins in my stead.”

“That seems fair,” Harry decided. He glanced at his watch and rushed outside of the Lion’s Den just before he felt the familiar tug behind his navel.

He regained his balance inside what looked to be a workshop of some kind. Filtered sunlight came through windows set high on one side of the room. There were stacks of wood here, logs and sticks there. An entire wall was taken up with a huge rack of tools and equipment. Adjacent to one workbench were rows of shelves filled with all manner of vials, jars, and other things Harry couldn’t identify. Next to the other workbench were bins of various sizes, large bins standing on the floor and small ones hung from the wall, holding screws, wire, straw, bristles and other materials. A C-clamp attached to that workbench held an unfinished broomstick. Something fairly large sat in one corner, draped by a heavy sheet.

“Welcome to my workshop, Mr. Potter. May I call you Harry?” The man standing in the shadows had wild dark hair strewn with grey that tumbled down past his shoulders. He had a severe face with a regal nose and bold eyebrows that peaked like arches. He was wearing common working clothes, covered by a full-length leather apron.

“ ‘Harry’ would be fine. Steady on... I know your face...” Harry said.

The man smiled. “Perhaps you saw me at the Hogwarts Cup finals; I attend when I’m able. Interesting match last year, wasn’t it? I doubt it would have been as competitive had you been playing.”

Harry asked, “Obviously you know who I am. Who are you?”

The man gave Harry an exaggerated bow. “Devlin Whitehorn at your service, sir.”

Harry’s eyes grew wide. “Devlin... Devlin Whitehorn? *Nimbus-racing-broom* Devlin Whitehorn? Bloody hell! It’s a real pleasure, Mr. Whitehorn! Did Sirius have a broom made for

me? This is too much! My friend Ron would –” He stopped. *Ron would kill to be here*, he thought, *provided that I was somewhere else*.

Whitehorn arched one of his eyebrows even higher. “Slow down, Harry,” he said. “I can explain everything, but it’ll be easier if I simply show you.” He led Harry toward the corner of the room.

Under the sheet was a motorbike. It was big, mostly black and chrome except for the red fuel tank painted with a silver arc and the word “Triumph”.

Harry gasped. “I used to dream about a flying motorbike,” he said; “My uncle yelled at me for it. Did this belong to Sirius, then?”

“I created this for him when he was just eighteen,” Whitehorn said. “She’s a 1969 Triumph Bonneville... in a way. Muggles in the know consider this particular Bonnie to be a classic... more of an antique now, I suppose. A fellow by the name of Diggle – you know him, I imagine? – contacted me a few months past through a friend of a friend of an associate, that sort of thing, to ask if I could restore something I’d built a long time ago. I never dreamt it would be this. The letter from Black was quite a surprise. It was... it was good to hear from him.” He seemed wistful, Harry thought.

Harry ran his hand along the seat. The motorbike flickered for a moment, shrank slightly, and then returned to the way it was before. He quickly whipped his hand back.

“As I said, this is only a Bonnie in a way,” Whitehorn reminded him. “You’ve just stumbled across one trick. She can adjust to the size of the rider, to a point. The last fellow to ride her must have been terribly large. When I received her, she was at least twice the normal size; it was a terrible time settling her down, I can tell you.”

Harry asked, “May I sit...?”

Whitehorn smiled. “Go ahead, she *is* yours.”

Harry slipped one leg over the top of the seat and carefully sat down. The motorbike didn’t flicker this time. He reached forward and held the handlebars, leaning forward a little. There was a quiver and then the handlebars extended toward him until he could grasp them comfortably.

“She’ll adjust for your posture and positioning, just like a professional standard broom,” Whitehorn said, “but only a bit at a time. It wouldn’t do for a Muggle to see a motorbike lose a foot in length, now would it?”

Harry asked, “You can ride it on the road, then, as well as fly?”

“She appears to run like a normal bike,” Whitehorn replied. “You’re actually flying at a fixed height. She’ll even bank around a curve like she’s rolling on the tyres.”

Harry turned the handlebars from side to side very easily. He had expected more resistance.

Whitehorn said, “You don’t want just anyone to sit down and take off. We need to key her to you.” He took out his wand, and said, “*Abalienato*. ” The motorbike shimmered, and Harry started to get off.

“Stay on the seat,” Whitehorn commanded. “Take your wand, touch it to the handlebars, and say *possessio* , followed by your full name.”

Harry took out his wand, and said, “*Possessio Harry James Potter!* ” The shimmering stopped.

“She’s all yours, Harry,” said Whitehorn. “No one else can ride her, unless you permit it.”

“How do I give permission?” asked Harry.

“It’s all in the manual,” Whitehorn returned. “You’ll need to read it later, cover-to-cover. We’ll spend some time going over the basics, though. You’ll leave here able to manage a simple ride without being picked up by the Ministry – or worse, by the Muggle constabulary.”

Harry ran his hand along the fuel tank. *It feels powerful* , he thought. “There are rules about enchanting Muggle artefacts. Is this going to get me sent to Azkaban if someone finds out about it?”

Whitehorn smiled broadly. “No worries there. This is a broomstick.”

Harry looked at him like he’d gone quite barmy. “Erm... it’s a motorbike.”

“It’s a broomstick and it may be my greatest professional achievement, which I don’t say lightly,” Whitehorn insisted. “I had to convince a jinni to assist with the spell work; I don’t recommend that, by the way. If you want to see what you’re sitting on, hold the handlebars and say *Abscondo Triumph* .”

Harry said it, and the motorbike disappeared. He was seated on a long pole suspended atop two narrow sawhorses, each where a wheel had been. A clamp on the front sawhorse held a T-shaped assembly with wooden cylinders that rested in his hands where the handle grips had been.

Whitehorn pointed at various spots on the wood frame. “The original frame was all oak, but Black asked that I upgrade the performance. Thankfully I made two more of these over the last twenty years, so I had a number of ideas in mind. Now it’s a mix of oak, sunset maple and some ridiculously rare tropical hardwoods, all carefully crafted to look like scrap. It has a cushioning charm over the entire run of the seat and overlapping onto the frame, and a new braking charm of my own design. In essence, you’re riding a twin Nimbus racing broom. She’s fast – *very* fast – but do understand that she won’t handle quite like a broomstick; she’s much more massive and less aerodynamic, see? It’s a challenge to run her along the ground, but you’ve quick reflexes so it should come easily for you. There are wand cores in those cylinders so that you can control her movement without waving your wand about in public. It’s not like using your own wand, but you don’t need a lot of power to control the charms. Why don’t you bring her back? Say *Ostendo Triumph* .”

Harry said “*Ostendo triumph!*” and the motorbike reappeared in place of the wooden frame. “So how do I ride?” he asked.

“You get her to run like a Muggle motorbike by saying *Veho Triumph*. You say *Evolo Triumph* to fly. You control speed with the throttle – turn the handle grip, just like this – and you control the braking charm with the handbrakes. There’s a clutch but it’s only for show. You don’t need to shout at her, by the way – shouting a spell is for schoolboys. She’ll respond to a whisper. If you’re practiced enough, she’ll even take to silent casting.” Whitehorn shook his head. “Can you imagine the looks you’d get, shouting at a motorbike on the street?”

“Nothing like the looks I’d get flying over people’s heads,” Harry pointed out.

“Not a problem, Harry,” Whitehorn assured him. “Say *Occultus Triumph* – say it quietly, don’t shout it out.” The motorbike around Harry disappeared and he along with it.

“*Fateor Triumph* will bring you back,” Whitehorn added. “It’s good for about two hours at a time; wood doesn’t hold that particular charm as well as metal. If you use it for two full hours, give it two hours before you try again.”

Harry returned to view and asked, “If Muggles think this is a real motorbike, what are the chances it would get nicked sitting on the street?”

“Fairly high, I imagine,” admitted Whitehorn. “There are two ways to address that. The first is to lash it to something, like a Muggle would; I’ve set aside an Unbreakable Chain and Lock for you. The second is to carry her along.”

“Awfully big for that, eh?” Harry laughed. “I suppose I could use reducing and feather-light charms.”

“She’s already over-charmed for that,” Whitehorn said; “You don’t want to cast too many casual charms atop permanent charms, right? That goes for cleaning as well – you use a good wand polishing kit on her, right? For reducing, you stand off to one side, hold a handgrip, and say *Recondo Triumph* – just a whisper, mind you. To bring her back, set her on the ground, put your hand on top so you’re catching the handlebars, and say *Redintegro Triumph*. She’ll easily fit in your pocket when reduced.” Harry climbed off the seat and reduced the motorbike to an inch in length and the weight of a single Galleon.

Once the Bonnie was returned to full size, Harry and Whitehorn spent a good deal of time going over the basics of imitating a motorbike on the roads and motorways. Even balance had to be relearned to a small degree, but Harry was more than up for it.

When they were finished, Whitehorn produced two small leather bags from the workbench. A wide leather strap connected them to one another. “Here are the saddlebags,” he said. “You sling this strap over the seat, and tie these underneath. I’ve got your manual in there, and the chain and lock, and some lashings to hold bigger items to the back of the seat. Black asked for something else as well – in that envelope there.” Sirius’ scrawl was on the envelope; ‘*For an extra bit of*

freedom’, it said. Inside was a scrap of heavy parchment.

“What is it?” Harry asked.

Whitehorn said, “You’ll need it for riding on Muggle roads, among other things. It’s more or less the same principle as I used on the motorbike combined with some of the old Black magic, so to speak. Hold it and say, ‘Harry Potter requires a motorbike licence’.”

As soon as Harry finished saying the phrase, the parchment became an operator’s licence with a picture of Harry’s face at that moment, an address he didn’t recognise, and his birth date. “The year’s off,” he noticed.

Whitehorn grinned. “Exactly. A year or two earlier, I imagine? That makes you old enough to ride.”

Harry looked at the licence suspiciously. “You know I’m not old enough to have the motorbike, then? Why are you doing this? I’m terribly grateful of course, but...”

Whitehorn finished Harry’s thought for him. “...But you have good reason to be suspicious; any wizard with half a brain could figure that.” He conjured two simple wooden stools and they sat. Whitehorn’s face took on a tired, weathered expression. Harry knew it well – he saw it each time that an Order member spoke of the last War.

Whitehorn began, “Times were tough back in the 70s, Harry. I hope we’re not heading there again, but it’s edging that way. Anyway, I met Black when he was bunking with your father’s family –”

“Did you know my father?” Harry asked eagerly.

Whitehorn sighed. “Hard not to – he and Black were thick as brothers. I don’t know how your father ever found time to court your mother, really. I knew your grandfather better. Alexander was one of my original investors, you know?” he said. “They were good people, Harry, the both of them... and then there was Black.”

Whitehorn seemed to grin in spite of himself. “He was an original. I can’t imagine what all those years in Azkaban must have done to him, but in ’78 or ’79...” He closed his eyes and the grin turned into a smile. “Here comes this kid, ready to take on the universe, asking if I can help him find a flying motorbike. I ask him why, and he says to me – straight faced, mind you? – ‘You can only carry one bird at a time on a broomstick!’ What’s more, he meant it! If Sirius Black didn’t have a fit bird on each arm, then it was a bad night for him – a real hound, that one.

“Well, he didn’t have a cauldron to piss in at the time. His mother tossed him aside – not evil enough for her, according to Black. So he says to me, he says, ‘I’ll test anything you’ve got’, and he wasn’t taking the mickey either. I could hand him a ‘stick with completely untested charms and off he’d go, doing loops and side rolls at a hundred, hundred and ten. He came up with the Anti-Burglar Buzzer, too – said he got the idea from something called a ‘joyful buzzer’ as I

remember it. He'd ride the bloody 'sticks twelve hours a day and then he'd drag me to the clubs. Here I was, thirty-two, thirty-three years old, and this kid fresh from school is getting *me* dates.

"He picked up a few of my bad habits along the way, especially betting on Quidditch. That's how Black paid for the bike, see? I had more or less decided to let him off the hook for it – he was just too much fun, for a start – but when he let me have the Buzzer gratis, that cinched it for me. Still, he comes up with this scam, and tells me he plans to work it against the wanker that his cousin had just been married off to. There was no warning him off so I shrugged and sat back to watch. He works it for half the season, and eventually manoeuvres the wanker to back Wimbourne over Montrose in the finals; as it happens, the wanker's tight with Ludo Bagman. What the wanker doesn't know is that Black's worked a deal with the bookmaker – he was taking a percentage of the wanker's losses as a sort of finder's fee. At the end of the season, he hands me 25,000 Galleons –"

Harry started laughing.

"What?" Whitehorn asked.

"I know who the wanker was," Harry managed between snorts. "Lucius Malfoy... it had to be Lucius Malfoy."

Whitehorn paled a bit. "Black liked trouble," he admitted, "but sticking a Malfoy like that... well... it couldn't have happened to a nicer family, in truth. Anyway, I only kept 5,000 – the boy was dead broke, right? He goes off and invests the rest with some mad Muggles, and... things were turning, and I didn't see him much after that. You know the rest, I suspect?" Whitehorn stared off into space and his smile faded.

"You just told me more about Sirius in five minutes than his so-called friends managed in three years," Harry said sadly.

Whitehorn seemed to think about that for a while before he said, "It's easy to forget that there were good times despite everything that happened in those days. I lost my share of friends and family, as most wizards did. I should thank you for making me dig up some fine memories – damn fine ones."

They sat there for a while in the long shadows of the workshop, before Whitehorn went on, "You asked me why I did this. There are three reasons, I suppose. First, Black sent me an obscene amount of Muggle money, and I've found that a few pounds here and there can be dead useful. He wrote that it was the rest of my share from the wanker, thanks to those mad Muggles of his and years of accumulated interest. Second, I like a challenge. Even racing brooms become stale after a while. Third, the letter made it clear that she was for you. I reckon you'll make good use; with You-Know-Who back, maybe she'll get you out of a tight fix?"

"Did Sirius explain to you... you know, what really happened back then?" Harry asked gingerly.

Whitehorn said firmly, "There was nothing to explain. Sirius Black, a Death Eater? He would

have cursed himself to death before he would have harmed your father or mother. I never believed a word of that tripe. At any rate, it was obvious to anyone with eyes that the Ministry was lying constantly at the end.”

Harry shook Whitehorn’s hand. “Thank you so much. I mean, obviously it’s the best birthday present I’ve ever had. But, it was his, you know, and – well, that means a lot to me.” Whitehorn looked a little puzzled to Harry, and it dawned on Harry that the man might assume that he and Sirius had never actually met.

Whitehorn said, “Use it well. Get in a little carousing, too. I’m sure that’s what Black would have wanted.”

Harry hesitated. “Mr. Whitehorn?”

“Please, call me Devlin,” Whitehorn insisted.

Harry began, “Erm... Devlin, can I ask a huge favour? I don’t have any right, but...”

Whitehorn smiled. “Ask it,” he said.

Harry said, “I’d like to pick up two Nimbus 2001s, and I’d really appreciate it if you might sign one for me.”

Whitehorn frowned. “I don’t really keep them lying around, you know? There’s no company business transacted here. This is my private workshop and I do try to maintain what privacy I can, but I’m still besieged by special requests. That’s why I don’t go out much except for Quidditch matches, and it’s the reason I had you use a portkey.”

Harry cast his eyes down. “I understand, sir, believe me. I’m in the *Prophet* every other day. Right now I guess I’m saviour of the world, and last year I was a deranged menace. Everyone stares at my scar... I understand. I don’t want to intrude on your privacy.”

Whitehorn nodded, and then glanced around the room as though he were looking for intruders. “I suppose you would understand, wouldn’t you? You won’t tell anyone where we are, then?”

Harry brightened. “Not a soul, I swear it.”

“Good enough, then. Follow me,” Whitehorn said.

Harry reduced the Bonnie and placed it and the licence into one of the saddlebags, slung the wide strap over his shoulder, and followed Whitehorn to a narrow stairway. The stairway led to a winding hallway, then more stairs, a long corridor, and another set of stairs. Harry was fairly sure that they went down the same corridor twice, and he was absolutely certain he could never find Whitehorn’s workshop again if he tried. The last set of stairs ended in a storeroom, filled with shelves and racks full of brooms.

A young man was stocking the shelves. “Mr. Whitehorn, sir! This is a surprise! What can we do

for you today?”

“Hullo, Jackie,” Whitehorn said. “I need two of the racing specials for my friend here, and I’ll need a black Permaquill as well.”

The stock boy’s eyes ballooned. “You’re going to sign them, sir? I mean – that is – you *never* ...” He turned to Harry. “Quality Quidditch Supplies is at your service, sir.” He went to a locked cabinet and brought out two long and highly polished wooden boxes.

“Should I include the cases, sir?” he asked Whitehorn.

“Why not?” Whitehorn replied. “Now, Harry, who should I make this out to?”

The stock boy’s eyes widened in recognition. He spluttered, “Harry? You’re *Harry P-P-Potter* ?”

Harry forced a smile. “That’s right,” he said.

“It’s an honour, Mr. P-Potter. All that stuff in the *Prophet* last year... erm... I thought it was a load of dung. Sir.”

Harry shook the stock boy’s hand. “That’s nice of you to say,” he told him.

Whitehorn cleared his throat. “Who are the brooms for?” he asked.

“One is for me, and the signed one is for my friend Ron – Ron Weasley,” said Harry.

“Weasley... he’s your keeper, isn’t he? Say, wasn’t his brother your House’s seeker a few years back?” Whitehorn asked. “Seems to me that was the last time they took the Cup before you came along.”

Harry nodded. “Charlie’s smashing; he works with dragons in Romania now.”

Whitehorn started writing on the second broom.

Harry said, “Wha... I only asked you to sign one of them... I don’t want to impose.”

Whitehorn smiled. “Oh, I insist on it,” he said.

The stock boy said, “How will you be paying for these, Mr. Potter? I’ll have to enquire, but on Mr. Whitehorn’s word we can advance the price for you –”

Whitehorn cut him off. “On my account, Jackie.”

Harry blurted, “That’s not at all what I intended! Devlin, I can easily pay for these!”

Whitehorn shook Harry’s hand, and then the stock boy’s as well. “If you need to reach me, I’ll accept your owl. I hope Weasley enjoys it; it’s awfully quick for a Keeper, but I think he’ll

manage. Good luck to both of you with the Cup this year. *Oh* – happy birthday!” With that, he disappeared up the narrow stairs.

“I’ll just wrap these cases for you, Mr. Potter, and mark the wrapping so you can tell them apart,” Jackie the stock boy said.

“Racing specials... what are these, anyway? I’ve seen the 2001s,” Harry said.

“These are Nimbus 2100-Rs,” Jackie said as he tied together the cases.

“I’ve never heard of a 2100-R; I’ve never heard of a 2100 at all,” admitted Harry.

“Oh, you probably wouldn’t have,” said Jackie. “The R series is meant for challenge racing, but Aidan Lynch is riding one next season and word is that they’ll be going into regular production. Mr. Carruthers had me set one in the window just last week.” He fashioned a simple handle for the cases from a light rope. Harry thanked him and walked out into the store.

Sun was streaming into the windows looking out on Diagon Alley; the rain had broken at last. The street was crowded. A knot of young boys and girls peered into the window at the Firebolt and the Nimbus 2100-R on display; their parents hovered nearby. On his way out, he overheard their conversation about the merits of various brooms. They looked to be near the age of first-years, he thought, but he didn’t recognise any of them.

“My brother has a Nimbus 2000, and he says they’re almost as good as a Firebolt,” one girl insisted.

“I’ll never get to ride anything like those in my whole life,” a boy said dejectedly.

Harry leaned in. “You know, Gryffindor House is going to be riding international standard brooms from now on,” he said.

The dejected boy looked at Harry curiously and then saw his forehead. “Eep! You’re *him*!” he squeaked.

“Merlin! It’s Harry Potter!” one of the girls said. Suddenly he found himself bombarded with questions, and several parents moved closer. He was both surprised and pleased that nearly all the questions were about Hogwarts and Quidditch. He seated himself on the kerb and chatted away, paying no mind to the expanding crowd of onlookers.

The girl whose brother had a Nimbus 2000 pointed at the Firebolt and asked, “So what’s it *really* like riding one of these?”

Harry grinned mischievously. He untied his packages, unwrapped the package marked for him, and set the fine wooden case on the curb. “Is that what I think it is? But... but I thought you flew a Firebolt!” the girl asked.

“Just picked this up today,” Harry said. He pointed to the boy who had first identified him. “You,

what's your name?"

"Erm, Alastair, s-sir... Alastair Blitz," he stammered.

"Alastair, I need you to watch my things. Can you do that for me?" Harry asked.

"Yes, sir!" the boy said brightly.

Harry opened the case and stood. The sleek racing broom rose effortlessly into his hand. Alastair goggled, and tugged on Harry's sleeve. "Is that – is that signed, Mr. Potter? By Devlin Whitehorn himself?" he asked in a reverent whisper. Harry nodded. The rest of the knot of children and even some of the parents murmured excitedly.

Harry took off his cloak and draped it over his saddlebags. He wore new denims and one of his hand-me-down boxing singlets. "So, what's your name?" he asked the curious girl.

"I'm Laura Davies," she replied, fidgeting.

"Are you Roger Davies' sister?" Harry asked. She nodded nervously.

Harry said, "I know Roger. He's quite a good Chaser." The girl beamed.

A middle-aged witch who shared the girl's features stepped forward and shook Harry's hand. "Mr. Potter, I'm Mathilde Davies. My son speaks highly of you."

Harry was surprised – he hadn't particularly thought Roger Davies the type to speak highly of others. He smiled and said, "That's nice to hear, ma'am. I think Laura here fancies a ride."

Mrs. Davies' eyebrows rose, and she looked nervously up and down the alley. "Do you think that's wise?" she asked quietly.

Harry shrugged. "I'd think a brief flight up and down the alley would be safe enough," he said. Wondering about the source of Mrs. Davies' reaction, he added, "Together, of course! I imagine she's not prepared to ride a broom of this calibre on her own?" He wasn't sure, but he thought the girl was actually holding her breath.

"I assume you'll stay at a reasonable speed?" Mrs. Davies said.

"I'm not about to get her hurt," Harry replied. "Roger would kill me, I'm sure." Mrs. Davies smiled and her daughter took in a lungful of air.

Harry perched himself on the 2100-R and held out his hand. "Well, come on, then – it's you and me," he said. There was a chorus of 'No way!' and 'Wow!' from her companions. Laura Davies looked as if she would burst. She took Harry's hand and seated herself behind him.

"I'm just going to circle around once, right? Keep a tight hold," he told her. She wrapped her arms around his stomach and giggled. He was true to his word and took a single swoop up and

down Diagon Alley. He stayed at a relatively low speed but went through sufficient paces to sense the broom's capabilities. A genuine grin broke out on his face – it was even more responsive than the broom Sirius had given him.

“I’ve never gone so fast in my life – that was *amazing!*” she said breathlessly as Harry helped her down.

Harry beamed. “All right, who’s next?” he asked. *There had to be something good about fame*, he thought, *and perhaps I’ve found it*. He gave each of the children browsing at the window a turn after clearing it with their parents, before he returned the 2100-R to its case and wrapping. He tied the two packages back together again, shook hands with all the children and their parents, and donned his cloak. It was while he signed autographs for some of the children that he became aware of the dozens of people standing and watching him, many of whom politely applauded.

“Good form,” said Fred Weasley in Harry’s left ear. “Smashing flying, as usual.”

“I’d give it an E, I think,” added his brother George in Harry’s right ear. “It wasn’t fast enough for an O.”

Harry hadn’t heard them Apparate in. He smiled and shook hands with both twins. They were wearing jackets equal to the garish numbers from the day before. “What are you doing here?” he asked.

“We were watching your demonstration,” George told Harry.

“We do have a shop here, you know,” chimed in Fred. “Surely you remember it?”

George nodded. “If you failed your O.W.L.s, Harry, it’ll be the start of a promising future on our sales floor.”

“We couldn’t put our partner to work!” Fred objected.

Harry picked up the saddlebags and the cases.

“We were both surprised to see you out here alone, Harry,” Fred said.

“It’s hard to believe that our, erm, protective friends aren’t swarming on you,” George agreed.

“They would be swarming on you right now, actually, if it weren’t for the foresight of our new Lord and master,” said Fred.

“Too true, too true – all hail Mister Moony!” George declared.

“Unusual knapsack you’ve got there, Harry,” Fred said.

“Do you have two new brooms in hand, Harry?” George asked.

“Very conspicuous consumption, Harry,” chided Fred. “Perhaps you’d like to increase your stake in Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes?”

Harry was half-dizzy trying to keep up with Ron’s brothers. “Umbridge made off with my Firebolt last year, and I still don’t know where it is,” he said. “I picked up the other broom for Ron –”

“A peace offering?” asked Fred.

“It *was* rather tense last night,” George observed.

Harry said, “I’ll show you everything if I can set down my things somewhere.”

Fred said, “Allow us, partner,” and took the cases from Harry.

George added, “We’ve been looking for an excuse to get you to the shop,” as he took the saddlebags.

As they walked, Harry asked, “So what’s all this partner business about? I don’t want you to pay back the 1000 Galleons. You *do* understand that, right?”

“Absolutely,” said Fred.

George shook his head. “Wouldn’t dream of it.”

Fred said, “We’re just giving you ten percent. It’s not a big deal.”

“Had it all drawn up nice and legal-like. You can have your stake now, being that we’re all adults,” George told him. “That’s one of the items for our next Annual Meeting.”

“We have Annual Meetings?” asked Fred.

“Absolutely, brother. I must have mislaid your invitation – remember?” said George.

Fred feigned shock. “Oh – the Annual Meeting... right! Mislaid the invitation, eh? That’s a likely story,” he said.

George swatted at him and then announced, “Here we are, partner... so what do you think?”

Harry was silent for most of a minute before he managed, “It’s very... erm... visible.”

The storefront was painted iridescent green and it glittered with yellow and bluish highlights where the sun struck. A garish sign with the company logo - three stylised and interlocked Ws – hung above the door. Children and their parents mobbed the windows, and filled the store to near capacity. Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes made the Burrow seem calm by comparison – children randomly turned into canaries on one side of the store and projectile-vomited on the other side; parents stood clear either out of disdain or for the sake of safety. The store staff constantly called

out “*Scourgify!*” but seemed to have as much fun as the customers. Harry quickly noticed that the workers were all female, young and pretty. Fred and George were clearly in their element. Just that quickly, it started – heads began to turn.

“*Look, it’s Harry Potter!*”

“*I saw him down the street – he was giving broom rides! Can you believe it?*”

“*Let me see – where is he?*”

“*Are you sure it’s actually him?*”

“*Surely not – they must have hired a look-alike for the day.*”

The store had already been quite crowded, and Harry felt thoroughly mobbed. Fred and George cleared a path for him toward the counter at the rear of the store. George opened the storeroom door and quickly shuttled Harry’s things inside.

“*Oh ! Excuse me, Mr. Potter, I’m so sorry!*” One of Fred and George’s staff was shoved flat into Harry; her forehead bumped into his nose and the rest of her pressed firmly into him.

“It’s not your fault. Here, let me get you out of this,” he said jauntily. She was undeniably attractive and he didn’t really mind her being shoved against him. He hoisted the young woman by the waist until she was seated on the counter, and then hopped up on the countertop himself.

Fred hollered to Harry over the din, “What are you doing? Hurry and slip back here!”

Harry waved him off and said, “Fetch George, would you?”

He took out his wand, cast *Sonorus* , and turned to face the crowd in the store. As soon as he began looking at faces in the crowd, he started to get nervous. He cleared his throat and it echoed through the room.

“Uh, sorry for that,” he said. “Look, I want to welcome all of you to Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes. Fred and George – where are Fred and George? – *there* you are – erm, Fred and George Weasley here are very good friends of mine, and I’m pleased to be at their shop. I’ve used their fine products and I can tell you that you’ll get a real bang out of them. Actually, you *will* get a bang out of quite a few of them.”

Harry’s nerves settled a bit atop polite laughter. He kept going, “I can guarantee that at least a hundred things in this store will make the list of banned items at Hogwarts” – there was more laughter – “and any store that can accomplish that in less than one year is pretty amazing. Have fun and buy lots of things. Thank you for coming!” The store erupted in applause, and Harry quickly hopped down behind the counter.

“We’ll make it fifteen percent,” quipped Fred.

“Twenty percent, then,” added George,” and not a Knut more.” Both twins burst into laughter.

Fred said, “You were great up there. I didn’t know you could handle a crowd like that.”

Harry was shaking a bit. “I think I’m going to spew up,” he mumbled.

George laughed, “We’re well used to that around here.”

Customers rushed the counter.

“I’ll take six of these, please!”

“Are you sure this antidote works?”

“Do you think Harry Potter would sign my Skiving Snackbox?”

Harry settled in on the steps beside the counter and signed a score of Snackboxes and a magazine or two before he ran into the storeroom to hide. Fred and George joined him eventually.

“That was a very good week’s worth of transactions, all in half an hour!” exclaimed Fred.

“We can’t have you come by too often, Harry,” George said, fanning himself. “This old heart can’t take it!”

Harry shook his head. “I’ve had people all over me – Gringotts, then Quality Quidditch, and now here. I don’t understand it.”

“Scarcity heightens demand, Harry,” said George.

“Huh?” Harry had no idea what he was talking about.

“What my brother the pseudo-intellectual means is that you’re rarely seen,” explained Fred. “How long since you’ve been to Diagon Alley?”

Harry said, “Until yesterday, I hadn’t been here since the summer before my third year.”

“Precisely, my famous friend,” George said. “It’s a matter of pent-up demand. Everyone wants to see you; it doesn’t matter whether they think you a hero or a nutter.”

“I’m inclined to the latter, of course,” Fred chimed in.

George said, “I’m more interested in this spanking good knapsack of yours. Where did you find this?”

“It’s part of a birthday present that Sirius left me,” said Harry.

“Goodness, it *is* your birthday today!” Fred shouted, clapping Harry on the back.

“Let me fetch some butterbeer to celebrate,” George said. “Something to eat, Harry?”

“Eat here? You must be joking!” Harry said.

“Aw, ickle Harrykins doesn’t trust the bad old pranksters,” mocked George.

“How are you supposed to carry that knapsack?” asked Fred. “It’s a bit awkward without a handle.”

Harry said, “It’s not a knapsack; they’re saddlebags.” He decided that there was enough room in the empty centre of the storeroom, and took the tiny motorbike out of the bag. He set it as close to dead centre as he could guess, set his hand over it, and whispered ‘*Redintegro Triumph*’.

“Merlin!” Fred shrieked.

“Oh, the fun we could have with that...” said George, and a goofy grin spread across his face.

Fred said, “I see endless possibilities for mayhem,” and rubbed his hands together in anticipation.

“Down, boys,” warned Harry.

“Where did Sirius come up with this?” asked George.

Harry told him, “Devlin Whitehorn made it for him. Sirius arranged for Whitehorn to refurbish it for me. It’s actually sort of a big broomstick under there.”

“Devlin Whitehorn?” Fred confirmed.

“*The* Devlin Whitehorn?” George asked.

“Put his own hands on the most incredible thing that I think I’ve ever seen?” Fred wondered.

“Just for you?” gasped George.

Harry tossed out, “Oh yeah, he signed the brooms for me, too,” as if it were insignificant, knowing full well what he was doing to the twins.

Fred and George looked first at each other with bugging eyes, then at Harry, and then at the wrapped brooms. They lunged for the packages and each tore one open.

Fred held up one of the brooms. “Ron’s going to wet himself! I’ve never seen anything like this – do you think it’s an original? Cor! Look at this, George! *To Ron: Hope you win back-to-back Quidditch Cups.* He’s signed and dated it, right here!”

George started cackling. He handed the other broom to Fred and choked for air.

Harry asked, “What’s so funny?”

Fred snorted, “You haven’t looked it over?”

“No, I haven’t,” said Harry.

Fred burst out laughing and Harry snatched back his 2100-R. In bold handwriting, in one line along the length of the broomstick, Whitehorn had written:

Dear Harry: Please break this broom over You-Know-Who’s arse. I’ll gladly give you a new one. Best wishes and happy Seeking, Devlin Whitehorn

Harry sputtered, “I hope Madam Hooch doesn’t have a problem with ‘arse’ written on my broom,” and then collapsed in laughter.

When they had all settled, Harry asked, “You think Ron will go for it, then?”

“The broom? If he doesn’t, I’ll break it over *his* arse,” Fred said.

George shrugged. “He’s always had a problem with jealousy. Like I said yesterday, it’s the natural outcome of a life of hand-me-downs and put-downs.” *No it’s not*, thought Harry, *and I should know*.

Fred smirked, “Of course, when you mix in the opposite sex – well, it’s a potion for disaster.”

“What are you talking about?” Harry asked.

Fred frowned. “You’re joking, right? George, I think young Harry’s trying to pull a prank on *us* .”

George said, “He knows better than that. I think perhaps the lad’s simply naïve. Shall we educate him?”

Fred nodded. “He’s either naïve or blind. Harry, in case you truly didn’t notice last night, our hapless brother thinks he’s in love with Hermione. However, he’s too big a git to get out of his own way. He also suffers from denial and self-doubt. It’s sad, really.”

“Quite sad,” George agreed. “We tried to help him with his misery last year but he was too stubborn to listen to us.”

“He’s in... *oh* . Erm... I see.” Harry collected himself, and added, “I mean they’ve always circled around one another, but he never actually said anything to me.”

George watched Harry as if he was the first test of a new product; he slowly broke out into a wicked smile. “Oi, Fred, we have a problem.”

Fred gave Harry the same inspection. “Most definitely a problem, George; this is too good! ‘My best friend loves my best friend and so do I’... sounds like something right from one of Mum’s trashy romance novels, doesn’t it?”

Harry stared at the twins coldly. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

George said, “This explains the circus at Gringotts last night, eh?”

Fred gave Harry a mock disapproving look. “Harry, let me break it to you. Ron and Mum will never be truly happy unless Hermione hooks up with Ron and you hook up with Ginny. That way, Mum gets the son she’d prefer over Ron, and Ron gets the girl *and* his best mate as a brother-in-law. Don’t pretend that you couldn’t see it!”

George shook his head. “You’re forgetting the spanner in the works, dear brother.”

Fred nodded. “Ah yes, that. Hermione doesn’t love Ron. Well, not like *that*, anyway.”

Harry’s mouth dropped open.

Fred chuckled. “I’ll close that for you if you like, Harry. We have it on very good authority – Ginny told us.”

“Well, she didn’t exactly *want* to tell us, but we’re rather persuasive when we want dirt on our siblings,” added George.

Fred’s eyes narrowed and bore in on Harry. “Of course, I think dear Ginny might have held out on us if we’d asked her this morning. What do you think, George?”

“This morning, Ginny was a cauldron gone horribly wrong,” George observed flatly.

Fred searched Harry’s face for a response. “I was thinking you might have something to say about that?” he said.

Harry answered quickly, “I feel badly for her. I know she was embarrassed, but she panicked – she didn’t need to blurt out everything in her head!”

“What do you intend to do about it?” George asked calmly.

Harry was becoming apprehensive about the twins’ demeanour. “I was considering leaving the country?” he offered, hoping to lighten the mood.

“That’s a start,” George said. He remained expressionless, and Harry squirmed until Fred started to make faces.

Finally Fred said, “If you hurt her, we’ll use you as our personal guinea pig for the next year. Still, old boy, we do see that you’re in an awkward pinch.”

“You’re allowed some latitude, Harry. She can be terribly dramatic,” George told him.

“She’s a fourteen year old girl, George – of course she’s dramatic!” Fred spluttered.

“Just be nice to her,” George demanded.

“But not *too* nice,” Fred added.

“No, definitely not too nice. That would be a sure path to product testing,” George said.

“So I’m more or less doomed,” Harry observed.

Fred nodded. “Until she decides to move on, yes. I don’t want to think about Ginny in love – it makes my stomach turn. I’d rather talk about the dirt that we wheedled from her.”

“I agree. We certainly thought it was good news,” said George.

“Hermione’s completely wrong for Ron,” Fred said flatly.

“Totally mismatched,” agreed George.

“Nothing in common,” Fred said.

George continued, “She’s too smart for him – she’d be bored with him in a month.”

Fred snorted, “She has to be dragged onto a broom, for Merlin’s sake!”

“Besides, we have plans for our little brother,” George cackled. “How can we sit idly by, when so many others have lust in their hearts for him?”

“Do you mean Lavender Brown?” Fred asked.

“She’s about Ronnie’s speed,” said George.

“What speed is that – idle? Say, what about Parvati Patil?” Fred wondered.

“The Patils still hate him from the Yule Ball,” George sighed.

“That’s quite a grudge, isn’t it? You don’t suppose Katie...?” Fred said.

George frowned. “Not bloody likely,” he grumbled.

“Who’s that Ravenclaw with the... you know... and the... oh, come on, brother, you certainly know...?” Fred asked; he scratched his head in frustration.

George pursed his lips for a moment, and then offered, “Isn’t it something like broccoli?”

“Bleagh!” Fred groaned. “If you’re going to use food to remember names, pick something less

likely to make me spew... hold on there... Brock... Brocklehurst, that's it!"

Harry's brows furrowed. "Mandy Brocklehurst? What about her?"

"Oh, for Merlin's sake, Harry! She has those... and that... and to walk behind her on the stairs..." Fred stopped and took a deep breath. "Delectable, positively delectable. Too smart for Ronnie, though."

"True, true – she'd stir up the same feelings of inadequacy as Hermione does," George said.

"I'm taking away the Wireless, brother," Fred said with a smirk. "You've been listening to Auntie Agony again, haven't you? 'Feelings of inadequacy'... next thing, you'll be buying skirts and lip gloss!"

"You're mad, the both of you," Harry huffed.

"Er... I have to ask a delicate question... you *do* like girls, right?" George asked.

"Of course I like girls!" snapped Harry.

"You know, there's someone else who's been crushing on Ronniekins? We could set Loony Lovegood on him –" Fred started.

"Don't call her 'Loony'. Luna deserves better than that from you two; she deserves better from everyone. Her own house treats her badly enough – don't you start to trifle with her," Harry warned both twins.

Fred and George exchanged surprised glances. "Goodness, Harry," Fred said.

"There are so many layers, aren't there, Fred?" asked George.

"Layers upon layers, George," agreed Fred. "Harry is complicated; he's nothing at all like our dear confused little brother."

"Enough!" Harry shouted. The twins laughed at him; Fred tried to ruffle his hair.

"So when do we get to ride it?" asked George, ogling the motorbike.

"*Ride* it? I want to know when we *disassemble* it," said Fred hungrily.

Harry stood up, reduced the motorbike, and put it back in his saddlebag. "You guys are too much," he said. The twins helped repack the 2100-Rs, lashed the cases back together with the handle, and handed them off. Harry reduced them and they joined the bike and another package that the twins gave him.

Lupin was waiting inside the shop; Harry couldn't tell for certain if he was amused or stunned by the spectacle around him. "I see they found you," he called out.

Harry couldn't help but grin. "The bike – it's brilliant!" he said.

Lupin broke into a smile and said, "I'm sure Sirius is very pleased just now."

Harry bade the twins goodbye and walked with Lupin to the Leaky Cauldron. Just short of the front door, Lupin said, "We've a quick errand to run. I had thought that taking the Underground would be for the best, but no one would ever expect... would it be all right if I were to ride pillion?"

"Pillion?" Harry asked.

"Behind you, Harry – would it be all right if I rode behind you on the bike?" explained Lupin.

"Er... are you certain about that?" said Harry nervously. "I was just shown how –"

Lupin waved him off. "If you can fly a Firebolt, you can manage this old thing," he said. Harry took a deep breath and stepped out onto the sidewalk. He stood just inside the anti-Muggle ward and enlarged the bike

Lupin stood stock still for a few moments at the sight of it. "I never expected to see the Bonnie again, you know?" he said quietly.

"If we're going to do this..." said Harry. Lupin summoned two discarded tins from the kerb and transfigured them into fair equivalents of helmets. He prodded Harry to don one of them and strapped the other to his own head. Harry nudged the bike out onto the sidewalk and pushed it by the handlebars onto the street. He tied the saddlebags in place, his cloak and shrunken gifts set inside. He and Lupin clambered on and then they were off into the traffic.

Whitehorn had been right; the motorbike didn't handle like a broom, especially when it was pretending to roll along the roadway. Harry enjoyed the way that the false engine noise escalated with the throttle, and had to admit that the loud rumble heightened the experience of riding. He also found the brakes a bit sensitive. They rode slowly and very carefully. Harry was content to draw horns and gestures rather than a traffic violation; he didn't care to test his licence. No one seemed to suspect that they were riding anything other than a motorbike. In fact, they drew a few admiring waves.

Lupin directed them to Grimmauld Place. It was early afternoon by the time that Harry saw Number 12 appear before him. As soon as his helmet was off, he asked, "Why are we here?"

"We need to take possession of the house now that the will has been read. Professor Flitwick has agreed to cast a new *Fidelius* tomorrow," Lupin said. "After that, we'll move here for a few days to sort things out... if you're up for it, of course. I realise that what you do is your own business, but if you can remain safe –"

Harry shrugged. "Everything's made sense so far. I can speak up for myself."

Entering the house proved rather simple. Harry held the Black signet ring against a rune adjacent

to the front door and tapped a second rune with his wand. There was a flash of light and a tingle in his fingers. Lupin cast against the same runes, with the seal of a parchment replacing the ring. The door opened of its own accord.

The entry wasn't as gloomy as the first time Harry had entered 12 Grimmauld Place, nor was it as tidy as when Mrs. Weasley had been running the household. There was no sign of new infestations, and the results of a few cautiously cast dark detection spells met Lupin's expectations.

Harry made his way to the kitchen and unloaded his saddlebags onto the tabletop. Lupin looked at the broom cases with interest. "I picked up two brooms from Devlin Whitehorn – still can't believe I actually met him," Harry said. "Can you believe he autographed them? There's one for me and one for Ron."

Lupin gave him a half-smile. "Impressive. Planning to try and make up, eh? Good man."

"I hope so. I might give Ron this, too," Harry said, nodding toward a square gold box. "It's a birthday assortment from Fred and George. I'm a bit afraid to open it."

"You might want to wait until you've settled things with Ron, then. A gift from the twins might offset the broom," Lupin observed. "By the way, would you please pick up an actual helmet to wear when riding the bike? Sirius dumped it a time or two. He learned the value of helmets the hard way. I'll ask that you consider having two helmets, in case you're planning on anyone riding pillion."

"The way Whitehorn tells it, Sirius needed three helmets," Harry said.

Lupin blushed. "That was sometimes the case, yes," he admitted. "I suppose Whitehorn would know. Sirius was close to him when he was working for Nimbus. I see he modified the bike a fair bit. It couldn't be reduced in size before; that surely would have gotten Sirius out of a fix or two."

Harry clenched and unclenched his fists and returned to the entry hall. "I wouldn't know anything about that," he said in a forced whisper. "Whitehorn had quite a lot to say about Sirius, actually. He said more than anyone else has ever bothered to tell me." He stormed up the stairs and toward the drawing room.

"I haven't shared a lot with you, have I, Harry? I haven't given you very much at all," Lupin said as he followed Harry, casting dark detection spells all the while.

Harry turned on Lupin. "No, you haven't," he snapped. "Wait, let me take that back: I do owe you my Patronus. I'm sure Dumbledore was thrilled about that. Everyone's all too willing to take an interest in my skills, aren't they? I'll give Hagrid due credit; at least he gave me the picture album. Even Sirius – I can't believe he worked for Nimbus and never told me. He found the time to tell Ginny about music. He loved books, and I guess he shared that with Hermione. He even knew Ron was obsessed with the Cannons. He waits until he's dead and gone, and then... and then drops all of this on me, and I –" *I will not cry*, he insisted to himself, *I won't give anyone the*

satisfaction .

“Harry, no one really knows what to say to you. No one ever has,” Lupin said sadly.

“You could have said *that* ,” Harry growled.

“I told you that I’d make a poor father figure,” Lupin said, “and I don’t expect to improve much on that score. Nevertheless, I intend to be here for you if you’ll allow me.”

Harry ignored him. The drawing room was nearly empty, he realised. The cabinets were bare and there was a discoloured area on the wall where the Black family tapestry had hung.

“Harry, please talk to me,” Lupin asked calmly.

“Why are you doing all of this, Remus? Is this out of guilt?” Harry demanded.

“No, but in part it is a matter of obligation. Obligation is one of the few noble options left to us,” said Lupin. “Guilt is a waste of one’s energy. I have an obligation – to you, to Sirius, and to your parents. That’s why I’m here, despite your bitterness and mood swings and endless cheek.”

“I have good reason to be bitter – you’re well aware of that,” Harry spat.

Lupin let out a low growl, set his jaw, and thundered, “Do you think you have a monopoly on loss? *Don’t flatter yourself!* ”

Harry wasn’t sure what he’d set off, but he began to apologise, “I didn’t mean to –”

“I’ll be thirty-eight years old this fall, Harry,” Lupin snarled, “and I’m completely alone. My so-called family won’t have me. My friends are all dead. I found love once – surprised, Harry? – and the Death Eaters took that away from me as well. Do you know why no one around you talks about the past? *No*

one cares to remember it! Nearly everyone from the old Order is swimming in loss, but you’re too self-absorbed to notice!”

Harry felt the telltale catch in his throat and dabbed at his eyes. He was determined to hold it together in front of Lupin and chose to say nothing.

Lupin picked up on Harry’s distress. “Your life has been tragic, Harry, by any measure,” he said, now closer to his usual demeanour. “I don’t dispute that – nor does anyone who genuinely knows your history – but I’m weary of watching you push away everyone who can help you. You’re choosing to push away your life. Can’t you see that?”

“People who get close to me die. I need to push them away,” Harry insisted.

Lupin said, “You need to give the people close to you a choice in the matter. Sirius and your father took an enormous risk when they befriended me. I was terribly worried, but they made

their choices and stuck by them.”

“Dumbledore doesn’t offer choices, at least where I’m concerned,” Harry countered.

Lupin frowned. “I don’t share all of Sirius’ anger on that count but I do share his concern. Dumbledore hasn’t been forthcoming with you and that has been a mistake.”

Harry seethed, “I’m fed up with the lies. Dumbledore and Snape must have let Sirius rot in Azkaban, as far as I can tell. Dumbledore told me that Snape was the eavesdropper who heard the prophecy, and that Snape was there when my parents were killed. How could he not know about Wormtail? If Snape knew, then so did Dumbledore.”

Lupin slowly turned red. “Would you repeat that, please?” he eventually asked in a low and dangerous voice.

“Snape was there when my parents were killed. He had to know about Wormtail, he *had* to,” Harry told Lupin, “which means that he let Sirius rot, and that Dumbledore let it happen.”

“There has to be an explanation... he couldn’t... no matter how much bad blood... I can’t comprehend... there has to be... *Snape!*” Lupin spluttered, clenching and unclenching his fists.

“Dumbledore said he would find me tonight,” Harry added. “I’m not letting this go.”

“You will tell me exactly how he explains himself,” Lupin ordered through clenched teeth. “You will spare me no details. Is that clear, Harry? I want to know *everything*. If Snape was responsible for Sirius being stuck in Azkaban –”

Harry was taken aback by the hatred burning in Lupin’s eyes. “I’ll let you know, I promise,” he agreed. Just then there was a loud squeal, followed by a *BOOM!* and a symphony of popping and crackling. Harry began to dash through the doorway but Lupin seized him by the shoulder. They crept, wands drawn, to the edge of the stairs, then to the entry, and finally to the kitchen.

Dobby was crouched beside the table, his head covered by his arms. Winky madly clutched at him. The gold box from Fred and George had burst open, and its contents jetted into the room. Twirling colours exploded into bright letters that spelled out ‘*Happy Birthday to our Partner*’, ‘*Welcome to the Family, Future Brother-In-Law*’, ‘*Harry Loves Devlin Whitehorn*’, ‘*Happy Birthday, Publicity Hound*’ and a half dozen much cruder references. A letter on cream parchment popped out, inviting Harry to an Annual Meeting of Weasley’s Wizarding Wheezes investors, to be held that evening at their Diagon Alley shop.

It took Harry and Lupin five minutes to quell the explosions, and another half hour to calm Dobby and Winky. Dobby explained that he knew Harry was in a place that needed to be cleaned, so he and Winky had come to do their duty as Harry’s servants. Lupin was amused by Harry’s attempt at arguing with the house-elves over their status. Immediately they set forth. Within a half hour, the ratty carpeting had been removed to reveal clean but unpolished wooden floors; the remnants of wallpaper had been removed and the walls scrubbed to nearly white; the house-elf heads were

banished; and most of the serpent-styled items – door knocker, candelabras and so forth – were nowhere to be seen. Harry and Lupin swept the house for any undiscovered dark items. Kreacher was nowhere to be found; when they made their way back to the kitchen, the deranged house-elf's lair was clean and empty.

"Pumpkin juice and light snacks are prepared for the sirs," Dobby said with a polite bow. Just as at the Lion's Den, a pitcher of juice, two glasses and two plates of small sandwiches and cookies were arranged on the table.

"I hope this is to your liking, Master Harry sir," Winky said.

Harry smiled. "Very much so, Winky. Welcome to Grimmauld Place, I suppose." He thought for a moment, and added, "May I ask something of the both of you?"

"Harry Potter may ask of Winky anything he requires," she said. Dobby nodded his agreement furiously.

"The house is very clean now – thank you, by the way – but didn't Kreacher get in your way? Have you seen him at all?" asked Harry.

Winky hissed and showed a glimpse of pointed and sharp-looking teeth that startled Harry. "Kreacher was a bad elf, Master Harry, sir. A terrible elf – *evil*. Kreacher led his master to death. *Abomination!*"

Harry agreed with her – even Kreacher's name raised anger inside of him. Despite that, he asked, "Where is he, then?"

Lupin sat straighter. "Kreacher hasn't managed to leave, has he?" he asked with not a little concern.

Winky's smile completely bared the sharp teeth; she positively dripped malice. "Kreacher is not free. He will not betray the house of Master Harry, sir. He will not betray Master Harry, sir, or friend-of-the-house Mister Lupin." Her eyes narrowed and she added, "Kreacher has earned his reward."

"Dobby and Winky will protect Harry Potter, sir, and his secrets," Dobby added fiercely.

Lupin put his hand on Harry's arm. "No need to press, I think," he said.

Harry looked Winky straight in the eyes, which made the house-elf take a step back. "Thank you for saving me the trouble of dealing with him myself," he said. Winky gave a nervous curtsy; Dobby bowed but crossed his arms in what seemed to be grim satisfaction. Lupin hesitantly took a cookie. Harry nursed his juice and considered how little he actually knew about house-elves.

Lupin encouraged Harry to attend the twins' Annual Meeting throughout the afternoon; he finally confessed that he would be there as well, and that he was uncomfortable with Fred and George's near-worship of him.

Harry decided to ride the Bonnie back to Diagon Alley. Lupin begged off, saying that he needed to check in with Tonks and would meet Harry at the shop. Dobby and Winky twitched at any mentions of Fred and George, and Harry spent his journey across London grumbling to himself about the twins' explosive birthday gift.

Harry Potter and the Years of Rebellion

A Less-Than-Shining Party

Chapter Seven

A LESS-THAN-SHINING PARTY

Harry knew little about actual motorbikes. It was obvious that helmets were required; Lupin had clearly been giving more than just advice. He had no idea where to purchase an actual helmet, so he pulled discreetly into a secluded alleyway not far from Grimmauld Place and transfigured an empty milk jug from an open bin into something that passed for a helmet without a shield. He wasn't sure how long the faux helmet would hold up, so he quickly returned to the roadway.

He quickly discovered that auto drivers weren't merely intolerant of his riding, but of motorbikes in general. A frustrated young driver raced past, cut him off, and then shouted out his open window, "Get over and milk it, scooter scum!"

Harry struggled with the explosion of road signs, and a copy of the Highway Code quickly joined a proper helmet on Harry's mental list of purchases to be made. He decided that the Bonneville's clock didn't work; the number of miles seemed to change randomly, and the indicated speed fluctuated wildly.

A few minutes into the ride, he was nearly found out. Two other motorcyclists pulled alongside at a signalled intersection and gaped at him. One rider managed to splutter, "Bloody amazing balance," before the signal changed. He watched carefully from behind at the next signal, and remembered that he should place at least one foot on the ground when the Bonneville was stopped.

Harry eventually came to a motorway, which was at once better and worse than the urban streets and carriageways. He could make better time and there was less manoeuvring required, but every time an 18-wheeled juggernaut would whip past, the Bonneville vibrated and its shudders shot up his spine. By the time he reached the centre of London, he was tired and cold. He'd worn his new aviator jacket, a shirt and denims, but the wind still tore through him.

He walked briskly through the Leaky Cauldron, so that no one had the chance to acknowledge him. After an impatient passage through the new security gate, he made his way down the Alley

to Number 93. One of the Weasleys – Harry was fairly certain it was Fred – opened the door.

“Come in before someone thinks we’ve reopened,” the twin said briskly.

George emerged from the back room; he was clutching a towel half-covered in thick black goo. “You don’t want to know,” he said to Harry with a grin.

“Lupin should be here soon,” Fred said. “I see you have those amazing leather bags with you, Harry.”

“That means you’re carrying the amazing motorbike, Harry,” George chimed in.

“And that means we’ll have the chance to give it a thorough look-over,” Fred said.

“No disassembling, of course!” said George.

Fred shook his head instantly. “Perish the thought, brother – didn’t mean a word of it this morning.”

“I hope so, brother,” George said, “because I’d rather not have our partner hex us from here to Hogsmeade.”

“Ixnay on the Ogsmeade-Hay, Eorge-Gay...” Fred muttered.

“Eorge-Gay? How dare you address me by that foul name, Sir Knave? I will have satisfaction!” George howled. The twins launched into a loud and mostly harmless duel that Harry watched from the relative safety of the counter. A tap at the door interrupted them. Fred rushed across the sales floor; George strolled behind him.

As soon as Lupin entered, Fred bowed deeply. “Welcome to our humble establishment, Your Grace!” he proclaimed.

George dropped to the floor and groveled at Lupin’s feet. “We live to serve you, liege lord!” he said.

“Yes, yes... well... are you the court fools, then?” Lupin returned.

Fred dropped to his knees and begged, “We would hope to be your humble apprentices, Lord Moony... please? Pretty please? Pretty please with potion on it?”

“Merlin help me,” Lupin said under his breath.

“Alas, brother, we have our Annual Meeting to attend – remember?” said George.

Fred sprang to his feet. “Of course, of course... to business, as our bankers say. That is, if you’re ready to proceed, Your Eminence?”

“Are you planning to do this for the entire evening?” Lupin sighed.

“Absobloodylutely!” George said eagerly.

Lupin’s face fell into his hands. “Let’s just get on with this, please?” he pleaded.

“It’s just the four of us, then?” Harry asked.

“Certainly not!” Fred gasped.

“We have to think of our future investors,” explained George. “It wouldn’t be fair to expect you to fund all of our expansion.”

“Expansion? You’ve just opened,” Harry said suspiciously.

Fred rolled his eyes. “You’re missing the bigger view, Harry. Think of the world out there, just waiting for proper pranksters to seize it by the –”

“Goodness, look at the time,” Lupin cut him off. “Obviously the meeting’s not going to be held here, gentlemen, so what comes next?”

George held up the goo-stained towel. “Portkey,” he said.

“I’m not touching that,” Harry said flatly.

“It’s not as if I planned it this way,” protested George. “I should have set it aside first, but... look, I’ll even let you and Lupin have the clean end.”

“Oi, where do you expect me to hold it?” Fred shrieked.

George ignored him. “Do you trust us, Harry?”

Harry crossed his arms and said, “I trust that when you kill me, you won’t mean to do it.”

“Point,” said Fred. “Do you trust that we aren’t going to give you over to Lord Voldemuffin, at least?” Lupin burst into choking laughter.

“Or to Minister Fudge and his bloody hench-hag?” George added.

Fred looked as if he’d swallowed a lemon whole. “Minister... more like Right Honourable Arsemonger, if you ask me,” he grumbled.

“That’s... rather harsh...” Lupin said between coughs.

“You’ve not filed to open a shop on Diagon Alley before, have you?” George said with disgust.

“So shall we take this portkey, or not?” Fred asked.

“If I die tonight, I’ll haunt you both,” said Harry.

“That’s the spirit!” Fred cheered as four hands took hold of the towel.

The spinning stopped, and Harry found himself sprawled on the floor of an empty entryway. The walls were rough-hewn wood but had been freshly whitewashed. The ceiling was dark and low, and the beams were exposed. Stairs led upward from the end of the hall. Instead of a door behind him, there was a hatch in the floor. There were two window frames, but they were boarded shut. Everything had a freshly repaired feel to it, he thought; there was an odd sense of anticipation in the air, as well. He had no idea where he was and he didn’t like that at all.

“Up we go, then,” said Fred. Harry followed the twins and Lupin to the stairs. He put his wand at the ready as they climbed, ready to dispel prank hexes.

George turned the corner first, and Fred held Harry back. Harry heard George say loudly, “I call this first Annual Meeting of Weasley’s Wizarding Wheezes into session! The first item of business is to announce the appointment of our former professor Remus Lupin as the company’s Chairman and Prankster Emeritus. All those in favour signify by saying ‘aye’!” Harry was startled by the thunderous cry of ‘aye’ from above; he wondered if the twins were taking the mickey out of him, or if there were actually dozens of people in the next room.

“Chairman Lupin, would you please take the gavel?” George called out.

Lupin grinned and disappeared into the room above. Harry heard him clear his throat and he began, “Thank you for that vote of confidence, I think.” He heard a number of snickers and could almost make out some voices.

“Moving to the second item of business,” Lupin went on, “the Directors of Weasley’s Wizarding Wheezes, His... are you certain about this?”

“Stick to the parchment,” George said.

Lupin resumed, “The Directors of Weasley’s Wizarding Wheezes – His Infernal Prankness, Alfred the First, and His Eternal Explosiveness, George the Last – wish to acknowledge their first and most important investor –”

“Without whom none of us would be here –” George cut in.

“I shan’t read this aloud, boys,” Lupin groaned.

George let out a lengthy sigh. Harry heard the crinkling of parchment and the clearing of George’s throat, who then intoned, “Our investor needs no introduction, which is why he’s getting one. He is a Snitch-grabbing, dragon-slaying, maiden-rescuing school champion. He’s a smashing teacher and he’s too generous for his own good. He gave us our start. Ladies, gentlemen, scoundrels and other sorts, I give you a man who will save you even if you don’t deserve it; a two-time winner of Teen Witch Weekly’s ‘Most Shaggable’ Award –”

“GEORGE FABIAN WEASLEY! There is no such thing! I expect an apology to Harry this instant!” Mrs. Weasley shrieked, which ended the twins’ attempt at a surprise.

“Er... Harry Potter, everyone...” squeaked George. Fred nudged Harry around the corner so firmly that he nearly stumbled.

Harry found himself faced by Mr. and Mrs. Weasley and all their children save Percy, Hermione and her parents, the Tonkses, most of Dumbledore’s Army, several Order members and a number of Hogwarts faculty waiting for them. At the sight of him, they all shouted, “HAPPY BIRTHDAY!!”

Mrs. Weasley came to him after an earnest round of hugs and handshakes. She stood with her hands on her hips. “Harry Potter,” she said, “I understand that you were left that – that – thing, and have been riding it around London with no escort and no advance warning whatever –”

Harry wrapped her in the sort of hug that grown children reserve for their parents. “I don’t want you to be angry at me,” he said.

Mrs. Weasley shifted from indignance to indulgence. “Harry, I’m not angry with you. I haven’t been angry with you at all,” she insisted; “It’s simply too much to take in, all of it.”

Ron stood back a few steps, with a smile fixed on his face that Harry knew was forced. “Happy birthday,” he said. “So what’s this about a thing?”

Harry couldn’t resist the opportunity. “Talking about my thing, are we?” he asked, but couldn’t get through it without a snort.

Mrs. Weasley rolled her eyes in long-suffering fashion. “I need to see what sort of havoc Fred and George have planned,” she said, and disappeared into the crowd of well-wishers.

“They said this thing was wicked, whatever it is,” said Ron. “Let’s see it, then?”

“We’ll need a bit of room,” Harry said. He led Ron to the side of the room, set down his saddlebags, palmed the motorbike and whispered the charm. The sight of the Bonnie drew a collective gasp from most of the people present.

Ron’s eyes went wide. He clutched at his right forearm with his left hand. “Get that away from me,” he said flatly.

“Ron, what is it? Are you all right?” Harry asked.

“Get it away, I said!” Ron shouted.

Fred and George quickly flanked him. “Where’s the fire, Ron?” Fred asked.

“What’s the problem?” George chimed in. Ron covered his eyes with his hands and wailed.

Harry quickly reduced the motorbike and thrust it back into one of the bags. “It’s put away,” he promised; “It’s gone now.”

Ron was ghastly pale and his hands shook, but he still managed to brush away his mother. George guided him to the stairs, where Madam Pomfrey – one of the many faces Harry hadn’t expected to see – descended upon him.

Harry looked to Mrs. Weasley for an indication. “Should I go after him? I don’t know what to do,” he admitted.

“I hope you’ll follow after him, Harry. Perhaps you might get through to him somehow? It’s been a very long summer,” said Mrs. Weasley.

Harry slipped the shrunken case for Ron’s broom from the saddlebags and handed the bags to Fred – with a quick admonishment to leave the motorbike alone – then headed for the stairs through the tight gathering. He made quick greetings but made it obvious that he was moving on. Ginny appeared beside him and politely fended people off.

George stood outside a closed door one flight up. “He shook off Pomfrey and won’t tell me a thing,” he sighed.

Ginny scowled and rapped loudly on the door. “Ron, Harry’s here to talk with you and you won’t make excuses!” she snapped. After a few moments of silence, they heard the door unlock.

“I’ll be in the next room,” said Ginny.

“You don’t have to –” Harry started.

“I need a break from all of this,” she said. “Help him, would you?”

Harry squeezed her hand in thanks, gave George a respectful nod, and opened the door. One lamp was dimly lit in the corner. As in the other rooms that Harry had seen, the windows were boarded. Ron sat in the corner of the empty room, hugging his knees. He looked blankly at Harry and then turned away. “Come to look at the freak, did you?” he asked bitterly.

“That’s more my line,” Harry said, in a failed attempt to lighten the mood.

“Can’t even have that to myself, eh?” Ron fumed. “We both have to be freaks... great... just effin’ great.”

“I brought you something,” said Harry. He pulled the shrunken broom case from a pocket and returned it to its normal size.

“A gift for poor Ron, so the great Harry Potter can show everyone how generous he is... isn’t that smashing?” Ron snapped.

“Then why wouldn’t I give it to you down there, in front of everyone?” asked Harry.

Ron didn't answer at first. "So what is it – an apology gift?" he finally asked.

Harry decided that he wouldn't be baited. "There won't be any apologies," he said. "It's a gift so you remember that we're mates."

"It's a very big package for that," Ron said.

"What happened to you must have been really horrible. It was my fault entirely; I shouldn't have been there, and you shouldn't have been there. That's what I was trying to say last night before Malfoy showed up," explained Harry.

Ron's eyes squeezed tight and Harry could almost feel the pain. "I was there because I wanted to be there, and I'd do it again. I just – Sirius can bloody well sod off, you know? I didn't need him telling me how to be a friend, or how to choose between friends in a pinch! He had no right to do that, Harry! It was a horrible thing for him to do –"

"You're right," Harry cut in.

"And then he... what'd'ya mean, I'm right?" Ron asked.

"You're right, Ron – Sirius had no business playing games with us," Harry agreed. "Besides, there was no need for it."

"Er... I don't understand...?" Ron said.

Harry pulled the broom case in front of Ron. "There was no need for it," he repeated. "I've known where you stand since we were first-years. You chose to take on that troll. You chose to sacrifice yourself in that game of wizard's chess. Even when we were fighting, I knew that you'd be there when it counted."

"I haven't just resented Sirius," Ron said. "I've resented you too, especially for all the secrets. I know I have a temper, but I can keep a secret, you know? 'Course, I didn't really understand it until this summer. Sometime it's too hard to share; it took this to get it through my head." He held up his well-covered forearms.

Harry nudged the package. "Open it," he said. As Ron tore at the coarse paper, he added, "Now listen to me, right? This isn't about money, or trying to impress you or anyone else – understood?"

Ron whistled as he revealed the well-polished wooden case. "Wow... you're really trying to make your point, aren't you? I know what comes in a case like this," he whispered, his voice cracking.

Harry smiled. "You don't know the half of it," he said.

Ron held up the Nimbus 2100-R. "It's a bloody racing broom," he said in awe. He traced his hand along the handle and then tested the bristles. Harry stayed silent as Ron set the broom down and ordered it up into his grasp several times. "I know this isn't about money," he said without taking

his eyes off the broom. “I don’t know why I acted that way last night. I’m just – well, I think it’s clear that I’m not myself.”

“Don’t fret over it,” Harry said.

Ron turned the broom, admiring it from several angles. “This is amazing, mate. What’s the marking there – you didn’t have it detailed, did you?” Harry took out his wand and quietly cast a light spell. Ron peered at the side of the handle and his jaw dropped.

“He saw you win the Cup, you know?” Harry explained. Ron’s eyes widened and his breathing quickened.

“Say something,” Harry insisted.

“I don’t know...” Ron managed. “When did you –?”

“This morning, when I picked up... the other thing,” Harry said.

Ron sighed and shook his head. “After everything last night, you go and ... thank you. That’s what I should say.” He turned his gaze back to the broom, and whispered, “Thank you, Harry.”

“You’re welcome. He signed one for me, too,” Harry told him.

“What’d he write on yours, then?” Ron asked. Harry recalled it for him, and Ron snorted. When he told Ron what he’d said to the twins about Madam Hooch, Ron burst out laughing. They sat and regaled each other with Hogwarts memories and Quidditch stories for a long time, and Harry felt a glimmer of old times.

“You can talk to me about anything – like what happened downstairs... when you’re ready for it,” Harry offered.

Ron cast his eyes down. “Right, just as soon as you tell me why you needed to disappear this summer, and I don’t mean that rubbish about darkness and what-not.”

“We’ll be talking soon, then,” Harry promised. “I’m almost ready.”

Ron said, surprised, “Seriously? Well, when that happens, I’ll return the favour – I promise you. It’s just... it feels like nothing will ever be right again if I do.”

“Now that’s something I understand,” Harry said knowingly.

Ron flashed a smile that Harry believed. “So there’s this bash going on just down the stairs, and here I sit hiding in the dark with the guest of honour. Let’s eat!” He stood, clutching the racing broom. “Actually, I can’t pass on the opportunity to gloat about this! Bloody hell!”

Harry sighed, “I don’t mind sitting here a bit longer, honestly. I wasn’t prepared for all of this.”

Ron smiled. “Fred and George really got you, eh? You should know better.”

“All these people, on practically no notice – can you blame me for being a little surprised?” Harry asked.

“Well, it wasn’t all for your birthday. I mean, we’re also celebrating the Weasley’s good fortune. We just boarded Ginny’s party train, that’s all,” Ron smirked.

Harry frowned. “Ginny’s responsible for this, after what happened last night? Maybe I should have a talk with her...”

Ron broke out into a satisfied grin. “What,” he asked, “you’re going to face my little sister’s hopeless infatuation at last?”

“I thought she was tight with Dean Thomas,” Harry said.

Ron laughed. “That was for my benefit. I think she actually thought I bought it for a week or two. I was pretty hard on her over Michael Corner so she wanted me off of her.”

Harry was caught off-guard. “She’s not over the crush?”

The grin on Ron’s face spread from ear to ear. “She sure went to a lot of effort last year convincing herself. Guess it didn’t take, eh?”

“There’s no need to be smug,” Harry complained.

Ron switched to a mock-frown. “Harry, I’m disappointed. A simple acceptance of your fate is all I ask.”

“Ron!” Harry warned.

“All right, all right,” Ron said, returning to an easy smile. “I didn’t expect that the idea would make you squirm?”

“I’m not sure we should be having this conversation,” Harry grumbled.

“Why not?”

“Because she’s your sister, for Merlin’s sake!” Harry thundered. “If I say I like her, you’ll want to give me a thumping. If I say I don’t like her, you’ll want to give me a thumping. I can’t win here!”

Ron crossed his arms. “I had hoped we were making a fresh start here – you know, less secrecy and more honesty?”

Harry cringed. “Could we start tomorrow?”

“Spill!” Ron demanded.

Harry laughed. “You *are* going to thump me no matter what!” Ron waved his new broom at Harry menacingly. He started to say something, but heard a sound – an enticing sound – and stopped.

“Had enough, have you?” Ron taunted. “There’s more where that came from, birthday boy!”

“Shh,” Harry said. “What is that?” When Ron continued to appear blank, he added, “That sound, Ron. What is it?”

“What, that groaning? It’s Ginny with that bloody violin again, that’s what it is,” Ron pouted. “She won’t put it down for five minutes, I tell you. Big party, lots of guests, her idea, and she brings that thing with her so she can hide out!”

“Groaning? It sounds good to me,” Harry said.

“Makes my teeth rattle,” Ron groused. “Let’s get her to knock off, and head down.”

Ron opened the door and quickly strode to Ginny’s door, Nimbus 2100-R in hand. He pounded with his fist, and said loudly, “Enough of that racket – let’s eat!”

Ginny called out, “Are there survivors? I hear one, at least.”

“We’re fine, Ginny,” Harry said. “You don’t have to stop on our account.”

Ron’s grin came back in full force, as he tore open Ginny’s door. “Put that blasted thing away, Ginny... Oh! We were just talking about you,” he announced. Harry felt his cheeks warm.

Ginny smiled. “You’re all square, then?” she asked.

Ron nodded. “Absolutely! Get a load of the fig leaf he brought to patch things up,” he said, holding up the broom.

“I hope you mean the *olive branch* he brought,” she sniggered.

“Yeah, whatever – check it out!” Ron exclaimed, and held out the broom.

Ginny carefully tucked the Black family violin into its case. She reached for the broom, held it high, squinted one eye, and sighted down the handle with the other. “Unbelievable,” she said in awe.

“Read the handle,” Ron insisted.

Ginny lowered the 2100-R, and turned toward the light from the stairwell. “To Ron, hope you win’ ... Merlin! How did you – I mean, he doesn’t – not *ever*, I thought.” She handed the broom back to Ron, and smiled her curious smile at Harry. “You’re something else, Harry Potter,” she

said, standing too close to him.

“There you are,” George said through Ginny’s open door.

Fred announced, “Ginny, look what some poor deluded owl brought you this morning.” He waved a paper in the air.

“That’s isn’t the *Prophet* ...?” Harry gasped.

Fred indulged an evil grin. “No, no, it’s even better.”

“That’s mine!” Ginny ordered as she tried to seize the paper from Fred, who quickly darted away.

George told Fred, “Put an end to the suspense – it’s just too good.”

Ron asked Harry, “What about the *Prophet* ?”

Harry moaned, “I was on the front page yesterday. I was sort of mobbed at Gringotts and someone took photos. It was embarrassing.”

“How do you get ‘sort of mobbed’?” Ron asked crossly.

“Give it over!” Ginny bellowed, and snatched the paper roughly from Fred. She glanced at the front page, and then threw it at George.

“Easy, sis,” George said. He caught the paper and waved it at Harry. “We could have sprung this on you downstairs, you know?”

Fred blocked Ginny from leaving the room. “Let me out of this room now – there’s a party to manage,” Ginny insisted in a cracking voice. Her cheeks burned red.

"What is it, *Witch Weekly* ?” Harry asked.

“No, my naïve and poorly-read friend. It’s *Teen Witch Weekly* . To put it mildly: you’re done for,” Fred informed him.

Ron stole the paper from Harry. “Let me see that ... Merlin! Will you look at this?” Nearly the entire front page of the tabloid consisted of a single picture with a headline blasted across it. The picture was a slightly grainy shot of Harry, in sleeveless boxing singlet and denims, as he prepared to fly Roger Davies’ sister on the racing broom at Diagon Alley. At the top of the page right below the masthead, a small heading said:

Stop the presses... it’s...

Across the bottom half of the page, in the biggest letters Harry could possibly imagine, the headline read:

... A HOTTER HARRY POTTER!!

Harry's stomach roiled. He scanned Ron's room for a waste can, a bucket, a bowl, something – anything to use when he spewed up. Ron calmly looked over the picture, and then opened the tabloid.

“Let's see ... two... three... four... five... six... seven... eight... nine... ten. Ten pages, Harry. That has to be a record of some kind, wouldn't you think?” Ron smirked. “Someone must be stalking you to get all these pictures... Fred! Did you have anything to do with this?”

Fred held up his hands, palms forward. “I'm innocent. It's not often I can say that, by the way.”

“Well, you're not guilty at any rate,” George snorted.

Ron suddenly smiled. “Look at this,” he said, jabbing Harry with his elbow. “Two pages of Harry Potter at Hogwarts... and here we are – my name's included for once. ‘Harry celebrates with close friend Ron Weasley, shortly after Weasley and the Gryffindor Quidditch team took the House Cup.’ I'll be switched – here I am again... and again!”

Harry forced a smile in return. “That's a good picture,” he managed. “I'd like a copy of that.”

Fred frowned. “You're all missing the smashing part!” he moaned. “Go to page nine, for Merlin's sake!”

Ron flipped the pages. “Page nine... oh, no. Harry, you won't like this...”

Harry ripped the paper from Ron's hands. A vertical box took up half the page, with the heading: Harry's Love Life. His shoulders slumped. From the corner of his eye, he saw that Ginny was crouched in the corner of the room.

Fred picked up the paper, and started reading aloud. “ ‘Right now, there's one question on the mind of every teen witch: is Harry Potter available? Harry's not talking, of course, and his Hogwarts mates have remained silent on the subject. He spends his summers with Muggles in the company of relatives. If Harry's found love, TWW puts its wager on Hogwarts as the source. Some of the likely candidates include'... There's a small bit here on Harry's ‘long-time gal pal’ Hermione Granger – it's not the best photo of her... or there's the, uh, ‘former girlfriend’ Cho Chang... oh, it could be the ‘enigmatic and misunderstood’ Luna Lovegood... how they came up with Lisa Turpin and Gretchen Hargrove, I can't figure... Daphne Greengrass? They've got to be kidding! I mean, *vavoom* – but she's Slytherin and cold as ice. Ahh, here we are. How could we

overlook little Ginny Weasley?”

“Fred, stow it,” Ron said dangerously.

Fred ploughed on. “Let’s see... this photo’s actually quite good. It says here, ‘The spunky sister of Harry’s best mate and a close friend of Granger, Weasley’s also a brilliant Quidditch player – surely the quickest path to a Seeker’s heart.’ ”

George stole the paper from Fred. “That’s enough, brother.”

Fred said, “Aw, but it’s so cute! You just have to –” He stopped, having at last noticed his sister’s quiet sobs. Harry barely kept a terrible wave of anger under control; he dimly realised just how terrible when Fred looked him in the eye and promptly took two steps backward.

“When I find out who is responsible for this...” Harry began darkly.

“Ginny will get howlers for weeks,” Ron said sadly. He glared at his brothers. “What were you thinking, rubbing her nose in this?”

Harry scowled. “All of them are linked to me now. These idiots haven’t a clue how dangerous that is!”

Ron stared into thin air for a moment before recognition set in. “If a Death Eater sees this...?” he began. Fred and George looked at each other, and then at Harry.

Harry said to Ron, “Take this down to your father, or to Dumbledore if he happens to be about.”

Ron nodded. “I’m on it.” He rushed down the stairs, paper in hand.

Harry turned on Fred and George. “You two – get out. Ginny and I need to talk.”

George asked meekly, “Are you sure that’s a good idea? Perhaps we should stay?”

Harry glared at both of the twins, but particularly Fred. “I think you’ve done quite enough already. *Get out* .”

The twins walked out of the room, and hesitated at the top of the stairs. Harry slammed the door, and shouted through it, “I’d better not catch an Extendable Ear, either. Think about what I can do in return – I *know* that I will.” He cast silencing charms on the door, all four walls, the floor and the ceiling.

Ginny remained crouched in the corner of the room. Harry knelt down beside her, and she muttered something that he couldn’t make out.

“What was that?” he asked.

“I – said – that I feel – so – stupid,” she managed between hesitant breaths.

“I could understand angry, but why do you feel stupid?” Harry asked, settling down onto the floor.

Ginny rubbed at her eyes with the back of her hand, and her voice quavered. “Goodness, why would I feel stupid? I made a complete arse of myself last night... I turn into a blubbering wreck tonight... stupid, stupid, stupid!”

“I feel badly about last night,” Harry said. “You didn’t have to be quite so honest to avoid the hex.”

She let out a half-chuckle. “Then I cursed the stupid git, and get hexed anyway. I can’t seem to get anything right this summer.”

Harry tried to change the subject. “I heard you playing the violin. Where did you learn to do that?” he asked her.

Ginny took a deep breath that seemed to settle her. Her eyes drifted closed and she managed a pained smile. “I heard him playing, up in the attic. He told me that it was to soothe Buckbeak. He was quite good – did you know that? After that, I would steal upstairs for a little while every day just to listen. Then he asked me to try it. I used to think I was musical, but I knew nothing would ever come of it. It just, I don’t know – it just came out of me from somewhere. He said I was born to play the violin – that it responded to me. I told him that it wasn’t bloody likely I’d ever be playing again, seeing as musical instruments are expensive. I guess that’s why he gave it to me. I admit it – I’m hooked. It almost makes up for what he put me through – almost.”

“You never gave me an opportunity to say anything – you know, about last night?” Harry offered.

Ginny pulled away from him. “You’re Harry Potter,” she continued, “and there are thousands of witches chasing after you. You know what I am... I’m a Weasley; I’m nothing.”

“That’s ridiculous. Your family –” Harry began.

Ginny cut him off tersely. “Ten pages in *Teen Witch Weekly*, Harry. It wouldn’t be the first time, either.”

“Where do they get this stuff, anyway? No one’s ever talked to me,” Harry fumed.

Ginny shrugged. “I suppose they don’t think it’s necessary. They’re just telling people what they want to hear.”

“Why do you subscribe, then, if it’s such a rag?” Harry asked.

Ginny rubbed at her eyes again, and then the corners of her mouth twitched upward mischievously. “To see whether Malfoy tops the Hot Ten List, of course.”

Harry snorted, and then started to laugh. “Malfoy... bleagh! I don’t want to know any more about this List,” he managed between snorts.

Ginny's grin faded. "No... no, I don't think you do," she decided.

"I'm not letting you off the hook, right?" Harry said. "The only reason anyone knows my name is because of something I didn't mean to do. I'm no different than you, really. Why do you think that you're nothing – that your family's nothing? It's not true, of course."

Ginny looked away. "I shouldn't have to explain it to you. You know me."

Harry hesitated, unsure what to say. "Erm... I don't know you as well as all that. It seems like you confide in with Hermione, but you and me... we haven't talked much, not really. You used to have a bit of trouble with that, remember – talking around me, I mean."

Ginny grimaced. "Don't remind me." She drew herself up, and locked eyes with him. "Fine, I suppose I'm an acquaintance to you. I thought we made up ground last year, even though you weren't exactly sociable. I suppose I just slipped your mind –"

"Ginny..." Harry chided.

"Just look at me, then. You should be able to see the reasons for yourself," Ginny said flatly.

"Is this about what you said last night? Look, I think your ears are just fine, and I don't think your nose is pointy at all," Harry insisted. "Now Ron... he has a pointy nose."

Ginny buried her face in her hands. "You remember exactly what I said, don't you?" she groaned.

"This idea that you're nothing – it's rubbish," Harry said firmly. "You're not just an acquaintance, either. You were a good friend last year. I mean, you came to the Ministry... you're important to me, Ginny."

"Not as important as *her*," Ginny said.

"That's not entirely fair," Harry said. "Hermione and I have known each other since our first train ride to Hogwarts. We've been through so much together. I just don't know you the way I know her. Maybe over time –"

"I didn't even say her name and you knew who I meant, Harry," Ginny said. "You're in love with her, aren't you?"

"That's not true. Hermione and I are friends," Harry said flatly.

"You're in love with her," Ginny declared.

"We're friends, and I would never do anything that might interfere with that," Harry declared.

"Just admit it," Ginny demanded.

Harry said, "I can't love anyone." His voice cracked, and he felt embarrassed.

“Why not?” Ginny said.

Harry sighed. “When I love people, they die.”

“That’s not true, not always,” Ginny insisted.

“You know it is,” Harry said. “You’ve seen enough to know.”

Ginny closed her eyes. “I didn’t die in the Chamber, Harry.”

“No you didn’t, thank Merlin,” Harry agreed.

Ginny took his hand, and they sat there quietly for a long time. With no warning, she said, “Kiss me.”

“Pardon?” gasped Harry.

“I said, 'kiss me',” Ginny repeated. “You remembered what I said last night, so you must remember the part about making my stomach fly in loops. I just... I need to know.”

“You need to know...?” Harry asked.

“I need to know where we stand,” she said. “Are you going to kiss me, or what?”

Harry thought that the room suddenly felt very, very small. “Erm... uh...”

Ginny sighed. “Oh, for Merlin’s sake – fine, then,” she said. She darted forward and kissed him full on the lips.

For a moment, Harry felt like everything was slowed. Then his senses were assaulted. He felt the wetness and softness of her lips, took in their taste. He felt her breathing quicken, and her lips tremble – or were those his trembling?

She broke off the kiss, and he kissed her in return; he hoped that it would tell her whatever she needed to know. When he pulled away, she just sat there with her eyes closed. Harry felt like this went on for something close to forever.

She opened her eyes, and said, “That was nice – very, very nice.”

He looked around, puzzled and uncertain how to respond; at length, he settled on, “I thought so too.”

“Thank you,” she said quietly.

“For what?”

Ginny sighed. “For letting me know where we stand. I don’t think you’re the one... at least I’m

not certain if you are.”

Harry goggled at her. “Wha...?”

She shook her head. “I don’t think you’re the one, at least not right now. It was nice... lovely, even. Much nicer than Michael Corner; he was like kissing the Giant Squid –”

“I didn’t need to know that!” Harry spluttered.

Ginny pressed on, “ – but that’s not good enough, not from you.”

“Erm – I could try again?” Harry offered.

Ginny shook her head. “I’m not getting tangled up with you or your type unless I’m thoroughly swept off my feet; that’s how it’s supposed to be,” she said.

“What do you mean, ‘my type’?” Harry asked; he was beginning to feel a bit annoyed.

“The serious type, Harry,” Ginny explained. “You’re the ‘bring-him-home-to-Mum’ type. Those stupid witches who burble over you in Teen Witch Weekly have no idea whatever about who you really are. Don’t misunderstand – there’s not necessarily anything wrong with being the serious sort.”

“I can be fun,” Harry protested.

“I didn’t say that you aren’t fun,” Ginny explained; “I just can’t imagine you being casual with a girl. You don’t do anything casually, other than joke with my brothers. Tell me honestly, do you think you could snog a girl senseless if you just liked her – you know, if you weren’t in love?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never thought about it,” Harry fumed.

“The answer is ‘no’, and you just proved it to me.” Ginny abruptly smiled at him. It wasn’t the curious smile from the evening prior – it was excitable and a bit off, he thought. He decided that he much preferred the curious smile.

Harry asked, “If I tell you something, will you promise not to laugh?”

The smile quickly faded from Ginny’s face. “Of course I promise.”

“Well – er, it’s just that – ahem – you see... that was my first real kiss,” Harry stammered.

Ginny stared at him. “What’s this?”

Harry still stammered. “That was – erm – my first real kiss. I mean, uh... Cho hardly counts. There was – well – there was no comparison.”

She said testily, “There’s something for my journal: half the witches in Europe are brushing up on

entrancements and love potions, and I'm your first kiss."

"There's no need to mock me," Harry snapped.

"I'm not mocking," Ginny said. "Can I offer you some advice?"

"What for?" he asked.

"Because you're thick and you need advice," she answered. "If you plan to do anything about Hermione, do it tonight. I think ickle Ronniekins is planning to make an arse of himself."

Harry sighed and looked away. "I hope you're planning to let that go."

Ginny stood up, and brushed dust from her denims. "I need to let a lot of things go," she muttered.

Harry said, "I'm sorry?"

"Never mind," Ginny snapped. "We should go downstairs. It's not good form to miss your own party."

Harry ended the silencing charms and Ginny abruptly slammed open the door. She nearly sent Fred and George flying.

"Coming?" she asked.

"In a minute," Harry said. "Erm... thanks for the advice." Ginny grunted something and headed down the stairs.

"Ahem – 'advice', was it?" Fred asked, nudging George with his elbow.

"Never heard it called that before," George admitted.

The twins turned toward the stairs as one, calling out, "Oh, Ginny...?"

Harry let out a slow breath. He thought through everything he'd just said or done, and thought through it again until he decided that he was thinking far too much. Why did I kiss her in return? he wondered.

Ron darted back into Ginny's room, breathing hard. "Dad took a look at the list," he panted. "The Turpins are pure, apparently. It goes without saying for the Greengrasses, of course. The Hargroves are like your parents – one was Muggle-born – and so are the Changs. Hermione's the only Muggle-born on the list."

"What about Luna?" Harry asked.

"Her dad's a wizard and so was her mum, so she's not Muggle-born. I guess Dad doesn't know

their family's history beyond that," Ron admitted.

"Thanks for talking to your dad," Harry said, sighing. "It shouldn't be necessary, though. Why does everyone around me get hurt?"

Ron hesitated before recognizing the implication. "What – you mean us? It's a bit late for worries, mate. Like it or not this family's dripping with Harry Potter, excepting Percy – the git. Oi, speaking of you and the family, Fred and George are tossing Ginny like a Quaffle down there. So...?"

"So - *what?*" Harry responded, cringing.

"Do I have to smack you with my broom?" Ron threatened. "I hate to do it with such an excellent broom, but if it has to be done..."

"Enough!" Harry moaned. "I tried to calm her down after the thrashing she took from Fred, right? Then she kissed me –"

"What?"

"– and I kissed her back, and I think she's over me now, but I'm not really sure," Harry finished.

Ron gaped at Harry. "I don't – wha...?" he started, before burying his face in his hands. "Let me see if I'm getting this," he muttered through his fingers, "she kissed you, you kissed her, and she's over you? If that's what you said, then I'm not getting it."

"You've got it right – and thank Merlin I'm done with that," Harry said.

Ron dropped his hands. "Hold up there – that's my sister you're talking about!"

Harry wagged his finger at Ron. "See, I told you! If I like her, you're stirred up. If I don't like her that way, you're stirred up!"

Ron frowned. "So she's over you, eh? You must be a pathetic snogger."

"Ron!"

"What was it?" Ron demanded. "Did you do something awful to her? I mean, no one goes from a crush like hers to 'over you' that fast – not without a push."

"Ron, I would never do anything awful to Ginny," Harry insisted. "She's a wonderful girl – and I mean that – but I'm not what she wants."

Ron eyed him suspiciously. "She doesn't want you, she's over you. What do you want?"

Harry frowned. "I'm sorry, Ron. I...I guess I tried, you know, when I kissed her back. I didn't think anything was there – not really – and now...?"

Ron appeared stung. “I see. Well...well, I see... as long as you didn’t hurt her... I suppose...” he stammered.

“We should head down,” Harry offered. “Maybe we can distract Fred and George?”

Ron drew himself up in very Percy-like fashion. “Yes – well – I do suppose that would be the right thing. They oughtn’t to hound her like that.”

Ginny scrambled away from Fred and George, bumping into people as she moved around the crowded room. She went back and forth between apologies to bystanders and shouts at her brothers. It was a measure of the size of the gathering that the three Weasleys weren’t the centre of attention.

Ron implored Harry, “What are you waiting for? Put a stop to this!” Harry strode into the crowd and was steps from George when Ginny careened into Neville Longbottom. Neville broke her fall and scowled at Fred and George.

“Haven’t you had enough?” Neville asked them.

George smirked, “Only when we find out what we want to know.”

“Look here,” Neville said, moving between Ginny and the twins, “you’ve been round and round five times – that’s right, I’ve been listening – and Ginny’s had one answer for you. Give it a rest!”

“Neville, don’t get in the middle of official Weasley business,” Fred growled.

“You know that we don’t play fair,” George said with a frown.

Neville walked straight at Fred until they were almost nose-to-nose. “B-bugger off, you” he said. Ginny started to chuckle but stifled it with her hand.

George smiled. “Could this be the timid young thing we used to victimise?”

Fred shook his head vigorously from side to side. “No, this can’t be our ickle Neville-poo. This fellow’s more bulldog than, say, canary.”

George peered closely at Neville. “Say, those aren’t feathers popping out there?”

Fred feigned horror. “Neville, you didn’t sample anything from those trays of snacks... did you?”

Neville stood firm. “I said, ‘bugger off’.”

Ginny took him by the arm. “I think they’ve had enough,” she said, and led Neville toward the other side of the room. She stuck out her tongue at the twins on the way.

“Looks as if my work is done,” Harry said to Ron. He fled before the twins could set after him. His path to the kitchen was blocked by a pack of schoolmates.

“Happy birthday, Harry!” Dean Thomas said, pumping Harry’s hand. “I can’t believe they declared you an adult – that’s... well, that’s so cool!”

“Thanks, Dean, nice of you to come,” Harry managed. “Seen Seamus this summer?”

Dean frowned. “His mum packed him off to his aunt in Canada for the summer. I’ll be a bit surprised to see him back.”

“That’s strange. It’s not as if he’s Muggle-born,” Harry said.

“Consider his mum,” Dean pointed out with a shrug. Harry nodded; Mrs. Finnigan had nearly pulled Seamus from Hogwarts the year before.

“Hello, Harry,” Parvati Patil cooed. “I like your hair that way. It makes you look so mature.” Lavender Brown nodded in agreement. Parvati had a strange look in her eyes and a curious smile on her face; Harry moved on quickly. He thought of the look in Parvati’s eyes, and then thought of the Imperius Curse; he quickly scanned the area for Order members, and cursed himself for jumping immediately to suspicion. He was still reeling when he nearly trod over Ernie Macmillan.

“Happy birthday, old man,” Ernie said brightly. “Bit scruffy but looking well, eh?”

Harry ran his hands through his hair. “A bit uncombed, I imagine.’

“That was quite a contraption you had there,” Ernie said. He leaned in, and added in a conspiratorial whisper, “I imagine you could get in trouble with an enchanted Muggle artefact like that.”

Harry returned a wicked grin and whispered, “Special permit. You know how it is... gratitude for services rendered – that sort of thing.”

Ernie said, “Ah, yes – of course,” and nodded knowingly.

“Hello, Harry. Happy birthday!” Colin Creevey gushed.

“Happy birthday, Harry!” his brother Dennis added.

Harry frowned. He put one arm around the shoulders of each brother, and led them toward the doorway to an adjacent room, which turned out to be a kitchen with a large hearth. “Boys, we need to talk,” he said calmly.

“Sure, Harry. What can we do for you?” Colin asked.

“What is it, Harry?” asked Dennis.

As soon as they were clear of the crowd, Harry let go of them and whirled around. “Which one of you is responsible for all the photos of me popping up lately?”

“W-what photos would those be?” Colin asked nervously.

“Oh! He must mean the *Teen Witch Weekly* bit!” Dennis said. “They must use really smashing paper to be so –”

Colin cut him off. “Dennis, I don’t think Harry’s interested in –”

Harry in turn cut off Colin. “Harry’s very bloody interested when ten-page articles turn up in *Teen Witch Weekly*,” he snarled.

“I told you he’d be displeased,” Colin said to Dennis.

“You thought it would be flattering,” Dennis insisted.

“What about the *Daily Prophet* yesterday?” Harry demanded.

Dennis shrugged. “Dunno,” he said, “there must have been a staff photographer at Gringotts by accident.”

Harry trembled and his voice quaked as he asked, “Did either of you read it?”

The Creevey brothers instinctively moved backward. “*Teen Witch Weekly* ? Erm – most of it,” Colin admitted.

“Come off it, Colin; you gave the sign-off,” Dennis said.

“Are you responsible for the portion on my love life?” Harry seethed.

Dennis shook his head. “They cook up that stuff on their own – the editor said it keeps the readers’ interest. Besides, you know that we take better photos than that.”

“You’re both very lucky,” Harry told them. He felt his jaw twitching. “If you were responsible for that part, I’d hex you into next Christmas! Think on it! How dangerous do you suppose it is for a girl to be connected with me that way?”

Both Creeveys looked at Harry blankly. Harry loomed over them menacingly. “Don’t you think that Death Eaters can *read* ?” he asked in an icy voice.

Colin’s eyes bulged. “Oh, bugger! I never gave any thought to... oh! Harry, I’m so sorry. I mean, really sorry!” Dennis’ face slumped down to his chest, and he shook his head balefully.

“I expect you’ll clear these sort of things with me in the future,” Harry ordered. He walked back into the larger room and conjured a rough-looking bench in one corner.

Ron was regaling anyone who would listen with an increasingly exaggerated version of Gryffindor’s most recent House Cup victory. Ginny sat on the floor between Neville and Lavender Brown, and egged Ron on. Harry grinned at each version, pleased to see a flash of the

Ron that he knew and relieved to see that Ginny seemed all right. It was almost enough to push aside the dark thoughts – until Harry started to think about why the Weasleys were celebrating their good fortune, and why he was free to ride the Bonnevillie in the first place, and why he felt so empty.

“Hullo, Harry. Happy birthday.” The familiar gruff voice brought Harry out of his thoughts. He found himself almost eye-to-eye with Rubeus Hagrid, who had sprawled on the floor beside the bench.

“Thanks, Hagrid,” Harry said mechanically.

“I, er, brought yeh a little gift,” Hagrid told him, as he fished through the pockets of his overcoat. “Don’ worry, it can’t bite and it don’ need feeding. Here.” He held out a roughly wrapped box. Harry tore at the paper, and gingerly opened the box. Inside was a pair of fitted dragon-hide gloves.

“Thought yeh might like ter have those when yer ridin’ the Bonnie,” Hagrid explained.

Harry’s brow furrowed. “How – you weren’t here when I – were you?”

Hagrid smiled, his dark eyes almost disappearing. “’Fraid I missed tha’ part. She’d bin hiding under the cottage for years. When Sirius tol’ me what he had in mind I was happy about it, ter tell yeh the truth. ‘Course yeh shouldn’t be tellin’ that ta McGonagall or Dumbledore. They’re both right angry wit’ yeh.”

Harry didn’t want to hurt Hagrid, and knew he’d do exactly that if he betrayed his feelings toward Dumbledore. He chose to avoid eye contact. “What about you?” he asked.

“Angry wit’ yeh, Harry? I don’ think so. Bit sad, really,” Hagrid answered.

“Sad? About what?”

Hagrid sighed. “’Bout Sirius doin’ wha’ he did, yeh know – the will an’ all? ’Bout yeh bein’ drawn into all this so young. ’Bout wha’s comin’, Harry.” Harry said nothing, just stared intently at his own feet.

“Righ’ then,” Hagrid said quietly. He shuffled to his feet, careful not to strike the ceiling with his head, and started to move away.

“Hagrid?”

Hagrid turned and looked at Harry expectantly. “You – er – needin’ ter say somethin’, are yeh?”

Harry said, “I miss him. I miss him, and I don’t know what to do about it. It’s tearing me apart.”

Hagrid drew close, and asked, “Talk ter someone. Tha’s all yer can do.”

“I can’t,” Harry groaned, “it’s too dangerous.”

“Naw, Harry; keepin’ all this inside yer belly’s no good. Talk ter someone. Give Ron a go,” Hagrid said.

“I think he’s had enough for now,” Harry decided.

“How ‘bout Ginny?” Hagrid suggested, “Fond of yeh, but yeh must know tha’.”

“I can’t do it, I can’t,” Harry said distantly, “She’s in enough danger because of me. I just can’t.”

“She don’ look in danger to me,” Hagrid said, pointing toward Ginny and Neville. He pulled on the end of his beard for a few moments, before he said knowingly, “Ah, yer talkin’ about Hermione. Should have seen tha’ comin’. Harry, she can handle ‘bout anythin’ yeh can dish out; give ‘er credit fer tha’.”

“You might not think so, if you knew what I had to say,” Harry said, a lump slowly forming in his throat. “I want to tell her everything, Hagrid, but she’s – she’s safer not knowing.”

“Wha’d’yeh think she’ll do if she don’ know somethin’ important an’ finds out later from somebody besides yeh?” Hagrid asked. “Best yeh think on tha’ before it happens, Harry.”

“She can be as cross with me as she likes, provided she’s alive. Thanks for the gloves, Hagrid,” Harry said

“Hermione!” Ron shouted. Harry whirled around; he had nearly forgotten that she was present, amidst all the commotion. She and her parents had just reentered the room along with Shackbolt and Bill Weasley. By the time Harry crossed to the stairs, Ron had already led Hermione away.

“Sorry, Harry,” Ginny said as Harry approached. “I’d hoped you would get to her before Ron.”

Harry snapped, “Why does this seem like some kind of game, where I don’t know the rules?”

Ginny’s eyes narrowed. “Pardon me?”

“What are you playing at?” Harry said. “You’ve gone from snogging me to being over me to tossing me at Hermione in less than half an hour.”

Ginny frowned. “That wasn’t snogging – it was one kiss,” she said. “I needed to know where you stood; you were loud and clear, thank you.”

“Loud and clear? I didn’t say a word,” Harry insisted.

Ginny snorted. “You kissed me like I’m your sister. It’s not as though I was left with doubts.”

Harry lowered his head. “I didn’t want to hurt you – I mean, I hope I didn’t manage to –”

Ginny laughed; the laughter was raw and edgy. “I’m not hurt – I’m glad for it. It should have happened sooner, if I’d had the courage! I’m *free*,” she said loudly. Harry was acutely aware of being watched by Hermione’s mother and a gaggle of Hogwarts schoolmates.

“Ginny, I’m really sorry,” Harry said quietly.

“Stop being sorry, right? There’s nothing to be sorry about! You’ve had my advice – talk to Hermione if Ron ever takes his mitts off her. No one should waste as much time pining away as I have!” Ginny told him. Harry was sure that she was shouting. To make matters worse, he spotted Mrs. Weasley standing near the door to the kitchen.

“I’ll be going now,” he croaked.

“You do that,” Ginny boomed. “Go and get over each other, for goodness’ sake!”

Harry scooted away. His schoolmates gawked at him whilst attempting to appear casual. Neville’s eyes shone with pity, a sure sign that the situation couldn’t worsen. He was wrong. Mrs. Weasley’s hands were on her hips, and Mrs. Granger wore a predatory expression. *Don’t show fear*, he thought.

Before Mrs. Granger could get in a word, Mrs. Weasley said calmly, “Cordelia, I need a word with Harry. Would you excuse us?”

Mrs. Granger managed a strained smile. “Harry, I trust you’ll make time for me as well? I believe we have a conversation to finish.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he squeaked as Mrs. Granger drifted away.

Mrs. Weasley’s eyes bored through him. “Well?”

Harry hesitated. “I’m sorry –”

“I heard that much. Would you care to explain the rest?” As he watched her hands on hips and tapping foot, Harry fought the urge to squirm.

“I’m not clear on what needs explaining,” he offered, as he struggled with an impulse to cringe.

“Who is pining for whom, exactly?” she asked firmly.

“I’m not sure,” he said. “Ginny seems to think I’m pining for Hermione.”

“I take it that you’re not pining for Ginny,” Mrs. Weasley said.

“No, ma’am,” Harry said as he stared at his shoes, “and she doesn’t doubt that.”

“Fred and George were running about like fools, chasing after Ginny’s story,” Mrs. Weasley said. “Let’s come to the point – tell me what’s happened.”

Harry sighed. He found it easier to tell with his eyes closed. “Fred was stirring up Ginny with the new *Teen Witch Weekly*. I’m on the cover, with a big article besides. Ron understood that part of the article could be dangerous for –”

“Arthur showed me the article,” Mrs. Weasley interrupted him.

Harry continued, his eyes tightly shut. “Ron brought it downstairs. I tossed Fred and George so that I could talk to Ginny. She seemed very upset. I talked to her for a bit, and she – she, erm, kissed me.” He ignored Mrs. Weasley’s sudden coughing, and continued, “Apparently I didn’t sweep her off her feet. She told me I’d helped her get over me. You heard most of the rest, I think.”

“I see,” Mrs. Weasley said. Harry peeked. Her lips were pursed and her jaw was tight. “Ginny said for you to ‘get over each other’. Who is pining for you, Harry?”

“I’m not pining for anyone,” Harry said flatly. “Ginny must think that Hermione has... has feelings for me. I really can’t imagine why she would think that.”

Mrs. Weasley looked crestfallen. “I do hope she’s mistaken. Ron...” she trailed off.

“I don’t want to hurt him anymore than I already have,” Harry said. “I should just go back to Grimmauld Place.”

“Absolutely not,” Mrs. Weasley decreed. “You can return to the Burrow with us at the end of the party, and spend the night in a proper home.”

“I don’t want to be a bother,” Harry ventured.

Mr. Weasley seemed to appear from nowhere. “Harry, there you are! I’ve been looking for you. Some of us in the rooms below have an interest in seeing that motorbike of yours. I have a professional responsibility in these matters, of course.” He smiled warmly, and Mrs. Weasley frowned immediately.

“Cordelia wanted to speak with Harry,” Mrs. Weasley said.

“Well, Tom Granger’s one of the people with an interest in the motorbike,” Mr. Weasley said. “I’m sure she won’t mind. Don’t worry; I’ll be sure to send Harry back after a while.” He smiled at Harry again. “Shall we?” Harry didn’t have to be asked twice.

Mr. Weasley led him away from the kitchen and toward the stairs. As soon as they were out of earshot, he slowed his pace and said casually, “Ron explained to me what happened between you and Ginny.”

“What did he say?” Harry asked timidly.

Mr. Weasley put his hand on Harry's shoulder. "Relax, Harry. Molly's thought of you as a suitor for Ginny since... goodness, I don't know when. She can be a bit, er, unreasonable when she sets her mind. I wondered if you might need saving sometime this evening."

Harry smiled. "Thank you," he said.

"Don't mention it – *please!*," Mr. Weasley said. "If you did, then I'd be in quite a pickle with her. Let's hide out with the lads; it's the safest course of action, I dare say?"

"May I ask a question?" said Harry.

"Certainly - ask away," Mr. Weasley offered.

"Er... where are we, exactly?" Harry asked sheepishly.

Mr. Weasley let out a loud bark of a laugh. "You haven't sussed it out yet? Well, I dare say you'll answer your own question shortly."

The room downstairs had two large doors that opened to the outside. A barricade had been built and Harry was certain that it was obscured from view by wards or the like. With one look over the barricade, he knew where the party was being held: the Weasleys had somehow commandeered the Shrieking Shack.

Harry Potter and the Years of Rebellion Happy Birthday To Me

Chapter Eight

HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO ME

A dartboard hung on the inside of one of the two doors opened to the outside of the Shrieking Shack. Fred and George were taking on Bill and Charlie, and Professor Flitwick looked on. Flitwick greeted Mr. Weasley warmly. “Is it true that they’re not supposed to guide the darts? With those two –” the professor said, gesturing at the twins, “– one never knows what to believe!”

Mr. Weasley launched into an earnest dissertation on Muggle games and hand-eye coordination, and Harry quietly took his leave. Hagrid was engaged in animated conversation with Mr. Granger and Lupin, who waved cheerfully at him. Kingsley Shacklebolt sat on the end of a bench next to Tonks; both of them nursed glasses of something. Shacklebolt gestured sternly for Harry to approach.

“Tonks, shouldn’t you be...?” Harry began.

She snorted loudly. “What, up there with the hens? Nattering on ‘bout recipes and home remedies an’ that rot? *Not – bloody – likely!*”

Harry sniffed. “Is that firewhisky?”

“ ’S been a long week, Harry. They ’jus keep getting’ longer,” she said, “an’ besides – I’m old, remember? I can drink what I want, where I want, when I want, how I want, why I want...” Tonks’ hair kept shifting from red to pink to orange and back again.

“Harry and I need to talk,” Shacklebolt rumbled.

“ ’Sno problem, Kingsley. I’ll jus’ humble those boys at darts.” Tonks slid from the bench to her feet and her eyes crossed for a moment.

“We’ll take a walk, Tonks,” Shacklebolt said. “Hold up the bench, would you?” Tonks gave a ragged salute. Shacklebolt swept by Harry, leaving him to assume that he should follow. They strolled out the doors and stopped at the barricade. Hogsmeade was bathed in orange light

streaming from the western horizon.

“I’m not the proper tutor for you,” Shacklebolt said. “I feel bound by Black’s wishes, but you can find a better fit.”

Harry said, “I don’t understand.”

Shacklebolt turned on him. “When you went running into the Ministry, did you think for a moment about the consequences?”

“I didn’t –” Harry began.

“No, you didn’t,” Shacklebolt finished for him, “and the results speak for themselves! The Lovegood girl got by with a concussion, but the Longbottom boy broke his nose and Arthur’s daughter broke an ankle. Who knows what really happened to her brother? Granger is still recovering – were you aware of that? Were you aware that Tonks almost *died*? It’s a matter of dumb luck that the lot of you aren’t dead.”

“I’m sorry,” Harry whispered.

“That’s not enough! The Department put Tonks and me on leave. They want us to sign a loyalty oath! It would have happened eventually, I can see that – but you forced everyone’s hand, Harry,” scolded Shacklebolt. “The Ministry knows that Dumbledore reactivated the Order, so they recalled the Dark Force Defence League – the bloody twits! It’s obviously a purge in the making. Fudge wants to keep in power, so he wants Dumbledore kept in the dark.”

“Not sure how I was supposed to know all of that...” Harry said.

Shacklebolt scowled. “An angry tutor will do you no good. Sirius be damned; I’m leaving it in Dumbledore’s hands. If he insists, then I’ll take you on.” He turned away and it was abundantly clear that the conversation was over.

Harry returned toward the doors. He heard a whizz! and saw a blur from the corner of his eye. His head whipped to one side, and the blur shot past him to strike the barricade.

“Wotcher, Harry! ’Sa good thing you’re a Seeker!” Tonks cried out. Harry recovered the dart.

“Enough for you, Tonks,” Bill said.

“Aww, but I’m still thirsty,” Tonks complained, holding her empty glass upside down.

Bill laughed. “That’s yours to reckon with. I was referring to the darts.”

“What were you thinking, giving Tonks something that sharp?” Fred snapped, and waggled his index finger at Bill.

Harry handed the stray dart to Bill and guided Tonks away by the arm. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

he asked her.

“Wha’d’ya mean – *oh!* ” Tonks shrugged. “Things happen for a reason. ‘Sides, you’ve enough to worry about.”

“Shacklebolt said you almost died,” Harry told her.

“He’s dramatic,” Tonks insisted. “I need to sit.”

Harry reached out for a chair; he managed to put it behind Tonks an instant before she began to sit down. He brought a second chair over for himself. Lupin was watching him intently but Harry didn’t know why.

“I’ve cost you your position,” Harry said, “and now you’re stuck minding Hermione and me.”

Tonks’ eyes fluttered closed. “I like Hermione - always wanted a little sister, right? You’re not bad either, Harry.” She laughed, and added very loudly, “Every witch in England wants to mother you or shag you, ’course.”

“Which is it for you, Tonks?” Charlie teased.

“What’d’ya take me for, a cradle robber?” Tonks bellowed. “He’s sixteen and I’m twenty-three, for Merlin’s sake! Mothering, thank you.” She opened her eyes, tried to focus on Harry, and added, “’Course if you were twenty-three, then I’d be - what - thirty? Who could say, then?” Harry looked around nervously.

Her eyes closed again. “Don’t like being sized up, eh? ’Sall right, Harry. Jus’ mind you leave a drawbridge in those walls of yours, ‘kay?” She stopped talking for a few moments, and Harry wondered if she’d fallen asleep.

Tonks’ eyes opened into slits. “Right, the career thing? Don’t fret - overrated. ’Sides, saving the world ... ’snot a bad gig.” Her eyes closed again. When she started snoring, Harry moved to sit next to Lupin.

“...yeh need ter know it’s not as dangerous as yeh might be thinkin’, Mr. Granger,” Hagrid said.

“The great majority of wizards and witches are licensed by their early twenties,” Lupin added. “It’s an advanced skill, but quite attainable.”

Mr. Weasley, who had sat down next to Mr. Granger, said, “Fred and George passed at 17. George, be a good lad and Apparate over here.” With a loud crack, George disappeared and reappeared behind his father.

Lupin told Harry, “Tom’s a little apprehensive about Hermione learning to Apparate. It seems she’s worked out the underlying mechanics on her own.”

Harry laughed. “That’s not surprising.”

Mr. Granger eyed him curiously. “Why not?”

Harry suddenly felt nervous. He stammered, “Well – surely you know that she’s first in our class, erm, by a wide margin. She’s well beyond me in Charms and Transfiguration, and ... and she just understands how everything works. Amazing, really. She’s brilliant.”

Mr. Granger said, “From what I’ve been told about you, I would have guessed that you’d be first.”

Lupin said, “Harry is better at practical demonstrations of his ability. Hermione, on the other hand, is the most capable student Hogwarts has seen in a very long time.”

Professor Flitwick, who had left the game of darts, agreed. “I would rank your daughter among the more capable students that I have ever taught.”

Harry was very surprised when Mr. Granger asked Professor Flitwick, “How does she compare to Harry, then?”

Flitwick hesitated, his ever-present smile fading. “Mr. Granger, how old do you think that I am?” he asked

Mr. Granger looked at the professor closely. “Hermione told us that magic folk are generally longer-lived than the rest of us ... if you were my neighbour, I’d place you in your sixties.”

“Sixty years ago I was instructing Aurors in the art of duelling. I graduated from Hogwarts in 1916, sir.” Flitwick waited for Mr. Granger’s reaction to pass before continuing. “I have taught thousands of students. Hermione’s ability to acquire and retain knowledge is among the greatest I have seen. Harry possesses a different kind of potential.” The professor looked at Harry and blushed. “There have been times that I have literally felt Harry’s power. I have only experienced that with a handful of people, students or otherwise. Hermione and Harry both perform well above their level of training, and that is the only comparison I can offer. Their abilities are quite different from one another.” Mr. Granger contemplated Harry with his arms crossed.

Mr. Weasley cut in, and Harry marvelled at his sense of timing. “Harry, I’m dying to see that motorbike.”

Fred threw his last dart and fetched Harry’s saddlebags. “See, Harry, I didn’t make off with it,” he said. Harry took the reduced Bonneville from the bag, palmed it, and whispered the appropriate words.

“Sweet Lord...” Mr. Granger whispered.

“Goodness, that’s Sirius Black’s motorbike!” exclaimed Professor Flitwick. “Where on Earth...?”

Hagrid said, “I’ve had it stashed away fer years. Sirius wanted Harry ter have the bike.”

Mr. Granger let out a low whistle. “A Bonnie... a mint condition Bonnie. It’s a ’69, isn’t it? You can tell by the fairings.”

Harry nodded. “That’s what Whitehorn said it was supposed to look like – a 1969 Triumph Bonneville.”

“Supposed to...? Obviously I’m missing something,” Mr. Granger said.

Harry made the Bonneville revert to its true form. “I thought you should see it like this, Mr. Weasley. It’s not an enchanted artefact; technically it’s a broomstick.”

Mr. Weasley ran his hand along the horizontal stick, shaking his head. “Unbelievable,” he said. “So that’s how Sirius got away with it. I never knew.”

“What’d Whitehorn do ‘ta fancy ‘er up, Harry?” Hagrid asked.

Harry shrugged. “I don’t know what it was like before. Whitehorn said it’s a twin Nimbus 2001 now.” Hagrid’s bushy eyebrows shot up.

Professor Flitwick smiled devilishly and asked, “How fast can you travel on it?”

“I don’t know yet, but I aim to find out,” Harry said. He nervously watched Mr. Granger for evidence of disapproval and was surprised to see none.

“That will be positively thrilling!” Flitwick said, clapping his hands. “I had a Vespa for a time, a number of years ago – this was in the days when one was allowed to charm a Muggle vehicle without special permits.” He frowned slightly, and added, “I’m afraid it wasn’t nearly as fast as a Nimbus broom.” Lupin stifled a laugh.

Harry pulled the manual out of the saddlebag, glanced at a particular passage, and touched the handles. “Have a seat,” he said, gesturing to the professor.

“I couldn’t, Harry!” Flitwick protested. “It’s far too big for me!”

Harry said, “Give it a go, Professor.”

Flitwick eyed him dubiously. He stood on a chair to swing his leg over the seat. As soon as he was seated, the Bonneville began to shrink. “Oh, my – a dynamic reducing charm! Smashing work!” he exclaimed. The motorbike lost over a third of its length and half its height. Flitwick still looked small on the seat but was no longer dwarfed.

The professor grasped the handles, which swept back to reach him more comfortably. “Did Devlin Whitehorn do this himself?” Flitwick asked.

“He told me that he convinced a jinni to help,” Harry replied.

Professor Flitwick paled and said, “I shudder to think what this cost.” He stepped off and onto the chair, and the Bonneville returned to the proper size for Harry.

Mr. Granger’s fingers gently traced the nameplate on the fuel tank. “It feels so real,” he gasped.

“Go ahead,” Harry said, motioning to the seat.

“May I?” Mr. Granger’s glee was evident as he settled onto the Bonneville. It adjusted to him slightly, and he did his best to avoid a startled expression.

Harry touched the handle and whispered “*Veho Triumph*”. The motorbike did a credible imitation of starting. Mr. Granger held the handbrake and lightly turned the throttle, which generated a satisfying rumble. He let out the brake and the Bonneville immediately rolled forward.

“What the – ?” he said, squeezing the brake tightly. “No clutch!”

“There's no engine at all, sir,” Harry reminded him. “The harder you turn the throttle, the faster you go. You squeeze the brakes to stop and turn the handlebars to manoeuvre – that’s about it.”

“I take it that she... flies?” Mr. Granger asked quietly. Harry nodded.

Mr. Granger took a deep breath, and asked impulsively, “Any chance you’d take me up?”

Harry froze. “I don’t have helmets,” he said, hoping that might provide a plausible excuse.

“Well...” began George.

Fred said, “We were saving these for later. Shall we?”

“Good enough,” George said; he produced a large wrapped box.

Harry took the box gingerly. “Dobby and Winky weren’t fond of that last box of yours,” he muttered.

“This one’s safe to open,” Mr. Weasley said, adding hastily, “unless you two have made changes?”

“No pranks – we promise,” George said firmly.

Harry tore off the paper and opened the box. Inside were two matching motorbike helmets – black with red and gold flames, and clear shields.

“They’re, erm, a little adjustable,” Fred said sheepishly.

“Not enough to spook a Muggle, even if he were to put one on,” George added.

“Any other modifications that you lads care to disclose?” Mr. Weasley asked, trying to sound stern.

Fred fidgeted, and George said, “There’s a variation on the charm behind the Extendable Ears, that’s all.” He took one of the helmets, and put it on. “Put on the other, Harry, and lower the shield.”

“How does it feel?” George asked. Harry thought it sounded like George was in the helmet with him.

“Brilliant,” Harry answered.

“This way, you can talk to whoever’s riding with you,” George told him. “Happy birthday, mate.”

Harry pulled off the helmet and earnestly shook hands first with Fred and then with George. “Thanks, they’re amazing. Still, I don’t know about a ride just now. We must be warded in; I assume the party’s here on account of security?”

Lupin looked up from the manual for the Bonnie. “It appears that the bike has an invisibility charm. You’re already keyed to the wards, so it shouldn’t be much of a bother.”

Mr. Granger was still sitting on the Bonneville. Harry resisted a sigh. “If you’re up for it...?” Harry offered, holding out the helmet in his hand.

Harry had his answer when Mr. Granger immediately donned the helmet. He took the other helmet from George, and slid onto the Bonneville in front of Mr. Granger.

“Can you hear me?” Harry asked.

“Outstanding,” Mr. Granger said. “That would have come in handy.”

“Any fear of heights?” Harry asked him.

“No,” Mr. Granger replied, “that’s Cordelia’s cross to bear.”

Harry pressed. “What about speed, or sudden turns?”

“I used to ride a lot – on the ground, of course,” Mr. Granger told Harry. “I liked it very, very fast. Don’t tell that to Hermione, by the way. Why all the questions? Are you intending to spook me?”

“Certainly not!” Harry insisted. “It’s just that Hermione’s a very, um, nervous flier. I thought that I should check first. Hang on, then.” The motorbike lifted off the floor and began to drift slightly. He gathered in the handlebars and edged forward out of the doors. The bike was back-heavy but felt more or less as a broom was intended. “I’m going to use an invisibility charm,” he explained. “It wouldn’t do for anyone to see us flying about. You won’t be able to see yourself or me or the motorbike. Just mind your grasp, and we’ll be fine.”

“Right then – let’s do this,” Mr. Granger resolved.

Harry allowed the Bonneville to slowly rise above the barricades. Soon they could see the lamps of Hogsmeade. He felt Mr. Granger tense. “Everything all right?” he asked.

“I’ve never actually seen Hermione perform any, um, you know?” Mr. Granger said. “Some of

her books are passing strange, but this... goodness, you're her schoolmate. This brings it home, somehow."

Harry checked in with Mr. Granger once more and then gunned the throttle. Mr. Granger shouted, but it was the sort of joyful shout that Harry associated with children at play. They covered the mile to the village in just less than thirty seconds. Harry climbed higher to be certain that no one on the ground would hear them; then he slowed to a crawl, and slowly drifted five hundred feet above the rooftops.

"The game you play on the broomsticks – Quidditch, is it? Do you fly that fast during a game?" Mr. Granger asked.

"I play the Seeker position," Harry explained. "I can spend a lot of time just watching and drifting. When I'm in play, though, I'm going as fast as the broom will allow. The top speed on a Firebolt's better than 140."

"It sounds dangerous," Mr. Granger observed.

"I've been to the hospital wing a time or two," Harry admitted. "Hermione doesn't care much for Quidditch." Mr. Granger didn't say anything.

Harry continued to drift over the village. "Everything still all right, sir?" he asked.

Mr. Granger said quietly, "Fine, Harry. Just fine."

"Let's have a look at Hogwarts, then," Harry said. "If you feel a sudden need to leave, let me know, right?"

As the Bonnie passed over the Quidditch pitch, Mr. Granger shuddered slightly and then tightened his grip. "Good Lord, will you look at that?" he said in awe. "It looked like a ruin before, but now... it's magnificent..."

"I was hoping that the aversion charms might not affect you if you were with me," Harry said. "Let's have a closer look, but do let me know if anything changes."

Harry took a slow loop around the castle, pointing out the Great Hall and the tower that held Gryffindor House. Mr. Granger marvelled all the while, and Harry was glad to be able to show him the place where Hermione spent most of her time. Harry moved on to the Lake and let the Bonnie drift slowly along its length.

He started to talk out of nervousness. "You used to ride a motorbike, then?" he asked.

"I had a '67 Bonnie, actually," Mr. Granger said, "and a BMW later on. Cordelia had me sell it when we knew Hermione was on the way."

"Do you miss it?" Harry wondered.

Mr. Granger chuckled. “Not until just now,” he said.

Harry blurted out, “Are you seriously thinking of taking Hermione to Canada or wherever? Erm, not that it’s any of my business, of course...”

“I don’t know; we just want what’s best,” Mr. Granger said. “That’s what parents are supposed to want for their children.”

“I wouldn’t know about that,” Harry said.

There was silence before Mr. Granger said, “I’m sorry, Harry, I wasn’t thinking.”

“I’m sure you meant nothing by it,” said Harry.

Mr. Granger told him, “She tells us about her friends, obviously, and bits about the classes. If we didn’t know better, we’d almost believe that she was attending a regular school. This little ride gives the lie to that, I suppose. Of course, the last month took away most of the illusions we’ve harboured. It sounds as if she’s doing so well here, you know? She’s at the top of her class, well respected by her teachers – I don’t understand why she won’t talk to us about it.”

Harry shrugged. “I don’t understand it either. If I could be with my mum and dad, I don’t think I’d stop talking again for the rest of my life.”

Mr. Granger patted him on the shoulder. “You seem to be a decent young man,” he said. Harry chuckled.

“Is something amusing in that?” Mr. Granger asked.

“I wish that you’d share your opinion with Mrs. Granger,” Harry suggested.

“Arthur said he saved you from her for the moment,” Mr. Granger laughed. “She’s concerned because Hermione thinks so highly of you. Acquiescence, Harry – it’s the best course with Cordelia. I tried to resist her once.”

“How did that work out?” Harry asked.

“It was twenty-six years ago,” Mr. Granger explained. “I ended up with a ring, a degree in dentistry and a daughter in the bargain. How do you think it turned out?”

“I want to thank you for – well, you know – being –” Harry began.

“What, civil?” Mr. Granger asked.

“Well, after last night I didn’t expect – I mean –”

“I was angry with you last night,” Mr. Granger said firmly. “I hope that you can understand my concern. After talking with Arthur a bit, I saw that my anger was misplaced. I should have been

angry with this Sirius Black for playing games. I should be angry with this villain of yours, and not you.”

“His name is Voldemort,” Harry said, “and I would die to protect Hermione from him. I mean that sincerely, sir.”

“That was very upsetting to Cordelia,” Mr. Granger said.

“Why?” Harry asked. “I suppose I thought it would be comforting.”

“She never believed that it could come to that,” Mr. Granger explained. “Even with the guards and all the precautions this summer, she never believed it – nor did I.”

“I’m not planning on it, believe me,” Harry said glumly. “It’s just that I couldn’t live with myself if Hermione were hurt again because of me.” He hesitated, and then added, “Perhaps a move would be for the best.”

Neither Harry nor Mr. Granger said a word as Harry cruised back to the Shrieking Shack. Harry disengaged the invisibility charm, and swooped down over the top of the barricade.

“Slow down, Harry,” Mr. Granger said. “What’s that about?”

They crossed through the wards just in time to see Hermione pull from Ron’s grasp and dash across the protected area behind the barricade. Ron quickly dashed back inside. Harry instinctively made for a landing between Hermione and the doors to the Shack. He turned and took Mr. Granger’s helmet.

Mr. Granger dismounted, confused. “I had thought... aren’t you...?” he began.

“I’ll speak to her later, I’m sure,” Harry said.

Mrs. Granger came rushing from the doors. She stopped abruptly and scowled at the motorbike, then closed in on Harry; it was clear she was furious about something. Harry extended one hand to quiet her and gestured to where Hermione stood sobbing in her father’s embrace. Mrs. Granger took a step toward her husband and daughter, before catching a glance from Mr. Granger. She turned to Harry as if to say something but instead turned away.

Harry flew the Bonnie away from the Grangers and set down beside the doors to the Shrieking Shack. He dismounted, reduced the bike and stuck it in one of the pockets of his aviator jacket.

Tonks was still snoring in her chair. Her father had arrived; Harry wondered if he had been called. Mr. Tonks was seated with Mr. Weasley, Hagrid, Lupin, Professor Flitwick and another man that Harry didn’t know.

Harry heard Ron bellow, “It’s none of your business!” He spun around to see Ron at the foot of the stairs, berating Luna Lovegood. Ron’s brothers had set down their darts and approached crossly. Mr. Weasley rose from his seat.

Luna looked at the floor and shuffled her feet. “I wasn’t suggesting business of any kind, Ronald. I apologise for taking an interest in your feelings.”

“You *should* apologise!” Ron screeched, wild-eyed. “If Ginny wants to put up with you, that’s her affair. I think you’re a nutter, and I try to think even that as little as possible!”

Luna sniffed, “I didn’t mean to presume... I promise to avoid you, if that’s your wish.”

“Ron!” Harry exclaimed.

Ron shook his head, as though he were just waking. “Wha –?” he started.

Harry strode toward him so forcefully that Ron’s brothers backed off. “Are you enjoying this? What’s wrong with you?” he demanded.

Ron tried to explain, “Look... I shouldn’t have been so...”

“Don’t say it to me – you say it to Luna,” Harry insisted.

Ron began to fuss with his shirtsleeves. “I shouldn’t have said those things,” he managed.

“Try it again, with conviction,” warned Bill. Arms crossed, Charlie glowered at Ron; Fred and George looked no friendlier.

Luna shook her head and twirled at her necklace of butterbeer caps. “No apologies are expected and none are required. I understand completely, Ronald. I know what loss feels like.” She looked to Harry and added, “It’s the worst feeling in the world, isn’t it?”

Ron fumed, “How can you lose something that you never had in the first place? I get what Ginny meant about being free. Life’s too bloody short to waste.” He waved off his brothers. “I’m going back to the party and I intend to enjoy myself,” he said before trudging away.

“Are you all right?” Harry asked Luna.

She sniffed and smiled. “Of course, Harry; I don’t hold onto things. I’m happy to be here – my daddy’s bubbling to meet you.” She gestured toward the man seated next to Professor Flitwick.

The man bounded to his feet as Harry approached. He was tall and rail-thin. His hair was light brown with wisps of white, and strewn wildly about his head. Luna had his eyes. He grasped Harry’s hand and pumped madly. “What a great pleasure to meet you, Harry! Goodness me, that interview was quite a coup for us! You’ve been terribly beneficial for my daughter and me, all the way around! Lovegood’s the name, of course – Oddment Lovegood. Friends call me Odd.”

“Of course they do,” Harry said without thinking. It was another several seconds before Mr. Lovegood stopped shaking his hand and Harry took a seat.

“Mr. Lovegood was just about to tell us about the story he’s been chasing,” Lupin explained. A

silly grin brewed beneath Hagrid's bushy beard.

"Was it something about Fudge selling his soul to druids?" Harry asked casually. Mr. Weasley coughed furiously and turned away.

Mr. Lovegood smiled. "Oh, that's old news; Fudge's soul was bought and paid for years ago. Now it appears that the *Daily Prophet*'s about to be bought and paid for, as well."

Ted Tonks raised an eyebrow. "You have this on good authority?" he asked.

Mr. Lovegood looked very satisfied. "I have registered copies of purchase agreements, two witnesses to the Muggle filings, and a solid confirmation on background from within the Ministry. Good enough for you, Ted?"

"Sorry," Mr. Tonks said, "but you have to admit that some of the stories you've run... take the Stubby Boardman thing as an example; that was rather absurd, wasn't it?"

Mr. Lovegood frowned. "Some things are more than they seem. As for the *Prophet*, this is a serious story and one worthy of concern. I'm hoping that Dumbledore will come around here tonight, actually."

Mr. Tonks said gently, "Odd... do you honestly think he'll take you seriously?"

Mr. Lovegood drew himself up in his seat. "He and I have had our moments but I'm certain he'll be interested in this. I'm no fan of the *Prophet*, but the thought of it in the hands of Keith MacLeish gives me pause." Harry thought Ted Tonks' eyes were going to pop out. Mr. Weasley shook his head, and even Professor Flitwick managed a disapproving look.

The name was familiar to Harry, and he sifted through memories of Uncle Vernon blathering on at the dinner table until it came to him. "Keith MacLeish – he owns some of the Muggle papers, doesn't he?" he asked.

Mr. Tonks looked as though he'd tasted something sour. "MacLeish owns half the papers in England, satellite television in Europe... seems like he holds half of Australia altogether," he explained.

Mr. Weasley shook his head. "You should hear my Australian counterpart talk about him," he said. "He owns the *Quill* – that's the paper there – and uses it like a Quidditch bat, apparently."

Harry still wondered if this wasn't another of the Quibbler's wild hares; perhaps all the men were having him on, he thought. "How would this fellow know about wizarding papers in the first place... is he a squib?" he asked.

"MacLeish is no squib; he's a wizard, Harry," Hagrid spat. "Yer lookin' at one of his ol' housemates, not that he gave a tinker's damn 'bout any of us. Should have gone straight 'ta Slytherin, if yeh ask me."

Professor Flitwick nodded in agreement with Hagrid, causing his cap to slip off. “The Sorting Hat does miss on occasion,” he observed. “Conniving, self-serving, rule-flouting, destructive... some think that he simply doesn’t care if the Muggles find us out.”

Flitwick’s tone convinced Harry that this was no joke, and he asked, “MacLeish isn’t a Death Eater, is he?”

“I rather doubt that,” Mr. Tonks said. “MacLeish has one agenda, as far as I can see: his own.”

“Harry,” Lupin reminded him, “a person can be evil without necessarily being in league with darkness.”

“Like Umbridge,” Harry said under his breath.

Mr. Weasley obviously heard him; he said, “There’s also a difference between being evil and being amoral. I wouldn’t have believed it until Ginny and the boys spoke with us, but I’d say that describes Dolores perfectly.”

“That Umbridge is as evil as they come, and MacLeish weren’t no different. He chose ta run wit’ the Slytherins, an’ mind yeh tha’ most of ‘em were with Grindelwald at the time. I remember he followed ol’ Tom Riddle ‘round like a chick to a hen,” Hagrid warned.

Mr. Lovegood said, “There’s also a partner involved who I’ve not been able to tease out.”

Mr. Tonks scowled. “I can’t imagine MacLeish partnering with anyone. I’ll make some enquiries, if you like,” he said.

From the dartboard, Fred Weasley asked aloud, “If this fellow takes over the *Prophet*, do you think they’ll put in Page Three girls?” Mr. Tonks, Mr. Lovegood and Lupin sniggered, while Mr. Weasley and Hagrid looked clueless. Harry knew perfectly well what Fred meant, thanks to Dudley. He turned away to hide his laughter, and saw that Luna was quietly tending to Tonks.

Responding to Harry’s glance, Luna asked, “Did no one cast a sobering charm?”

Ted Tonks shook his head and said, “Look on it as a life lesson for her; she’s old enough to know better.” Mr. Weasley began to tell a story about Charlie and a party that quickly drew the attention of the Weasley brothers away from their darts.

Harry slipped away to kneel next to Luna and the sleeping Tonks. Luna said quietly, “I don’t think she’s well. There are better ways to teach someone a lesson.”

Harry said, “I’d take care of it, but I’ve never even heard of a sobering charm. It’s not something Flitwick’s likely to teach fifth-years, eh?”

Luna managed a slight smile. “The incantation is *finite crapulam*, if you care to try it.”

“Why would you...?” Harry began, but trailed off as his gaze shifted toward Mr. Lovegood.

“It’s not like that,” Luna insisted. “My daddy had a very difficult time after my mum died. He stopped drinking before I left for Hogwarts.”

“Wouldn’t it be dangerous to cast a sobering charm on yourself when you’re the one in need of it?” Harry asked. “That’s how you heard of it, right? Your father cast it?”

“I learned how to cast it myself when I was nine,” Luna said. “It worked if I put my hands on him. Underage magic isn’t closely tracked until a witch is accepted to Hogwarts.”

“You taught yourself wandless magic when you were nine years old?” Harry asked, to be sure of what he was hearing. Luna nodded in silence.

Harry fished out his wand. “You’re full of surprises,” he said with a grin.

“What a *lovely* thing to say!” Luna cooed in a singsong voice as Harry cast the sobering charm. Tonks stirred, and then resumed snoring.

“She should feel better in a few minutes. Thank you, Harry,” Luna said.

Harry shrugged. “It was the right thing to do. I’m glad that you spoke out.” He stood up. “I’m going upstairs for a bit, then. Are you all right – you know, with what Ron said?”

Luna smiled and her large eyes twinkled. “Eventually Ronald will offer me food. It’s a strange way to apologise, but I find it endearing.”

Someone upstairs had tuned a wireless to the WWN music service. Harry cringed; most wizarding music sounded to him like the cries of a caged animal. A number of young people were dancing. Ginny was practically dragging a visibly exhausted Colin Creevey. Harry considered it appropriate punishment for his hand in the *Teen Witch Weekly* article. Several women were seated around a table near the door to the adjacent kitchen. Harry saw Professor McGonagall at the near end; she was watching one couple with evident disapproval.

Harry looked closer at the couple and realised that it was Ron and Lavender Brown. Enchanted lanterns backlit the room, and Harry couldn’t see any light shining between the two as they wriggled together. Harry looked for Mrs. Weasley and eventually spotted her sitting very stiffly at the far end of the table; he saw no sign of Mrs. Granger. Harry became angrier each time his eyes passed over Ron and Lavender.

“Oi, Harry!” said Neville as he tapped Harry on the shoulder.

Harry forcibly exhaled. “Hello, Neville. I expected you’d be with Ginny,” he said.

“With Ginny? No, I did my bit – you know, sympathetic ear and all? I thought I’d leave the rest to Colin.” Neville gestured toward the elder Creevey, who was sweat-soaked and trembling.

“That looks to have been a good choice,” Harry observed.

“I’ve got something for you... it’s in here *somewhere*,” Neville said as he felt around the inside of his cloak. “Ah!” He produced a small box wrapped in red paper.

“You didn’t need to bring anything,” Harry said, tugging at the paper. Inside was a very slender and wicked-looking contraption.

“It’s a –” Neville began.

“It’s a wand holster,” Harry realised. “I think I saw this sort at Ollivanders.”

“Then you know how they work?” Neville asked. “Gran and Great-Uncle Algie both think they’re dead useful.”

“It’s a brilliant gift, really,” Harry assured him, “but it must have been expensive.”

“Gran covered most of it,” admitted Neville. “It’s her way of thanking you for putting up with me. Happy birthday, Harry.”

“Thank you,” Harry said. “I’ll put it to good use, I’m sure of that. I would have brought you something if I’d known you would be here. It’s your birthday, too, after all,” Harry said.

“It was yesterday, actually,” Neville said. “How did you know?”

“Erm... you must have said something once,” Harry covered.

Neville nodded. “I suppose I must have. Hermione brought me a gift – it’s a book on memory charms... Harry?”

Harry absently shook Neville’s hand. “Listen... thanks again; it’s really smashing. I just need to... I’ll see you soon, right?” He walked briskly down the stairs and out the doors toward the barricade.

He could barely make out Hermione and Mr. Granger, leaning against the low wall. He didn’t notice Mrs. Granger sitting on the ground until he had passed her.

“Hello, Harry,” she said quietly.

Harry froze. “Hello, Mrs. Granger. I was just checking –”

“They’ve been sitting like that for the longest time,” Mrs. Granger said.

Harry took a deep breath and sat beside her. “Is that good?” he asked.

“They haven’t spent this much time together all summer,” she said.

“Then it’s good,” he decided.

Mrs. Granger asked, "What did you say to Tom?"

"I don't know... a lot of things," Harry answered.

"He used to have a motorbike. Now I suppose I'll have to talk him out of picking up a new one," she complained.

"I didn't mean anything by it, ma'am," Harry explained. "He asked me for a ride, and I gave it to him. He said... flying seemed to change his perspective, I thought. He said that Hermione didn't tell either of you much about Hogwarts, and that he didn't understand why."

"But what did *you* say?" she asked again.

"I said I didn't understand it either," Harry answered her. "I told him that if I could have my parents back, I'd never stop talking. I told him that I would die to protect Hermione. I told him that you should move away, if that would keep her safe."

Mrs. Granger's expression changed. "I'm sorry?" she said. Harry wished that he could read her face, but he couldn't; she was more guarded than Hermione.

Harry shrugged and quietly repeated, "I told him that you should move, if it would keep her safe."

Mrs. Granger fired questions at him. "You actually told him that? Were you just trying to be gallant? Do you believe you could accept that, should that be our decision?"

His arms suddenly felt heavy, as though he needed to think in order to breathe in and out. "I don't... I'm not certain... I really can't say..."

Mrs. Granger looked at him with sad eyes that, for a moment, became the eyes of her daughter. "Tell me – it's important that I know," she insisted.

It seemed like forever before he said, "She's my best friend. It would be like giving up a part of myself."

"I see," Mrs. Granger said. She let her hand rest on his shoulder for a moment and then returned to the Shack.

Hermione and Mr. Granger stood and embraced. She caught sight of Harry and raised her hand in greeting. Mr. Granger strode toward him.

Upon reaching Harry, Mr. Granger took his hand. "She talked to me," he said. "It was long overdue... you look a bit off, Harry. Are you...?" He caught sight of Mrs. Granger walking away.

"Cordelia and I are going to have words, I suspect," Mr. Granger said. "I think that Hermione could use a friend just now instead of her father. Take over, would you?"

The light of the half-moon dappled the surface of the pond and highlighted Hermione's hair. She was wearing jeans, a plain white shirt, and a necklace that made him notice the way her hair draped over her shoulders. Harry thought a hundred thoughts, and many felt inappropriate between two friends. They were quelled when moonlight flickered off the moisture pooled at the corners of her eyes.

He stood before her. Her head dipped, but not before he saw one corner of her mouth turn upward a bit. "You dropped out of the sky to bring me my father... I know you won't like me to say this, but it was a very heroic moment," she said.

"Ron's an arse," Harry said matter-of-factly.

The other corner of her mouth turned upward. "You don't even know what was said."

"I don't have to know. You ran away from him and he made you cry," Harry said. "Then he said horrible things to Luna, and he's making a fool of himself as we speak –"

She looked up at him and asked, "What did Ron say to her?" He decided that he had to avoid her eyes.

"Luna tried to be nice to him and he began yelling," Harry explained. "His own brothers actually stuck up for her."

"Aren't you interested in what he said to me?" Hermione asked.

"I can imagine it. Ron's fancied you for a long time," Harry said.

"I suppose I've known for quite a while," she told Harry. "It's just that he was so formal about it. It didn't feel like being asked for a date; it felt almost as if he was proposing marriage. I suppose that I did react rather badly."

"Would it have been different if he hadn't pushed?" he asked.

"I can't say, really. He's just so... so... I don't know, he's just *Ron*," she tried to explain. "I should have taken Ginny more seriously; at least I would have been prepared. Speaking of proposals, Ginny didn't by any chance...?"

Harry frowned. "Let's move on, shall we?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "It went that well, did it?"

"The twins stirred her up, I tried to make her feel better about everything that's happened, and she kissed me. After that, she decided she was over me," he said.

"She kissed... wait, she's over you?" Hermione's brow furrowed. "Just like that, after five years of crushing? That's peculiar..."

Harry shrugged. “She tried to convince me to chase after you, just before Ron showed up. I asked her what she was playing at, and she said that you and I should go and get over each other.”

Hermione hesitated. “Each other? She said that?”

“Exactly like that,” Harry repeated. “‘Go and get over each other’, she said.”

Hermione looked around furtively. “I see,” she said.

“What’s wrong?” he asked. “You’re a bit flushed.”

She looked past him and her eyes widened. “Who is that?” she asked.

“Where?” Harry looked around, his wand already drawn.

“Over there,” she said, pointing at the far side of the protected area. “It looks like someone trying to sneak off. Of all the foolish things to do... don’t they understand the danger?”

Harry squinted and then hesitated. “I... can’t tell – too far away,” he lied.

Hermione peered into the twilight and her mouth formed a silent ‘O’ as she recognised Ron and Lavender.

Harry made a show of looking again, and then exclaimed, “What is he thinking? I told you he was making an arse of himself.”

“He said he wanted to take me off to the woods – not that I would have gone anywhere – but he said that’s what he wanted! How could he do this to me?” Hermione cried. “And with her, of all people – not an hour later, and he’s trading me off for a silly Essex girl!”

Harry wasn’t certain of what to do, so he reached out and pulled her into an embrace. She pounded at one of his shoulders with her fist and buried her head against his neck. She shouted obscenities into his ear. He held her tighter and she winced; the obscenities dissolved into loud sobbing. He quickly softened his hold, cursing himself for hurting her. His urge to rip out Ron’s throat was muted by the desire to comfort his friend.

He spied more movement along the barricade and told her, “I see something that might give you a lift.”

“What, did that stupid cow take a fall?” she asked between sniffs.

Harry saw a few white sparks near the point where Ron was attempting to climb out. “No, but I think that ickle Ronnie’s in for a treat,” he offered.

“You’re honestly furious with him, aren’t you?” she asked.

“Of course I am! He must have known you’d be hurt, and I don’t know if I can forgive him that.

You seem surprised,” he said.

“I don’t know that he meant it, really, but I wasn’t sure where you would stand,” she admitted. “Ron’s your best friend.”

“No, he isn’t,” said Harry. “I meant what I told you last night.” He heard a crackle and turned to follow the sound. “Ah, here it comes.”

Hermione could only manage to say, “Wha...?” before the top of the barricade erupted; silent bright-white fireworks seemed to consume it. Ron and Lavender sat rigidly at the epicentre. Hermione gaped at the display. Fred and George quickly emerged from the doors and cried out a round of huzzahs. They gave an elaborate bow and Hermione began to laugh; she went on until fresh tears were running down her cheeks.

“I almost feel sorry,” she choked out.

“Don’t,” Harry said firmly.

“I said ‘almost’,” Hermione managed. Bill Weasley stopped short of the display, shook his head, and began to cast counter-curses.

Mr. Weasley stormed out of the Shack; for the first time that Harry could recall, the man was visibly angry. “Fred! George! You’ll help Bill to set this right!” he shouted. “We asked that you create proximity warnings, not a fireworks display! Why did we even bother to cast obscuring wards? As for you, Ron, I’ve had quite enough! Are you trying to discover how many girls you can humiliate in a single night? Perhaps I should leave you to your mother?”

The twins’ display still illuminated the entire protected area. Ron looked directly at Hermione, silently pleading. She turned and walked away.

Harry quickly followed. “Did you still want to talk with me about last night?” he asked.

“I’ve had enough for one evening,” Hermione told him. “Have you moved to Grimmauld Place yet? Could I come there tomorrow, perhaps?”

“It may have to be the following day,” Harry said. “This wouldn’t be to look over the library, would it?”

She lit up. “I saw it over Christmas! There must be over a thousand volumes and another two to three hundred scrolls!”

“That should keep you busy for a week or two,” Harry teased.

Hermione smiled and continued to walk along the barricade. “Do you honestly consider me your best friend?” she asked. He was weighing an answer when he heard a quiet *pop!* His wand was in hand and he faced the source of the sound even before Hermione began to react.

Dumbledore stood before them, hat in hand, bemusement playing across his features. “Good evening, Harry; and good evening to you, Miss Granger. Please accept my birthday wishes. Ah, a fireworks display – splendid!”

“You’re looking for me, then?” Harry grumbled.

“As much as I hate to interrupt the festivities, Harry, might we discuss important matters?” asked Dumbledore.

Hermione squeezed Harry’s hand and said, “I’ll find Mrs. Weasley and see about the cake. You have presents to open, you know?”

Harry nodded and then turned his attention to Dumbledore. “Let’s get this over with,” he said flatly.

Dumbledore led him back inside the Shrieking Shack. He whispered something to Lupin and then led Harry up the stairs until they reached the room that Ginny had used earlier in the evening. He closed the door and then flicked his wand to and fro; Harry watched with great interest as the background din from the guests below faded away.

There was no sign of a twinkle in Dumbledore’s eye. “I have been with the Board of Governors since the morning,” he sighed.

Harry thought that Dumbledore looked terribly old, and he’d never before truly considered the Headmaster in that way. His blue robes seemed too large for his frame, his hands were gnarled, and he leant into his ornate walking stick.

“We will be joined shortly. Perhaps we should dispense with your questions first?” Dumbledore suggested. “You still harbour concerns about what Professor Snape and I did or did not know in regard to Sirius fifteen years ago.”

“‘Dispense’, is it? You think this is a trifle?” Harry snapped. “I’ve had my fill for the day, so let’s get on with this.”

Dumbledore bowed his head. “Must it be this way, Harry? Must we fight each time that we come together? I grow weary of it.”

Harry refused to look at him. “I’m weary of the lies,” he said.

“What lies do you believe that you have been told?” asked Dumbledore.

Harry was prepared to shout, but he felt Dumbledore’s pain and regret and saw it in the man’s eyes and on his face. Harry saw an old man withering away. He knew Dumbledore had bent the rules for him and had even supported him, other than his placement with the Dursleys. He knew all of that in his head, but the rest of his being raged on. “How could you let Sirius *rot* in that place *for – twelve – years ? You let it happen, didn’t you?*” he seethed, fists clenched.

Dumbledore very slowly let out his breath. After an uncomfortably long pause, he asked, “Why was Sirius sent to Azkaban, Harry?”

“He didn’t betray my parents! *He didn’t!*” Harry shouted.

“You are correct; he did not betray your parents,” Dumbledore acknowledged before he asked again, “Why was Sirius sent to Azkaban?”

Harry said firmly, “He didn’t kill Wormtail, and he didn’t kill those Muggles – Wormtail did.”

“Harry, I am going to describe something in hypothetical terms,” Dumbledore said. “I would like you to listen carefully. When I am finished, I would like you to explain how you would deal with the situation. Will you allow me that much?” Harry gave a reluctant nod, his arms tightly crossed.

“Very well,” Dumbledore began. “Suppose for a moment that your friends Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger were in grave danger from Voldemort ... is something wrong?”

“I’m not sure that ‘Ron’ and ‘friend’ belongs in the same sentence,” Harry fumed.

“I fervently hope you do not mean that, Harry,” Dumbledore said. “In any case, I am only using names to make a point. May I continue?”

When Harry again nodded, Dumbledore went on, “As I was saying, Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger are in great danger from Voldemort. It is necessary for them to go into hiding. You believe that Mr. Neville Longbottom is their secret keeper. You do not know that they have changed secret keepers from Mr. Longbottom to... Mr. Dean Thomas, let us say. Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger are subsequently found out and killed. Mr. Longbottom finds out what happened. He attempts to involve himself in the aftermath and then briefly disappears. When he reappears, it is in a public confrontation with Mr. Thomas. It appears that Mr. Longbottom murders Mr. Thomas and a dozen innocent Muggles in the process. What would you conclude, Harry? What would you do?”

“But Neville wasn’t the secret-keeper,” Harry protested.

“You do not know that this was the case, and Mr. Longbottom is not particularly helpful in his own defence,” Dumbledore added. “Furthermore, you are told plainly by the authorities not to interfere. Veiled threats are made against a dozen other of your friends. In the end, Mr. Longbottom is not judged to have been responsible for the deaths of Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger. It is the deaths of Mr. Thomas and the Muggles that are deemed of concern, and the evidence points strongly to Mr. Longbottom’s responsibility in the matter.”

“You could have stood up for Sirius. He wasn’t charged with anything; he didn’t even have a trial,” Harry said quietly.

“He was in fact charged, but yes, there was no trial,” Dumbledore acknowledged. “There were

terrible abuses at the end – retributions, lies, calumny... it was nearly as dark as the War itself in some ways.”

“Why didn’t you become Minister then, after Voldemort disappeared?” Harry asked.

Dumbledore said, “Because of the prophecy, I felt that I needed to remain at Hogwarts.”

“You could have been the Minister for ten years,” Harry said. “You could have forced a trial. You could have done so many things.”

“The Board of Governors would not have welcomed my return to Hogwarts,” Dumbledore pointed out.

“You would have been a good Minister. They would have let you come back,” Harry insisted.

“Do not assume that the Board conducts itself honourably; consider that Mr. Malfoy was a member for quite some time. In any case, what is done is done,” Dumbledore sighed. “I am nearly ten times your age, Harry, and lost count of my regrets long ago. Let us return to my scenario, however. What would you do in this case? What decisions would you take?”

Harry hesitated. “I think... well, I suppose... oh, I don’t know! Right, let’s assume this isn’t real; that should make it easier... steady on – this is a ‘greater good’ problem, isn’t it?”

“What do you mean by that?” Dumbledore asked.

“Hermione was telling us once about a book she’d read – not surprising, I suppose,” Harry explained. “It was about balancing the good of the individual against the greater good. Your best friend is in the path of the Killing Curse, next to twenty people who are about to be crushed by a boulder – whom do you save? It boils down to that, doesn’t it? You could have fought for Sirius, but you couldn’t see a way to help Sirius and others would have been hurt along the way.”

The familiar twinkle flashed in Dumbledore’s eyes for a moment. “Very well – using your scenario, which do you save?” he asked.

“There’s always a way. Deflect the boulder, and then jump in front of the curse,” Harry said immediately. “You save everyone.”

Dumbledore frowned, and he asked, “Did you share that solution with Miss Granger?”

“I did,” Harry recalled.

Dumbledore asked, “What was her reaction to your solution?”

“Funny, I never gave it a thought at the time...” Harry began. Dumbledore looked at him curiously, and Harry completed his thought. “She said ‘almost everyone’, and ran out of the common room.”

“I was thinking much the same. Your solution saves everyone but yourself,” Dumbledore pointed out.

Harry felt a twinge of rage return. “When has that mattered before? I’m not supposed to do that, am I?” he fumed.

“Harry –”

“Here’s a cracking scenario for you,” Harry snapped; “A schoolboy faces off against, what, the worst dark wizard in a century? There are two choices, aren’t there? He wins, or I take him with me.”

“There is a third alternative, without question,” Dumbledore insisted, “and you shan’t be a schoolboy. You will be a fully trained and well prepared wizard.”

“What else do you know that I don’t?” Harry asked with acid in his voice. “Do you honestly believe he’ll wait two years?”

Dumbledore reached out and clasped Harry’s right hand with his own. Harry resisted, but was surprised by the power of his grip. “I cannot say how long it will be before you confront him. I can promise that you will be fully trained, no matter what happens,” Dumbledore said.

“What do you mean, ‘no matter what happens’?” Harry asked.

“As I said, Harry, the Board of Governors as a whole does not always conduct itself honourably,” Dumbledore answered. The door shimmered and he added, “Ah, I see we are joined.” He waggled his wand twice, and Madam Bones entered.

“Good evening, ma’am,” Harry said reflexively.

“Happy birthday, Mr. Potter,” she said. “Nothing comes easily for you, does it?” Her voice was laced with fatigue. “I am in the custody of two letters, Albus. The first provides Mr. Potter’s OWL results. The Board of Governors issued the second not an hour ago. I wish both of you to know that I am deeply opposed to this action, but am honour-bound to bear it.”

She passed the letters to Dumbledore, who held them out for Harry and said, “Harry, the Board has voted by a bare majority to place you on probation. This is an inappropriate action on their part. In the event that this situation worsens for any reason, I do have a –”

Harry didn’t hear the rest. The world stopped and Dumbledore’s voice echoed in his frozen ears. The only thing he could feel for a moment was the rapid pounding of his heart. Motion returned abruptly, and he seized the letters. He let the first fall to the ground and tore open the second. Only bits and pieces of the contents registered as he read.

... repeated instances in which you have endangered the lives of your fellow students ...
... while not always of your own volition, the Board cannot overlook ...
... heroism is creditable, but does not outweigh the responsibility of the Governors and the Headmaster to all of our students and staff ...
... Therefore, the Board of Governors orders the Headmaster to place you on probation, effective immediately upon receipt of this notice ...

Harry let the letter fall free.

“This was calculated – of that there is no doubt,” Dumbledore said.

“There were Galleons behind the vote,” Madam Bones said, “and I am beginning to wonder if the same Galleons might have been behind the decision to restore Sirius Black’s legal and property rights. Both the restoration of Black’s rights and the decision to place you on probation took place in the hands of persons whose interests are questionable at best. With one exception, this was a vote based upon blood –”

“I can’t... I can’t hear this right now. I’ve had enough,” Harry bit out. “Lupin blames me, Shackbolt blames me, now the sodding Board blames me... *I’ve had enough.*”

He wrested his hand away from Dumbledore and bumped into an invisible barrier. It dawned on Harry that Dumbledore had cast more than a silencing charm. He growled, “*Finite incantatum!*” and flung the door open; it collided with the wall and nearly came loose.

Dumbledore asked, “Harry, where is your wand?”

“In my back... pocket...” Harry’s voice trailed off.

“You did not use your wand to destroy the Dursleys’ cellar. You were on the telephone with Miss Granger immediately prior to her frightening episode, were you not?” said Dumbledore. “You are not experiencing a control problem; it is something rather different. We must discuss –”

Harry whirled around. “There’s nothing to discuss. If I’m not wanted at Hogwarts, so be it! If I got Sirius killed, so be it! I’m leaving!”

“Harry, please –”

“I wonder if you’re able to stop me?” Harry asked coldly.

“Mr. Potter!” Madam Bones scolded. “You will show your Headmaster the respect appropriate to his office!”

“He’s not my Headmaster until the first of September,” Harry fired back.

“That may be so, but a wise man doesn’t push away what allies he has,” Madam Bones snapped in return.

“This action by the Board is a grievous but manageable disruption, Harry. I am merely trying to keep you well informed,” Dumbledore said.

“Oh, don’t worry about me – I’ll still do what I have to do!” Harry shouted. Madam Bones and Dumbledore began to argue behind him, but were cut off by the telltale squelch of an Imperturbable charm.

Harry pushed past a bewildered Mrs. Weasley and Professor McGonagall and stopped at the large kitchen hearth. There was no Floo powder to be seen. “Of course – it must be blocked,” he muttered to himself, then said loudly, “Dobby!”

The house-elf popped noisily into the kitchen. “Harry Potter, sir! Can Dobby help you?”

“I want you to disconnect Grimmauld Place from the Floo Network and seal the doors. No one besides me is to enter the house – *no one* . Do you understand?” Harry ordered.

“But Harry Potter, sir –”

Harry grimaced. “Dobby, I don’t have time for this. Do you understand?”

“Dobby understands what Harry Potter wants, but does not understand why Harry Potter wants it done,” Dobby squeaked.

“I need a bolt-hole. Just do it, please?” Harry said.

“It shall be done as you request,” Dobby said. He gave a modest bow and disappeared.

Harry burst out of the kitchen and nearly tripped over Mrs. Weasley. “Why did you have Dobby seal off... that house? Why were you yelling at Professor Dumbledore? What’s happening?” she asked.

“I have to go,” he said flatly.

She clutched at his arm. “Harry, explain yourself,” she insisted.

“I’m leaving. I’ve been put on probation at Hogwarts,” he growled, looking toward the stairs. The entire room went quiet – even the wireless stopped.

Mrs. Weasley loosed her grip. “Probation...?” she said blankly.

Professor McGonagall was a few feet away and looked to be in shock. “What could Albus possibly be thinking?” she wondered aloud.

“It wasn’t him; it was the Board of Governors,” Harry said. “Dumbledore thinks it was planned.

It doesn't matter to me. I'm leaving."

"Leaving? You – you can't just leave," Mrs. Weasley said.

"Er... Fred told me that the portkeys are set for midnight," Neville spoke up.

"I have my own ride," Harry said, even as he pushed through the stunned partygoers and made for the stairs.

"You mustn't do that, Harry. It's not safe," Mrs. Weasley called out.

"I'm no longer a child, Mrs. Weasley. Thank you for the party, but I *am* leaving," Harry said firmly. It seemed as if everyone had come into the main room now. He pushed past questioner after questioner, answering none.

"You said you were leaving, but you didn't say that you were going home," Hermione said quietly from his right. Harry continued on without a word. He ignored the thump-thumping of the stairs behind him, and fished for the motorbike. By the time he reached the doors to the barricaded area, he was once again surrounded.

"Talk to me – please?" Hermione asked. Harry enlarged the Bonnie and then the saddlebags.

Madam Bones held out the parchment and the unopened envelope. "These belong to you, Harry, like it or not," she said.

"Why are they doing this, Albus?" Mrs. Weasley asked.

"Regrettably, politics and malice have trumped common sense yet again," Dumbledore answered.

"This is madness," Mrs. Granger said. "This magical world of yours isn't always like this, is it?"

"Where are you heading?" Mr. Granger asked.

"There are a few different places," Harry muttered as he lashed the saddlebags to his bike.

"There's a house in London, another to the west, another –"

"We must be five hundred miles from London!" Mr. Granger said. "Are you in a state to ride any sort of distance at all?"

"I'll manage," Harry said. He enlarged one of the helmets, and mounted the motorbike.

"Harry, I strongly urge you to wait here and then to return with Remus," Dumbledore said firmly.

"No, thank you," Harry returned as he tugged on the helmet. Hermione abruptly hopped onto the Bonnevillie behind Harry.

He looked over his shoulder. "Wha –"

“You’re not leaving here by yourself,” she said.

“Please get off,” Harry said politely.

“I agree!” Mrs. Granger added; Mr. Granger shot her a cross look.

“Mother, let it drop. Harry, you’re not going anywhere without me,” Hermione decreed.

“Hermione!” Mrs. Granger exclaimed.

“Get off the bike,” Harry ordered.

“No,” Hermione insisted.

“You’ll freeze in that shirt,” Harry protested.

“I don’t care,” Hermione said.

“Get off or I’ll remove you,” Harry warned her.

“You wouldn’t dare,” she wagered. Harry looked at Mr. Granger imploringly. He didn’t get what he’d hoped for in return.

“I know that you’ll take no chances with Hermione riding pillion,” Mr. Granger said. “If you’re set on such a long ride, then she can direct you to our home. It’s at the outskirts of Winchester; we’ll await you there. I expect you’ll travel at a reasonable speed and make frequent stops – that should put you there in about eight hours, I expect. Now if it proves too far, Hermione does have a credit card. I’m sure she won’t allow you to take any chances with her safety.”

“Winchester’s a fair option,” said Lupin. “It’s not far from where we’re staying, actually.”

Mrs. Granger protested with her posture, but said nothing. It was clear to Harry that he was expected to acquiesce.

“You’ll need two helmets,” Mr. Granger reminded him, “and take this at least, would you?” Mr. Granger removed his jumper and slipped it over Hermione’s head against her mild fussing.

“Perhaps Bill and Charlie should follow?” Mrs. Weasley offered. “That might offer you a margin of protection.”

“I’m not taking a broom from here to London,” Bill said. “You should take a rest in the Midlands at least, Harry. If you see anyone or anything out of the ordinary, the best way to defend yourselves is to make a run for it.”

“*Defend* yourselves?” Mrs. Granger snapped. Mr. Granger said nothing.

“You insist on coming, then?” Harry asked once more. Hermione nodded, and Harry presented

her with the other helmet.

Dumbledore moved directly in front of the Bonnie. “Harry, I must forbid this.”

“Madam Bones, is he able to forbid anything I choose to do?” asked Harry.

With obvious reluctance, Madam Bones said, “He cannot forbid any action on your part that falls within the law.”

“That is not entirely correct,” said Dumbledore. “If I must –”

Harry’s response was to take the Bonnie straight upward. Hermione clutched at Harry. He let the Bonnie slow until it drifted high above Hogsmeade, much higher than he had taken her father.

“You’re shaking,” he said.

She shrieked and nearly lost her grip on Harry; once she regained her hold, she clung to him as if he was a life preserver. “You should have told me that the helmets were charmed!” she cried.

Harry started to slip off his aviator jacket. The motorbike rocked from side to side as he pulled at the sleeves.

“What are you doing?” Hermione shouted. “Stop moving about!”

“I’m taking off my jacket, and we’re only moving around a bit,” Harry said. “Can’t you see what I’m doing?”

“I haven’t opened my eyes since we lifted off,” Hermione snapped. “Why are you taking off your jacket? It’s freezing up here!”

“A warming charm’s out, I think,” Harry admitted. “I’ve not cast one in a while and I’m a bit on edge, so unless you’d rather I set you afire...?” He turned, swinging his legs around until he was facing her. She protested through the entire manoeuvre, grabbing at his arms and torso and pulling at his shirtsleeves.

“Open your eyes,” Harry said.

“I can’t,” Hermione insisted; “I’ll lose my balance and fall.”

“You’re not clumsy. Are you afraid of heights like your mother?” Harry asked.

She clutched his forearms; her eyes were squeezed shut. “How did you know that?” Hermione wondered aloud.

“Your father told me,” Harry explained. “I’m guessing at the rest from your love for brooms and the grip you have on me.”

“I’m not afraid of heights,” Hermione said. “I’m fine in the Owlery, or the Astronomy Tower. I walked the steps at the Eiffel Tower. I’ve skied in Switzerland. What I’m afraid of is flying. Not just brooms – I don’t care for airplanes, either.”

“You seemed fine riding with me on Buckbeak,” Harry recalled.

“That was a life-or-death situation,” Hermione reminded him. “I set aside my fear.”

Harry said, “Just set it aside all the time, then. Everything with us is a life-or-death situation.”

“That’s a comforting thought,” Hermione said.

Harry wrapped his jacket around her. He looked around at the skies, now mostly dark. “Just try opening your eyes,” he suggested. “What if I need your help watching out for, I don’t know, oncoming birds or something?”

“You won’t let go of me?”

“I’d never let you fall,” Harry promised.

Hermione scowled. “I know that! I still want you to hang on.”

“You’re the one digging your fingers into me,” Harry pointed out. “I promise I won’t pry off your hands – is that enough?”

“You don’t have to be a prat,” Hermione protested. “What’s so important about opening – *oh* !”

Hermione looked all around; the wonder on her face was clear even through the helmet shield. It was a crystal-clear night, with a quarter-moon and a scattering of lights from the village casting a faint glow. The last of the twilight was disappearing to the west. The sky had exploded with stars.

She flipped up her helmet shield and bubbled, “I’m not certain that I’ve ever seen things this clearly, even from the Astronomy Tower. You can make out all the major constellations so easily – there’s Scorpius, and Sagittarius, and... what?”

Harry shook his head. “Stop thinking for one minute, would you? Don’t think – just look.”

“What’s wrong with thinking?” Hermione protested. “Fine, then. No thinking, just looking...” She slowly took in the star field from east to west. “What am I looking for?” she asked.

“You’re a hopeless case, aren’t you?” Harry said, exasperated. “How does it make you feel?”

“What, seeing the stars like this? I don’t know – I’ve never considered it,” Hermione said.

“Don’t consider it – just say something,” Harry insisted.

“It makes me feel small,” she decided, “and very glad that I’m not alone. You?”

“It makes me feel a part of something bigger, in a good way,” Harry said.

She continued to watch the skies. “I like your answer better,” she said.

Harry said, “Put the jacket on properly, while I swing back around.”

“I think not!” Hermione squeaked. She pulled tightly against him, which made turning difficult. When he was back in place, her helmet settled against the back of his shoulder. The jacket lay squashed between them.

He decided to follow the motorways because Hermione seemed to have a fair idea of the directions. They flew fairly low – no more than a few hundred feet above the traffic. Even against the moon, Harry doubted anyone would think them to be more than a bird. He thought about asking her to relax her hold on him, but it helped to keep him warm and it was a pleasant feeling.

Neither of them said much for quite a while. Hermione spotted something called a Welcome Break just off the M74; Harry swooped down to a clear spot on the motorway and rode normally until they arrived. He was cold and she was shivering. He bought her hot chocolate and stretched his legs. Before they left, he slipped his aviator jacket onto her and she didn’t protest. With Hermione ensconced in the jacket, Harry flew higher and far faster – so fast that the Bonnie shook in protest a time or two. After a tiring and bracing ninety minutes in flight, he returned to the motorway and exited at another Welcome Break. They stopped to look at a motorway map in the entry; they had covered somewhat more than three hundred miles in three hours.

Harry reviewed the food options warily. “Are you familiar with any of this?” he asked. “I haven’t eaten since this morning.”

“Most of it will make you feel full, at any rate,” she said. “Get one of these sandwiches... the soup is passable, and it’s warm... and hot chocolate. You don’t want the tea – trust me on that.”

Harry did as she said, and they found a table. “Are you certain that you don’t want anything?” he asked.

She glanced around. “I do see one thing that looks interesting. Do you mind? I’m good for it when we reach my parents’ house.”

He said, “I’m not worried. Here – this should cover it.”

Hermione looked at the 50-pound note. “I should say so,” she said; “I’ll be back shortly.” Harry wolfed down the sandwich and the soup; his stomach was left growling but full.

Hermione said from behind him, “Happy birthday, Harry.” She walked around the table with a large piece of cake on a small plate. Two lit candles were stuck in the icing.

She set the plate in front of him. “It wasn’t much of a birthday party, was it?” she said. “For that matter, this isn’t exactly a splendid birthday cake.”

“I haven’t had many of them,” Harry told her, “and Hagrid made the first – you can imagine what that was like. I think it’s wonderful, but I don’t understand why there are two candles, though. Don’t the candles represent years – you know, sixteen candles for sixteen years?”

“Adults don’t get a candle for every year – it would be impractical,” Hermione pointed out. “You’d need a bucket of water to douse Professor Dumbledore’s cake.” Harry chuckled at the image.

“Blow them out, then, and make a birthday wish,” Hermione instructed.

Harry looked at the cake blankly. “Pardon?”

“A birthday wish – that’s the Muggle... erm, I mean, the folklore behind candles on birthday cakes. When you blow out your candles, you’re supposed to make a wish,” she explained.

Harry quickly blew out the candles and then plucked them from the cake. “Would you like some?” he asked.

“No, thank you,” she said. “What did you wish?”

“Im dursnt muddr kurz ins wohn habbin,” Harry muttered through a mouth full of cake. Hermione rolled her eyes.

“Sorry,” Harry said. “It doesn’t matter because it won’t happen.”

“You shouldn’t waste a wish,” Hermione said. “I’ll help make it happen, if I can.”

Harry choked on a second mouthful of cake. Between fits of coughing, he managed, “I won’t let you.”

Hermione lit into him. “Stop talking in riddles, Harry! What happened to you this summer? What are you hiding from me?”

“What about you?” Harry asked. “You didn’t tell me that you’re still injured from the Ministry. I had to hear it from Shackbolt.”

She shook her head. “It was a deep wound, so I’m still a bit sore. Don’t avoid my questions.”

Harry said nothing, and impassively ate his birthday cake. Hermione pleaded, “Tell me what you’re thinking – please?”

Harry stacked his plates, bowl and cup on a plastic tray. “You know what I’m thinking?” he asked. “I’m thinking ‘happy birthday to me’. Happy bloody birthday! We should move along. Your parents will worry.”

“My dad’s expecting we’ll keep at motorway speeds and stop regularly. We’ve plenty of time,” Hermione insisted.

“Your mother’s probably expecting that I’ll keep over 100, never stop, and stop somewhere that I shouldn’t before I take you home,” Harry groused.

“That’s an excellent suggestion,” Hermione said, in the tone she used when she knew that she had the upper hand. “Either way, I’m not expected for hours. We’re going to the place you’ve been staying, then.”

“We can’t do that; I’m not even certain I could find it,” said Harry.

“Then we’re going to Grimmauld Place first. I know how to get there by road,” she said. “We can make that in well under two hours at the rate you’re flying. It would be well under an hour from there to Winchester. That would leave ample time for you to explain yourself.”

“I don’t have to explain myself to you,” Harry snapped. “Besides, I had Dobby seal off the place,” he said.

“Then Dobby can open it for you,” Hermione said. “Besides, you can’t find my parents’ house unless I direct you there.”

“That’s blackmail!” Harry protested.

“I suppose it is,” Hermione admitted. “You’re going to talk to me, Harry. You’re going to talk to me, or I’ll keep us out the entire night and let you explain *that* to my parents in the morning.”

Harry Potter and the Years of Rebellion

Secrets Revealed And Guarded

Chapter Nine

SECRETS REVEALED AND GUARDED

Once they reached the outskirts of London, Harry found a secluded spot where he could render the Bonnie invisible again. Rather than trifle with traffic controls and late-night drivers, they followed the urban roads from above the rooftops. Neither Harry nor Hermione had much to say. Harry wasn't pleased at being blackmailed into taking Hermione back to London. He was tired and cold from the long ride, and numbed from the longest three days of his life. Hermione was fiercely determined to reach Grimmauld Place. At one point, he lowered their speed; she immediately noticed, and accused him of tarrying.

He set down a few blocks from Grimmauld Place but maintained the invisibility charm. As they rode slowly toward the house, Harry scouted for signs of undesired company – especially Moody, who could doubtless see through the charm with his magical eye. He circled past the house twice but only spotted a single person: Lupin sat on the front stoop. Harry waited until they were inside the wards before he disengaged the charm.

Lupin showed no surprise. He doffed his cloak and draped it around Harry. “You must be freezing,” he said.

“No one else is here?” Harry asked.

“No one else was interested in sitting outside,” Lupin smirked. “Dobby is extremely loyal to you.”

“My parents...?” Hermione began.

“At home,” Lupin told her. “Tom and I decided that you'd probably come here first. Cordelia hoped we were wrong.”

“Why here?” Harry asked.

“I didn't think you'd find the other place on your own,” said Lupin.

Hermione shot Lupin a puzzled look. “You're on a first name basis with my parents?”

Lupin managed a wry smile. “Perhaps you should give them more credit for their ability to cope with your circumstances?” he suggested. “They’re fine people – too rational to be completely comfortable with us, perhaps, but fine people nonetheless. You certainly seem to have made an impression on them, Harry.”

“Yes, I’m sure,” Harry said suspiciously.

“Since your house is not accessible via Floo, Hermione, we agreed that I would decide whether either of you were in any condition to continue riding,” Lupin said. He made a show of looking them up and down, and shook his head. “I think not. Harry, would you please ask Dobby to open the house?”

Dobby let them in immediately. “Dobby is pleased to see Harry Potter!” the house-elf squeaked. “Harry Potter worried Dobby with his instructions. Dobby did not like to leave Mister Lupin out on the stoop.”

Chagrined, Harry said, “I should have made an exception for Prof... erm, for Remus. Unblock the Floo, but only for Remus and myself.”

“Dobby will – *OH!* Dobby wishes Harry Potter a happy birthday! Dobby forgot to give a birthday present this morning!” For a moment, Harry thought Dobby was going to punish himself. Instead he pulled a small and carefully wrapped package from inside his patchwork jacket.

“Thank you, Dobby,” Harry said. In the package was a matched pair of tan woollen socks.

“They’re great. I’m, uh, surprised by the choice,” Harry told Dobby.

Dobby looked to his left and then his right, cupped his hand to his mouth, and whispered, “Dobby let Winky choose. Dobby thinks Winky is a bit lacking in colour.” Harry couldn’t help but snigger at that.

Lupin asked Dobby, “Would you make up one of the guest rooms for Hermione, please?” He yawned, and said to Harry and Hermione, “I’m knackered. I’ll be retiring for the evening.”

Harry wondered, “Don’t you want to know what Dumbledore had to say about, erm, things?”

Lupin shook his head. “He and I spoke at length after you left. It was less than pleasant, but I’m satisfied – for now.”

“What about Mr. and Mrs. Granger? Don’t they expect you to keep an eye on us, or at least an ear?” Harry asked.

“You’re an adult now,” Lupin answered. “You don’t need chaperoning... do you?” Harry and Hermione looked at each other nervously.

“I thought not,” Lupin said. “I’m going to assume that Hermione will sleep in the guest room.

Try to manage that by morning, would you? Harry... well... if there's anything you need to... what I mean is... that is to say... you have had a talk, haven't you?"

Hermione turned crimson, and Harry spluttered, "What does that have to do with Hermione and me?"

Lupin smiled. "I didn't mean to offend. I just... someone had to ask whether a talk was in order."

Simultaneously, Harry and Hermione exclaimed, "No!"

"As I thought, no need for a chaperone," Lupin said.

"We just need to discuss some things," Hermione offered.

Lupin's brow furrowed. "Things such as what happened last night, perhaps?" He searched Harry's face for a reaction, and seemed to find it.

"Harry," Lupin said, "think very carefully about what you say." When Harry scowled at him, he added, "I'm not telling you what to do. Just think things through, right? Good night, then." He slowly ambled up the stairs.

"Dobby did not greet Miss Granger," Dobby said. "Welcome to the house of Harry Potter." The house-elf bowed with a flourish.

Hermione chuckled. "Thank you, Dobby. Please don't bow to me – I don't merit that."

Dobby beamed. "Dobby will most certainly bow to Harry Potter's honoured guest. May Dobby provide some refreshments?"

"Pumpkin juice would be nice – I'm parched," Harry said. "For you, Hermione?"

She shuddered. "Something warmer, I think. What would you recommend, Dobby?"

"Dobby always recommends hot chocolate for warming oneself. Dobby will make it just the way that young Master M –" The house-elf quickly stopped himself, and then added hesitantly, "Dobby knows how to make proper hot chocolate."

"Bring it to us on the fourth floor, please," Harry called after Dobby. He motioned for Hermione to follow him up the stairs.

"You'd better not be putting me off," Hermione warned him. Harry stopped before the door farthest from the fourth floor landing; he knew she would remember what was behind the door.

Hermione smiled. "Well," she said, "I suppose you can put me off for a few minutes."

She opened the door to the library. There was one very tall window on the wall to the left of the door. The draperies were down, piled atop the long reading table that sat before the window. To

the other side was a hearth faced by a small sofa. The rest of the walls were lined from floor to ceiling with books of all sizes and colours, and there were rolling ladders on two of the walls. A second table and four chairs were set at the center of the room, beside a small freestanding shelf fully loaded with scrolls.

Hermione's eyes were wide with excitement; Harry couldn't help but enjoy watching her. She dashed to the nearest books, running her index finger across spines as she read their titles. "This is amazing, Harry! Look - Agrippa's testimony, and I think it may be an original! And Malecrit's plays, all of them from the looks of it. Look at this – I didn't know Bagshot had written any other books. *Oooh*, it's de Montmorency's grimoire... that will certainly be interesting. Goodness, this one is *very* dark. *Oh my!* I see what Sirius meant about some of this deserving to be binned! There's no organization, not that I can make out. I'll need to begin a catalogue straight away."

"I think this must be what you'd see in the Mirror of Erised," Harry laughed. Hermione's face fell.

"What did I say?" asked Harry. "I'm sorry; I didn't mean to be upsetting."

"I've gotten low so easily this summer," she sighed. "I was just... never mind. Sorry for that."

"We need to stop being sorry all the time," Harry said gently.

THUMP!

Harry and Hermione looked toward the long reading table. A chair partly obscured by the pile of drapery had tipped backward and fallen, and a high-pitched squeak accompanied the thump.

"Is Dobby here?" Hermione asked.

Harry said, "I don't know," and dashed to the fallen chair.

Winky scampered out from beneath the chair, and squeaked, "Winky is working! Winky is working!" She brushed at her apron and shook her head from side to side.

"No worries, Winky. Let me right this chair," said Harry. There was a large folio on the floor next to the chair. "What's this?" he asked as he set it on the table.

"Winky is working! Winky is working!" Winky repeated. She hopped nervously from foot to foot.

Hermione looked at the cover of the folio. "Winky, were you looking at this book?" she asked.

"Winky is working! It is not my place to look at books belonging to Harry Potter!" Winky insisted. "Bad Winky!" she added and banged her fist against her forehead.

Hermione wrapped her hand gently around the house-elf's wrist. "Winky, please stop! These are my books now, and you may look at them if you like. This book has lovely pictures, actually," she

said.

She opened the folio and turned the pages, which contained reproductions of a number of Muggle paintings. “I wonder why the Blacks would have this. Look, Harry – I’ve seen that one at the Louvre. Rembrandt, of course. I’m not familiar with these three. They all have a similar look to them. Same artist, I’d imagine.”

Winky said, “Vermeer,” then cowered.

Hermione leaned in to peer at the accompanying text. “Did you say Vermeer?” she asked. Winky gave a furtive nod.

Hermione turned the pages again. “What about this one?”

“Rubens,” Winky said, still cowering.

Hermione reached out and gently stroked the house-elf’s hand. “I didn’t – er, please don’t be offended – but the idea of a house-elf reading for pleasure never occurred to me. Please, Winky, don’t be frightened. No one will ever strike you in this house. Isn’t that right, Harry?”

Harry said, “Absolutely. Dobby can vouch for that.”

Winky frowned. “House-elves can read. Winky has to keep the larder and follow instructions from the... from Harry Potter.”

“Dobby is here! Dobby can vouch for what, Harry Potter?” Dobby entered the library with a tray holding a glass of pumpkin juice and a steaming mug of hot chocolate.

“Winky is working!” Winky cried. “Bad Winky!” Hermione gripped the hand she was stroking before Winky could use it to hit herself again.

“Winky was just reading this book,” Harry said, “and she fell from the chair. I don’t believe that she wanted to be seen.”

Dobby set down the tray and walked toward Winky until their noses were nearly touching. “Dobby needs to hear again, please. Winky was reading this book? This book, on this table? Winky was not working?” Winky squeezed her huge brown eyes tightly closed and nodded up and down furiously.

“Dobby – is – so - *happy* !” Dobby enveloped Winky in a hug, then stepped back quickly and instead stroked her cheek. He looked down to Winky’s feet, and squeaked, “Socks!”

“Winky is becoming, as you said,” Winky said quietly.

“You will excuse Dobby and Winky,” Dobby said. With that, he pulled Winky out the door by the hand.

“Becoming what?” Harry asked after the house-elves had left.

Hermione laughed. “You don’t think that Dobby and Winky are... you know...? I mean, if I saw people acting like that, I’d assume they were in love. Wouldn’t you?”

Harry shrugged. “Why not? Little house-elves have to come from somewhere, don’t they? Come on, House-Elf Crusader, shouldn’t they be able to read books and fancy one other?”

“I didn’t say they couldn’t,” she protested, “I’m just surprised – pleasantly, of course. It demonstrates what I’ve been saying all along, that they’re quite capable of being free.” Harry wondered how Hermione would react when she returned to Hogwarts and Dobby wasn’t there to pick up all of her hats and scarves anymore.

He drank his juice. “Delicious,” he said, “and there’s no one to chase me out for drinking or eating.”

Hermione said with a grin, “I just haven’t set the rules yet.”

“It was a brilliant choice that Sirius made,” Harry told her. “If he’d left this to me, I’d have given it to you anyway.”

“I’ve let you put me off long enough,” Hermione chided. “There are some things I really need to tell you. At least, I think I can tell you about them... hopefully, I won’t turn into a canary.”

“This is about what you signed, then?” Harry asked.

“There’s also the letter he wrote me,” Hermione added.

Harry said, “He left me a whole journal, as well as a letter. I’m afraid to open either one, to tell you the truth. Perhaps you could help me go through some of what he left me?”

“As long as you aren’t avoiding me, Harry,” Hermione agreed.

“No, not tonight. I think all of my things are still at the other place,” said Harry. He withdrew his wand and started a fire in the hearth. Hermione sat down on the sofa; she closed her eyes and soaked in the warmth.

Harry eventually broke the silence. “I have something to tell you. At least, I want to tell you. I just... it doesn’t seem like a good idea.”

“I didn’t think you’d be the one to speak first. That’s a hopeful sign.” Hermione sat up. “Why don’t you come over here?”

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea, either,” Harry said.

“Oh. Are you... is this about what happened last night, erm, before I left?” asked Hermione.

Harry said nervously, “We should talk about that as well, I suppose. The thing I want to tell you, it’s been with me a while.”

She asked him, “Is this about the reason you stayed away from us, then? If it is, then of course I want to know. Why wouldn’t you want to tell me that?”

He buried his face in his hands. “Because it’ll change everything. It’ll change everything, and there’ll be no changing it back.” He lowered his hands, still looking down. “If I tell you this, you might never be safe again.”

“Harry,” Hermione said gently, “I think it would be a very good idea if you sat over here. Please. While you think about whether you should tell me – well, whatever it is you have to tell – perhaps I should tell you about what I signed last night... if I’m able.”

Harry reluctantly sat on the other end of the couch from Hermione. “You’re still worried that you’ll be hexed?”

She said, “I don’t know which would be more cruel – hexing me so that I can’t tell you, or allowing me to tell you. I feel the same as you; if we finish this conversation, I’m afraid everything will change.”

Harry swallowed hard, and then said, “Then perhaps we shouldn’t be talking.”

Hermione slowly shook her head from side to side. “I’m trapped at the centre of a bridge, Harry. Both ends are on fire. I can go back to where I came from, but the fire is everywhere. I can’t jump over it, and I’ll never be able to run through it without burning. If I stay in the centre, the fire will eventually reach me. As for the flames ahead, who knows? What should I do?”

“What is it with scenarios?” Harry asked. “Fine, then. How high is the bridge?”

She rolled her eyes but smiled faintly. “I’m not letting you get off that easily; it’s a thousand feet high. What should I do?”

“We’re Gryffindors,” he said at last. “We go forward.”

Hermione nodded; she sounded uneasy. “Mr. Diggle owled everyone their formal copies of the will this morning. There was a copy of what I signed, as well. I assume everyone else received the same?”

Harry said, “I don’t know; I’ve been given more stacks of paper than I know what to do with.”

Hermione pulled a piece of parchment from the front pocket of her denims. “I had a thought... perhaps it will work, and perhaps it won’t,” she said. “Take it from me and read it. I won’t give it to you, and I won’t say anything.”

“Clever,” he said, and she grew pale. “Are you sure you want to do this? We can still jump over the side.”

She closed her eyes. “Gryffindors go forward, right?” she said. Harry wrested the parchment from her hand, and read it.

*I, Hermione Jean Granger, solemnly swear that I will help Harry James Potter find and experience true love, no matter the sacrifice required, for Harry has known little love and much sorrow. I solemnly swear that I will not forsake Harry when others do, knowing full well that such a promise may exact a terrible personal price. I solemnly swear that I will lighten up a bit and venture out of the library from time to time, because life is short and the greatest pleasures in life aren't found in a book. To honour Sirius, James and Lily, I promise to break at least one rule per month during my remaining time at Hogwarts (Sirius allows that the rules may be minor ones). Finally, I solemnly swear that I will play by Sirius' rules tonight, certainly against the better judgment of me and those assembled, and shall refrain from cursing his name until tomorrow.
This I so swear before all authority, both civil and supreme, on this 30th day of July.
Signed
Hermione Jean Granger*

He handed the parchment back to her without a word.

“Harry?” Hermione whispered. “Say something. Please. Your hand is shaking – Harry, please say something.”

Harry closed his eyes. “He had no right,” he said in a low monotone.

“It felt right to me – it still does,” she whispered.

Harry felt a catch in his throat. “He had no right to do this to you,” he said more forcefully. “It’s wrong.”

Hermione reached for his hand. “He did nothing to me. I had to make a choice last night, and I chose you.”

Harry pulled his hand away. “He asked you to be a human sacrifice, and you said yes! How could you do that? How could *he* do that? I thought I knew him. I thought – I thought he loved me.”

“Harry, he did love you,” Hermione said, her eyes pleading. “He does love you. You have to believe me. The letter he wrote –”

Harry seized both of her hands and squeezed. “Did you read what you signed, did you really read it? The whole thing’s about what you’re expected to give up on my behalf! What did it say – ‘sacrifice’ and ‘terrible price’? I – I won’t let you, that’s all. I won’t allow this!”

Hermione said, “It’s done, and I don’t want it undone,” and a tear trickled down her cheek.

Harry wiped it away with his fingertips, and she shuddered. “If this stands, it would be like this all the time,” he said.

She told him, “You should read his letter,” and fumbled through her pockets.

Harry pulled away. “If this is how things are going to be, then I can’t possibly tell –”

Hermione’s eyes lit. “It’s about the prophecy, isn’t it?” she said abruptly.

“Where did that come from?” Harry asked, sitting up straight.

“You heard it, didn’t you?” Hermione asked. “You heard it before the orb broke.”

“No, I didn’t hear it then,” Harry said.

“That’s why you hid from us all summer, Harry, isn’t it? You know what the prophecy says, and you don’t think that you can tell anyone. You’re pushing me away... *no* .” She stopped, stricken.

“Hermione – please!” Harry pleaded.

She insisted, “*No!* It doesn’t... Harry, Divination is very flimsy. Trelawney predicted your imminent death every week –”

“Stop it! Please stop!” Harry shouted.

Hermione pleaded, “Harry, you have to share this with someone. I swear to you that I can handle it!”

There was a knock at the door. “Harry, is everything all right in there?”

Harry spun to face the closed door. “Remus, I thought you were going to bed.”

Lupin called out, “I could hear you two floors down. May I come in?”

Harry started to refuse, but Hermione said loudly, “Yes!”

Lupin slowly strolled toward the fireplace. He extended his hands toward the fire, palms out. “It’s warm in here, isn’t it? I should light the fireplace in my room on occasion.” Without turning away from the fire, he asked, “Let’s talk about what you wanted to stop, Harry.”

“He knows the prophecy,” Hermione said, “I’m certain of it. It must predict his death, because he’s pushing all of us away and he’s afraid to share it.”

Lupin sighed. “It’s a bit more complicated than that,” he said as he continued to warm himself at

the fire.

“What are you doing?” Harry protested.

“You don’t want to tell me, because knowing would make me a target. Is that it?” Hermione asked Harry. “Besides being Muggle-born, I’m already closely associated with you. Why do you think I’ve been cooped up with my parents for most of the holiday? I’m a target now, for goodness’ sake!”

Harry tried but couldn’t give voice to his concern. It would have been difficult enough for him, but with Lupin in the room he couldn’t manage a word.

Lupin explained to Hermione, “All who know of the full prophecy can conceal their knowledge of its contents.”

“I thought that Harry’s Occlumency lessons failed,” she said.

Harry reluctantly admitted, “They worked, I think. I just didn’t realise it at the time.”

“I can learn,” Hermione insisted, “if someone will teach me.”

“You have the mental capability, certainly. I’m sensing that you have the necessary incentive, as well,” Lupin said.

“Remus, don’t encourage her!” Harry snapped.

Hermione frowned at him. “You can’t go on like this – it’s devouring you.”

Harry glared at Lupin, who looked back at him impassively. “I believe she’s correct,” Lupin said. “You need to share this with a friend. I’m not a friend, I’m... well, whatever I am, it’s something different than a friend. Everyone around you is in danger, as are any wizards or witches who would stand up against Voldemort. Telling or not telling anyone won’t change that. Would you prefer to hear this from Dumbledore?”

Harry frowned immediately. “I’d rather not.”

“It’s probably best to have his permission first,” Hermione said.

“Well... it’s settled, then,” Lupin said. “May I...?” After a nod from Harry, Lupin retrieved a pinch of Floo powder from a small pot next to the hearth, and the fire went from burnt orange to emerald. Instead of placing his head in the flames, Lupin pointed his wand and muttered something under his breath.

Several moments later, Dumbledore’s head appeared. “Ah,” he said, “I see that our motorcyclist and his passenger have reached you, Remus.”

“They are worn but safe,” Lupin said. “Something’s come up, Albus, and it won’t be of surprise

to you. Would you mind terribly...?”

“Certainly – I’ll just need a few moments,” Dumbledore said. Shortly, he stepped out of the fireplace; Lupin moved to steady him. He wore a robe over his bedclothes, and Fwooper-feather slippers over bright orange socks. Hermione stifled a chuckle.

Dumbledore fished his small wire-rimmed glasses from a pocket in the robe. “Good evening, Harry.” He glanced around the room. “This is an impressive family library, is it not? Do you approve, Hermione?”

Hermione blushed. “Erm – it’s very impressive, sir. I’m sorry, it’s just... I believe you’ve always referred to me as ‘Miss Granger’.”

“Have I?” Dumbledore asked. “No matter – I have this sense that our conversation this evening shall place us on a first-name basis. Does someone care to confirm why I am visiting at this very late hour?” Harry pulled out his wand and began casting various charms around the room.

“I see,” Dumbledore said. “My sense about the conversation-to-come is accurate. Harry, do you care to begin?”

Harry said, “Hermione’s guessed that I heard the prophecy. She wants me to tell it to her.”

Dumbledore conjured one of the armchairs that he seemed to favour and sat heavily. “How do you feel about this development?” he asked Harry.

Harry returned, “I want to tell her... but it’s not safe.”

“I don’t care,” Hermione said. Harry waited for a scolding from Dumbledore – or a scowl, or a frown, or even a flicker; instead, Dumbledore smiled. “I was beginning to wonder how long I would have to wait,” he said. Harry gaped at Dumbledore, and was relieved to see a similar reaction play across Hermione’s face.

Dumbledore explained, “I couldn’t expect you to hold the knowledge to yourself forever, Harry. In my ideal conception, we would have met at least weekly throughout the summer. By now, I would have expected you to choose at least one confidant. I would have predicted Hermione’s selection.”

“I share Harry’s concern with regard to safety,” Lupin said, “although now that the knowledge exists beyond you and the orb...”

“It is only a matter of time before Voldemort possesses the full content of the prophecy,” Dumbledore finished for him. He turned to Hermione and explained, “The first portion of the prophecy has been shared with the Order, because Voldemort already possesses it. It is the second portion that must be safeguarded for as long as possible.”

“Harry, I want to share this with you, but not if it puts you at more risk,” Hermione said.

Harry sighed. “How could I be at *more* risk?”

“I believe that I provided the answer to that question during our meeting at the conclusion of the term,” said Dumbledore. “Hermione, why are you so eager to know?”

“Harry’s my best friend,” Hermione answered without hesitation. “I intend to see him through to the end of all of this. I’m sure that’s obvious to you, sir.” She turned to Harry. “You saw what I signed. It should be obvious to you, too, if it wasn’t before.”

“What you signed...?” Lupin’s eyebrows slowly rose. “What did Sirius ask you to swear?” When she hesitated, he turned to Harry. “Obviously you know what she agreed to – have you seen a copy?” Harry said nothing.

“I assume that you were provided a copy of your agreement with Sirius. Is that copy on your person?” Dumbledore asked directly. Hermione slowly withdrew the parchment.

Before Dumbledore could reach out, Lupin took it and quickly read the contents. “He... asked quite a lot of you, didn’t he? It was rather inappropriate for him to ask this of a school-age witch. If I were your father, I would be rather upset by this.”

Lupin handed Hermione’s parchment to Dumbledore. Dumbledore’s eyes lingered on it, before turning to Hermione with a curious mix of pride and sadness. “These are the precise contents of the agreement that you signed last night?” he asked her.

“Yes, and I’d do it again,” she said with defiance in her voice.

“I am more interested in the contents of your heart than the contents of this agreement,” Dumbledore told Hermione. “It is your wish to do these things?”

“I knew what I was signing,” she said.

“Do you recognise that knowing the contents of the prophecy puts you much closer to the dangers suggested here?” Dumbledore asked.

“I... I have to know,” Hermione said quietly.

“I believe you, and I believe that Harry needs you to know,” Dumbledore said; when Harry frowned, he added, “even if that admission makes him uncomfortable. However, that presents a dilemma. You would have to learn Occlumency immediately, but even that would be no guarantee.” He hesitated, which made Harry very nervous. “There is another means to safeguard important information such as this, but I am loathe to employ it.” Lupin frowned instantly, which did nothing to ease Harry’s nerves.

“There’s a way that I can protect the knowledge?” Hermione asked. “If that’s true, then I *do* want to know.”

Dumbledore watched her impassively. “Do you truly understand what it is that you ask? If

Voldemort were to ever suspect that you possess knowledge of the full prophecy, then he would seek to capture you. He would assume you to be vulnerable.”

Her voice cracked. “I understand.”

Dumbledore said firmly, “He would gladly kill you – you must realise that.”

“I would let him, before I would betray Harry,” she said with resolve.

“I won’t have this; I won’t tell you,” Harry said sadly, because he knew that she would not be denied.

Hermione turned her resolve full-force on him. “If the Death Eaters ever take me, I *will* be killed. It won’t matter what I know or don’t know, Harry. They’ll kill me because of who and what I am. I want to know, and you want me to know, but if anything ever happens to me I will *not* betray you.” Without taking her eyes off Harry, she added, “Professor Dumbledore, I want this.”

“Hermione, we must discuss this in frank terms. You must convince me that you understand the consequences of what you ask,” said Dumbledore.

Hermione stood. “We’ll be just outside, Harry,” she said, and she led Dumbledore out of the room.

Harry sat silently facing the fireplace. Lupin looked as if he was ready to say something on more than one occasion as they waited, but never spoke. After the better part of half an hour, Dumbledore returned.

“I believe that we should share the prophecy with Hermione,” he announced. “What say you, Harry?”

Harry turned to Hermione and said, “You won’t stop until you hear it, will you?”

“Should I stop?” she asked. “I think you need to tell the prophecy to someone, but it wouldn’t be right for anyone to force your hand.”

“Would you prefer to think on it until the morrow?” asked Dumbledore.

Harry shook his head. “I’d like Hermione to know, but I don’t like the sound of this safeguard,” he said.

“It’s for the best, Harry,” Hermione said. “It can be taken off when I’ve mastered Occlumency.”

“If you’re sure...?” Harry offered – it was a last opportunity for Hermione to back down. She didn’t do so, and he spoke the prophecy.

“Oh my God,” she said as she pulled Harry into an embrace. He thought she was going to break his ribs. *It’s out*, he thought, *she knows now*. He was surprised to feel relief, although he decided

that he would feel even better if he could breathe a little.

“Hermione,” he managed, “ease up a bit, would you?”

A flood of her hair moved away from his face. She stared at him, eyes shining with tears and an inextinguishable smile on her face. “Oh my God, Harry! You don’t have to die!” she shouted, and then proceeded to squeeze the life out of him again.

“Hermione, I – don’t – you’re supposed to – wha...?” he stammered. Dumbledore was smiling. Harry looked to Lupin half in confusion and half in desperation, and felt some satisfaction that a measure of confusion played across Lupin’s face as well.

She let her arms loose but leaned in against Harry, much to his surprise. “I’ve done nothing but think about what the prophecy could have been, all summer long,” she explained. “You shut us out all year. There were so many things that you wouldn’t tell, that you didn’t want to tell, and then came all the business with the prophecy, and you just disappeared. It seemed as if you were giving up, Harry, and you don’t give up – you simply don’t. ‘What does he know?’ I wondered. I decided – I don’t know why – but I decided you must have found out you had to die for V-Voldemort to be defeated, or something like that. Then... in his letter, Sirius asked... well, that just seemed to confirm it.”

She was almost wild-eyed, Harry thought. “But you *don’t*, Harry... don’t you see? You can win; you don’t have to die! Isn’t it wonderful?” Hermione finished.

Harry frowned. “The prophecy says I have to kill him or be killed. It doesn’t say I’m not going to die.”

“Fine, but it doesn’t say that you *will*,” Hermione said. “Do you mind if I savour that for a bit, before we go over the safeguard?”

Harry looked to Lupin again, who had settled into the same smile as Dumbledore. He said in exasperation, “I have to *kill* him! Forgetting for a moment that this might be a bit of a challenge, don’t you have a problem with it? If I want to live, I have to murder someone!”

Hermione shook her head disapprovingly. “Murder seems rather strong, don’t you think? It’s not like you’re going to run around offing schoolchildren. Honestly, Harry, I never assumed that this could end unless *somebody* kills him. Can you really envision Voldemort captured and on trial?”

“Will you say something, please?” Harry pleaded with Lupin.

Lupin’s smile was broad and apparently inextinguishable. He said, “Hermione, I think that you have more faith in Harry than he has in himself.”

Dumbledore’s eyes twinkled. “You continue to exceed my high expectations for you, Hermione. Harry, you have made a wise choice – a splendid choice.”

“I didn’t choose this,” Harry snapped at him.

Hermione pulled him close again. “That’s true, Harry; I chose it. I could never give up on you, not ever. I’ll follow you anywhere, you know – even if I think it’s a bad idea. I’ll give you any help that I can, no matter what it takes. I want you to find love, too, like Sirius wanted. I want you to have everything you deserve in life. That’s what best friends want for each other, right?”

Harry asked quietly, “So we’re, um, best friends?”

“Of course we are,” Hermione quickly returned. Her brow furrowed for a moment. “You’d better not have changed your mind between here and the Shrieking Shack!”

“Hermione, you must remain near Harry for the remainder of your schooling, if you truly wish to fulfil these intentions,” Dumbledore said, “and if you wish to remain near Harry, then your agreement with Sirius must be severed. You are not of age, so it is not binding in any case.” Hermione began to protest, but Lupin gently waved her off.

“Your parents are teetering on the edge of withdrawing you and relocating abroad,” Lupin said. “If the agreement is broken, you’ll temper their concerns a bit.” He turned to Dumbledore, and added grimly, “That being said, I wonder if the Headmaster might simply be substituting a new concern for the old.”

“The law is clear with regard to magical consent, Remus,” Dumbledore said. “I am satisfied that Hermione understands the potential consequences of both the knowledge she now possesses and the magic that will safeguard its transmission.”

“You’re equivocating, Albus,” Lupin said. “That does nothing to ease *my* concerns about this.” Dumbledore shot Lupin a very parental look, and Lupin sighed. “Very well... I sense this is my cue to leave. Hermione, I’ll have a chat with your parents about the agreement.”

As soon as the door closed behind Lupin, Dumbledore said, “Now then, to address the consequences of knowing what you now know...” He quickly withdrew his wand and pointed it toward Hermione.

The instant Harry saw the wand, he shouted, “*Expelliarmus!*” Dumbledore’s wand shook and then slipped from his searching fingers; it landed in Harry’s grasp. “If you so much as flinch, I’ll break it in two,” Harry said murderously.

Dumbledore’s eyes twinkled. “What did you think I was going to do?” he laughed.

“You – I don’t know, you pulled your wand on her and – and – not a word of explanation – and – and what was I supposed to think? I don’t know, I – I – I guess I thought you were going to *Oblivate* her, or... I don’t know,” Harry stammered. His hands shook and sweat beaded at his temples.

Hermione put her hand on Harry’s, wrapping her fingers around Dumbledore’s wand in the process. “Harry, it’s all right. Give it back,” she said.

The touch of her hand made him stop shaking. “I – I don’t understand,” Harry said.

Dumbledore gently took back his wand. “Why would I reveal the prophecy only to modify the memory of the recipient?” he asked. “Moreover, where would I begin? The two of you have shared significant portions of your lives for five years. If I were a full-time Obliviator, I would still be putting Hermione at a modest risk. For that matter, I’m somewhat offended that you thought me capable of performing a memory charm without consent.”

Harry felt ashamed. “I – don’t know – I – saw the wand, and – I don’t know what...”

Dumbledore smiled. “Your apology is accepted, Harry. I am curious about one thing, however. How did you manage to disarm me without your wand?”

“But I just...?” Harry began, and then stopped. Hermione ran her hand along the side of Harry’s leg, and pressed against the wand concealed in his pants pocket. Her eyes betrayed questions and wonder.

“As I said earlier, we really must discuss this so-called control problem of yours,” Dumbledore said to Harry. “Now then... Hermione, you do agree that the oath between you and Sirius may be dissolved?”

“I will agree to that,” replied Hermione.

“You will also agree to any measures that I might deem necessary in order to assure your safety?” Dumbledore asked.

Hermione sighed. “I’m less than pleased about the idea of ‘any measures’.”

“Your parents have given me their trust, which I shall not betray. Under the circumstances, your protection will become a primary focus for the Order. You may find this stifling but I do insist. I will endeavour to keep you a part of the decision-making, as you are legitimately more qualified to do so than are your parents,” Dumbledore explained.

“Then I agree,” Hermione said.

Harry lowered his head. He couldn’t remember ever feeling so completely powerless, even when he’d been in Voldemort’s grasp. Part of him wanted to cry out, but the rest of him understood that it would make little difference.

Dumbledore explained to Harry, “The safeguard is a variation on a very old protective spell. I acquired it from a friend within the Department of Mysteries. It is not evil, but its essential aspect does come from the Dark Arts. Hermione cannot be harmed in any lasting fashion by the casting of the charm. However, it is not pleasant for the caster, the recipient or the bearer –”

“The bearer?” Harry asked.

“In this case, that would be you. For purposes of this protection, you are the bearer of the secret to

be kept,” Dumbledore said. “Hold out your right hand, please.” Hermione reached out to Harry with her left hand, and intertwined her fingers in his.

Dumbledore flicked the back of Harry’s hand with the tip of his wand, and then did the same to Hermione’s hand; three dark characters appeared. “The runes will for the most part disappear once the incantation is cast,” Dumbledore said. “If you would both remain seated on the sofa, please? I would ask that you keep your hands entwined as well. Hermione, you must relax and clear your mind in the manner that we discussed. Harry, you must keep your mind fixed on the contents of the prophecy – do you understand?”

Harry nodded glumly. Dumbledore stood directly in front of Hermione, and held his wand in both hands like the grip of a sword. He moved it around in a figure-eight, and it began to glow like he was casting a light spell.

“I ask you one more time: are you absolutely certain about this?” Dumbledore asked. “Once done, it cannot be easily undone.” She nodded.

“Harry, are you going to intercede?” Dumbledore asked.

“No, he isn’t,” Hermione said; “Are you, Harry?”

“This shouldn’t be happening,” Harry said grimly. “I should have kept things to myself.”

Hermione grasped Harry’s hand tightly. “Stop,” she said; “This is the right thing, and we both know it.” She closed her eyes, but Harry forced himself to watch.

Dumbledore said ‘*Arcanum se astringo dum dolor*’, and a glow spread from the tip of his wand down the shaft. As he said ‘*Arcanum se astringo donec nex*’, Dumbledore’s robe rustled and Hermione’s mane of thick brown hair blew back as if stirred by wind.

Dumbledore touched the tip of his wand against the centre of Hermione’s chest, and said, “*Tutela!*” There was a flash of light, and she cried out as though the wand had pierced her; her eyes shot wide open and her back arched in spasm. Harry felt a rush of energy surge from her hand to his and he let go in shock. When Dumbledore withdrew his wand, she slumped.

Her eyes closed and she began to tremble. Harry immediately brought her toward him. She was cold, and she shook so hard that Harry had difficulty holding her. He glared at Dumbledore, who produced a wrapped chocolate from the folds of his robe and wordlessly gave it to Harry.

Harry fumbled with the wrapper, broke off a bit of the chocolate, and carefully pressed it inside Hermione’s lips. “It’ll make you feel better,” he said. He tugged her up until she was curled across him, her head resting near his shoulder. He felt as though the heat was being drained from his body; it reminded him of Dementors, and he shuddered at the thought.

She whispered something, but he didn’t catch it. He inclined his head, and told her, “I’m listening.” She said it again, and he laughed nervously.

Dumbledore asked, “What did she say, Harry?”

“She told me not to fuss over her, that she’d be fine,” Harry said. He stroked her hair and whispered, “Hermione, don’t you ever think that you were sorted into the wrong house, not for a moment.”

Harry answered Dumbledore’s questioning look by telling him quietly, “She told me once that the Sorting Hat considered her for Ravenclaw first.”

Dumbledore nodded thoughtfully. “She does possess the clever mind associated with Ravenclaw, but I agree that she has found her proper place.” He reached out and gently brushed the backs of his fingers along Hermione’s cheek, and told her, “You will feel yourself again within the hour, dear girl,” before he fell back into his conjured armchair. Hermione’s moment diminished and her breathing relaxed. Harry stared blankly into the fire.

Dumbledore said quietly, “You seem so like your father this evening. I find that I resist comparing Hermione to your mother, for fear of unintended consequences.”

“Hermione and I are friends, best friends,” Harry said. “I have no expectations beyond that, not with anyone. ‘Neither can live while the other survives’, right?”

“Harry, there is a fine line separating ordained prophecy from self-fulfilling prophecy,” Dumbledore warned. “At the surface, this part of the prophecy is logical. Voldemort cannot possess that which he believes he wants, unless you are eliminated. You cannot reasonably expect to undertake a normal adult life while Voldemort’s power grows – nor can Hermione, the Weasleys, or any of your schoolmates. There is a war coming, and none of you will truly live until it is concluded. I will not spare you that truth. However, if you persist in acting as though the prophecy prevents you from having friends or experiencing enjoyment or knowing love, then it will be by your own choice.”

“You said it yourself: I can’t have a life until he’s gone,” Harry insisted.

“A brave young lady just put your life before hers,” Dumbledore reminded him. “Others have already made similar agreements, tacit and otherwise. Those around you accept heightened risk in exchange for your company. In fact I did so this afternoon, during my meeting with the Board of Governors.”

“I don’t follow,” Harry said.

“I made certain concessions, in order to placate key members of the Board. I shall leave it at that for now,” Dumbledore said. “I will never abandon you, and I will not allow dark forces to separate us. Hermione will never willingly abandon you – that should be abundantly clear, if it was not before. I sincerely doubt that the young Messrs. Weasley or their sister will ever willingly abandon you, nor would their parents. The Order exists largely for your benefit, and the key members all understand this. Despite the feelings that have been stirred within you due to the prophecy, you are not alone now and you need never be alone again except by your own

choosing.” He began to rise from the armchair, but slumped to one side.

Harry jumped up in surprise, and carefully helped Dumbledore to his feet. “Are you all right?” he asked.

Dumbledore smiled faintly. “It is late, I am old, and the charm was more draining than I anticipated. That is curious, most curious indeed... it was as though I were casting it several times. I shall have to make enquiries...”

Harry felt Dumbledore tense. “What is it?” Harry asked. “Is there anything I can do for you?”

“It is well past time to retire for the evening, Harry,” Dumbledore said awkwardly. “I am not at all accustomed to asking... but I believe that I may manage the Floo with modest assistance.” Harry put his arm around Dumbledore’s waist, and they stepped through the fire into the Headmaster’s office. Harry tried to avoid thinking of his last visit to the office, but failed miserably.

Dumbledore took up his walking stick from beside his desk. “I shall be fine from here. Your best friend needs you now,” he said. His eyes shone – dimmed but but unmistakeable.

Harry reappeared in the library at Grimmauld Place. He quietly walked down two flights to discover that Lupin had indeed retired for the night. He didn’t want to disturb Hermione, but he wanted to be close in case she needed anything. The only remaining light in the room came from the flickering fireplace, which was now returned to its normal hues. Flickering light reflected off her hair. She had drawn her arms up, and her hands were pressed against the side of her face.

He held up his own hand in the orange light; the runes were barely visible, just as Dumbledore had said. He whispered, “Why did you do this?” He expected no response, of course, and there was none.

He watched her sleep for a while, but had to turn away. He couldn’t shake the sight of her crying out from the spell, which in turn brought back the image of her lying unconscious at the Ministry, which in turn brought back the sight and the sounds of the veil.

Harry wondered what he done to deserve friendship of the sort that Hermione had shown that night. He was too tired to notice that she had stirred and rolled against him. He was asleep long before the last embers of the fire died.

Harry Potter and the Years of Rebellion Past Tense, Future Imperfect

Chapter Ten

PAST TENSE, FUTURE IMPERFECT

Harry's left arm tingled, and his neck was sore. His eyes fluttered open to a sideways world.

Hermione's voice was a sleepy drawl. "Hello there."

"Hello yourself," he croaked, and gingerly sat up. "Feeling any better?"

She nodded slowly and asked, "What time is it?"

"I don't know," he said. "No sign of light yet – three or four o'clock, I suppose?"

"How long have you sat there?" she asked.

He shrugged, which caused a flicker of pain in his neck and shoulder. "I didn't realise that I feel asleep."

She patted the side of the sofa without lifting her head. "Come back here," she said. It was a command, and he nervously obeyed; he nearly sat on his glasses in the process.

Harry lay on his back with Hermione awkwardly beside him and stared at the ceiling. "Is this what best friends do?" he asked. His voice cracked, and he wanted to cringe.

"I don't know," she admitted. "I think that we're making this up as we go." She sounded uncertain, and he found that somehow reassuring.

She moved her head from the arm of the sofa to his shoulder, draped one arm across his stomach, and nestled against him. "Perfect," she murmured.

He was sure he'd hugged her this way at some point – arm around her back, her face pressed against him – but it was an utterly different experience lying down. He'd never noticed how warm she felt or how soft she was. He'd never noticed the feel of straps through her shirt. He thought about escape for a while – could he slide free after she fell asleep again and sneak off to the couch, without offending her or making her angry? He knew that he wanted to escape because he was worried about what might happen and afraid of what he might want to do.

She lifted her head to look at him, and said, "You're stiff as a board," she said. He winced inwardly at the surely unintended double meaning. She continued, "I'm sorry. I just thought..."

Even in the dim light cast by the waning fire, he knew he'd waited too long to flee – there was no escaping now. They kissed, and it electrified him and made him queasy all at once.

She drew back and searched his face, and whispered, “Me, too.” He knew that a silly grin was plastered across his face, and he didn’t care. She was right – it was perfect. ‘Who says I can’t live?’ he thought, as he drifted off into a very satisfied sleep.

August 1

Harry blinked against bright sunlight. He absently brushed hair back from his face, and sat up. The room was blurry, and it occurred to him that his glasses weren’t on his face; a moment later, he recognised that he was on the bed in the room that he had shared with Ron the previous summer. Hermione was nowhere to be seen.

He stumbled to the bathroom and made a futile effort at combing his hair. There was no doubt in his mind that he simply recalled a vivid dream, the by-product of a long and intense day. That didn’t explain waking up in the bedroom. Dobby could have moved him, or Lupin perhaps. He found the perfect explanation – Hermione had woken up and fetched Dobby to help move him before she retired to her own room. For some reason, the word ‘perfect’ left him uneasy.

Harry dressed in his clothes from the day prior. The door to the library was open, which made perfect sense with Hermione in the house. She stood with her back to the door, contemplating four stacks of books on the table. She wore her father’s light jumper over one of Harry’s boxing singlets, and a pair of Harry’s denims rolled up at the ankles.

“Where did you find my clothes?” Harry asked.

Hermione spun around in surprise. After gathering herself, she said, “I hope you don’t mind. Professor Lupin fetched your things from wherever it is that you’ve been staying, and I sweat through my clothes overnight, actually, on account of the spell –”

“No, it’s fine,” he said. “How did you – erm, I mean, did you sleep well?”

“Very well, actually,” she said, turning back to the books. “I’ve been taking a stab at sorting through all of this. I was spot on, you know – no organization of any kind.”

“Uh-huh,” Harry said absently. “I was worried about you last night. I sat with you for a long time.”

“I know,” Hermione said, pulling more books from one of the shelves. “It was nice of you to look after me, despite the fact that I told you there was no need.”

“It wasn’t about need,” Harry told her.

“Well, it was nice all the same,” she admitted. “Say, would you look over those shelves and see if there are any more texts by deGrassi?”

Harry tapped at the spines of the books as he read them. “Somehow I moved from the sofa to a bed,” he said casually.

Hermione divided one of the book stacks into three smaller piles. “You don’t remember?” she asked.

“I’m not sure,” Harry said. “I had... an odd dream last night, a very real one. I’m having quite a time getting it straight.”

“Did you find any deGrassi texts, then?” Hermione asked.

“None on these shelves,” Harry replied.

She contemplated the smaller book piles. “It was a night for dreams, wasn’t it?” she said quietly.

“Anything you want to talk about?” he asked.

“Erm... I’m sure it was just an after-effect from the spell,” she answered. “Could you help me with those folios on the top shelves?”

Harry moved one of the rolling ladders, and scrambled up to the highest shelf. He took four of the large folios, and started down the ladder. His right foot slipped, and he came down awkwardly.

Hermione dashed over to him. “Are you all right?” she asked.

“Right as rain,” he fumed; “I just landed flat on my bum, that’s all. I hope your books made out as well.” Harry had tossed the four books clear.

“Let’s see ... good... good... good... blast, the binding cracked on this one,” she reported.

Harry pulled himself to his feet. “Sorry,” he said, “I don’t know how I lost my footing.”

“Come and look at this, Harry,” Hermione said, as she flipped the pages of the cracked folio.

“What is it?” he asked.

“It’s called ‘A Compendium of Dark Beasts’. I’ve heard of it before, but I’ve not actually seen it in the Hogwarts library,” she explained. “Based on the look and feel of it, I’d guess it to be around a hundred years old.”

“Isn’t *that* lovely?” he said, pointing at a sketch of a large, broad shouldered creature covered in greyish-olive hair.

“It’s the Fear Liath More – the Grey Man. You can find this one in Muggle folklore as well,” Hermione said.

“ ‘Fear Liath More is a creature that inhabits the peaks of the Scottish Cairngorm mountains,” Harry read aloud. “ ‘Frequently, the Grey Man is encountered as a physical sensation rather than in its true physical form. Sensations of this type include an icy feeling in the surrounding atmosphere, as well as a physical feeling of a cold grip or touch against the observer’s flesh. A

high pitched humming sound is also associated with the Grey Man’... Hermione, listen to this. ‘Additionally, the Grey Man has a powerful psychic effect. Visitors to the Cairngorm peaks report feelings of overwhelming negative energy, typified by acute fear, apprehension and panic, leading to suicidal thoughts or physical flight from the area.’ It sounds a bit like a Dementor, doesn’t it?”

“That hadn’t occurred to me,” Hermione said. “Isn’t it too tall?”

“I don’t know how tall a Dementor is, not really... eh, never mind, it was just a thought,” Harry shuddered. He looked around the room. “Any more that you want me to get down?” he asked. “I won’t drop more than half of them, I promise... Hermione? Hello?” Hermione had turned the pages of the cracked folio, and was staring at it intently.

“Hermione...?” Harry tried again; she simply kept staring so he peered over her shoulder. The illustration was unmistakeable: a wizard was depicted waist-deep in a pond, under attack from two tentacled brains.

“Merlin...” Harry whispered. He read the accompanying text.

COGNIVORUM CADOGANSIS

These vile creatures are believed responsible for more than seventy attacks during the ten-year period from 1871 to 1881. Cognivorum cadogansis appears to favour shallow water with a strong earth element, such as a marsh or bog. Medieval lore attributed Sir Cadogan of Entwistle with the extermination of the last of these beasts in the late 15th century. Nine of the creatures were driven into Loch Lomond and were captured by Mr. Algernon Croaker in 1881. No further attacks have been reported, but additional specimens may remain at large. Cognivores are believed to feed on the thoughts of their victims. Medieval texts suggest that victims are beset with visions of the future. Little information is available from those attacked during the recent scourge. More than half died within weeks of their unfortunate encounters, and thirty-four souls have been permanently committed to St. Mungo’s Asylum.

“Are those...?” asked Hermione.

Harry nodded. “I’ll never forget them.”

“Beset with visions of the future...” Hermione read aloud, and trailed off.

“Visions... he told me that they showed him things,” Harry said.

“It must have been horrible,” Hermione whispered. She dropped into a chair beside the table.

“Did he say something? Did he tell you what he saw?” Harry asked.

Hermione shook her head. “Harry, he was so... I don’t know – determined when I talked to him this summer, and... and then the way he asked me out was so... well, it was desperate, actually – like he *had* to do it...”

Harry paced the room. Things began to come together for him – the moods, the arguing, the Bonneville... the Bonneville.

“Something’s occurred to you, hasn’t it?” Hermione asked.

He silently cursed her for knowing him too well, and realised that there was nothing to be gained by keeping another secret. “The motorbike,” he said.

“What about it?”

“Ron saw the motorbike when I came to the party, and he went absolutely spare – ran off to his room. He couldn’t look at it,” Harry told her.

“He’d seen it before,” she said quietly. “Do you suppose he saw something happening to you?”

Harry thought about that for a moment, then shook his head. “He wasn’t concerned; he was terrified. He saw himself, I’m sure of it.” He sighed. “This changes quite a lot, doesn’t it?”

Hermione hesitated. “I... I thought about saying yes, you know.”

Harry’s stomach tightened. “What – to Ron, you mean?” he asked.

“I nearly did it,” Hermione said. “He – he seemed to want it so much, that I considered giving it a go. I didn’t want to hurt him. But I hesitated, and everything fell apart from there.” With a bitter edge in her voice, she added, “He certainly had no problem moving on straight away, did he?”

Harry’s thoughts kept returning to the last sentence in the description of the cognivores. “Ron may actually be going mad, if you believe that book,” he offered.

Hermione gave in to the impulse Harry shunned. “He’d have to be mad, to make off with Lavender Brown like that!” she fumed. “They deserve each other!”

“I’m angry at him for hurting you,” Harry said, “but... I know what it’s like to be alone and scared, you know – to think you’re going mad. Who knows what he’s seen, or thinks he’s seen?”

“Don’t make him out to be noble, Harry,” Hermione warned. “He didn’t try to spirit Lavender away for conversation. The only things she talks about are boys, makeup and Divination –”

“Exactly,” Harry tried to interject. “She’d be likely to take him more seriously about visions than you –”

Hermione ignored him. “– and even then she’s hard to listen to. It’d be like carrying on a conversation with a flobberworm, for goodness’ sake! It’s a wonder she’s managed –”

Harry cut her off. “She acquitted herself well in the DA, as I remember it.”

Hermione’s eyes narrowed. “She’s curvy, she’s giggly, and she’s *easy*, and *that’s* why Ron took

to her.”

Harry cringed. “Remind me to stay on your good side, would you?”

Hermione closed her eyes, and put a hand to her forehead. “I’m sorry, that was uncalled for. It’s just... it’s just that I was willing to try, you know, and that wasn’t good enough. I’m the one that didn’t want anything to happen, and now I’m shirty about being rejected. Perhaps I’m the one going mad?”

Harry smiled. “You’re not going mad. I’m not sure it’s about the brain attack, either. Maybe this is just a Weasley problem?”

Hermione looked puzzled. She began, “What are you...?” before recognition set in. “Ah ... Ginny,” she recalled. “I really should have warned you.”

Harry nodded. “Rather like a game of Exploding Snap gone badly, all the way around,” he said. They both laughed, but it was uneasy laughter.

“I know you’re hurt, and I’m angry, but we have to help him,” Harry said.

Hermione frowned and admitted, “You’re right, Harry.” She rose from the chair, and slid her arms around him. “I thought that I was supposed to be the sensible one. How did we flip things around?” she said.

Harry carefully put his arms around her in return. He wanted that dream out of his head, but he knew that it wouldn’t matter. After the safeguarding of the prophecy, he felt as if an invisible line had been crossed – that somehow the friendship of their childhood was at an end, no matter what choices were made.

Dobby called from just beyond the door to the library, “Miss Granger can be found in here, sirs and madam.” Lupin entered the room, closely followed by Mr. and Mrs. Granger. Harry dropped his arms immediately, but Hermione inexplicably continued to hold him. He was certain that he radiated guilt.

“Good morning, Dad,” Hermione said brightly. “It’s starting out to be a wonderful day, isn’t it?”

“Smashing,” Mr. Granger said flatly, as he looked Harry up and down.

“You’re up at last, Harry! I’m glad to see you’re recovered from the ride,” Lupin said, and he rushed forward to clasp Harry’s hand. This gave Harry an opportunity to disengage from Hermione – from Mr. Granger’s daughter, as he was very acutely aware.

Mrs. Granger chided, “I realise that the baggy look is in, Hermione, but...”

Hermione shrugged. “I didn’t have a change of clothing, Mother, so I borrowed these from Harry.” Mr. Granger squinted at Harry’s clothes on Hermione, and then returned his gaze to Harry.

Lupin strode between Harry and Mr. Granger, and gestured widely around the room. “This is Hermione’s library,” he said. “She’s been organizing it, you know... all morning long.”

Mrs. Granger swept along the shelves, and a smile began to form on her face. “Fascinating,” she murmured.

“Quite a lot of books here,” Mr. Granger said. “I should think we’d have to add on, to accommodate all of this.”

“By the time I hand off some to the library at Hogwarts and when the really dark material is binned, as I was told, it may be cut in half,” Hermione told her father. “I was hoping Harry would allow me to keep it here, until I have a place of my own for it.”

“A place of your own – that should be quite a while, then,” Mr. Granger said.

“You can keep the library here as long as you like,” Harry offered.

“Tom, you should see some of these titles,” Mrs. Granger said. She stopped abruptly. “This can’t actually... good heavens, is this some sort of joke?”

Hermione glanced casually at the shelf before her mother. “It’s not a joke, Mother; de Montmorency was a very serious potions scholar.”

Mrs. Granger’s eyebrows began to climb. “This isn’t something you would cover in a class, is it?” she asked.

“Of course not... well, perhaps in seventh year,” Hermione sighed. “I’m familiar with the author from History of Magic class.”

“Let me see that... *love potions* ? You’ll be binning that one, straight away,” Mr. Granger commanded.

“Dad!” Hermione protested.

“*Fine* – we’ll hold it for you until you reach an appropriate age,” Mr. Granger said gravely. “What do you think, Cordelia – 30, perhaps?”

Mrs. Granger continued to read book spines. “She’s maturing nicely enough... I believe we might consider it at, say, 28?” she said.

Hermione snapped, “Mother!”

Mr. and Mrs. Granger both began to laugh, and Hermione turned ever redder. Mr. Granger reached out and tousled her hair. “You’re still easily teased,” he snorted.

“Over nothing, at that; you won’t need that book,” Mrs. Granger said absently.

“I’m so pleased that I amuse you both,” Hermione grumbled, as she ran her fingers through her hair. She looked to Harry, and her eyes narrowed. “What are you smiling at?”

“Nothing – I’m just taking notes,” Harry insisted. Hermione shot him a foul look, and Harry’s smile became a smirk.

Mr. Granger paused in front of the table. “Good Lord! What on Earth are those things...? Cognivores... they eat *thoughts*?”

Lupin walked slowly to the table. He peered at the open folio for some time. “When did you find this?” he asked Hermione.

“Just now, Professor,” she answered.

“I was too tired to insist last night, but I’ll remind you that I’m no longer your professor. Remus will do nicely,” Lupin said. He sighed. “I didn’t know what they were, in truth. You do realise that this may explain some of Ron’s recent behaviour?”

“Ron... Ron Weasley? You mean... Good Lord, when Arthur said something about a ‘brain attack’, I thought perhaps he meant a stroke or an epileptic episode. You’re saying that Ron Weasley was attacked by *those*?” Mr. Granger asked nervously.

“It would seem so,” Lupin said. “He has received treatment, of course; and our understanding of magical disorders is much improved since this was written.” Mrs. Granger peered around Lupin at the folio, and put a hand to her mouth in shock.

Mr. Granger took Hermione by the hands. “Of your two closest friends, one is attacked by brains that eat thoughts, and the other is marked for death by someone so horrible that most of these people can’t speak his name! It’s enough that your two closest friends are both boys, for God’s sake. Does this seem acceptable to you?”

Mrs. Granger stared at Hermione in disbelief. “You... you’ve seen these things?” she asked. “My God, what else have you seen?”

“We planned to tell you that we’d decided to remain in England, for now,” Mr. Granger said. “I didn’t expect to have my mind changed again, but here we are.”

Hermione snatched her hands away. “I won’t go anywhere,” she said firmly. “I’m returning to Hogwarts next month.” Hermione and her father stared at each other, jaws set and bodies unmoving.

Mrs. Granger looked to Harry and Lupin, and said quietly, “I’m sorry that this has to play out in front of you.”

Harry impulsively stepped forward and took Hermione by the arm. “Excuse us for a moment, please,” he mumbled, and then pulled her through the doorway and into the corridor.

“This had better be important,” she growled at him.

“You need to tell them everything,” he said.

“*You* need to stay out of this,” she warned.

“Do you like making decisions without knowing all the facts?” he asked.

“Of course not!” she snapped.

“How do you think they feel?” he asked. She stared daggers at him, but said nothing.

“You’ve been angry with me most of the summer because I wouldn’t talk to you,” Harry said, “and you’re doing exactly the same thing to your parents.”

“That’s not fair,” she insisted. “You knew you could talk to me, and everything would be all right. I *can’t* tell them everything.”

“Why not?” he asked.

“They’ll go mad!” Hermione shrieked; “They’ll withdraw me for certain!”

“It seems they may do that anyway,” he pointed out. “They may as well do it with everything in hand, right?”

“Enough! I get it,” she fumed. “I wouldn’t know where to begin, honestly.”

“At the beginning, I should imagine?” Harry said.

Hermione shoved her hands in her front pockets. “Everything?” she asked nervously.

Harry shrugged. “That’s what I would do, in your shoes. I’d tell my parents everything.”

“You might feel differently if you were actually faced with it,” Hermione said bitterly.

“You may be right – I don’t know,” Harry said. “I wish that I had a choice in it.”

Hermione looked around furtively. “Will you come back in with me?” she asked. Harry nodded. She drew herself up, in a way that reminded him of McGonagall, and he followed her back into the library.

She stood before her parents, her hands clasped behind her back. She struggled for words. “I... I have a story to tell. It’s...” She faltered. Harry wanted to reach out and take her hand, but Lupin chose that moment to stand next to Harry.

Hermione collected herself and continued, “It’s about a little girl who received a strange letter from a strange place, you see? It’s about how that little girl was changed, and how she grew up.

The whole affair is rather like Alice passing through the Looking Glass, except that this story is real. Some of it... some of it may be hard for you to take in. I know you've heard the introduction and selected parts of the story... would you care to hear the rest?"

Without a word, or even a sound, her parents took chairs next to the table. Hermione stood at first, and later sat on the floor. She hit every high point and low point from her first three years at Hogwarts, from the mountain troll to Buckbeak. Harry was mostly silent, except when he thought that she was drifting from her own story toward his. He wouldn't allow her to recede into the background of her own accomplishments. Lupin, ever the teacher, provided a few well-crafted explanations where they were required.

When explaining Sirius Black – and thus drawing a contemptuous expression from Mr. Granger – Hermione insisted on describing the circumstances that led to Sirius' imprisonment, including the death of Harry's parents. Harry prepared to intercede but Lupin gently held him back. Mrs. Granger watched Harry through the entire explanation, with an expression that he couldn't fathom. Mr. Granger was fascinated by the concept of the Time-Turner and asked question after question. He and Lupin tore off on a tangent regarding paradoxes until Mrs. Granger cut them off.

Lupin had to explain the concept of the Patronus Charm. He suggested that Harry summon his Patronus. Harry searched for a happy thought, and then smiled. He spoke the charm instead of shouting it out like a schoolboy. A wash of silver luminescence erupted from his wand, followed by a dazzling silver stag that cantered around to face all three Grangers. The stag was vividly real, down to the individual hairs and the texture of its antlers. Mr. and Mrs. Granger appeared uncertain how to respond and settled on polite applause.

"Outstanding," Lupin said. "You've happened upon the perfect thought, for certain." Harry's wand twitched in his hand when Lupin said 'perfect', and the silver stag quickly dissipated.

Hermione pressed on through the Tri-Wizard Tournament. Her parents were familiar with Krum, but knew little or nothing about the circumstances under which they met. Both Mr. and Mrs. Granger were incensed as she described the second task. Lupin took great pains to assure them that Hermione had not been at any actual risk. Harry couldn't understand why they were more upset by the idea of their daughter caught underwater than by the incident with the basilisk or a half-dozen other things.

When she came to their fifth year, Harry was very much on guard. Hermione's descriptions were terse, and she talked more of him than of herself. He kept jumping in until she cut him off. She showed fierce pride when talking about Dumbledore's Army. She began to describe the encounter in the Department of Mysteries, but for some reason kept getting lost in the story. Each time that she began again, she seemed more confused. After the fourth attempt, Lupin interrupted to tell the story. Harry filled in the gaps and wondered what was wrong. By the end of the telling, Hermione seemed herself again.

"That takes us to the beginning of the summer," she finished, "and you know the story from there." Everyone sat silently. No one seemed to know who should speak next, or what should be

said.

Harry cleared his throat. “Perhaps Remus and I should step out?” he ventured, and stood to leave the room.

Hermione said, “I’m not finished.” Harry froze. He was apprehensive about what else she might have to say.

“This is who I am – it’s what I’ve become. I... I hope you can accept that,” she told her parents.

Mr. Granger said, “If we had it to do over again... we knew you were different, you know. Deep inside, we knew. When you were very young, we could label you as gifted and set our fears aside. Later, though... do you remember what happened when those boys kept harassing you? What was the one boy’s name – Strauss, or something?”

Hermione winced. “Stroud – David Stroud. That’s a rather difficult thing to forget. I sometimes wonder how long it took for his hair to grow back,” she said.

“We explained it away, of course,” her father said. “No one wanted to believe that an angry ten year old girl could make a boy’s hair fall out. We knew better, your mother and me – you were different. You were different, but we loved you – we have always loved you.”

Hermione seemed part sad and part embarrassed. “I know that, Dad,” she said.

“Then why has it taken you five years to confide in us?” her mother asked. “We accepted that outlandish letter on its face; we were so desperate to understand you, and for you to understand yourself. We’ve always been proud of you – you must know that. Why couldn’t you see fit to trust us with the simple truth?”

“What is simple about it? A part of me is still in disbelief every time I go to class. Read some of these books, for goodness’ sake! Dad, you flew last night – you sat on some concealed sticks and you *flew*, without any wings or engine. It’s not simple,” Hermione insisted.

“No, but I did it,” Mr. Granger reminded her. “I asked for a ride, I jumped on, and I flew. I seem to have retained my faculties in the process. Answer your mother’s question – why couldn’t you trust us?” He looked at Harry, and added, “Why did you have to be talked into trusting us now?”

“Because I was afraid, right?” Hermione cried. “Is that what you wanted to hear? I was afraid!”

“You’ve had a hundred things to fear over the last five years, and you decided to be afraid of us? Why?” Mr. Granger asked.

“You’ve always been on the edge of taking it all away from me,” Hermione said angrily. “There’s always a threat there. I won’t let you do it – I *won’t*. It would be as if I asked you to breathe water –”

“– which you have apparently done,” her father added. “We know we can’t ask you to come

home, and be something that you never were; you should give us more credit. It's your safety we're concerned about, not your identity. Do I wish that your circumstances were different? I suppose that I do –"

"You can't wish this away. Magic will always be a part of my life. If I ever have children, it's likely that they'll be magical as well," Hermione said.

Mrs. Granger's eyes were moist. "When you do have a child," she said in a halting voice, "I hope you never feel as powerless to help her as I feel right now."

Mr. Granger looked as if he wanted to say something else. Then he shook his head, and held his arms out toward Hermione. She stood up, slowly shuffled to her father, and embraced him.

Lupin whispered in Harry's ear, "This would be a good time to make our exit." Harry agreed and quietly followed him out of the room and down the stairs.

When they reached the entry hall, Lupin stopped before Harry. "Why did you encourage Hermione to open up to her parents?" he asked.

Harry shrugged. "I thought that they might be afraid of what they didn't know. Even if they were uncomfortable with the truth, I thought that they might be less afraid. I don't know – it seemed like the best chance for getting them to reconsider," he explained.

Lupin smiled broadly. "Well done, Harry. You handled yourself brilliantly in there. I'm... I'm quite proud of you."

Harry blushed. "Erm – thanks, Remus," he said awkwardly. His stomach growled, and he added, "I'm famished."

"Perhaps we should arrange for some food to be taken up?" Lupin suggested. "They may be a while."

Harry asked Dobby to arrange food for the Grangers, and Winky served sandwiches and crisps to Lupin and Harry in the kitchen. Between bites, Lupin said, "I have a birthday present for you. I never got around to giving it yesterday."

Harry hastily chewed, before he told Lupin, "You didn't need to get me anything."

"Finish up here and I'll show it to you," Lupin said.

After they were finished eating, Lupin led Harry down to the cellar. Harry had never been below the kitchen level before. At the base of the stairs, two doors led out of a small alcove. One door looked especially stout and had thick metal loops that looked as if they would hold chains, and the other door was painted red. Lupin opened the red door.

Inside was a virtual duplicate of Dudley's workout room at Privet Drive – before Harry blew it up, of course. Harry lightly jabbed at the speed bag, and then the heavy bag. He made a visual

inventory of the free weights. There were two large black trunks stacked in one corner.

“I thought that you might like to maintain your routine,” Lupin said.

Harry turned and gave Lupin a stout handshake. “This is wonderful,” he said. “Thank you.”

“Everything packs in the trunks, so you can take it all with you in the fall,” Lupin explained.

Harry fidgeted. “This must have been very expensive...”

“I have little use for money,” Lupin said.

“How did you know what equipment to buy?” Harry asked.

“Oh, your cousin was most helpful,” Lupin said.

Harry’s eyes widened. “My *cousin* ? You talked to Dudley?”

“I contacted him via Arabella Figg,” Lupin explained. “He sent me an equipment list. He also sent along that package next to the trunks.”

A long, flat package wrapped in brown paper leaned against the bottom trunk. When Harry opened the end of the wrapping, an envelope fell out. He carefully pulled out a painted canvas. A figure in silhouette faced the ocean, its back to the viewer, looking out at a twilight sky and burnt-orange horizon. It was one of the half-dozen paintings and drawings that had hung in Harry’s room. Harry wondered if and how Dudley had known it was his favourite.

Lupin looked at the painting. “That’s very nice. Much better than previous gifts from the Dursleys, I imagine?”

“That wouldn’t take much,” Harry said. “This was hanging in my room. Dudley painted it.”

“You must be joking,” Lupin said. “Your cousin doesn’t look the artistic type.”

“He’s really quite good,” Harry said absently, as he opened the envelope. There was a sheet of typing paper folded inside, covered with a rough scrawl.

Potter –

Am using enjoying new weights and bags. Bought what I had before, so I can pay my trainer if Dad welches. Took the Latin exam yesterday. Don’t know how it went but it felt good. Thought I’d send a painting for your place. Mum said you fancied this one. Water and sky colours turned out well, I think. Stay away from Lord Nutter, right?

Dudley

Harry handed Lupin the note. “‘Lord Nutter’?” Lupin laughed.

Harry murmured, "I preferred 'Lord Whoop-de-do'," but Lupin didn't hear.

"Shall we check on our guests?" Lupin asked.

Harry slid the painting back into its wrapping, and tucked it under his arm. On the way out, Harry pointed at the other door and asked, "What's in there?"

Lupin looked away from Harry. "That room is for my use," he grumbled. "It's well reinforced." Harry left it alone.

Dobby and Winky were in the kitchen; Dobby was washing plates while Winky surveyed the pantry. Dobby grinned at Harry. "Harry Potter has seen his present from Mister Lupin," he said. "It must be to his liking."

"Very much so," Harry agreed. "Is... everything in hand upstairs?"

"The Grangers have moved to the drawing room," Dobby squeaked. "Dobby left beverages there."

"We should make an appearance – don't you agree?" Lupin asked.

Winky peeked out of the pantry, and shot a cross look at Dobby. "Miss Granger's parents moved," she added, "but Miss Granger remains in the library, Harry Potter."

The corners of Lupin's mouth turned up slightly. "We see her parents first, Harry. It's good form."

The door to the drawing room was open. As they climbed the stairs, Harry fell farther and farther behind Lupin. He could hear Lupin talking to the Grangers, but couldn't make out what they were saying. No one's voice was raised, which Harry took as a good sign. He trudged up the last steps, and faced the open doorway. Mr. Granger caught sight of him, and motioned for Harry to enter. Lupin watched Harry with a curious expression, one that left Harry a bit uncomfortable.

Mrs. Granger looked at Harry. She stood with her hands clasped and her head tilted a bit – it was the same posture Hermione took when she was nervous or uncertain, Harry realised. "While we do not appreciate that Hermione needed your permission before she would talk to us –" she began. Mr. Granger nodded fervently.

"– we do appreciate what you accomplished by interceding," Mrs. Granger continued. "There's quite a lot that we find troubling in all of this, as you might imagine." She hesitated, and then added, "We would be pleased if you would join us for dinner this Sunday, at our home."

"Yes – yes, of course," Harry stammered, "I'd, erm, be delighted." It occurred to Harry that he didn't know what day of the week it was. Sweat began to bead at Harry's temples. He looked to Mr. Granger, and hastily added, "Are you planning to...?"

"No," Mr. Granger said sternly and formally, his arms crossed. "Hermione was rather persuasive. Given her attitude with regard to you, we think it important that we all get to know one another –

very well. That might require *several* Sunday dinners. Surely you agree.”

Harry looked to Lupin, who showed no inclination to save him. Mr. Granger watched and waited – he was a predator stalking his prey. Mrs. Granger maintained her nervous posture, and regarded Harry with the same unfathomable expression as when she had heard the story of his childhood. *Show no fear*, he thought, *show no fear!*

He swallowed hard. “Erm – yes, certainly – er... very well, yes. I had hoped we made a start toward that at the Weasley’s, sir.” Mr. Granger’s countenance lightened a bit, but he said nothing in response.

Mrs. Granger said, “Remus is going to call for our ride now. You have a few minutes.” Harry hesitated, not quite comprehending what she was telling him.

“Upstairs! Go!” Mr. Granger commanded, waving his hands toward the doorway. Harry nearly dropped the wrapped painting in his haste to leave. There were sounds behind him as he quickly mounted the stairs – for a moment, he thought that he heard laughter.

Hermione was on one of the ladders in the library, extracting more books. Harry knocked on the doorframe, rather than risk startling her. “Harry!” she called out. She carefully climbed down the ladder, set an armful of books on the table, and bounded toward him. He barely had a chance to set down the painting, before she was upon him – her cheek pressed against his ear, and hair everywhere.

“I’m so glad you’re not moving away,” he said. He reached up, and swept her hair from his face.

She pulled back and smiled mischievously. “What did they tell you?” she asked.

“Your father said you were persuasive,” Harry said.

“Persuasive... you could say that,” Hermione laughed, her arms still around Harry’s waist.

“Well?”

“Well – what?” Hermione asked.

Harry pretended to shake her. “Tell me!” he demanded.

“I told them that if they took me to Canada I’d learn Apparation on my own, and that I didn’t care if I ended up splinched or worse. I said that as soon as I learned how, I’d Apparate right back to Hogwarts,” she said proudly.

“I’d like to see you Apparate across the Atlantic Ocean,” Harry teased.

“What they didn’t know didn’t hurt them – I was simply making a point,” Hermione explained. “They had to know that I’d simply refuse to go with them.”

“Your parents want to have me for Sunday dinner,” Harry told her.

“Really?” she said, and her eyes widened a bit. “Sunday dinner at the house?”

“Uh-huh. I couldn’t tell if they want me rolled in crumbs and baked, or if they’d prefer me raw,” Harry moaned, only half-joking.

“That’s terrible,” Hermione said, as she playfully struck him with the back of her hand. She added, more seriously, “Obviously, you don’t understand the meaning of the invitation.”

“What, there’s more?” Harry asked nervously.

“Sunday dinner is a family meal in our house – *only* family. Mother and Dad evict all the Order members; even Tonks generally eats out in the front room.” Hermione thought for a moment. “I can’t think of the last time I had a friend for Sunday dinner... it would had to have been before I left for Hogwarts, if even then.”

“Your father threatened me with *several* Sunday dinners,” Harry reported. “I think they believe I have some kind of unnatural hold over you – something about your ‘attitude toward me’, or the like.”

Hermione said in a low voice, “Excuse me?”

“Your mother seemed to think that you required my permission before you were willing to talk to them,” Harry explained.

Her jaw tightened and lips pursed. “She doesn’t think that I make my own choices?” Hermione growled. “We’ll just see about that!” She started for the door, but Harry tightened his loose hold around her waist.

“What are you...?” she protested.

“Save it for dinner,” he joked.

“You actually want to go through with dinner?” she asked.

“Gryffindors stick together, right? Besides, your parents may be trying to surprise you. I can’t very well interfere with their plan,” Harry said.

“I hadn’t thought of that,” Hermione admitted. “I wonder if they intend to invite anyone else. I can’t imagine – I mean, it’s Sunday dinner after all.”

Harry shrugged. “It sounded like they were fairly intent on getting to know me – whatever that may involve. No one else was mentioned.”

Hermione frowned. “As long as they don’t invite Ron...” Before Harry could interject, she cut him off and continued, “I’m sorry, Harry – I’ve just had enough for now. If you want to help him,

I won't interfere. As I see it, he can go and bugger –"

"Hermione!" he exclaimed.

"– or flail away at Lavender Brown... whatever he wants, as long as he stays away from me," she snarled, and pulled away.

"Enough with Ron," he said. "You were the one who brought him up, not me."

"Sorry," she muttered as she turned her attention back to the books. "Thank you for allowing me to keep the library here for the time being. I haven't decided how I'll go about reading everything. I suppose I'll take home a few books to start?"

Harry offered, "It should be easier after you sort through all the material, right? I mean, you did say that sorting would cut it in half."

"You didn't believe that rot, did you?" she muttered without looking up from the table.

Harry's eyes widened and he said, "I'm sorry?"

Hermione turned, and the mischievous smile was back. It was a smile he would have associated with the Weasley twins, not Hermione. "Sirius was the one who told me to break a few rules and loosen up. So, I've decided to start with his library. I'm not binning *anything* without at least looking it over. If anything proves truly dangerous, I'll hand it over to Madam Pince for the Hogwarts restricted section."

She set her hand on one of the larger stacks of books. "I put these aside for you to review. They all deal with advanced defensive work, and I've only *heard* of two of them. You don't mind, do you?"

"Not at all," Harry said. "It might help prepare me for the fall." He glanced at the spines of the stacked books. "Some of these certainly look intriguing... 'Scandalous Tactics for Duelling'? What, do I need more scandal in my life?"

Harry didn't notice that Hermione had put her arm around him until after he read all the book titles. She didn't seem remotely self-conscious about it. He felt that it should bother him, though he wasn't certain why.

He turned toward her, and she put her other arm around him. "This seems a little out of order for best friends, doesn't it?" Harry asked nervously.

"I don't know," she answered, "I'm just making this up as I go."

Harry froze. "What *did* you dream last night?" he asked haltingly.

Hermione blushed faintly and let go of him. "I told you it was probably just a result of the safeguarding charm," she said. "It was nothing."

“Hermione!” Mr. Granger’s voice carried up the stairs. “It’s time to leave! Our ride is here!”

“Could you help me with some of these books?” Hermione asked. “I want to take these two stacks home. That should tide me over for a while.” Harry picked up a large stack of books as he was directed, and followed her down the stairs to the entry hall. Mr. and Mrs. Granger were waiting by the door.

“You’re taking all those books home?” Mrs. Granger asked.

“It’s just some light reading,” Hermione claimed. Harry groaned, and shifted the weight of the dozen thick books he carried for her.

There was a nondescript car in front of the house. Harry was reminded of the cars used by the Ministry. A young, thickly built man who Harry did not know sat behind the wheel. Seeing Harry coming, the driver reached down toward his feet and the boot popped open. Shacklebolt stood by the open rear door of the car and silently observed. Lupin stood on the front stoop, and kept a careful eye on the neighbouring houses. Harry lowered the books into the boot, and then shook his arms to restore the flow of blood. Hermione placed her smaller stack of books into the boot as well.

Harry said to her, “You know that you’re always welcome to study here in the library. I’ll make sure that Dobby knows to admit you.” Sensing Mr. Granger watching, he hastily added, “And your parents as well, of course.”

Hermione smiled. “That’s perfect. It would be much easier, to be sure, and then I could organize and read all at once.” She stared at her mother, who was climbing into the back seat of the car, and added loudly, “I’m certain my parents would find that amenable.”

Harry closed the boot and walked Hermione around the sedan. Her parents were very obviously watching them from inside the car. Hermione stopped and turned toward Harry. “I’ll return your clothes straight away,” she said. Shacklebolt stopped looking around and stared at Harry; one eyebrow slowly climbed.

Hermione stopped at the door. “Thank you for taking care of me last night,” she said, then hugged him tightly, and planted a lingering kiss on his cheek. Harry stood completely still, in order to avoid betraying his mounting panic. *What in the hell are you doing, Hermione?* he thought. Harry turned away from the car very quickly, as Mr. Granger reddened and spluttered. Half of him resented being used as a pawn; the other half was too overwhelmed to care.

“Potter!” Shacklebolt barked.

Harry turned back again slowly. “Yes?”

Shacklebolt said tersely, “Here, at eight o’clock tomorrow morning. Don’t disappoint me.” He swept back his cloak and clambered into the front passenger seat of the car, which swiftly pulled away from number twelve, Grimmauld Place.

Harry drifted down the walk to the front door. Lupin still stood on the front stoop. “I see Kingsley’s been talked into teaching you,” he said.

“It looks that way – I know he’s none too happy about it,” Harry observed.

“That was an interesting end to your time with Hermione. Perhaps the two of you *did* need a chaperone last night?” he laughed.

Harry sighed. “You don’t recognize a sham when you see one?”

“What do you mean by ‘a sham’?” Lupin asked.

“She’s furious with her parents. Hermione wouldn’t behave that way; she was making a point,” Harry explained.

Lupin sighed and shook his head. “If that’s how you see it...” he said.

Shortly, Harry retired to the library and took the top book from the stack of defensive texts. He was going to have an angry tutor, which meant that it would be very wise and very practical to spend the remainder of the evening preparing for their first session.

After two hours of continuous reading, Harry stopped to stretch. He caught sight of the wrapped painting from Dudley. There were a few finishing nails in the library walls, where presumably evil artwork had been removed. Harry unwrapped the painting, found a well-lit spot, and balanced the canvas on a nail. He wasn’t sure why he was so taken with the image – there was just something about it.

He was still looking at the painting, when Lupin entered the library. “Taking a stretch?” Lupin asked. “This would be a good time to break for dinner.”

“That sounds grand,” Harry said. “My eyes are burning.”

“Find anything useful?” Lupin wondered.

Harry grinned. “Absolutely, yes – some of these jinxes are vicious. I’ll have a few surprises in store for Shackbolt, I think.”

Lupin walked toward the painting on the wall. “I see you’ve hung it here. Not planning on putting it in your room, then?”

“This room could use some colour,” Harry said. “I’ll leave it here for now.”

Lupin gazed at the painting and stroked his chin. “Is it sunrise or sunset, Harry?” he asked.

Harry considered that at length. “I don’t know,” he decided.

Harry Potter and the Years of Rebellion Potter Training

Chapter Eleven
POTTER TRAINING

August 2

Harry pored over each of the books that Hermione had selected for him, and then he tore through the shelves looking for more. He took laborious notes, complete with sketches and diagrams. He studied and practiced and practiced and studied until his hand was sore from gripping his quill and his eyes burned with fatigue. He stumbled up to his room, fell face down onto his bed, and then dragged himself up with the sun.

His book binge began because he was unwilling to be humiliated by Shacklebolt, but it was spurred on by fascination. The books that Hermione had set out for him weren't textbooks – they were practical manuals for the art and science of war. MacLachlan had trained Aurors a few decades earlier, and Harry wondered if he might have trained Mad-Eye Moody. *Chronicles of the Goblin Wars* by von Lichtenstein described everything from military campaigns to brutal hand-to-hand combat.

Scandalous Tactics for Duelling was Harry's hands-down favourite, however. The Marquis de Maupassant was witty, direct, and utterly reprehensible. The book reminded him in a way of Devlin Whitehorn's manual for the Bonneville; it was written as much for the Marquis' enjoyment as for the reader. It was clear that de Maupassant had held no respect for the codes that governed wizards' duels and felt that any reader should share his opinion.

Lupin appeared at the door, pale and bleary-eyed, at around half past seven. "Harry, I consider myself a patient man, but what – is – causing – all – that – banging?" he bellowed.

Harry winced. "I'm sorry, Remus," he said. "I didn't think about the fact that they were hitting the floor. They didn't, at first."

"What are 'they'? What in the devil are you talking about?" Lupin demanded.

Harry flicked his wand, and a silver ball the size of a large grapefruit appeared in mid-air. It fell to the floor with a clank! before it dissipated. "Cannon shot," he bumbled. "I was reading von Lichtenstein's book about the Goblin Wars: the part where he discusses a shortage of cannon

shot. It really grabbed me; magical cannons – who would have thought? Anyway, he talked about the problems with conjuring more shot – you know, making it sufficiently dense and smooth, making it last long enough to impact the target, that sort of thing? I’ve laboured a bit with transfiguration and I’ve never managed effective conjuring before, but this just made sense to me somehow.”

“You’ve been dropping cannon shot on my ceiling since seven o’clock!” Lupin fumed. “In future, please wait until nine o’clock to begin a siege!” With that, he stomped off.

Harry switched from conjuring cannon shot to lengths of rope – the Marquis described more than two dozen questionable ways to use rope against an opponent, in graphic and sometimes side-splitting detail. He experimented with two of them and was ready to move on to a third when he heard Dobby offer greetings at the front door. Shackbolt swept in, followed by Tonks and Hermione.

Harry hadn’t expected to see two of the three. “Good morning, Tonks,” Harry said; he added uneasily, “Good morning, Hermione.”

Hermione’s reply was terse. “Good morning, Harry. I’ve come to use the library, as we discussed yesterday,” she said. She looked tired, he thought, and he wondered if the three Grangers had talked well into the night.

“Of course; have at it,” Harry offered. “I left a bit of a mess, I’m afraid. I was going through the stack of books that you left for me.”

Hermione began to reply but Shackbolt ordered, “Tonks, go to the library with Miss Granger – now. Potter has his first lesson to learn.”

Tonks glared at him. “I’m sure that Dumbledore wouldn’t mind if you took this slowly,” she said.

“Dumbledore made his feelings abundantly clear,” Shackbolt said flatly. “Go.” Hermione stood hesitantly until Tonks nudged her toward the stairs. Harry gripped the tip of his wand between the fingers of his right hand; the body of the wand ran up his sleeve.

As soon as Hermione and Tonks were out of sight, Shackbolt told Harry, “It’s time for your first lesson. It’s essential, and I expect you’ll remember it well. Everbero!”

A red beam of light shot toward Harry, who managed to shout ‘Contego!’ in time to partially block the spell. The remaining energy struck him in the shoulder like the hardest punch he could imagine. He flew backward and slammed against the foot of the stairs.

Harry muttered, “Creo rope”, jabbed his wand toward Shackbolt, and then shouted, “Evincio!”; a newly conjured rope wound and tightened around the auror’s legs. Shackbolt toppled and barely missed Harry with a stunning spell. Harry forced himself up the stairs against the painful protests of his shoulder.

He nearly crashed into Lupin, who snarled, “More cannon shot, is it? What will it take to make you stop?” A flash of light shot up the stairs, and punched a hole in the ceiling plaster.

Lupin instantly produced his wand, and conjured a small mirror. He eased the mirror around the edge of the stairwell, which drew another red flash. “Kingsley, what in Merlin’s name are you doing?” he shouted.

“Back off, Lupin,” Shacklebolt warned; “Don’t interfere with Potter’s training.”

“I’ll damn well interfere if you’re going to destroy the house!” Lupin yelled. “Shacklebolt! Shacklebolt – answer me!” Lupin sniffed the air and spun around just as Shacklebolt appeared.

“Petrificus totalus,” Shacklebolt muttered, and Lupin’s stunning spell missed by inches. “There’s my answer,” he added. Lupin immediately began rocking back and forth on the floor as he tried to counter the spell.

Shacklebolt slowly moved toward the drawing room. “Let’s see... if I were an arrogant whelp, where would I be hiding?” he wondered aloud. Harry had Disillusioned himself and had cast silencing charms all around to mask his laboured breathing. He stood perfectly still as Shacklebolt entered the drawing room and passed within a foot of him.

Shacklebolt looked around the room. “He’s taken the O.W.L.s so he could have vanished himself, but that wouldn’t be the wisest choice inside these wards,” he lectured. “I’m fairly certain that he knows the Disillusionment charm. Any worthy teenager would think to silence the floorboards... there’s one thing I’m betting you didn’t hide, Potter.” He said "Lumos!", and pointed his wand along the wall where Harry stood.

Harry realised too late that although Disillusioned, he still cast a shadow in bright light. Shacklebolt snarled, “Percutio!” The ex-Auror blasted a Galleon-sized hole in the wall with each flick of his wrist; sharp bits of plaster sprayed everywhere. Harry dove for the doorway, and bounced against the floor with a noisy squeak. Shacklebolt said, "Finite incantatum," and Harry knew he was again visible. He scrambled awkwardly for the stairs.

“The floor squeaked, Potter. Obviously you’ve never snuck into a young lady’s house,” Shacklebolt said. He strode onto the stairs and added menacingly, “I’m coming for you. Show me something, schoolboy.”

Harry stood back from the open stairwell, and waited. Tonks called down from above, “Kingsley, he’s not an Auror-in-training. He hasn’t even studied N.E.W.T.-level spells, to speak of. Dumbledore would never approve of this.”

“Dumbledore said I could select my own methods. I’ll let up after this lesson,” Shacklebolt called from below, “if he proves worthy of it.”

Tonks came down the steps and crept toward Harry. The floor didn’t squeak when she walked, he noticed. She whispered, “You’re bleeding. Just give up and end this; I’ll train you up, if it comes

to that.”

Harry followed her gaze and touched his own face. He felt blood and pinpoint cuts from the flying plaster. His cloak was tattered where the first spell had struck him and his back was tightening. Harry shook his head from side to side by way of response; he locked his gaze on the stairs.

Tonks said, “What is it with men? I hope you have something planned, then.” She tiptoed back to the ascending stairs. Harry heard Hermione engage Tonks in a stream of angry whispers that he couldn’t make out. In the midst of that, he heard a tap from the descending stairs. When he muttered ‘Finite incantatum’, the top of Shacklebolt’s head came into view through the gaps in the railing.

Harry madly flicked his wand toward the space above the open stairs and called out over and over, “Creo cannon shot!” Silver balls appeared in mid-air above Shacklebolt’s head like popcorn popping, and the stairwell echoed with the sound of wooden stairs splintering. Shacklebolt ran up instead of down, which Harry hadn’t expected. He managed to bat away a half-dozen balls, but one struck him on the side of the head and another slammed into his shoulder as he fell forward.

Harry said, “Accio wand,” and Shacklebolt’s wand flew into his hand.

Tonks demanded, “Kingsley, put a stop to this, now!” She started down the stairs again.

Shacklebolt whipped a second wand from his cloak, and quickly called out, “Expelliarmus! Accio glasses! Aduro cloak!” Harry moved to one side but his glasses flew off and the bottom of his cloak burst into flames. He recalled the extinguishing spell that the dragon keepers used during the Triwizard Tournament, and put out the fire before anything save the ruined cloak was burned. He couldn’t see anything clearly, including his wand, but he could make out that Shacklebolt had clambered to his feet and that Tonks was nearby. Shacklebolt ground his foot against the floor and there was a crunching sound. So much for my glasses, Harry thought.

Hermione forcefully whispered from the ascending stairs, “Get up here!”

“My wand...” Harry muttered as he groped along the floor.

“It fell down the stairs. He’s gone mad! Get up here now, before he really hurts you!” Hermione insisted.

Tonks shouted, “Enough of this!” She exchanged a flurry of spells with Shacklebolt, punctuated by muttering and snarling that Harry couldn’t follow. Harry tried to stand but his back seized up. He felt an invisible hand grasp his and found himself sliding along the floor toward the nearest bedroom. Once inside, the door closed.

“Colloportus!” called Hermione’s voice just before she reappeared. The door squelched tightly shut. “This must qualify as self-defence,” she explained.

Explosions rattled outside, and they heard Shacklebolt’s muffled voice. “Hello, Lupin – nicely

done. I apologise for the next bit in advance,” he said. More bangs and reports followed, and then Tonks cried out. After more booms and crunches, Lupin bellowed something like “Aaargh!” The door to the bedroom rattled and shook.

“You didn’t get the pieces of my glasses, did you?” Harry asked quietly.

“I was otherwise occupied,” Hermione snapped.

“This door is well sealed, Miss Granger,” Shacklebolt called from the hallway. “Perhaps I should be training you instead? I’ll admit that the metal balls were creative, Potter; you’ll have to pay for that.” The door blew off its hinges; it barely missed Hermione and smashed a tall, ornate side table into pieces.

Shacklebolt was standing in the doorway. “Somnio!” he shouted. Hermione yawned and slid gently to the floor before she had a chance to raise her wand.

Shacklebolt held Tonks by the collar with his free hand. She struggled in his grasp; her wrists and ankles were bound. “What in the hell are you playing at?” she shouted.

Shacklebolt’s eyes blazed at Harry. “Do you understand your first lesson, Potter? Do you? Death Eaters don’t duel like a bunch of pureblood pansies at a society party. Death Eaters attack first, and they kill. If you’d understood that in June, we’d all be a lot happier now – wouldn’t we? Wouldn’t we?”

Harry stood and squinted at Shacklebolt. “What do you want from me – another apology?” he demanded. “I’m sorry! I got Sirius killed, right? Ron is probably going mad because of me! Tonks and Hermione were badly hurt. Do you think I could feel any worse? I get it! Put a stop to this and let Tonks go.”

Shacklebolt said, “You’re quite good at getting other people to sacrifice themselves on your behalf. I think we’ll move on to your second lesson. I am You-Know-Who and you are Harry Potter. It seems I’ve got your little friend here, Potter. She’s defenceless and so are you. What do you think I’m going to do... don’t try it, Lupin – you know that I can drop you where you stand.”

“End this, Kingsley. End it now,” Lupin said in a strangled voice.

Shacklebolt went on. “I’m Voldemort, Potter! What do you think I’m going to do to your friend? She’s just Mudblood filth in my eyes –”

“Kingsley! Don’t use that word!” Tonks shouted, as she continued to struggle.

“Out with it, Potter! What do you think I’m going to do with a trifle like Granger? Hand her off to my minions, perhaps? Maybe I’ll just kill her slowly while you watch.” Harry stiffened at the mention of Hermione’s name. It’s a game, he reminded himself, a nasty one, but a game all the same. He won’t hurt Tonks; he’s just angry with me. He took slow breaths, but the room still

closed in on him – it was stifling.

“Kingsley, you’re going to make Harry angry. I don’t recommend that,” Lupin warned.

“Aw, does baby Potter have a little control problem?” Shacklebolt mocked, affecting a voice that was too much like Bellatrix Lestrange for Harry to stomach. Harry wiped sweat from his brow. He thought, there has to be an option - think!

“It’s not a little problem,” Tonks said, her wrists moving back and forth in quick bursts. “I take it that you didn’t hear about his aunt and uncle’s cellar?”

“What are you going to do now, Potter – swear at me? You don’t have many alternatives from which to choose,” Shacklebolt sneered. Harry wiped away more sweat. Try as he might, he couldn’t squint hard enough to make out Shacklebolt’s face – just the shape of his head and the golden glint of his earring.

“Kingsley, I’ll give the next lesson,” Tonks said. She pulled her wrists apart, rammed her elbow into Shacklebolt’s stomach, and stomped hard on his foot. “Never make assumptions about the damsel in

distress!” she shouted. Shacklebolt nearly lost hold of his wand but he managed to gasp out ‘Expuli’ and Tonks slammed hard into the wall.

Shacklebolt turned his attention to Hermione, who was sound asleep. “Aha! The real damsel!” he said.

Harry dove across the bed, falling into the remnants of the shattered side table. He groped along the floor, in the hope that Hermione’s wand might be loose. He felt a long wooden cylinder roll beneath his hand, grasped it tightly, and sprang to his feet.

“What do you think you’re going to do with that?” Shacklebolt laughed. Hermione slowly slid across the floor toward him. The sweat dripped into Harry’s eyes and it stung. He blinked hard and saw the glint of gold again. It was suddenly very clear what he needed to do.

“Accio earring!” he hissed.

Shacklebolt screamed as the hoop tore through his earlobe and flew toward Harry’s outstretched hand. Instead of running away, Harry charged him. He shoved Shacklebolt – who was shrieking and clutching at his ear – hard into the wall opposite the doorway.

Shacklebolt instinctively crouched, and Harry did precisely as Dudley had instructed him: he pounded at his opponent’s abdomen with crisp, hard blows. He swung upward and connected firmly with the auror’s jaw, whose head snapped back. With one more blow, Shacklebolt lay sprawled on the floor of the corridor.

“Expelliarmus!” Harry shouted, and Shacklebolt’s wand shot down the hallway. “The lesson’s over,” he spat.

Lupin sat propped against the wall a few feet away. “Pray that you’re never near me during a full moon, Shackbolt,” he croaked.

“Good show, Harry – serves him right. I just want to know how you pulled it off,” Tonks called out from the bedroom. “Are you taking after Moody, hiding wand cores inside everything?”

“Wand cores? What are you on about?” Harry asked. He looked around in confusion. With effort, the wooden cylinder in his hand came into focus: it was a broken table leg. He dropped it as though it had stung him.

“Potter,” Shackbolt murmured, “you should have used plural from the beginning.”

“Wha –?” Harry began.

There was yet another wand in Shackbolt’s hand; he muttered ‘Percussum’ and swept his wand from one side to the other. Harry felt like a giant open hand slapped him across the face, and fell hard onto his sore shoulder.

“You should have said ‘Accio wands’, not ‘Accio wand’,” Shackbolt said as he crawled toward Harry. “Never walk away from an opponent unless or until you are dead certain he’s finished.” He leaned in, his face inches from Harry’s, and snarled, “Your last lesson for today is this, Potter – the lesson is over when I say so.”

Shackbolt collected his earring from the floor and slowly rose. “You will diagram this entire sequence of events, every element of it. For each element, you will prepare an analysis. You will summarize by writing two feet on how you would defeat me, given the same circumstances,” he ordered. “We will review your work tomorrow at eight, and we train at nine.”

Lupin rose to his feet behind Shackbolt, and jabbed the tip of his wand hard against the former auror’s neck. “Going somewhere?”

“Apparently not,” Shackbolt murmured.

“You have a good deal of repairing ahead of you, followed by a great deal of explaining. If I decide to let you live, then you will explain yourself to Albus; tomorrow will be up to him, won’t it?” growled Lupin.

Harry wiped blood from the corner of his mouth. “I believe that’s up to me,” he said firmly.

Hermione came out of the bedroom. She became aware of her surroundings as though coming out of a fog, and Tonks steadied her. “Harry!” she cried; “Look what he did to you.” She gently placed her hand on his face and he flinched at the pain. Then, she turned and stared down Shackbolt.

“You should be very glad that I’m underage!” Hermione raged. “What kind of a teacher are you?”

“Want to hex me, do you? Keep in mind that I used a sleeping spell when I could have stunned

you, or worse,” Shacklebolt said. Lupin pulled back slightly but kept his wand pointed at Shacklebolt’s head.

Tonks shouted, “I thought we were going to be cleaning Harry off the walls, for Merlin’s sake!”

“I held my own,” Harry insisted. He said to Shacklebolt, “Tomorrow morning, then,” which drew a curt nod.

Hermione gaped at Harry. “Please tell me you’re joking!”

Lupin added sternly, “You should discuss this with Dumbledore before committing to anything.”

“I’ve made my decision,” said Harry.

“Look at what Mr. Shacklebolt has done to Harry Potter’s house!” Dobby squeaked from the stairs. He slowly walked down the hallway, looking from side to side, and then up and down. “Plaster... paint... wallpaper... trim... doors... terrible!” he fumed.

“I’ve ordered Kingsley to begin making repairs,” Lupin explained to Dobby.

Dobby stopped in front of Harry. He looked at Harry’s face and cloak and began to shake. “That – will – not – be – necessary,” the house-elf blustered. “Dobby will make the repairs. Dobby can repair faster and better.” He immediately reached toward Harry’s face.

“Would everyone please stop touching my face?” Harry asked. “It hurts!”

“Harry Potter will stop moving, please,” Dobby said. “Dobby will begin the repairs with Harry Potter.” In a few moments, Harry’s face no longer stung.

“I didn’t know that house-elves could heal,” Lupin said, impressed.

Tonks said, “Well-treated house-elves can manage basic healing if they’re asked, but I’ve never seen it done without prompting... I’ve never seen house-elves do much of anything without prompting, beyond cleaning and the like.”

Hermione said smugly, “You obviously haven’t seen free house-elves, then,” and then proceeded to give a brief primer on house-elf liberation. Tonks buried her face in her hands, Shacklebolt was clearly puzzled, Lupin smiled and shook his head, and Dobby rolled his enormous eyes.

Dobby then turned his attention to Shacklebolt. “May Dobby escort Mr. Shacklebolt to the door?” he squeaked menacingly.

“That won’t be necessary,” Shacklebolt said.

“It would be best that you leave,” Lupin said.

“There are supposed to be three Order members near Miss Granger at all times,” Shacklebolt

noted.

“You weren’t exactly on protective duty this morning,” Tonks snapped, “nor was I, thanks to your idea of a lesson.”

“I’d say Harry would be more useful in a pinch than Mundungus Fletcher or Diggle,” Lupin added. “With Tonks and me, that makes three. Good-bye, Kingsley. Sadly, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“I really do think –” Shacklebolt started.

“Dobby, please show Mr. Shacklebolt out,” Hermione said in a tone that brooked no argument.

“Does Harry Potter have instructions for Dobby if Mr. Shacklebolt should resist?” Dobby asked Harry; the grin on his face was quite like Winky’s murderous expression when she had spoken of Kreacher.

Harry blurted out, “Be sure that you don’t kill him, please.”

Shacklebolt began walking backward toward the stairs. “Easy, now,” he said to Dobby. “House-elves can’t kill...” He held his wand out slightly in a defensive posture. Dobby reached out a hand, waggled his fingers, and Shacklebolt’s remaining wand flew to him; he neatly snapped it in half and tossed the pieces aside.

Shacklebolt stopped halfway down the flight of stairs, and said, “You don’t have to turn me out. Clearly, you don’t –”

Dobby raced down the stairs and exclaimed repeatedly, “You are resisting, sir!”

Shacklebolt called out, “Tomorrow morning, Potter! Be prepared!” Harry heard the thump-squeak-thump-squeak of a person racing down the stairs, and then a loud pop! that was quickly followed by the slamming of the front door.

“I don’t think I’m prepared for free house-elves,” Tonks muttered.

“I’m entirely unprepared for Shacklebolt to return to this house,” Lupin said firmly, arms tightly crossed.

“I agree,” Hermione added. “Harry, he could have killed you.”

“I thought that my intentions about tomorrow were clear,” Harry said.

“Training-by-ambush seems completely out of bounds to me,” Lupin observed.

Tonks shrugged. “That’s how it’s done, Remus. By Auror School standards, Kingsley was fairly controlled. I just thought he was over the top given Harry’s inexperience – no offence intended, of course.”

“That was consistent with Auror training?” Hermione asked incredulously.

“More or less,” Tonks answered. “He’s cross with Harry, and that sort of bias would ordinarily be forbidden in practicals. Still... on the main, I would have to say that combat training is the hardest thing I’ve ever done.”

“He didn’t treat me like a child,” Harry said.

“Definitely not,” Tonks agreed. “He treated you the way that he treats trainees. Believe me, I know. Kingsley was my combat tactics trainer, and he can be a nasty, filthy, hard-nosed son of a...”

Lupin cut her off. “Tonks!”

“You think I’m off? I see the evidence in our midst,” Tonks chuckled, gesturing toward Harry. Lupin frowned.

Hermione looked Harry up and down, and sighed. “Are you sure about this? You look like... let’s just say that you’ve looked better.”

“You know what I’m up against,” Harry said. Hermione suddenly looked out of sorts, and Harry felt... something. He looked at the back of his hand and quickly added, “That is, you’ve seen everything I’ve faced over the last five years. I need real training, not the school work at Hogwarts.” Hermione relaxed, and he resolved to force Dumbledore to explain the safeguard – he was the ‘Bearer’ after all, whatever that meant.

“Steady there, Harry,” Tonks said. “You’re really whipped without those glasses, eh?”

“Just wondering what’s left of them,” Harry mumbled.

Hermione dashed in front of him, and gathered up some fragments. “I’m not sure that these can be repaired,” she said. “The right lens has been ground practically to dust.”

“Let me have a go at them,” Lupin said. He crouched down to peer at the remains of Harry’s glasses. Instead of attempting to repair them all at once, he reconstructed one portion at a time. “Here, give them a try,” he said, holding out the mended glasses.

Harry gripped his glasses by the hinges, and slowly slid them on. He backed them away twice, blinking furiously, before he settled the frames on his face. “Thank you for the effort, Remus, but they’re not right. Everything looks curved.”

Lupin frowned. “You’ll need new ones, then. I suppose it’s been quite some time since you’ve had your eyes properly looked after, anyway. Backup pairs would be in order, I’d say – three or four of them, perhaps.”

“An Unbreakable Charm would be a good precaution as well,” Tonks added.

Hermione shook her head. “How many times have I suggested that?” she chided him.

Harry just smiled. “I’m going upstairs for a bit,” he announced.

When he nearly missed the first step, Hermione said, “I’ll go with you.”

Harry took off his glasses. “Better off without them for the moment, I think. I’ll be fine now.”

Hermione began, “Are you sure? I mean, I –”

Harry waved her off. “I’ll be fine. I’m going to tidy myself up a bit. Meet you in the library, then?”

“Where else would I be?” she said. Harry wished that he could match her expression to her strained tone, but it was enough that he could find the steps.

In the bathroom, Harry peered into the mirror from a few inches away. Half his face was dotted with spatters of blood. Although the nicks and cuts were gone, his cheek was reddened and there was certain to be some kind of bruise later from Shacklebolt’s slapping spell at the end. He slipped off his charred cloak and dropped it in a heap, and his sweat-soaked shirt quickly joined the cloak. He filled the washbasin, found a cloth, and began dabbing at his face.

“You really are a sight,” Lupin said from the doorway to the bathroom.

Harry jabbed the cloth hard against his cheek. “Ouch! Damn it, you startled me!” he cried out.

“Language, Harry,” Lupin scolded. “I just thought that someone should look in on you.”

Harry turned his attention back to removing the blood spatters from his face. “Surprised it wasn’t Hermione,” he muttered.

“She seems peeved with you,” Lupin observed. “Tonks is with her.”

“Peeved with me?” Harry protested. “Who was using whom yesterday?”

Lupin shrugged. “Why don’t you tell me?”

Harry set the cloth atop the washbasin, and glared at Lupin – or in the direction of Lupin’s blurry image, at any rate. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You wouldn’t have minded what she did, if it had taken place on your terms,” Lupin said.

Harry shook his head, and returned to his task. “That’s ridiculous,” he insisted.

Lupin began, “I saw the way that she looked at you last evening, when you were asleep. She –”

Harry stopped him. “When I was ... you saw me asleep? Where – in my bed?”

“No, leant across the sofa,” Lupin explained. “It’s a wonder that you didn’t fall to the floor.”

“Then why did...? I’m confused,” Harry admitted.

“Hermione awoke and fetched me around three o’clock. She couldn’t rouse you and didn’t want to leave you like that. I floated you into bed, and returned to my room,” Lupin said.

“And Hermione...?” Harry asked.

“Went to the guestroom, I imagine,” Lupin answered. “She’s a remarkable young woman, but surely you know that.” Harry smiled strangely.

“You’re amused by that?” Lupin asked. “After what she did for you, you could at least acknowledge –”

Harry shook his head. “No, no, I agree with you. I just... I thought that I remembered last evening a bit differently.”

Lupin crossed his arms. “Do you care to explain yourself?”

“I mistook a dream for something else; no need for panic,” Harry assured him.

“You’re dreaming about her, then?” Lupin asked, his right eyebrow rising slightly.

Harry snorted. “It’s not like that, for goodness’ sake!”

“Judging by the colour of your face, I’d venture that it’s slightly like that,” Lupin smirked.

Harry examined his red cheeks in the mirror. “That’s from Shacklebolt,” he determined.

“Are you angry with her, then – about yesterday?” Lupin asked.

Harry brushed past Lupin and walked across the corridor to his bedroom in search of fresh clothing. “Are you baiting me?” he asked Lupin absently.

“I’m simply trying to ascertain your feelings,” Lupin answered dispassionately. “Tonks thinks... erm, I think that you seem rather... I don’t know, confused?”

Harry found another of the boxing singlets that he’d set aside when Dobby had turned out his old clothes. “I’m not confused in the slightest,” he insisted. “I know exactly how I feel.”

“And...?” Lupin said expectantly.

Harry passed in front of Lupin and re-entered the bathroom. “That’s my business,” he said, suppressing a smile. “What’s with Tonks, by the way?” he added, feigning innocence.

“Excuse me?” Lupin said in a low voice.

“‘Tonks is with Hermione.’ ‘Tonks thinks this.’ ‘Tonks thinks that.’ What’s with Tonks, then?” Harry asked. He couldn’t allow himself to look at Lupin for fear that he’d laugh, but he angled to one side in hopes of catching some of Lupin’s expression in the mirror.

“There’s nothing whatever with Tonks,” Lupin said hastily. “I believe we were talking about you.”

“You were talking about me,” Harry corrected him. “I’m talking about you. Tonks is definitely on your mind.” He kept his back to Lupin. One snort escaped him, and he quickly clapped his hand over his mouth.

“Who’s baiting whom here?” Lupin chuckled.

Harry turned around, and burst out laughing. “You win,” he snorted.

A broad smile spread across Lupin’s face. “Let’s call it a draw,” he said. Harry did enjoy making Lupin smile. It was relatively rare, and Harry thought that a smile took ten years off the man. At the same time, those smiles made Harry feel a tinge of something deep inside that he simply couldn’t name. When Lupin smiled, Harry began to feel serious – for whatever reason.

“I’m sorry that I disturbed you this morning,” Harry offered.

Lupin scowled a little, and then softened. “I’m on edge – you’re not responsible for that. It’s just that... dash it all, Harry, no more secrets. I’m not well, not at all. I’ve had to discontinue the Wolfsbane potion. The last two full moons have been... well, they’ve been the worst I’ve known in a very long time.”

Harry’s heart sank. “Why did you have to stop the potion...?” He stopped abruptly. Five years’ worth of suspicion and enmity welled up inside of him. “Snape,” he added venomously. “This was his doing, wasn’t it?”

Lupin held his hands up to pre-empt Harry. “No, Harry – it’s quite the contrary. If anything, the fact that I tolerated the potion for this long is a testament to his skills. We’ve learned that few of my kind can take it for an extended period. Snape gave me several good years; in fact, he holds out some hope that I may be able to resume it in time. Despite what you think of him – despite what he thinks of me, for that matter – I choose to be grateful.”

“The room downstairs... you needed extra reinforcement,” Harry realised.

Lupin nodded sadly. “Tonks helped me to prepare it. She’s been a great comfort to me the last few weeks, though it’s hard for me to imagine her motives.”

“Why?” Harry asked.

Lupin sighed. “You see past my nature,” he said, “and that’s also a great comfort – but Tonks has... she has seen me.” He shuddered. “She knows everything now, the full horror of it.”

Harry said gently, “I suppose that she sees past your nature as well.”

Lupin tensed. “Perhaps she does... or perhaps she’s simply naïve. Sweet Merlin, she’s scarcely past her school days. She shouldn’t be messing about with anyone fifteen years older than she is, let alone...” He sighed. “I keep explaining to her that she’s been toying with something terribly dangerous... she could be killed – or much worse.”

Harry stepped forward and rested his hand on Lupin’s arm. “Dumbledore trusted you to teach, and I’m sure that he still does. Hermione... I think that she respects you more than any other professor that she’s had. I choose to be here with you, and nothing that you could do would change my mind.”

“I’ve succumbed to Sirius’ choice in that matter, but that doesn’t mean I concurred,” Lupin growled. “I don’t want anyone else hurt because of me.”

Harry shrugged. “We’ve all made our choices. You may as well accept that.”

Lupin’s sad, gentle eyes bored into Harry. He said haltingly, “You mean well, Harry, I truly believe that... but... you’re actually telling me that I should accept the willingness of others to risk injury on my behalf? You must surely sense the irony in that.”

Harry’s first impulse was to insist that their situations were different, that the nature of the danger surrounding Harry was more unmanageable. He knew that wasn’t true, of course – especially now that Lupin could no longer rely on the one measure of control that had been available to him.

Instead, Harry simply asked, “Feeling helpless is horrible, isn’t it?”

Lupin nodded, his eyes closed. “Of all the things that we could possibly share in common, you and I – why does it have to be that?”

Harry finished cleaning his face, and fussed with his hair to little avail. They retired to the library, which he had decided was the most comfortable room in the house, and started a magical fire; it was too warm for the real thing. He was so tired – tired from the reading, tired from the day’s lesson, tired from all the changes – just tired. Seated on the sofa and without his glasses, it was very easy to lose himself in the green flickering flames.

Lupin browsed through several books before he broke the silence. “I’m not certain how to bring this up, so I’ll just spit it out. I do intend to take on fully my responsibilities toward you and the Black Trust, and to that end I’ve been studying the finances. I’ve stumbled across a few things that concern me. For example, it turns out that Diggle was appointed as the Black trustee nearly five years ago. He also held power of attorney over your personal accounts from July 19th until your birthday.”

Harry’s attention flickered with the flames. “Uh-huh... five years ago... my accounts,” he muttered.

“I’ve also found a number of transactions that make no sense to me, mostly in June and July of this year,” Lupin continued. “Most are from the Trust account, but some are from your personal accounts. One is quite large... astoundingly large, actually. It appears to be a transfer of some type, rather than an expense. Frankly, Harry, I’m rather lost in the details. Madam Bones and I have agreed that Ted Tonks should have a go at it, unless you have strong feelings otherwise.”

“Uh-huh, Tonks,” Harry muttered. “She’s fine... whatever you want.”

Lupin took on an impish expression when Harry said ‘she’. “By the way, Harry... I thought you should know that Tonks is carrying our love child. It’s a Labrador retriever, and we’ve decided to call him Fudge. I trust you’ll turn up at the christening, then?”

“Uh-huh... christening,” Harry muttered. “Fudge is nice... Fudge? Wha...?” He sat up and stared at Lupin with glassy eyes.

“Just checking whether you were nodding off,” Lupin laughed. “Did you hear a word that I said?”

“I certainly did. Fudge is a terrible name, and I can’t believe you’d pick a dog without me,” Harry complained absently.

Lupin snorted. “Rest for a while,” he said. “We’ll talk later.” Harry saw the flicker of green flames and then nothing at all

He blinked hard, and his eyes watered. The green flickering was still before him, but sideways. The shadows in the room were all wrong... Lupin had been blathering something about dogs, and then... he sat up slowly. Someone sat quietly in one of the armchairs. He didn’t need his glasses to make out who it was.

“How do you feel?” Hermione asked.

Harry thought for a moment. “Rested,” he replied, and added with a smirk, “You know, if you keep spending your days in my house, people may begin to talk.”

“It’s a little late to worry about that,” Hermione observed. “Tonks told me that I’d received over fifty Howlers by this morning, courtesy of the subscribers to Teen Witch Weekly.”

“The Creevey brothers are going to wish I wasn’t coming back to Hogwarts... what were they thinking?” Harry fumed.

“The Creeveys? Oh, I suppose that does makes sense,” Hermione decided. “I imagine that they did mean well.”

“I wonder if everyone on that stupid list is getting the same treatment?” Harry mused. “I certainly hope not.” He added hastily, “Not that I want you to get the worst of it... you know what I meant, right?”

“I understand you,” Hermione said. “I doubt the Howlers are evenly distributed. After all, this

isn't my first time down this road."

Harry cringed, recalling the treatment Hermione received when Rita Skeeter had first linked the two of them. "Obviously, they didn't spend much time putting that list together. They certainly could have spared some of the grief; it wouldn't have taken much research to cut it in half, or better."

"The girls remaining on the list would probably have received more Howlers," Hermione said flatly.

"I suppose that makes sense. That would have been terrible for you," Harry said. "Fifty is quite enough, I'd say – I can't imagine several times that. I mean, who has to screen all of those posts –"

"What did you say?" Hermione asked quietly.

"I said that fifty Howlers are enough. I would have felt terrible if you'd received hundreds of them, or thousands. As it is, I think that Fred and George should arrange for the replies." Harry sniggered at the thought.

"Who would have remained on the list?" Hermione asked.

"I'm sorry?"

"You said it wouldn't have taken much research to cut it down – who would have remained on the list?" Hermione asked again.

"Are you feeling anxious about something?" Harry asked.

"What...? I'm not anxious. Whatever would make you think that?" Hermione spluttered.

"Your hands are folded in your lap, and you're drumming with your fingers," observed Harry. "You do that when you're anxious, you know, and... and you just feel anxious."

She grasped the armrests of her chair. "I'm not anxious, not in the slightest. It was a simple question, and I would be satisfied with a simple answer. Besides, I have a special responsibility in this area – you do remember what I promised Sirius?"

Harry grimaced as her meaning dawned on him. "You're actually following through with it? There's no need, you know. Sirius was cooped up in this house far too long, if you ask me. What was he thinking, making you responsible for that?"

"I think it was inspired," Hermione said proudly. "I know you as well as anyone does, and you're too thick to take care of the job yourself."

Harry playfully growled at her. "Answer your own question, then – you're the genius here, after all," he said. "Start with the easy ones. Daphne Greengrass? Please!"

“She has certain... assets that at least a few of our housemates seem to favour,” Hermione grumbled.

“You mean the ones that she lets halfway out of her top on Hogsmeade weekends?” Harry asked. “Putting those on the positive side of the ledger –”

Hermione’s eyes grew wide. “Harry!”

“You were the one being catty,” Harry noted. “Let’s examine the negatives, then – she’s a Slytherin; she acts like she’s queen of Hogwarts; and her family are probably Death Eaters. Off the list!”

“Good,” Hermione said grimly. “No tarts allowed.”

“Don’t hold back on my account!” Harry chuckled. “Now, who else was on that list...? Lisa Turpin? I don’t think so.”

“I don’t know – she seems nice enough, if a bit quiet,” Hermione offered.

“Quiet? The bloody library’s loud by comparison! Have you ever listened to her when she does talk? I’ll bet she aspires to be Madam Pince,” Harry complained.

“You know, a lot of people might say that about me,” Hermione said.

Harry’s brow furrowed. “Why – because you like books? They don’t know you, then. You are very well-read and rather fun. From what I’ve seen, Lisa Turpin is bookish and boring.”

“You think that I’m fun?” Hermione asked, with a note of surprise in her voice.

Harry said, “Sure... well, at least when you’re not riding me about my studies... or turning in my Firebolt... or chiding me for one decision or another... did I mention the Firebolt?” He grinned at her.

“So I’m conditionally fun; how charming,” Hermione deadpanned. “What about Gretchen Hargrove?”

“She kissed me on the cheek in Gringotts the other day – can you believe that? I scarcely know her; I didn’t even recognise her at the time,” Harry told her.

“Right - she’s the one who was in the Prophet. A researcher might leave her on the list for that alone,” Hermione surmised.

“Not if the researcher had bothered to ask me about it,” Harry said.

“You said you scarcely know her,” Hermione said, “but you have an opinion?”

Harry nodded. “A pale imitation of Ginny,” he said.

Hermione's eyebrows rose. "Now who's the catty one?" she asked. "I wouldn't have thought you paid such close attention to the girls at school, honestly. Do you boys have these sorts of conversations up in the dormitory?"

"What, rating the girls? Not in our room at least," Harry answered. "Dean goes on about football when he's not drawing, Seamus has never really been tight with any of us but Dean, and Neville was too timid to even think of chatting up a girl until this spring."

"'Chatting up'? Who are you, and what have you done with Harry Potter?" Hermione laughed.

"That's what it's called, right?" said Harry.

Hermione rolled her eyes, and asked, "And what about Ron?"

"Did I talk about girls with Ron?" Harry thought for a moment. "No... we really didn't. Around the time of the Yule Ball, I suppose we talked a bit – not many other times, though."

"You've no one to talk with about this sort of thing, then?" Hermione asked.

Harry said, "It hasn't been an issue. It's not as though I have a dating history, or a little black book like Sirius."

Hermione's cheeks coloured. "A little black book? Are you joking?"

"Devlin Whitehorn said that Sirius used to have a woman on each arm most of the time when he was just out of school," Harry said.

Hermione shook her head. "Why any self-respecting woman would subject herself to that treatment...? Were they foolish or just desperate?"

Harry shrugged. "Dunno... I couldn't be like he was. Who's left on the list, then?"

Hermione said, "Let's see; Ginny, Luna... me... oh, and Cho Chang."

"We can dispense with Cho," Harry said quickly.

"You did go out with her," Hermione noted, "and there was a kiss involved."

Harry snorted. "It hardly counted. I broke off from her to meet you at the Three Broomsticks, remember? Besides, we both know I was just a stand-in for... you know... anyway, I couldn't see it then but I do now." He couldn't bring himself to say Cedric's name, even after more than a year.

"You had quite a crush on her," Hermione said distantly; "You were attracted to her."

"I had this idea of who she was," Harry explained, "but it didn't match with the real thing. She's definitely off the list, and that leaves you and Ginny and Luna. See, I told you that the list could

easily be cut.”

“You’re going to make this task very difficult for me, aren’t you?” Hermione sighed.

Harry began, “Which task...? Oh, no, are we back to the ‘true love’ business? Look, I told you that don’t have to – ”

“I promised him,” Hermione said, “and just because the parchment is gone doesn’t change the fact. You certainly won’t manage it. You’ll never think about it, and if something happens...” She stopped, and seemed to gather herself. “I’m doing this for you, and that decision is final. The challenge will be in determining what you want, because you obviously have no idea.”

“Oh, thank you very much! Of course I know what I want!” Harry huffed.

“You haven’t a clue, Harry,” Hermione insisted. “You wouldn’t know love if it snuck up from behind and bit you, so I’ll have to ensure that it’s made simple for you.”

“This should be charming,” Harry moaned; “I can see it now – you’ll have some kind of scoring system, with rankings and averages and all the information ever... what?”

Hermione was crimson. “What’s wrong with a scoring system?” she snapped. “It’s an excellent approach to ensure unbiased and accurate results.”

Harry buried his face in his hands. “You’ve already started it, haven’t you?” he muttered.

“There’s not a lot to do, trapped in one’s own house,” she complained. “I ran out of schoolwork weeks ago. At least I have some useful reading now.” I know a bit about being trapped in the summer, Harry thought, but he remained silent.

Hermione stood up. “We should go downstairs. Tonks and Professor... erm, Remus are taking me home after lunch. He’s anxious to get your glasses replaced.”

“What’s the hurry? Why don’t you come with us?” Harry asked.

Hermione frowned. “No more trips to public places – it’s one of Professor Dumbledore’s new restrictions, I’m afraid. I did agree, you know.”

“Sorry,” Harry said. “It would have been fun to take you to Flourish and Blotts, now that you have a book allowance to spend.”

Hermione gaped at him. “Fun to take me to a book store?” She put her hand to his forehead. “Are you feeling all right?”

“I guess you’re rubbing off on me,” Harry grinned.

“Speaking of books,” Hermione told him, “I’ve left another stack for you in the library. If you insist on continuing with Shacklebolt, then you have some heavy reading to do.”

Harry nodded in agreement. He said, “The books you picked out yesterday were dead useful. I used three or four things straight away.”

“You read all of them?” Hermione asked incredulously.

“Great stuff – I couldn’t put them down,” Harry admitted.

Hermione beamed. “I am rubbing off on you.”

Harry Potter and the Years of Rebellion Into The Frying Pan

Chapter Twelve

INTO THE FRYING PAN

August 3

Harry followed Professor Flitwick and Lupin into Grimmauld Place's cellar. "What are we looking for, exactly?" he asked.

"I'm seeking the keystone of the house," Flitwick said. "Professor Dumbledore asked Headmaster Nigellus's portrait, but it couldn't recall the precise location. Why do you suppose we wish to locate the keystone, Mr. Potter?"

"Er... uh... because it ties the charm to the entire house?" Harry ventured.

"I'd give that answer at least two points," said Flitwick. "We can anchor a *Fidelius* charm to a structure in other ways, but all require a tremendous amount of raw power. Professor Dumbledore did not bother with the keystone, of course, because he possesses the necessary ability and he also made himself the secret keeper. I could attempt to recast the charm without locating the proper stone, but there would be some risk of a flawed casting."

"I think this is it," said Lupin. "There are a number of runes inscribed on this particular stone."

Flitwick perched a pair of glasses on his nose and peered at the stone. "Well spotted, Remus," he said. "There are several charms linked to the stone, most of which are of the traditional variety – fertility for the head of house, and the like... and some rather nasty curses, one of which looks to be quite recent. It's linked to a specific individual, which is something rarely done... quite difficult to accomplish, actually."

"I know of that one," Lupin said, "and it's well warranted. Sirius placed it himself."

"I'd rather not tamper with any of them," Flitwick admitted. "None will interfere with casting of the *Fidelius* charm, but we should be mindful of these two in particular. They appear to be linking

runes for blood feud curses, and we wouldn't want to accidentally admit anyone from the affected family lines. I don't know which families these indicate... sketch those two runes, would you, Remus? We may be able to identify appropriate banishing wards."

Harry was fascinated but also feeling a bit lost. "Should I have taken Ancient Runes, Professor?" he asked.

"That's an apt question, Mr. Potter," said Flitwick. "Most of these are Common Runes, which we cover in the seventh year tuition for Charms and Defence. If you've an interest in pursuing a mastery for either field, however, you'll need a fair grounding in Ancient Runes. You can pick that up by apprenticing at a later time, if you like."

"Shall I unpack your kit?" Lupin asked Flitwick.

"Yes..." Flitwick said absently. "We may have a bit of a problem... I imagine that Professor Dumbledore used Mr. Black's blood to circumvent any lineal restrictions?"

Lupin frowned. "Bother," he said.

"You need blood from a Black family member, is that it? Can you use mine?" Harry asked. "I'm Head of the House of Black now."

Flitwick's eyebrows beetled. "Is that so? Are you the Head by blood or by kinship?"

"Sirius adopted me, more or less," said Harry.

"No, no, that won't do," Flitwick sighed.

"Your great-aunt was a Black by blood," Lupin told Harry.

Harry's eyes widened. "Pardon?"

"Your great-uncle Charlus Potter was married to a Black; I can't recall her name," said Lupin. "It's probably listed on the Black tapestry."

"That won't do, either; it's a kin relationship," said Flitwick.

Harry suddenly lit. "What about Mrs. Tonks?" he asked.

"Do you mean Nymphadora Tonks' mother?" asked Flitwick. "Yes, she was Andromeda Black, wasn't she?"

"Sirius did reinstate her to the family," added Lupin.

"We need to move this along," Flitwick said. "Once Dumbledore verbally revealed the secret to me, the existing charm began to dissolve. It won't be more than another two hours before the charm collapses entirely. Even now, I'd say it only protects against those with directly harmful

intent.”

After a brisk explanation, Mr. and Mrs. Tonks returned with Flitwick and Lupin to Grimmauld Place. Mrs. Tonks provided three drops of blood and then watched Flitwick use it to wet the stick ink. Harry couldn't blame her for her caution; he knew enough about blood magic to understand how easily it could be misused. Once Flitwick mixed in the water and added fixing oils, she settled somewhat. Still, she followed along as Flitwick used the runic ink to inscribe the proper runes on the keystone and in various places about the house. She didn't relax completely until Flitwick vanished the remaining ink.

Harry invited the Tonkses to remain. He felt it was appropriate that Mrs. Tonks know the location of the Black family home, and Lupin pointed out the need for Mr. Tonks to come and go on account of financial issues.

Flitwick gathered all present in the cellar. He asked Harry to kneel and touched the tip of his wand to Harry's temple. After a deep breath, he said, “*Fidelius* .”

The room shimmered in a white light, and the normal draughtiness of the house suddenly became a gale. Harry blinked against the light and struggled to hold his ground against the magical wind. He blinked a second time and was sure that the house was slowly disappearing. The light receded, and the house was gone, the neighbourhood was gone; he and Flitwick and Lupin and the Tonkses appeared to be surrounded by nothingness. Then there was a dull clanging, felt as much as heard. First the neighbourhood reappeared, and then the house around them. When the clanging stopped, dust and debris fell from the stone walls of the cellar, as though the house had been picked up and roughly set down.

“Wh... where are we?” Mrs. Tonks asked.

“It would seem that the charm was successful,” Flitwick said. “I recall casting it, but I haven't the faintest idea where I cast it or for whom.”

“This is the strangest thing,” said Lupin. “I'm positive I should know where we are...”

Harry snatched up a scrap of parchment from Flitwick's kit and a stray quill. He found an ordinary bottle of ink amidst the supplies, and wrote:

Harry Potter's house may be found at 12 Grimmauld Place, St. Pancras, London, UK

“Don't show that to anyone whom you wish to exclude from the secret,” Flitwick warned.

“I'm comfortable with everyone here,” Harry said. He passed the scrap around, one to the next, and the feelings of confusion in the room dissipated. Harry set the bit of parchment along with the quill and ink next to Flitwick's kit. “Now what?” he asked.

“I understand that Professor Dumbledore used this residence for, shall we say, more public purposes in the past?” Flitwick said. “If you wish to allow this, Harry, you'll have to redistribute

the information. Do it in just that fashion – never tell the location to someone aloud, even if that person is already in the know; it wouldn't be worth the risk. Tell it twice aloud in succession, regardless of whether the listeners are aware of the secret, and you will collapse the charm. That is what Professor Dumbledore set in motion by telling both Lupin and myself. I wouldn't keep a permanent written copy of the location, if I were you; recreate it as needed."

"Did Dumbledore rewrite the secret each time?" Harry asked Lupin.

"I'm afraid he didn't," Lupin said with a frown. "I recommend you follow Filius's advice on this." Harry retrieved the parchment from the floor, withdrew his wand and incinerated it.

Mrs. Tonks shuddered. "I never go into our cellar," she said. "It's cold and draughty and full of vermin."

"It's nothing of the kind," Mr. Tonks said. "You just don't want to ferry things in and out of storage."

Mr. and Mrs. Tonks broke into a round of friendly bickering, and Flitwick smiled as he re-packed his kit. "I look forward to the next school year," he said to Harry. "You've shown a deeper interest in Charms than I've observed in your classes."

"I'll be taking things very seriously from now on," Harry said.

Flitwick gazed at Harry for a moment as though he was searching for something, and then he nodded. "That's a capital idea, given your history to date," he said. "Might we be going? I have a round of golf this afternoon with two of my former apprentices – Roland Ettinger and Oscar Pomfrey."

Mr. Tonks turned his attention to Flitwick. "I haven't heard Oscar's name in years," he said; "I didn't know he was still in England."

"Oh, yes. He lived in Canada for a time, but he's in Cornwall now – not far from my family's home, actually," Flitwick said. "He's quite a bit older than you. From where do you know him?"

"I knew him on a professional basis, early in my career," said Mr. Tonks. He looked to Harry and added, "Oscar is the brother of your school healer."

"We'll see you off, then," Lupin said to Flitwick. He took Flitwick and the Tonkses to catch the Knight Bus at the far end of Grimmauld Place, while Harry returned to his reading. Shackbolt had been merciless that morning and Harry wasn't going to be made a fool.

August 4

"Once more, Potter!" Shackbolt commanded.

"I've tried this five times – it's hopeless!" Harry fumed.

“What is the surest path to defeat?” Shacklebolt boomed.

“The surest path to defeat is to quit before the battle is joined,” Harry replied in a mocking sing-song voice.

“Just for that, we’ll try it *two* more times. There is absolutely no reason why you can’t master this. Everything else has come quickly, and that’s spoiled you!” Shacklebolt put his face inches from Harry’s. “Stand up and do it again!”

Harry shot Shacklebolt an icy look. He set his stance and waited for an attack. As soon as Shacklebolt began to cast, Harry attempted to tap his wand against his heel and mutter ‘*Tripudio*’. In the process, he missed his heel, caused a portion of the dining room floor to jump out of place, and caught Shacklebolt’s slapping spell in the forehead.

“You have the concentration of a flobberworm!” Shacklebolt spat.

“I have dinner with the Grangers soon,” Harry moaned, as he struggled to his feet.

Shacklebolt smirked. “I see the problem, then. You should be thinking about me, and not Miss Granger.”

Harry rubbed at his forehead. “I’m thinking about Mr. and Mrs. Granger,” he grumbled, “and I still don’t understand why we’re doing this.”

“Jumping gives you another option for dodging a cast spell, and it will make you less predictable,” Shacklebolt explained.

“I thought you said I was unpredictable,” Harry protested.

“I said that you were *undisciplined*,” Shacklebolt said without a trace of a smile.

“The object is to dodge the spell, right?” Harry asked with exasperation.

Shacklebolt’s eyes narrowed. “You have a better idea, Potter?”

“I preferred your approach the first morning,” Harry said cautiously. “Yesterday and today, it’s like a classroom practical.”

Shacklebolt silently appraised Harry for a long while. His words were measured when they finally came. “I brought emotions into that first session that should have been left behind,” he said. “I apologise for that; it didn’t serve you well. Control is a critical element in combat tactics. I did tell you that I might not be an appropriate tutor.”

“I preferred the first morning,” Harry repeated. “I learned more that way.”

Shacklebolt flashed an enigmatic smile. “If you prefer live-action training, that can be arranged. Personal combat training is usually given in half-day blocks,” he said.

“Eight o’clock until noontime, then... seven days a week?” Harry asked hopefully.

Shacklebolt raised an eyebrow. “I’ll say this for you – you’re hungry. I can respect that. Here’s another lesson for you, then: I can be unpredictable as well.” Shacklebolt raised his wand to his own head, and Harry found himself face to face with Voldemort’s double. “Time to die, Potter,” he added in a fair imitation of Voldemort’s voice.

Harry felt sudden bursts of panic and anger. The room felt close and overheated, and everything seemed to slow down. He scanned the room. Shacklebolt had taken a good position, Harry recognised. The dining room was long and narrow, and Shacklebolt had him pinned at one end.

“Control, Potter – that’s where you need the work,” Shacklebolt hissed. “I’m coming for you.”

Harry was able to effectively block everything that Shacklebolt threw at him, and the battle turned into a continuous exchange of charms and curses – neither of them withdrew or gained advantage. They manoeuvred in a circle like two boxers stalking each other in the ring. Their curses became more brutal, and they did the room no favours; two sessions’ worth of deflected spells had already severely damaged the wall panels and cracked the ceiling in a dozen places.

Harry tried to nudge their circling toward the middle of the room, but Shacklebolt was onto him. Instead, Harry found himself nudged backward until the wall was at his back. He threw all his energy into maintaining a continuous shield against Shacklebolt’s barrage of puncturing curses.

“This is the end, Potter,” Shacklebolt hissed. “With you out of the way, I’ll pick off all of your little friends one by one.”

Harry’s hand shook with the effort of blocking the curses. “Trying to irritate me, are you?” he panted. *How can I get around him?* he wondered.

Shacklebolt stopped flicking his wand. “Nice shield, Potter, but you can’t keep it up much longer. Surrender!” he boomed. “Surrender or I start with Weasley and the Mudblood.”

Harry maintained his shield in front of Shacklebolt’s wand, but it was badly flickering. “Stop baiting me,” he warned.

“Do you know what he’ll do if he defeats you?” Shacklebolt said in his own voice. “Do you understand what Death Eaters used to do with captured Aurors? Imagine an entire day of Cruciatus Curses! Imagine what he’ll do to those who support you. I’ve heard tell of what Death Eaters did to women, Potter...”

The rest of Shacklebolt’s words came in slow motion, spoken underwater. Harry took in the whole room, looking for any way out. All the furniture and finishing had been removed – even the chandelier; there was nothing to summon. He couldn’t conjure anything without ending the shield spell. *I have to get around him!* he screamed to himself. *If I could get behind him, I’d have a chance!* In the midst of the strain of holding his shield in place, with sweat pouring into his eyes, he found himself riveted to a spot on the floor three feet behind Shacklebolt. Reason escaped

him. *If I could just get there...*

Harry heard an intensely loud ringing in his ears, and Shackbolt was no longer in front of him. *Where is he?* Harry wondered. *He couldn't have Apparated forward, could he? I was practically against the wall.* He spun around, half-afraid of finding Shackbolt splinched.

Harry stood six feet away from the wall. Shackbolt had turned to face him, his wand lowered and his face frozen in surprise. Harry simply reacted; "*Percussum*," he said, and knocked Shackbolt to the floor.

Shackbolt sat up very slowly, his hand pressed against the side of his jaw. "Twice in three days, you've done something that I can't explain," he said woozily. "We need to discuss this 'control problem' of yours... Potter? Hello?"

Harry's hands shook; he dropped his wand. "I – I don't understand what... how did I... I've never Apparated before..." he said quietly.

"I have no idea if that was Apparation. If you Apparated, then you passed directly through your own defensive spell. You should be splinched in the floorboards, at best," Shackbolt explained calmly. "Of course, there was the bit with the table leg as well. I was waiting to bring that up, in case it was a chance event. It most certainly was not."

"You didn't accept what Tonks said, then?" Harry asked.

"Tonks can be such a Muggle from time to time, building a fantasy to explain the obvious," Shackbolt chuckled. "Stashing wand cores everywhere – spare me. Only Moody is that paranoid. You're surely not paranoid... overly emotional, but not paranoid."

Still on his knees, Harry rocked back and forth nervously. He clasped his hands together to stop them from shaking. He knew that Shackbolt was watching him keenly, so he clenched his teeth and resisted the urge to say what he was thinking.

Shackbolt saw right through him. "Let it out," he commanded.

The quick analysis of Harry's behaviour was like the decisive thrust in a duel. Harry slumped in defeat. "I'm afraid of what's happening to me," he blurted out. "I'm afraid I'm going mad, or that I'm going to hurt someone, or... I don't know..."

Shackbolt spoke slowly and deliberately. "A little fear is a good thing in combat – hold on to some of it. You don't know what's happening to you, and apprehension about that is sensible. Let me ask you this – do you think this fear will help you deal with whatever is happening to you?"

Harry couldn't bring himself to look up or even to respond. Shackbolt continued, "I thought not. You fight fear with knowledge, Potter. For tomorrow, I want you to think of every incident in which you believe you've performed magic without a wand, as far back as you can remember. For each incident, describe the circumstances – where you were, whom you were with, time of

day, time of year, anything you can recall. I also want you to describe how you felt – happy, sad, tired, keyed up... shaky, perhaps? Can you manage that? I wouldn't want to cut into your dinner plans."

Harry cringed. "No reminders - I'm shaky enough as it is," he said, and managed a faint smile.

Shacklebolt clambered to his feet, and extended a powerful hand to help Harry up. "Tomorrow, we'll have a go at your list. We'll see if we can't put a name to whatever this is. If you can name it, you can control it," he said.

Harry closed his eyes, and took several long, calming breaths. He opened his eyes, and asked, "Shall we work with the swords, then?"

Shacklebolt's brow furrowed. "Perhaps you're a touch *too* hungry, Potter. Go and read, if you're inclined. I'm sure that Miss Granger waits. Tomorrow, promptly at eight o'clock." Shacklebolt swept through the door and out to the entry hall. Harry caught a glimpse of Lupin and heard a flurry of muttering.

Harry was in no hurry to climb the stairs. Hermione was doubtless immersed in sorting books. He felt too edgy for deep conversation – and Hermione was not one for idle banter. Idle banter was Ron's speciality, and Harry missed that. He missed Ron – the *real* Ron, not the git who had replaced him – and he had no idea what to do about it.

A strange sound came from the library, followed by a voice that he didn't immediately recognise. He heard the strange sound again, and placed it – it was a moan. He raced to the door. Tonks had her arm around Hermione's shoulder; Bill Weasley was seated in front of her, holding her arm. Winky looked on anxiously. Along with Shacklebolt, Bill and Tonks had been cleared to enter Grimmauld Place the previous evening in order to round out a complement of Order members for Hermione's watch.

"Just one more go, and we'll have it licked," Bill said reassuringly. He flicked his wand, and said "*Adtenuatus!*" Harry moved closer, and Hermione's arm came into clear view just as it reduced to normal size. He forced himself to hold back, as it was obvious that Bill had everything under control.

"Better?" Bill asked gently.

Hermione nodded, even as she dabbed at her eyes with her free hand. "It's my own fault," she said. "I should have been more observant."

"Looks innocent enough, doesn't it?" Bill observed. "The only indication of any kind is that tiny rune on the spine. I would likely have opened it... that is, if the topic had the slightest appeal."

"Why curse it at all?" Tonks asked. "Did some medieval versions of Fred and George get hold of it?"

Bill chuckled. “I can picture that... doubtful, though. This one could have caused serious injury. Thankfully, no lasting harm done.”

Hermione said, “Thank you for dashing over – terribly sorry for the bother.”

Tonks looked up. “Wotcher, Harry. Hermione found a right nasty book.”

Harry asked Hermione, “You’re all right, then?”

“I’m fine. As Bill said, no harm was done,” she replied with obvious embarrassment.

Bill sat back in his chair. “Perhaps I should have a look around while I’m here – you know, for any other unpleasantness?” he offered, and then asked Harry, “How goes training with Kingsley, then? Hasn’t made any more attempts on your life, has he?”

I see that Tonks is chatty as ever, Harry thought. “Today was interesting,” he mumbled.

“Tonks told us about the bit with the earring – smashing bit of improvisation, that,” Bill said. “Where did you get the idea?”

Harry shrugged. “He’d already crushed my glasses, so I couldn’t see much besides the light shining off his earring. I was reading before hand – *Chronicles of the Goblin Wars*, and then *Scandalous Tactics for Duelling ...*”

Bill smirked. “Ripping good book, isn’t it? Some of his ideas simply won’t work, but you have to love it all.”

Harry nodded. “It’s a brilliant book. His ideas for rope conjuring work well enough.”

Bill winced. “Please tell me that you didn’t use number eighteen...?”

“No!” Harry exclaimed. “Can you imagine? That should be an Unforgivable!”

“Too true, too true!” Bill laughed.

Tonks looked blankly at Hermione. “Do you have any idea what they’re talking about?”

Hermione shook her head. “None whatever. It sounds as if that might not be a bad thing, in this case.”

Harry recoiled in mock surprise. “What’s this? There’s a book that Hermione Granger doesn’t want to read?”

“I’m not *that* bad,” Hermione pouted.

Tonks patted her shoulder reassuringly. “I’m sorry to say that you *are* that bad.” Hermione swatted away Tonks’ hand.

“I hadn’t pictured you as the reading type, Harry,” Bill said. “If you’re interested in tactics, then be sure to read *Mastery of the Sword* . It’s ancient – written by a Chinese wizard called Sun-Tzu. He wrote some military philosophy as well, something that Muggles seem to fancy.”

Harry nodded. Looking around the library, he imagined that Hermione would be feeding him stacks of books for quite some time. His eyes settled on a particular folio and it left him cold.

“Bill, how much do you know about what happened to Ron at the Ministry?” Harry asked. Hermione shot him a questioning look.

Bill frowned. “I know what I’ve been told – which isn’t much – and what I’ve heard in passing. He was attacked by some creatures lurking about in the Department of Mysteries. I’d imagine there are more than a few nasty surprises in there.”

He shuddered and went quiet, but Harry motioned for him to press on. “I’ve heard reference to a ‘brain attack’, and I wonder what that actually means,” Bill continued. “Whatever attacked him had fingers or claws or *something* that left those marks on his arms. I know that the marks have been treated with Oblivious Unction – that says something about the active principle of the attack, but I’m not sure what it means. He’s made the rounds, I can tell you, and there’s no evidence of possession or magical illness. Still...” Bill paused. He radiated unease.

“There’s something else?” Hermione asked cautiously.

Bill hesitated. “Look... I want nothing said of this to Mum or anyone else in the family. We don’t need a row over it, and it’s just an impression, but... when I’m around Ron, I can feel...”

Tonks became very serious. “What can you feel, exactly?”

“It sounds as though you’ve felt it as well,” Bill observed, and Tonks nodded. He explained, “The temperature drops – just barely. Edginess sets in. Auras dim, or flicker a bit. It’s on the edge of perception. It’s the echo of a curse – I know it.”

Tonks agreed. “I was beginning to question myself. Of course, *you’d* know a curse when you felt one. I’d surely believe that those horrid things are capable –”

Bill cut her off. “You saw them? You saw what attacked him?”

“No, but... I received a briefing,” Tonks said. “They were –”

Harry held up a hand to stop her, and took up the folio. “We stumbled across this. I’m afraid that I had a very good view of the things. You’re not going to like it, but I think that someone in your family needs to have a look.” He turned to the correct page, but held back. “If you’d rather not...” Bill looked over the pages; he flinched once, but betrayed no other reaction.

Tonks moved to peer over his shoulder. “Those fit the description,” she whispered.

Bill let out a slow breath. “Thank you for showing this to me,” he said grimly. “It explains quite

a lot, doesn't it?"

Tonks mumbled, "Croaker trapped them... Croaker... I mean, he's quite old, but couldn't possibly... could he?"

Harry's eyes narrowed. "What? Who's Croaker?"

Hermione lit up. "You think you've met the fellow who trapped the cognivores?" she asked.

Tonks answered, "There's an Unspeakable named Croaker, but that was... what, a hundred twenty years ago?"

Hermione noted, "Professor Dumbledore was in his thirties at the time."

"Merlin... Dumbledore's really that old?" Tonks asked. "I knew that he was teaching when he offed Grindewald, but still..."

"He's a hundred years older than my mum and dad – hard to fathom, isn't it?" Bill said.

"Should we see about talking to this Croaker fellow?" Harry asked.

"One of my old housemates works in the Department. I'll make enquiries," Bill offered.

"What do you think we can do for Ron?" Hermione asked Bill. Harry was relieved that she was the one to ask the question.

Bill stammered, "Hermione, let me... I'm not sure how to... the thing is..."

Tonks said to Hermione, "I suspect Bill's trying to suggest that you stay behind the scenes for the moment."

Bill looked relieved. "I think he might talk to you, Harry. He's so changeable from moment to moment. He seems to have gotten past this idea that you... you know..."

Harry said darkly, "No, I don't know. Perhaps you could explain for me."

Hermione lightly put her hand on Harry's arm. "Settle yourself – you were the one who suggested that I should go easy on Ron."

Bill positively gibbered, "It's just that he has these fits, if you like... totally unreasonable... it took him an entire day to put it aside..."

Tonks advised him, "Spit it out before Harry explodes, would you? We're all sitting within the blast radius." Harry glared at her.

Bill wrung his hands and said, "Ron thought that you and Hermione... went off on the motorbike and behaved just like he did with that classmate of yours."

Hermione stiffened. “How did they behave, precisely?” she asked icily.

“We didn’t go off and snog – Hermione came with me so that I wouldn’t do anything rash. It was a very nice thing for her to do,” Harry protested.

“Thank you, Harry,” Hermione said, though her anger at Ron remained apparent.

Bill tugged at his collar. “Well it’s just that... you see... it’s this – Ron didn’t exactly think that you were snogging...”

Harry ground his teeth, and Hermione turned flaming crimson. “He was shagging that cheap tart?” she shrieked. “I wish Fred and George had hit him in the arse with those fireworks – *her* as well, that... that... *urgh* !”

Harry said in a strained voice, “It takes two to shag, as I understand. I doubt that Lavender dragged him out there.”

Bill said gently, “Look, it was... less than shagging but more than snogging, right? I’m counting on discretion here – Charlie and I are the only ones who know anything of it, and I’m not excusing Ron’s behaviour. It’s not just his carrying on with this... Lavender, was it? He’s so, I don’t know, it’s as though he intends to have everything served up to him today, as though there’s no tomorrow...”

It struck Harry all at once. He slumped into a chair as though he had been deflated. “Of course – like there’s no tomorrow,” he said.

“What are you talking about?” Hermione asked sceptically.

“Don’t you see it? He believes that there’s no tomorrow – no future,” Harry said, leading her to see what he already saw.

Her face went from flushed to pale. “You don’t think... Merlin! That explains everything, doesn’t it?”

“He’s still being a complete arse – but it all makes more sense,” Harry said.

Bill buried his head in his hands. “Of course... he saw his own death,” he said in a ghostly whisper. “He knows how it’s going to happen.”

Harry added sadly, “I think he knows *when* it’s going to happen.”

Hermione insisted, “Visions... Divination... p-p-prophecies... it’s all a crock, I tell you! Ron doesn’t know how nor when he’s going to die, and Harry doesn’t – you – don’t... you... ever...” She had choked over the word ‘prophecies’. Her breathing was ragged; Harry couldn’t tell if her eyes were watering or if she was tearing up. It had to be the safeguard spell affecting her, he figured.

He knelt down and wrapped his arm around her. “Let it go,” he said gently. “It’s safe – everything’s *safe* .” He didn’t dare say anything more obvious, but hoped that it would make a difference somehow.

“Why is Ron acting this way?” she whispered back. “You should be the... you should... it’s you that...”

Harry worried that the safeguard was affecting her again. He put his lips so close to her ear that they brushed against her hair. “The difference between me and Ron is that he thinks he’s going to die, and I think I’m going to live,” he whispered. It was a lie, but one that she needed to hear. Her breathing steadied.

Tonks rested her hand on Hermione’s shoulder. “Everyone’s worried about Harry. You’ve nothing to be ashamed of.” Relief washed over Harry – he knew that there would be no questions.

“May I take this book with me?” Bill asked. Hermione nodded.

Bill turned to Harry. “Will you consider talking to Ron? Perhaps he’ll open up to you.”

“I might,” Harry said flatly. “Perhaps he will.”

“Thank you for helping,” Hermione said weakly, extending her hand to Bill.

Bill took her hand. “I’m sorry that Ron hurt you. He’s developing a gift in that department. I’ll have that look around now – see if there are any obvious dangers.”

“Mind if I observe – pick up some pointers on curse-breaking, perhaps?” Tonks asked.

As soon as they moved away, Harry quietly asked Hermione, “Are you all right?”

“Cold,” she said distantly, “I’m cold.”

“I don’t like this,” Harry said.

“Getting worse each time,” she mumbled. “Scary.” Her eyes were slightly glassy. He resolved to have that conversation with Dumbledore, and perhaps ask him about revealing the prophecy to a wider circle. He could easily imagine Tonks accidentally triggering the safeguard, and then asking questions that only made things worse for Hermione.

“I think you should take a rest until we leave for dinner,” Harry suggested. He helped her stand, and let her lean against him as they slowly left the library.

“Scary,” she mumbled again.

“That’s exactly how I feel about dinner,” Harry admitted.

Harry carefully led her down the stairs to the guest room she had claimed. Winky had preceded

them - the bed covers were turned down and the sheer curtains were drawn, muting the sunlight.

“Is this suitable, Harry Potter?” Winky asked.

“Very much so,” Harry answered quietly. “Thank you, Winky.”

Hermione mumbled, “Thank you.”

“Winky is concerned about Miss Granger,” said the house-elf.

Hermione smiled faintly. “Miss Granger will be fine,” she said with effort. Winky nodded and left the room, closing the door behind her.

“Harry Potter wishes that were certain,” Harry muttered.

Hermione sat on the edge of the bed. “My head is clearing,” she insisted. “I’ll be fine.”

“You need to rest,” Harry said firmly.

Hermione lay down on her side. “I need to feel warm again,” she said.

Harry drew the bed covers over her, and she shook her head from side to side. “Not enough?” Harry asked. “I could try a warming charm.”

“Better idea,” she murmured and patted the bed beside her with an open hand. Harry froze, certain that he misunderstood.

She patted the bed again. “Hold me,” she said. “Worked after the spell, when we were on the sofa.”

Harry felt a little warm and a little dizzy. “Erm... all right, then.” He slipped off his shoes, walked around to the other side of the bed, and lay next to her atop the bed covers.

Hermione giggled, and Harry almost fell to the floor. *Hermione doesn’t giggle – not ever*, he thought. “Under here,” she said, shaking the covers with one hand as she continued to giggle.

Harry stammered, “I’m certain this should do the trick.”

“You’re blushing,” she observed distantly.

“Don’t you find this a little odd?” he blurted out.

“I’m sorry that you’re uncomfortable,” she said, eyes lowered.

“You don’t make me uncomfortable,” he insisted. His breathing was fast.

“Good,” she murmured, and rolled over. She backed into him, just as in his dream.

“Is this what best friends do?” he wondered aloud.

“I don’t know,” she mumbled. He lowered his head to the pillow, trying to avoid contact with her hair. He rested the back of his left hand on her cheek, checking to see if she was still cold. She grasped his hand and pulled his left arm around her, and he was acutely aware of boundaries crumbling to dust. *She doesn’t mean any of this*, he assured himself. *It’s the safeguard – she’s half-asleep and giggling! This doesn’t mean a thing; she’s just cold and that’s the end of it.*

He replayed his latest encounter with Shackbolt in his mind, and thought of ways to avoid being backed to a wall. He was too tired to dwell on his sudden Apparation – it was all getting to him, all the reading and all the practising and all the training with the bags and the weights and all the changes and all the anger and all the fighting and all the loss and the loneliness and the bloody *Witch Weekly* article and...

“Hello, Harry.”

Harry sat up abruptly in the bed. Hermione was nowhere to be seen. He pushed his new glasses back into place, thankful for the Unbreakable Charm on the frames.

Sirius sat in the chair next to the door. “Are you going to say anything, or are you just going to stare?” he asked, and a smirk formed on his gaunt face.

“I don’t understand – I don’t... how...erm, hello?” Harry managed.

Sirius broke into his familiar barking laugh. “That’s a start. I thought I’d drop by and see how you’re making out.”

“I have so many questions!” Harry began excitedly. “I...”

Sirius cut him off. “My questions first, Harry – it’s the prerogative of the dead. How’s your love life?”

“Excuse me?” Harry asked, flustered.

“I asked you about your love life,” Sirius repeated.

“You visit me from the dead, and you’ve nothing better to ask than that?” Harry complained.

Sirius shrugged. “I have to live vicariously. Besides, you know I have an interest on that front; you saw the oath I left for the Granger girl.”

“We need to talk about that,” Harry grumbled.

Sirius waved him off. “Later... we can talk about that later. So, I was reading Teen Witch

Weekly and...

“You were reading Teen Witch Weekly? Setting aside that it was Teen Witch Weekly... you’re telling me that dead people can see it?” Harry asked dubiously.

“Oh, we get all the papers here,” Sirius insisted. “They’re a few days behind, of course.”

“I guess I imagined something different for an afterlife,” Harry said.

“Incredibly mundane, I’m afraid,” Sirius told him. “Terrible traffic, paint peeling everywhere, nothing ever gets done... that, however, is a story for another time. Back to your love life, then.”

Harry cringed. “Of all the... I suppose you saw the Daily Prophet, as well?”

Sirius chuckled. “Oh, yes. That young lady in the Prophet photo – she was on that list, wasn’t she?”

Harry buried his face in his hands. “This is a nightmare,” he moaned.

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Sirius. “It looks as though you’re in a familiar place.”

“Of course it looks familiar; it’s your house, after all,” Harry said.

“Some memories are hazier than others, I suppose. Perhaps it’s a place I wanted to forget?” Sirius wondered aloud.

“I could see why you wouldn’t want to remember Grimmauld Place,” said Harry.

Sirius stroked his chin. “Grimmauld Place... why doesn’t that ring true?”

“You were stuck here for a year,” Harry groaned. “12 Grimmauld Place – it was your parents’ home, for pity’s sake!”

“Oh, of course... yes, I didn’t want to remember 12 Grimmauld Place... not the best of times... but I did want to remember you, Harry” said Sirius.

“This is a strange dream. Why haven’t I dreamed of you like this before?” Harry asked. “Is this a dream, or are you really visiting me?”

Sirius said, “What do you think, Harry? Is this just a garden-variety dream? It could be so much more than that, of course, and all you have to do is play...”

A lurid jacket and pants worthy of Fred and George instantly replaced Sirius’ black robe. He finished his thought with a cadence straight from the tackiest reader on the Beeb. “... ‘Who’s Harry’s True Love?’ Let’s meet the contestants!”

Lisa Turpin entered the room, wearing a gown that Harry vaguely recalled from the Yule Ball. She smiled wanly, and stood next to Sirius.

Still speaking in the affected cadence, Sirius announced, “Our first contestant for Harry’s heart is the lovely Lisa Turpin. Representing Ravenclaw House, Lisa can out-think a dozen Hufflepuffs and still dance the night away. Polite applause, please, for Lisa Turpin.” Recorded applause resounded in the background, like a chat show on the telly.

Sirius shook his head. Returning to his normal voice, he said, “Not a flicker, Harry, nothing at all there. I think we can move this along. Thanks for playing, Lisa. We have a Snuffles the Wonderdog statuette waiting for you backstage. Bye-bye!” Lisa waved sadly and disappeared.

Back to his Beeb reader’s voice, Sirius announced, “Our second contestant is the captivating Gretchen Hargrove...” He dropped the voice. “Goodness, Harry – a scowl. You didn’t appreciate that little kiss on the cheek, did you? Well, a parting gift for Miss Hargrove, then.” Harry heard a shrill scream outside the door, followed by pre-recorded laughter. He tried willing himself to wake, to no avail.

“Our third contestant is the voluptuous Daphne Greengrass,” Sirius intoned. Daphne sauntered through the door in a tightly fitted top, a barely-legal mini and black heels. Harry silently congratulated himself on his vivid imagination. “Miss Greengrass is certainly the apple of every boy’s eye at Hogwarts, isn’t she? Now, I know that her lineage is... well... rather dark, and she was certainly sorted to Slytherin for a reason, but still...” Sirius laughed. “Take a breath, Harry. Miss Greengrass, if you’d please stand over there.”

Daphne smiled faintly at Harry, but it was a sad smile somehow. “I certainly didn’t expect that this would be about you. I never thought you paid me any mind,” she said. “That’s... sweet, really. I... I don’t suppose you’d mind if I changed my clothes? This is a bit much.”

Harry blushed. “Erm... sorry. I suppose that I should give you the benefit of the doubt, shouldn’t I?” A pair of denims instantly replaced the mini, and her heels were exchanged for trainers.

She lowered her eyes. “Thank you, Harry. The boys I know aren’t nice enough to... what am I saying? This is the strangest dream...”

“Our fourth contestant is the formidable Cho Chang,” Sirius went on. Cho walked in, wearing a long black dress with a high slit.

“Not again... I’m tired of dreaming about you, Harry,” Cho pleaded, “so very, very tired. This has to end.”

“She’s as strong as you in her way, and quite intelligent – yet not very smart. Of course, there’s a history between you. The question is – could you overcome that, Harry?” Harry knew the answer and it appeared that Sirius did as well.

“Sorry, Miss Chang. Thanks for dropping by,” Sirius said. The floor opened, and she fell away.

“More than halfway there, Harry, and only one finalist so far,” Sirius said. “I was more inclined to lust than love, myself. I’d completely understand, of course. Hell, if I were younger...”

“Sirius!” Harry protested. He half-expected that the idea of Sirius ogling Daphne Greengrass would immediately wake him up. He wondered if somehow the thought of Daphne was keeping him the dream, and the idea made him feel very uncomfortable. He wondered why she was sad.

“Fifth on our list is the... erm... unique Luna Lovegood,” Sirius announced. Luna entered the room wearing a silver dress festooned with sparkles and butterbeer caps, and ratty trainers that peeked out from beneath. She looked around curiously, smiled at Harry, and then pulled out a copy of the Quibbler from nowhere and began to read it upside down. “You’re dead, in case you’ve forgotten,” she told Sirius absently.

“What can one say about Miss Lovegood... frankly, I don’t know,” Sirius wondered. “There’s something about her company that you find beguiling, isn’t there? Does she understand you, Harry? Does she support you in some special way? I don’t understand this one.”

Harry struggled. “Luna’s... innocent... but not innocent. It’s hard to explain. She takes a thrashing every day from nearly everyone, but she bounces back and keeps going. I admire that.”

“True love material, then?” Sirius asked.

Harry shrugged. “I don’t know what love is.”

“You should give yourself more credit, Harry,” Luna offered.

Sirius stroked his chin thoughtfully. “I suppose you may not know. Perhaps we have that in common... Let me ask this way: would it be painful to lose her? Would you miss her if she weren’t there?”

Harry said, “Of course. Luna’s a good friend.”

Luna smiled strangely. “Thanks; I feel the same,” she said. “Strange dream you’re having, isn’t it? I’m not yet certain why I’m here, but I’ll take it as a compliment for the moment.”

Sirius raised an eyebrow toward Luna. “Over by Miss Greengrass, then,” he said brusquely. Luna curtsied and strode awkwardly across the room. She looked Daphne up and down, shrugged, and returned to reading the Quibbler. Daphne appraised the entire scene with the same vaguely sad expression as before.

“Today’s sixth contestant is the spunky Ginny Weasley,” Sirius announced.

Ginny entered the room with her arms crossed. “What in the hell is going on here?” she demanded. Then she caught sight of Sirius. “You!” she howled. “I’ve had quite enough of you! Thanks for the money, thanks for the violin – now leave me alone!”

She turned, and saw Harry sitting on the bed. Her eyes widened. She looked around the room. “What the... this is my room at the... what sort of dream is this?”

“I’ve been asking myself that for a while now,” Harry offered.

“I know about your little kiss, of course,” Sirius said. “I’ve developed a nasty habit of spying on you over the years, Harry Potter. Do you really believe that she could give up on you that easily?”

Ginny protested, red-faced, “How dare you make assumptions about my feelings?”

Sirius’ eyes narrowed. “I understand you better than you understand yourself, my dear little Ginny. You’re so transparent. You loved him so much that you almost lost yourself. You have a tendency to do that, don’t you... losing yourself in powerful men. You’re a bit obsessive, aren’t you?”

“If this is about Riddle, you’re out of line,” Harry warned. “She was eleven years old.”

Sirius shook his head. “She has a tendency for questionable judgement, as well. Opening an unfamiliar book... she didn’t think... she doesn’t think. Rather like you, Harry – rush in first, and repair the damage later. Quite a combustible pair, aren’t you?”

Ginny cried, “Why are you doing this? You were so nice to me... then there was that horrid will, and now this!”

Harry seethed, “If you wanted to be sure that I wouldn’t miss you anymore, Sirius, then you’ve succeeded.”

Ginny looked down at herself. She was wearing a short strapless dress. “Look at this – it makes me look like a pole! This is a complete nightmare!”

“I’m sorry,” Harry said. “Why don’t you pick something else, then?”

A jumper and jeans replaced the dress. “Much better,” she said. “Now, if I could only wake up...”

Sirius said, “Sorry, dear Ginny, but this is Harry’s show. You’re just one of the players, albeit an important one. Now, be a good girl and stand over by Luna.”

Harry thought it seemed as though Ginny was forced to walk across the room. She immediately bombarded Luna with whispers and mutters; Luna appeared to reassure her.

“Our last contestant should be self-evident,” Sirius announced. “The resplendent Hermione

Granger, ladies and gentlemen.”

Hermione peered into the room. “Harry?” she called. “What’s going on here? I... we... weren’t we in this room?”

Harry sighed. “I don’t know... I thought this was a dream... I still think it’s a dream... I don’t know anymore.”

Hermione looked down. “Erm... I see I’ve changed clothes. That puts it squarely in dream territory, don’t you think?” She was wearing Harry’s white terry cloth bathrobe. She pulled the front out from her body slightly, and blushed. “Goodness!” she exclaimed. “Definitely a dream! At least this isn’t Transfiguration class.”

Harry sniggered. “Is that a common dream, then?” Hermione scowled at him.

“Terribly familiar, aren’t you both?” Sirius observed. “The very best of friends, clearly. There’s more to it, though – isn’t there, Harry? Face facts... she makes your pulse rise, doesn’t she? I can feel it in you.”

Harry snapped, “Sirius, put a stop to this – now!”

Sirius gestured toward Luna, Ginny and Daphne. “Perhaps you don’t want to choose at all, Harry. I can respect that. Ménage á cinc, then?”

Hermione and Harry simultaneously shouted, “Sirius!”

Daphne appeared hurt. “Everyone has the wrong idea about me,” she said quietly.

Luna’s expression was unreadable. “A typically male suggestion,” she said flatly. “You greatly misjudge Harry – which is not surprising, of course.”

Ginny’s hands were defiantly at her hips. “Of all the... I’d like to take your violin and shove it up your –”

Sirius gave a mock-frown. “You can’t blame me for trying, Harry Potter.” He returned to his game show cadence. “All right, then. It’s time for ‘Who’s Harry’s True Love?’ to come to an end. You must make your final selection. Who will it be?”

Harry crossed his arms. “Sod off, Sirius,” he said firmly.

“I asked you ‘Who will it be?’” Sirius hissed.

Harry gritted his teeth. The dream was giving him a terrible headache. “If you’re all-seeing, then you should already know the answer,” he snapped.

Sirius’ mouth smiled but his eyes failed to join in. “Well, you may not be ready for true love... you’re surprisingly inexperienced, for one. Frankly, I would have expected you to sample the

fruits of your fame – I certainly would have, in your place. Still, young love is so... delicious.”

Luna, Ginny and Daphne disappeared.

Harry found himself lying down in the bed, with Hermione.

Sirius said generously, “Enjoy yourselves! Life’s terribly short. You may as well say exactly what you’re thinking; after all, it’s just a dream – there’s nothing to lose, is there?”

Harry began, “But I still have so many questions, Sirius. I...”

Sirius waved him off. “I know most of what I need to know,” he purred. “We’ll see each other again – very soon, I promise. You’ll have all the time you need to ask questions then, both of you. Patience!” He winked, and disappeared in a flash.

Harry didn’t know what to make of any of it. Hermione searched his face, and he was overwhelmed by how real it all seemed – her expressions, her voice, and the things she said. He wondered if he was actually that observant.

Hermione said, “I’m generally a very vivid dreamer; it stands to reason, since I’m prone to recalling detail. I have to say... this is the most realistic dream I’ve ever had, even beyond the last one that I recall. Do you suppose this is an effect of the safeguarding spell?”

“Everything about you seems so real,” he admitted.

“Well, he did say to enjoy myself; I suppose I can test the limits a bit. So... you feel... you know, that way about me?” she asked.

Harry swallowed hard. “Erm... I think I might. I fret about you, you know? I think that’s what keeps me away – the thought of you being hurt. What about you?”

Hermione hesitated. “Yes... definitely in dream territory, aren’t we. If anyone overheard, I’d be sent to St. Mungo’s for this – having a full-blown conversation with myself!”

Harry shook his head. “It’s like listening to you in the Common Room – amazing, really... although I prefer being here like this. You...erm...wear my robe well...” He felt his throat tighten as he spoke, and his head felt light and fuzzy.

“I could give into this,” Hermione said. “If it was real, I’d be so afraid of ruining our friendship. I never want to lose that. You know that I’ll probably muck up any relationship you ever have, always hanging about and all? I hope you’ll forgive me for that, but I need you. I’m afraid that I’ll push you away.”

Harry traced the line of her jaw with his fingertips. “You can’t push me away. It’s just that I have to pull away, to keep you safe. I do love you, you know.”

Hermione’s mouth formed a silent “O”. She just stared at him.

Harry started to correct himself. “What I meant, of course was... well, I meant that in a certain way... that is, I...”

Hermione leant in and kissed him, and the world exploded. She backed away slightly, and looked at him nervously. He couldn't stop smiling, and he was the one who leant in for another kiss. They devoured one another for a while, like two predators unleashed to feed.

Harry came up for air, and Hermione said seriously, “I love you, as well. Please tell me our friendship can survive this?”

Harry laughed. “This is a dream, remember? No one will be the wiser.”

Hermione snorted. “That's an excellent point. I suppose that there are no consequences whatever.”

“Well, I might have some difficulty looking at you later today,” Harry observed. “So... Sirius promised that this could be a better-than-average dream –”

“I think that's assured, Harry,” Hermione giggled. She ran her hand through his hair. “I deserve a wicked dream, with the summer I've had. We can do anything you like – surprise me.”

“Anything we like, you say?” Harry asked. “I wouldn't know where to start.”

“That's to be expected from you, isn't it? Honestly, this whole ‘true love’ business is going to tax me! Well, then...I have a few things in mind.” Hermione smiled seductively, which was something that Harry had never before contemplated. “You see, it's good to be well-read,” she added, and then whispered a few things in Harry's ear – one involving whipping cream and chocolate - that took his breath away.

“What on Earth have you been reading?” he gasped. She laughed, and he smiled. “This beats the stuffing out of dreams of Voldemort, I can tell you!” he said, and realised that he was wearing only boxers.

Hermione rolled atop Harry, kissed him deeply, and then teased, “I'm glad I come before Voldemort in your eyes...” She stopped abruptly. “Harry? Where did the bed go? Where have we...? Oh, no... not this...”

Hermione quickly moved off and clutched together the front of her bathrobe. Her face was frozen in stark terror. Harry sat up and looked around the Transfiguration classroom. They were atop the massive desk at the front. Neville, Dean and Seamus all lay atop Ron, who struggled mightily. He swore loudly and continuously, and his three dorm mates swore back. Lavender and Parvati Patil gaped at them in mute shock, and a gaggle of Slytherins laughed hysterically. Harry was grateful that Hermione had the robe, but wished he were clad in something more.

“Oh, this is too much!” Draco Malfoy howled. “Prince Potty and his Mudblood princess, about to shag on McGonagall’s desk! And you thought probation was bad?”

Pansy Parkinson tut-tutted, “Potter, I had no idea that you were so under-demanding.” Millicent Bulstrode made a terribly rude crack about Hermione’s appearance – Harry was furious but struck by the irony of the source – and Malfoy resorted to the same obscene gesture that he’d employed at the will reading.

“This isn’t something I’d care to dream again,” Harry said quietly.

Hermione’s voice was uneven and strained. “I’m usually presenting, without the benefit of a robe. Professor McGonagall’s always standing right over there.”

As soon as Hermione pointed, McGonagall appeared before them. It would have been impossible for her lips to become any thinner. “Miss Granger and Mister Potter, you will explain yourselves at once!” she thundered.

“I want to wake up now,” Hermione said weakly. “Please, let me wake up.”

Harry put his arm around her. “It’s all right,” he whispered. “I won’t let you be hurt, not even in my dreams.”

Facing down McGonagall, he announced loudly, “We were just practising our Animagus transformations, Professor.”

McGonagall’s eyebrows raised a notch. “I must have misheard, Mister Potter. Did you say ‘Animagus transformations’?”

“Yes, Professor,” Harry said. “Why don’t we show them, Hermione?”

“Harry, what in the devil are you talking about?” Hermione whispered frantically.

“This is a dream. Why can’t we transform, if we want to?” Harry whispered back. “Just think of an Animagus form and follow my lead.” Harry concentrated, and immediately felt himself changing. There were shrieks from his classmates; he hoped he hadn’t turned into a snake.

He asked Hermione in a throaty roar, “How’s it coming, then?”

She growled back, “Quite well. I imagine you might expect to become a snake; not in this dream, it seems.” He turned awkwardly, unaccustomed to moving on four legs. Next to him stood a sleek lioness with Hermione’s eyes.

Harry watched in awe as she moved effortlessly across the room and presented every impression of stalking the Slytherins. Malfoy dove over two desks to get away from her.

“Perfect,” he roared. “You were made for this.” He followed her and bared his teeth at Malfoy. She nuzzled him, and her nose brushed against his mane.

“So...the king of the jungle, eh? Yes, exactly as I would expect,” she purred as the colours began to drift and the room fell away...

Harry was warm and comfortable, despite a lingering dull headache. He slowly stretched, his senses still hazy from sleep. He drew his left arm back and realised that his hand was trapped just below Hermione’s armpit. When it occurred to him exactly *what* his hand was cupping through the bed sheet, he fought rising panic and very carefully disengaged himself. Still foggy from the dream, he gently moved aside the bed covers wrapped around Hermione’s shoulder. When he revealed her shirt collar, he breathed a very quiet sigh of relief – although a small part of him had hoped to see white terry cloth. He gingerly slid off the bed, and tiptoed to the door. Looking back, he saw that Hermione looked relaxed with a hint of a smile on her face. He was pleased – it was a far cry from the pained look too often on her face.

Time for a shower, he thought; *a long one, I suspect*. It was at that moment that he remembered the dinner-to-come. His concerns about looking at Hermione without blushing were washed away, and replaced by the thought of appearing terribly guilty before her parents. Lupin had suggested that he bring flowers and a bottle of wine to the Grangers' home as gifts. *What wine goes with fear?* he wondered.

“What an interesting choice,” Mr. Granger remarked, as he peered closely at the bottle. “Care to sample it with me?”

Harry hesitated. “Remus bought it for me; I only told the shopkeeper what I was looking for. I didn’t, erm... I didn’t really know what I was doing, sir.”

“You’ve never had wine with dinner before?” Mr. Granger asked. When Harry shook his head, he continued, “Merlot is a fair choice. That’s not all you asked of the shopkeeper, is it?”

“Why would you say that?” Harry asked nervously.

“Anyone working in a wine market would have made a more conservative choice, if unprompted,” Mr. Granger explained. “This particular vineyard has a reputation for a more complex palate. I’ve never had any of their offerings, truthfully.” He expertly removed the cork from the bottle. “It should be a bit astringent at first. Let’s allow it to breathe, shall we?” He ran the end of the cork beneath his nose, and watched Harry’s expression. “A bit of a formality these days, I’ll grant you, but it’s still wise to check for mould.”

Mrs. Granger bustled into the kitchen. “The flowers are lovely, Harry,” she said. “I’m quite fond of delphinium.” *Ten points to the Hogwarts side*, Harry thought, *thanks to Hermione*.

She stopped, and eyed the bottle. “Te Awanga... a New Zealand merlot, eh? Was that intentional?”

Harry was becoming accustomed to an elevated pulse after fifteen minutes at the Grangers’, but he

still felt a charge of nervousness. “I’m sorry, ma’am?” he said.

“Distinctive, but not audacious,” she smiled. “Do you fancy yourself a strategist, Mr. Potter?”

“Mother, are you trying to intimidate Harry, or are you just demonstrating your natural superiority?” Hermione snapped as she entered the room.

Mrs. Granger shot Hermione an icy look, and Harry took the opportunity to look away. Her mother had come so close to his instructions to the shopkeeper that she could have been snooping in the wine market. *Thank Merlin that Hermione walked in*, he thought.

Harry turned to the mixing bowl, balloon whisk and assemblage of ingredients before him on the island. *Stick to what you know, Potter*, he thought as he opened the bag of flour, *but don’t get too comfortable*. He knew there was little risk of that – the anxiety provoked by Mrs. Granger at every turn, Hermione’s abrupt distancing from him, and the mild embarrassment that struck each time he looked at her all conspired against confidence.

“Thomas, did you put our guest to work?” Mrs. Granger asked. “Harry, feel free to relax; we’ll manage everything.”

Harry quickly measured flour into the mixing bowl, formed a well in the centre, and broke an egg one-handed into the well. “I’m happier with something to do, Mrs. Granger,” he said honestly. “Besides, there won’t be time for the batter to rest if it isn’t started now. The joint will be ready in around an hour and a half, I’d wager.”

Mrs. Granger looked into the lower oven, and crossed her arms. Harry noticed with some satisfaction that she was smiling.

“I couldn’t find a baking dish,” Harry continued as he briskly whisked the mixture, “and I’m assuming that there are drippings or fat on hand.”

“You know your way around a kitchen,” Mrs. Granger said. “Perhaps you could encourage Hermione; she should be able to prepare something other than croque-monsieurs or bubble-and-squeak... Dora, if you eat all the carrots, there’ll be none left for boiling!”

Tonks, who had sidled up to the end of the counter, frowned. “Sorry, Cordelia,” she managed despite a mouthful of carrot.

Harry looked at Tonks, his eyebrow raised. Tonks swallowed forcibly, and explained, “You know I don’t care for my given name, Harry. Cordelia doesn’t care to call me by my last name. We... *agreed* to use my dad’s pet name.” Her expression made perfectly clear the level of agreement.

Hermione walked around the island. As she passed Tonks, she smoothly handed off a freshly peeled carrot. The two exchanged subtle grins. Harry made a point of not reacting, and returned his attention to the Yorkshire pudding batter taking form before him.

“Harry, I can handle that if you like,” Mr. Granger offered.

Harry shook his head. “Happy to do it,” he said, as he began adding milk.

Hermione peered into the lower oven at the joint of beef and roast potatoes. “Merlin! That’s enough to feed ten – we’ll be eating Sunday seconds all week!” she exclaimed.

“With your guards, I should think it would be closer to twelve,” Mrs. Granger said. “Harry, would you be put out if I asked for a second batch of batter?”

“And that’s my cue to check on the wards,” said Tonks, and she exited the kitchen quickly and with unexpected grace.

“Not at all,” Harry said. He thought for a moment, and quickly added, “I didn’t know there would be other guests, or I would have brought more wine.”

“Speaking of wine, Harry...” Mr. Granger said. He handed Harry a glass containing a small splash of merlot.

“Would you please excuse us for a moment?” Hermione said through a clearly forced smile. She grabbed her mother by the elbow and pulled toward the dining room.

Harry returned his attention to the wine. “First, we check to see if it’s clear,” Mr. Granger instructed. Harry gazed at the swirling merlot in his glass.

Mr. Granger passed the glass beneath his nose. “Another whiff... no mouldiness, no dustiness, nothing acrid.”

Harry went through the same exercise. “It smells... it smells like berries,” he observed. “Blackberries?”

Mr. Granger nodded. “Very good. A bit of a foodie, are you? Right then, time for a taste.” Harry took a careful sip.

He could hear Hermione’s voice rising in the dining room. “I should have known you wouldn’t make a Sunday dinner exception just for Harry! This is so unfair... *don’t tell me to lower my voice!* I can’t believe... please! As if you had any regard whatever for my feelings! I will not... no, I will *not* ; I’ll gladly sit in the front room with...”

Harry looked to Mr. Granger for an explanation. Mr. Granger deadpanned, “Welcome to my summer, Harry. Given my druthers, I’d have picked Majorca.”

“What are they arguing about?” Harry wondered aloud. He took another sip of the merlot. It fascinated him how something could taste sweet and bitter all at once.

“A rather ill-advised idea on Cordelia’s part, I’m afraid,” Mr. Granger said. “Sometimes, Harry, you have to allow the consequences of a poor decision to unfold.”

“Are they always like this?” Harry asked nervously.

“It gives one pause, doesn’t it?” Mr. Granger acknowledged. “When one lets up, the other provokes. I must say, this is turning into an exceptional row – even by this summer’s standard.”

Mrs. Granger’s voice rose in waves. Harry couldn’t understand most of what she said. “...let me explain... unreasonable... disrespectful... think about the impression... houseful of *maniacs* ... reprehensible... tired of your cheek... questionable influence... use the intellect that God gave you for *two blessed minutes* ... decent people... *civilized!* ”

Hermione thundered, “I will not be ambushed, and I will certainly *not* share a meal with *Ron Weasley!* ” and stomped into the kitchen.

Harry choked on the merlot and burst into a coughing fit. Mr. Granger asked him repeatedly if he was all right and offered a glass of water. Hermione took Harry’s wineglass from him, seized the bottle of merlot, filled the glass, and tossed it back in a single swallow. Mr. Granger closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Mrs. Granger was nowhere to be seen. *The Weasleys are coming for dinner* , Harry thought. *I don't think there's a right wine for that.*

Harry Potter and the Years of Rebellion Guess Who's Coming To Dinner?

Chapter Thirteen

GUESS WHO'S COMING TO DINNER?

“ You actually made the Yorkshire pudding with your *hands* , Harry?” Arthur Weasley asked.

Harry absently drew his fork through the food on his plate. “I picked up some useful skills from Aunt Petunia,” he said darkly.

Mr. Granger turned to Bill Weasley. “More wine, Bill?” he asked.

Hermione held out a glass. “Please,” she replied.

Mrs. Granger flashed Hermione a disingenuous smile. “You know the rule, Hermione,” she said. “One glass with dinner until you’re of age. Of course, moderation is always best no matter one’s age. Don’t you agree, Thomas?”

Mr. Granger topped Bill’s glass with the remaining merlot, and turned to what Harry reckoned was his third glass of cabernet. “Certainly... yes, of course,” he said.

“You don’t want to be miserable all night,” Mrs. Granger advised Mr. Granger; he formed a subtle scowl that went as quickly as it came, and helped himself to more carrots and peas.

Bill sipped the merlot. “Very pleasant,” he said. “It reminds me of a particular table wine... can't remember which one, though.”

Molly Weasley’s brow furrowed. “I wasn’t aware that you had a fondness for Muggle drinks,” she said.

Bill said, “When I travelled for Gringotts, Mum, it wasn't unusual for me to be the only wizard within a hundred miles or more. The Muggles I met along the way usually took wine with dinner. I rather enjoyed it, truthfully.”

“You’re well-travelled then?” Mrs. Granger asked.

“Every continent excepting Antarctica,” Bill said proudly. “Not much call for curse-breaking there, you can imagine.”

“If you could go anywhere – right this instant – where would you go?” Tonks piped up.

“There are so many places...” Bill began. “This instant? Canada, I imagine – British Columbia, if you’re at all familiar. I was partial to Chile as well; spent over three months there... and New Zealand – the south island, in particular. Of course, they’re in mid-winter now... I see the merlot came from there. No wonder it was familiar?”

Ron looked at Harry, and his eyes narrowed. “I suppose Harry made the wine, as well,” he sneered.

Hermione’s eyes burned at Ron. “He chose the vineyard and the varietal,” she snapped, and added “prat” under her breath.

Ginny took her eyes off of Harry – for what felt to Harry like the first time since the Weasleys had arrived – and frowned at Ron and Hermione. “Stop it,” she demanded.

Mrs. Granger broke the uneasy silence that followed. “Molly, would you care to help me with dessert?” she asked.

A flash of the old Ron broke through. “Dessert, eh?” he said excitedly, and quickly added, “Er... it was a fine dinner, Mrs. Granger.”

Mrs. Granger smiled in acknowledgement. “Thank you, Ron. You’re up for pumpkin pie, then?”

Ron grimaced. “Erm... is there more than one choice?” he asked tentatively.

“Ronald Weasley! Mind your manners, please!” Mrs. Weasley barked.

Mrs. Granger flushed slightly. “I’m sorry, Ron,” she said. “I’m certain we can scrape up something. With all the pumpkin juice around here this summer, I simply assumed that... well, I’ll find something.”

Mrs. Weasley managed her own disingenuous smile. Her eyes bore into Ron, even as she spoke to Mrs. Granger. “That won’t be necessary, Cordelia. Ron will make due with the same dessert as the rest of us. I fear our good fortune may be going to his head.”

Ron crossed his arms. He wore a new jacket, fashioned from the same iridescent material as Fred and George favoured but mostly grey in colour, and a sleek black turtleneck tucked into his denims. Harry had already decided that the new wardrobe made Ron look older – in fact, it made him look a great deal like Bill. Of course, Ron omitted the fang earring and ponytail; his life would be an unending Howler if he did that, Harry surmised.

Hermione offered, “You must admit that pumpkin is out of season. Even the juice is a little off in

the summer.” Ron relaxed his posture a bit.

Sensing that Ron required a defence, Harry added, “Pumpkin pie’s fine, of course, but Hermione’s right. It is a fall dish, isn’t it?”

Mrs. Weasley’s forced smile fell and she said in clipped tones, “Perhaps I failed to make myself clear. Everyone will make due with the same dessert.”

Mr. Weasley offered, “One might expect Ginny to be... averse to pie, Molly.”

Ginny snapped, “Dad!” Bill chuckled, and Mrs. Weasley rolled her eyes. Ron covered his mouth to stifle a snort.

“I believe there’s a story here,” Tonks observed.

Ginny clenched her jaw. “Fine,” she muttered. “I tried my hand at baking, and it went something less than well.”

Ron chortled. “Burned an apple pie to a crisp,” he blurted between snorts. “Then there was the treacle...” He burst into shaking laughter.

“It wasn’t funny,” Ginny moaned. “I had to paint the kitchen, even after the scouring spells.”

Harry successfully fought the urge to laugh, but Hermione failed. She laughed until tears formed, and she dabbed at her eyes. “Oh, I’m sorry, Ginny,” she managed.

Mrs. Weasley looked at Ginny indulgently. “I’ll put out a piece for you, dear – just in case you change your mind,” she said.

Mrs. Granger placed a dessert plate with a slice of pumpkin pie before Harry. Mrs. Weasley set bowls of whipping cream on each end of the dining room table.

Harry looked at the slice of pie. Under other circumstances, he would have politely declined. He eyed the whipping cream, reached for the serving spoon and ladled a copious amount onto the pie.

Ron forced down a bite, and did a poor job of concealing his dislike. Ginny stared at her piece for a time and then doused it with whipping cream.

Harry looked up, just in time to see Hermione drop spoonful after spoonful of whipping cream onto her plate. She returned the serving spoon, took a forkful of pie, immersed it in the pile of the whipping cream, and ate it. Then she giggled.

“What’s funny, then?” Mr. Granger asked.

“Nothing, Dad,” she chuckled.

Mrs. Granger looked suspicious. “Hermione, you’re giggling like a schoolgirl. We don’t giggle,”

she observed.

"It's nothing, Mother," Hermione insisted. "I just had, erm, a few things on my mind." She ate a forkful of whipping cream without any pie at all, caught Harry's eye, and then blushed.

Impossible, Harry thought. It has to be the wine. He took a slow calming breath. I must be red as the Gryffindor crest, he realised.

He pushed back from the table abruptly. "Excuse me," he said quickly, and dashed into the kitchen. He turned on the cold-water tap and splashed his face. He braced himself against the counter and let the cool droplets fall.

Tonks followed Harry through the door. "Everything all right in here?" she asked. When he didn't answer, she added, "Is it the wine getting to you, or the company?"

Harry said hurriedly, "It must be the wine – I'm not accustomed."

Tonks put her hand on his shoulder. "Not very fun watching Hermione going spare, is it? She's had moments like this all summer, but..." She sighed. "Harry, I know you're not going to like this, but it's been far worse since she started sorting through the Black's library. Do you think she may have stumbled across something worse than that cursed book?"

It's the safeguard – it must be, Harry thought. "She's cautious enough," Harry ventured.

"I worry about her," Tonks said. "I will say that her parents have adjusted rather well. A month ago, Cordelia would have popped a seam over that business with the pie. She's become more relaxed around us, thankfully. I like Tom; he reminds me of my dad."

"How red was I?" Harry asked quietly. "When... erm... when Hermione was going on about the whipping cream? How red was I?"

"How red were you? I don't know... I didn't notice, I suppose," Tonks answered. "Why would you be red...?" Her brow furrowed.

"I had this dream, you see, and when she started giggling... and then she said she had a few things in mind... just promise me that you'll keep this to yourself," Harry said in a forced whisper.

Tonks' eyes bulged. "You're having dreams involving Hermione and whipping cream?" she whispered back. "Gods! Does she know?"

"Not about Hermione and whipping cream!" Harry spluttered. "It was just a very real dream, and... and I'd almost swear that we shared it."

Tonks became very serious. "I hope that's not the case. Shared dreams are an ill omen," she said, too loudly for Harry's taste.

Ron's voice rang out. "Tonks, you sound like Trelawney." He affected the Divination teacher's

reedy voice, and intoned, “In the seventh month, when Jupiter and Mercury are in conjunction, an ill wind shall seek out Harry Potter and it shall muss his hair terribly – oh, the woe and weal!”

Harry laughed. Finally! – that sounds like Ron, he thought. “Read any good tea leaves lately, then?” he asked jokingly, before it occurred to him that Ron wasn’t smiling.

“I don’t need tea leaves, just my eyes. Try this one on, Harry,” Ron snarled. “In the eighth month, when Venus is besieged by Saturn and Mars, the Princess did laugh at the whipping cream, the Prince did panic, and the Fool... well, he was just a fool, wasn’t he?”

Harry’s hackles rose, despite himself. “I didn’t think you bought into Divination, Ron – just into Lavender Brown’s knickers,” he sneered.

Ron strode purposefully toward Harry, and Tonks stepped backward toward the door to the dining room. “Well, boys, it appears that you have some catching up to do... old times, and all that... I think I’ll just, erm... Bill? Could you, uh...?”

“I’ve had enough of everyone’s sniggering,” Ron said darkly. “She was there for me, which is more than I can say for either of you. I don’t regret it, not for one moment.”

“Perhaps you should have spent one moment considering Hermione?” Harry asked with venom in his voice. “You have it out with her, and not an hour later you’re shagging away with someone else... and of all people it had to be Lavender Brown, didn’t it? For Merlin’s sake, Ron...”

Ron lashed out and roughly shoved Harry back against the counter. “What?” he snarled. “Spit it out, you wanker! She must be a ruddy tart because she was interested in me – is that it? I suppose I’m not good enough for the bloody ice maiden... wait, I have it! She has a thing for Seekers, doesn’t she? And I thought she didn’t care for Quidditch! That explains everything... like why she led me on and put me off for two effing years. Do you know the best part – do you? At long last, Harry, you weren’t first in line for something.” He paused for emphasis, and added with an evil grin, “How does it feel to pick up Viktor Krum’s seconds?”

Harry tossed Ron against the island, and balled his fists. “We’re finished – just as soon as I use you for a punching bag,” he warned.

Bill breezed into the kitchen, and abruptly put one arm around Harry’s shoulders and the other around Ron. “Let’s all take a nice stroll, shall we?” he commanded, and drove them forward with surprising strength toward the French door that led out to the yard.

Bill shoved Ron through the door first, and sent him sprawling onto the porch. Harry reacted quickly, but not quickly enough. Bill tripped him, and knocked him flat onto the porch as well. Bill closed the door behind him as if nothing had happened, and then turned on them. “I can’t decide which one of you is the bigger arse!” he boomed. In one motion, he had both Harry and Ron’s wands.

Harry sat up and reached toward Bill, who gripped the wands tightly and growled, “If you even

think of summoning your wand, I swear that I'll conjure a rope. We've read the same book, you and I – remember? Number twelve, I think... and I will enjoy it." Harry quickly settled on discretion and sat on his hands.

Bill glared at Ron. "You – you should never have left the dining room. You went after Harry because you wanted to provoke him. You had no reason, and you had no right!"

Ron argued, "It's his fault – he got in my way, and he knew it! He has a problem with Lavender and me? Where did they go straight away, then?"

Harry seethed, "I was put on probation at school, in case you haven't heard or didn't care. Getting shagged was the last thing on my mind, I can assure you!"

"We weren't shagging!" Ron shouted. "As for the probation thing, I wouldn't worry about that. Dumbledore will bail you out of trouble; wouldn't want his prize pupil to stumble, would he? Anything for the saviour of the bloody universe!"

"Silencio!" Bill screeched. Ron and Harry continued to yell at one another for a moment, until it was obvious that nothing could be heard.

"Five years!" Bill ranted. "Five years of friendship, and the two of you have let it come to this? Harry, you just had to stir the cauldron, didn't you? You didn't think I heard you? The neighbours across the lane heard about Lavender Brown's knickers, you twit! You're concerned with Hermione's feelings? If you gave a tinker's damn about her feelings, then you would have kept your fool mouth closed! Ron, I do hope that you're satisfied – you managed to call her an ice maiden and accuse her of shagging both Viktor Krum and Harry, all in one sitting! Bloody brilliant! But it gets better, doesn't it? Both of her parents were listening in – you must feel like you just caught the effing Snitch! Mum and Dad must be so bloody proud! Git... prat... wanker... none of them quite capture my love at this moment! I'd rather sit down for roast dinner with Percy than look at you! At least I was able to spare Dad the humiliation of dragging you out here!"

Ron's eyes bulged, and his lower lip twitched. Harry wanted to slink off into the yard, but the thought of a conjured rope kept him in place.

Bill turned on Harry. "As for you," he snarled, "I'd grade your opening attempts at adulthood a resounding D... come to think of it, you're not even managing Dreadful. You know what Ron's been through, and I know that you feel responsible for it. Why in Merlin's name do you not make allowances, then? He's not the same person anymore, Harry, and there's nothing to be done about that. Are you going to be the kind of man who gives up on friends when it suits you? If you're going to manage your affairs based solely upon your own convenience, then please be loud and clear. I'll be the first in line to quit on you! And you, Ron – did you hear one word that Harry told us? You're not the only one who... och, the hell with it!"

He crossed his arms. "Stand up – both of you!" he ordered. Neither Harry nor Ron chose to object.

"Right, then," Bill said. "Which one of you plans to throw the first swing?"

Harry eyed Ron warily. For his part, Ron looked as though the very life had been wrung out of him.

“Go on!” Bill exhorted them. “Beat the bloody hell out of one another! That was the plan, right?”

Ron stuck his hands in his pockets, and peered intently at his shoes. Harry slowly shook his head from side to side.

“Do you think you’re capable of speech, without cocking it up?” Bill asked. “I’ll take your shuffling around as ‘yes’. Here’s my plan, then. Hestia Jones is going to... have either of you met Hestia? Oy, Hestia!”

A black-haired witch resolved chameleon-like from the wall at the back of the yard, and waved. Harry vaguely remembered her – she had been part of the Advance Guard when he had left the Dursleys the year prior.

Bill raised his voice. “Hestia is going to keep an eye on you. I’m going to release the silencing spell. You can talk things through, you can knock each other senseless, you can hex each other to the moon... at this point, I don’t give a care either way. Whatever you choose to do, don’t share it with the neighbours. Hestia, feel free to have St. Mungo’s collect any survivors.”

Hestia sniggered and waved. “Right-o, Bill,” she called out.

“I’m allowing you a few minutes, before I return to survey the damage. Perhaps the afternoon can still be salvaged,” Bill grumbled. He dropped their wands on the porch, and flicked his own wand once as he passed through the French door. Harry rubbed at his throat, and cleared it audibly.

“Ron... I...I haven’t the slightest idea how to fix this,” Harry admitted as he picked up the two wands.

Ron blurted in frustration, “I hate feeling this way!”

On one corner of the porch were two benches with high backs, facing either other across a low table. Harry set Ron’s wand on the table, and sat down on one of the benches. “It was simple in the beginning, wasn’t it?” he said. “Answer the letter, and get to King’s Cross on time. We spent the day eating chocolate frogs, and just like that we were there.”

Ron laughed grimly. He looked at the bench opposite Harry. “Anyone sitting there?” he asked, pointing at the bench. Harry shook his head, and Ron sat down.

He extended his hand to Harry. “Ron Weasley,” he said. “I’m Fred and George’s brother. Are you really Harry Potter? I thought it might be one of Fred and George’s jokes, you know.”

Harry chuckled. “I’m afraid so,” he said, as he drew back his bangs to reveal the scar. “You might want to find another seat while you have the chance.”

“I’ll stay here for now,” Ron said. “I heard you went to live with Muggles. Are they all right,

then?”

Harry answered, “Well, my uncle’s an arse, but my aunt can be tolerable, and my cousin will grow on you... literally. He’s huge.”

Ron smiled, and reached inside his jacket. “Anything off the cart?” he asked, and took two Chocolate Frogs from a pocket.

Harry shook his head. “Carry those around regularly, do you?” he laughed.

Ron shrugged. “I didn’t expect dessert, so I brought my own. Remember how Hermione’s parents would send all that sugarless claptrap? Have you been in the guest bath, by the way? They have spare toothbrushes set out in little boxes, and these odd little spools of white thread.” He shook his head, bemused, and handed a Chocolate Frog to Harry.

Ron unwrapped his Chocolate Frog and glanced at the card. He groaned, and set it face up on the table. “Agrippa – wouldn’t you know it? I would have killed for that card a few years ago. Which did you get?”

Harry managed a wry smile. “Dumbledore,” he said. “Want it?”

“Naw, I really don’t collect anymore. Besides, I must have two dozen of him,” Ron told Harry.

“One is more than enough,” Harry observed. “Any pets? I have a snowy owl.”

Ron scowled, “Just this damn rat named Scabbers.” Harry cringed, and wondered how could he have slipped his mind. Ron took a bite of his frog, and added, “If I’d had any idea what a rat he really was, I would have fed him to the nearest Kneazle before we boarded the train.”

Harry asked, “So what’s your Quidditch team?”

“Chudley Cannons,” Ron said proudly. “You?”

“Cannons, of course,” Harry said quickly. “Things can only improve.”

Ron smiled. “Codswallop,” he said. “You look like a Puddlemere man to me.”

“Nope – Cannons all the way,” Harry insisted. “I always pull for the downtrodden.”

“Ouch,” Ron pouted.

The French door opened, and Ron quickly pocketed his wand. Ginny carefully passed through as though she feared an ambush. “No sign of the enemy,” she mocked. “It looks safe to proceed.”

“Funny,” Hermione said flatly, and followed Ginny onto the porch.

“I think the train’s getting crowded,” Ron said, “and since when did 10 year olds get a ticket?”

Ginny smiled curiously. “How many times did Harry strike you in the head, exactly?” she asked.

“We were just riding the Express to Hogwarts,” Harry explained. “Ron was introducing me to Chocolate Frogs, and I was telling him that I’m the Cannons’ biggest fan.”

“Liar,” Ginny said. “What team do you pull for, anyway? You’re not a Puddlemere man, are you?”

“Shall we sing the Cannons anthem, Ron?” Harry asked.

“Absolutely,” Ron agreed, “provided that you don’t mangle the words. Can it wait, though? I want to toss Scabbers under the wheels first.”

“I’ll gladly help with that,” Hermione said.

Ginny smiled wickedly. She curtsied and extended a hand to Harry. “Hullo. Obviously you’re Harry Potter. I’m Ginny Weasley, and I’m not actually here until next September. May I?” Harry gestured to the benches.

Ginny sat next to him. “I have a tendency to knock over and break things when you’re around, in case my brother hasn’t told you. Some people think that I have a tendency toward questionable judgment –”

Harry sat up with a start. “I’m sorry? What did you say?” he asked.

“You would have to catch that bit, wouldn’t you? I said that I have a tendency toward questionable judgment,” Ginny groaned. She stopped and searched his face. “Are you all right? You have this odd look about you.”

Harry shook it off. “Sorry, it was just... the phrase struck me funny, that’s all.”

Ginny smiled. “No worries,” she said. “Oh, by the way? I’m going to be possessed by the most evil wizard in the world, and a basilisk will bite you when you save me. I just thought I should apologise in advance.” Ron gasped and Hermione looked at her in horror.

Harry said, “I’m sure it all turns out in the end, so I’ll forgive you. Just promise me one thing – no kissing!” He burst out laughing as Ginny’s cheeks pinked, and Ron followed suit.

Hermione looked Harry up and down, and then extended her hand. “You’re Harry Potter, of course. I know all about you,” she said very fast. “You’re in Modern Magical History; Great Wizarding Events of the Twentieth Century; Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts; let’s see... you reputedly have your own chapter in the new revision of Hogwarts: a History; you’re in roughly every other issue of the Daily Prophet – oh! We mustn’t forget Teen Witch Weekly –”

Ron saw the immediate queasiness on Harry’s face and cut in, “Someone wants to forget it.”

Hermione didn’t miss a beat. “...and we mustn’t leave aside this people-saving thing of yours. Did I mention that you have a knack for disrupting things – you know, exams...? Quidditch

matches...? Evil plots...? Sunday dinners...? I'm Hermione Granger, by the way." She turned to Ron. "And who are you?"

"Ron Weasley," Ron said with a smirk.

"Ah, yes – I've heard about you," Hermione said. "Look, I only came out here because some of the people on the train are behaving very childish. You've got chocolate on your nose, by the way – did you know that?" Ron quickly reached for his nose and Hermione giggled at him.

He shot her a mock-sowl. "Your mum's right – you're not a giggler," he said. "What gives?"

Hermione sat down next to Ron. "I don't know. I used to be; it was a nervous habit. My mother seems to have conveniently forgotten. This whole summer has been a reprise of my life as a ten year old."

"I'm sorry," Ron said.

"It's not your fault," Hermione assured him. "I never expected to be stuck here like this." She looked at Harry, and added, "It must have been awful for you, stuck at the Dursleys. I always knew, but I never understood – not really."

"That's not what I meant," Ron said. "I'm sorry. I'm really sorry. I... dragged you into my problems, and it wasn't right."

Hermione closed her eyes. "I forgive you," she said after a long pause. "The rest will take some time." Ron smiled faintly. He appeared to relax – for the first time all summer, Harry suspected.

Harry quietly cast a series of overlapping silencing charms all around the benches. He watched, until he was certain that the porch was thoroughly covered and that none of his friends had noticed. I hope this isn't a mistake, he thought. Gryffindors go forward.

Harry said, "Ron, can I ask you something?"

"Why not?" Ron replied.

"I'm just curious – how are you going to die?" Harry asked casually.

Ron snorted and shook his head. "On your ruddy motorbike, of all things –" He stopped, and froze in mute shock. Ginny screamed. It was a shrill inhuman scream, and it was something that Harry had failed to thoroughly contemplate. Because of the multiple charms, Ginny's screams rebounded loudly and startled her into silence.

"That was subtle," Hermione said disapprovingly.

Ron babbled. "How did you... wha... I never... you didn't talk to Lavender, did you...? I mean, with all the name-calling..."

Ginny sat very still, her face drained of colour. “Die?” she asked in a child’s voice.

“Lavender knows?” Harry asked.

“No one’s going to die. We’re essentially talking about Divination, after all,” Hermione assured Ginny. She changed benches and wrapped her arm around Ginny’s shoulders.

“Die?” Ginny wept. “Did those... those things tell you that?”

“I don’t understand how you knew,” Ron said, his voice almost ghostly.

“We found a book in the library at Grimmauld Place,” Harry explained. “It had a page on the brains, Ron. They’re called cognivores, apparently.” So much for not cocking things up, he thought as he watched Ron’s expression oscillate between anger and terror.

Bill came out the French door, followed by Tonks. He said, “I see everyone’s still alive... hullo, I didn’t expect to see...” He squinted, and looked carefully around the porch. “You’ve built a silent space,” he said. “That’s seventh-year work, at the very least – impressive.”

“They didn’t teach us that when I was in school,” Tonks said. “I picked it up later.”

“Hiding the shouting, are you?” Bill asked with a smile. He drew closer and took in Ron’s expression; his smile quickly melted away.

Harry motioned to Ginny, and flicked his wand here and there. “Have a seat,” he said grimly. Tonks sat on the end of the table, and Bill immediately went to Ginny. Harry began flicking his wand again.

“Where did you pick that up, anyway?” Tonks asked him.

Harry put away his wand. “Dumbledore did it at the party. I don’t know how... I felt it, and it occurred to me how he might have done it. It’s a good thing I didn’t vanish the porch, I suppose.”

Ginny clung to Bill as if she were drowning. Harry couldn’t understand anything she said – it was all buried deep within sobs. Bill turned his head toward Harry. “I take it that you were right, in the library?” he confirmed. Harry nodded.

Tonks said to Ron, “I’m sorry, Ron. We hoped otherwise, truly we did.”

Ron asked anxiously, “Who else knows about this?”

Hermione answered, “Remus saw the book, but he doesn’t know what you saw. We were only surmising, after all. My parents saw the book as well.”

Panic rose in Ron’s voice. “They wouldn’t tell my parents... would they? Mum’s wound tightly as it is.”

“They understand that it’s a matter between you and your family; I’m certain of it,” Hermione said.

“It’s between you and me, as far as I’m concerned,” Bill assured Ron. “Mum wouldn’t handle it well, and Dad has enough on his mind at present. Charlie doesn’t need to know, the twins can’t keep their mouths shut, and Percy... well... you know.”

“It’s very, very questionable,” Hermione insisted. “Visions are dodgy at the outset, never mind the possible intent of these creatures.”

“What did the book say about them?” Ron asked.

“Ron, perhaps we should take this a step at a time –” Bill began.

“What did the book say?” Ron demanded.

“It’s not good,” Harry told him. “Are you sure...?”

“What did it say? Tell me,” Ron pleaded.

Hermione suggested, “Bill may have a point, you know.” Ron and Harry both glared at her.

“I can’t keep track of all the secrets anymore,” Harry said. He turned to Ron. “They’re called *Cognivorus cado... cado...*”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “They’re called *Cognivorum cadogansis*, after Sir Cadogan. Apparently, he was believed to have killed them all. Clearly, that wasn’t the case.”

“Sir Cadogan... Sir Cadogan... Wasn’t that the crusader bloke who filled in for the Fat Lady – ‘tally ho’ and that rot?” Ron asked. When Hermione nodded, he added, “Struck me as a braggart, that one.”

Harry continued, “According to the book, *cognivores* feed on thoughts and they leave visions of the future.”

Hermione corrected him, “No, victims are beset with visions of the future.” When Harry looked at her askance, she snipped, “It’s a significant difference. It implies the potential for false visions.”

“Fair enough,” Harry acknowledged. “These things went on a rampage a hundred years ago. They attacked seventy people. Half of them died, and the other half...” He couldn’t make himself finish the thought.

“The other half what?” Ron asked impatiently.

“The other half went mad,” Hermione said. Before Ron could respond, she hastily added, “Of course, the book said over seventy people were attacked, and only thirty-four ended up at St. Mungo’s. That means some of the victims may have been unaffected.”

Ron began to laugh in staccato heaves. Harry and the others all watched him cautiously. He spluttered, “When I said I thought I might be going mad... I wasn’t entirely serious, you know.”

Harry spoke slowly, assembling his thoughts as he talked. “Maybe – just maybe – they went mad because they couldn’t handle what they thought they saw, not because of anything actually done to them.”

“The deaths may have been self-fulfilling prophecy,” Bill agreed hopefully.

“There’s a word I don’t care to hear again soon – prophecy,” Ron fumed. “Answer me this, O high priestess of the library; if Divination is so flimsy, then why was that sodding prophecy so important?”

Hermione gasped and shuddered. She started to speak, but only guttural sounds emerged. Harry immediately moved toward her.

“What?” Ron said, a guilty look spreading across his face. “What did I do? All I did was ask about the prophecy; it’s not –”

“Stop!” Harry shouted. “Can’t you see what you’re doing to her? Don’t say another word!” He pulled her to him. “It’s safe, I promise. It’s safe,” he repeated himself over and over.

“Can’t... it’s not right... have to... tell Professor... D-Dumbledore,” Hermione managed; her voice quavered as she shook.

Tonks moved to take Hermione’s hand. “What’s happening to you? What can we do?”

“I’m putting an end to this,” Harry said. “Ron, I told you there would be no more secrets. Listen, all of you. Can I trust you?”

Everyone sat mute, caught up in Hermione’s writhing.

“Can I trust you?” Harry repeated. “Dumbledore believes this is a life-or-death matter. Can I trust you?”

“I told you that I can keep a secret,” Ron replied.

“The Order is sworn to protect you,” Bill said. “You have my word.”

“Likewise,” said Tonks.

Ginny nodded nervously.

“Hermione was willing to guard this secret with her life,” Harry said. “If any of you betray us, I swear that I’ll kill you myself.” Hermione looked up at him, her eyes wide with surprise.

He looked around for assent once more. “I won’t let you die to protect this from our own friends,

for Merlin's sake," he told Hermione.

Hermione quavered, "Not dying... just... not right... are you... sure... you...?" She shuddered, and Harry's hand tingled.

He spoke the prophecy – all of it. "The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches - born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies. The Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not, and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives. The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies." Moments after he finished, Hermione's body relaxed.

"How did you know...?" she began weakly.

"I didn't know if it would help," Harry admitted. "I took a chance. Dumbledore said you would only be able to speak of the prophecy in front of people who already knew it."

Ron and Ginny stared slack-jawed at Harry, and Bill took on a pensive expression.

Tonks said, "Sweet Merlin... you're the Defender. It makes sense, when I think about it, but... you're the Defender."

"The 'Defender'? What are you talking about?" Harry asked.

"The central purpose of the Order of the Phoenix is to protect and support the Defender of the Light – the person who is fated to vanquish Voldemort," Bill explained. "The secondary purpose is to protect the lives of those whom Voldemort and the Death Eaters have marked for destruction. That obviously includes you, Harry; and Hermione as well. Dumbledore's always maintained that the identity of the Defender was unknown. Frankly, most of us assumed that it was him, and he was just being modest." He turned to Ron and then Ginny. "If Mum finds out you know that, or anything else about the Order, she'll serve all of us for roast dinner – understood?"

Ron stared at the table, his face cradled in his hands. Harry watched him as his fingers flicked to and fro. "Playing chess, are you?" he asked.

"'Either must die at the hand of the other'... 'neither can live while the other survives'... 'power the Dark Lord knows not'... what a puzzle," Ron muttered. He looked up at Harry, and then sat up abruptly. "'Either must die at the hand of the other' – think of the implications. If he doesn't kill you, will you be immortal? Is it impossible for someone or something else to kill you? If you were to walk in front of the Knight Bus tomorrow, would it just bounce off you or something? So... he can't order someone to kill you, can he? He has to dirty his own hands – or does he? What does it mean to use one's hands? Can he be killed using a wand, or does it have to be done with the hands... could it mean wandless magic? 'Neither can live while the other survives' – what in the wide world of Quidditch does that mean? With him it makes a bit of sense, you having offed him and all. You can't live? That makes no sense at all – you look alive to me... if you were undead, I think we would have caught on by now. 'Power the Dark Lord knows not' – now that's interesting.

You can kill him with a spell he's unfamiliar with, perhaps? It's all a great puzzle."

Ginny gaped at him. "That was impressive!"

Hermione stirred and turned to look at Ron. "Nicely done," she said. "That gives us something to work with."

Bill patted him on the shoulder, and Tonks raised both thumbs in salute. Ron looked questioningly at Harry.

"Good show, mate," Harry said. Ron visibly relaxed.

"V-Voldemort doesn't know Harry has the power to kill him – is that the big secret?" Ginny asked nervously.

Hermione sat up slowly, stretched gingerly, and mouthed 'thank you' to Harry. She said, "Voldemort doesn't know that he has to come after Harry himself, and he doesn't know that he can't live as long as Harry survives. We need to keep him in the dark as long as possible. You can surely see that Harry's life may depend on it." Ginny paled.

Harry asked, "Does anyone have a problem with the idea that I have to kill him?" He raised his own hand, and was met with a chorus of 'no's.

"Would anyone feel differently if they had to do it?" Harry asked.

Ron said, "I'd blast him to ashes, and then burn the ashes. I wouldn't give it a single thought."

Bill said, "He's earned it."

"It's war," shrugged Tonks. "People die."

Ginny squeezed Harry's hand. "No one in his or her right mind would ever blame you," she said. "We'll all be there for you afterward." She looked pointedly at Ron, and added, "All of us."

Bill said to Ginny and Ron, "I hate to break this up, but we should all get back inside; it's the civilised thing to do." He turned to Hermione. "It's obvious that something was done to you, relating to this prophecy – a safeguard or binding of some kind? I need to know more about it; I'd like to help." Finally, he shook Harry's hand. "We're sworn to support and protect you, Harry. It's... it's an honour, strange as that may sound to you. You may want to get used to that sentiment."

Ron said, "We'll be right there. I have a few things yet to clear up with Harry." When Hermione hesitated, he added, "Alone. Don't fret; there's no punching involved."

Harry held back until the French door closed. "What is it?"

Ron said calmly, "You don't expect to live, do you?"

Harry couldn't bring himself to lie. "No, not really."

"Neither do I," said Ron.

"I'll take him with me, though," Harry promised.

"I expect that you will," Ron told him, "and I intend to help you, whether you like it or not."

Harry asked nervously, "Have you... did you see something that...?"

"Two things that I saw have already happened this summer – that's how I know it's real," Ron whispered. He looked around furtively, as if he were afraid of being heard. "Most of it is hazy now. All that damn Oblivious Unction did was to muddle things. Some of it's clear – the motorbike, for one. You're there; so is Hermione, I think, and someone else – a blonde who I can't recognise. I saw myself in a mirror, near the end. I don't look a lot older than now. It's coming, Harry – it's coming soon." He leaned in close to Harry's ear. "They think I'm already mad, you know; I overheard them at St. Mungo's. They couldn't bring themselves to tell me. Thank you for that much."

"You're not mad. I don't know if what you saw is real, but you're not mad," Harry said.

"You may be the only one with that opinion," Ron fumed.

"So... we go down together, then?" Harry asked.

Ron paused, and appeared to mull over the idea. "I could live with that," he decided.

Harry didn't think Ron was mad, but he knew that it was possible. He was certain at first that Ron was paranoid; the furtive glances, the whispering – it all pointed in that direction. After a few minutes back inside the house, he had changed his mind somewhat. Mr. and Mr. Weasley behaved as though neither wanted to be the first to call out "Snap!" He began to wonder if Hermione had misjudged her parents, and if anything had actually been shared between them and the Weasleys. Tonks was on uneasy ground with both Ron and Harry. She seemed to be moving in a room filled with breakables, although in her case that was often a reasonable assumption. Ginny's countenance cried out 'stiff upper lip', but Harry could see it in her eyes – the impulse to cry out, barely suppressed. He felt badly for heaping Ron's condition and the truth of the prophecy upon her in the space of five minutes. Considering that, he concluded that she was the picture of grace. As for Ron, if he wasn't precisely relaxed, he at least seemed relieved. He moved easily, despite the rustling and nervousness around him. He was gentle and attentive with Ginny – clearly worried about her, and not just about what she might do or say. Harry was certain that she'd earned that from Ron after the last few weeks.

Hermione and Bill huddled in the front room and spoke in hushed tones, she on one end of a settee and he in a plush armchair. Hermione waved him over, and Harry broke off from Mr. Granger. Harry sat next to Hermione; she appeared anxious.

Bill said quietly, “Harry, I need you to tell me anything that you can remember about the safeguard cast on Hermione – anything at all.”

“I’m a bit hazy on that entire evening, as you can imagine,” Hermione explained.

Harry nodded. “Dumbledore said it was a variation on an old spell. There was quite a bit of wand work involved, and some runes on her hand and mine, and then a long incantation... arcanum se astringo dum something, and then a variation on the same. Then he said tutela, and I thought he was going to force his wand right through Hermione’s chest.”

Bill raised an eyebrow. He reached out for Harry’s hand. “Runes? May I?” Harry allowed him to look, and he came away with a scowl. “I imagine it was dum dolor, Harry,” he said. “Please tell me the rest wasn’t something along the lines of arcanum se astringo donec nex?” Harry felt a chill on the back of his neck.

“Was she ill following the casting of the... er, was she ill afterward?” Bill asked.

“She was terribly cold,” Harry answered. “I could scarcely warm her.”

“But you could – you could warm her?” Bill said. He turned to Hermione. “You’re not cold now, are you?”

“I feel all right. Casting of the what?” Hermione asked.

“I’m sorry?” said Bill.

“Casting of the what?” she repeated. “You started to ask if I was ill following the casting of the... something. Why did you stop?”

Bill didn’t answer. “Does your hand hurt when Hermione is out of sorts?”

“It tingles, I think, but it doesn’t really hurt,” Harry answered suspiciously.

“Did Dumbledore say where he learned this?” asked Bill.

“From someone at the Department of Mysteries, I think,” Harry replied after a pause.

Hermione agreed. “He’s right. I do remember that much. Look, Bill, I agreed to this.”

The growing alarm on Bill’s face prompted Harry to add, “He did say that the charm wasn’t evil, and couldn’t cause any lasting harm.”

Bill frowned. “He does like to emphasize the difference between dark and evil. As I said before, I would trust Dumbledore with my life. Nonetheless, I can’t accept... surely he had to realise what he was undertaking.”

Hermione appeared impassive. Harry snapped, “What was he doing, then? Did he lie to us?”

“He mislead you, at any rate. I respectfully disagree with his interpretation of lasting harm,” Bill fumed. “I can’t fathom what he was thinking, casting a barely-legal variation of an ancient Unforgivable on a schoolgirl. He’s going to explain himself to me and to the Order if I have anything to say about it. I intend to break this curse, and I’ll damn well know who provided the runes.”

“You shouldn’t interfere,” Hermione said. “He had his reasons.”

Harry seethed. “He cursed you,” he said. “I can’t believe that he cursed you.”

“I was the weak link in the chain,” she said distantly. “He did what was necessary.”

Harry desperately clutched her shoulders with his hands. His voice shook. “Is everyone losing their minds around here? Hermione, have you gone stark – barking – mad?”

There was sudden pounding at the front door. Bill jumped up from the armchair, and flicked his wand. A small portion of the oaken door was rendered transparent, to reveal Lupin and Fred Weasley standing on the other side.

“You’ll have to teach me that one,” Harry said, impressed. “That’s dead useful...” He went silent the instant that he spotted the gashes on Fred’s head and the long rips across his shirt.

Bill shouted, “Dad!” and flung open the door. He quickly ushered Lupin and Fred into the front room, slammed the door, and called out, “Colloportus!” He looked to Harry and Hermione, and shouted, “Get up - now!” The moment that they stood, the settee flung itself across the room and landed directly in front of the door.

Mr. Weasley ran into the front room. “Fred! What... who did this?”

“Death Eaters...” Fred panted. “They - they stormed the Burrow.”

Harry Potter and the Years of Rebellion Heartburn

Chapter Fourteen

HEARTBURN

Mrs. Weasley stopped cold at the sight of Fred. Harry half-expected her to collapse, but she instead assumed a calm demeanour rather unlike the woman that he knew. “I’ll get a cloth,” she said, and returned to the kitchen.

“Where is George?” Mr. Weasley asked.

“The Lovegoods were attacked as well. We fetched Madam Pomfrey, and George stayed behind,” Fred said.

Mrs. Granger followed Mrs. Weasley into the room. She showed no sign of panic whatever; *this woman is all business*, Harry thought.

“Sorry about the carpet, ma’am,” Fred said meekly.

“That’s a low priority at the moment,” Mrs. Granger said. “You need to stop talking while we attend to your cheek. If I can get pressure on...”

“Pressure?” Mrs. Weasley asked. “Oh, of course – you’re stopping the blood flow, aren’t you?”

“Sorry, Molly,” Lupin said. “I gave it a go, but my – er – condition takes the edge off of healing charms.”

Mrs. Weasley gently moved Mrs. Granger’s hands away. “Allow me,” she said kindly. With two flicks of the wand, the bleeding stopped.

Mrs. Granger shook her head. “For the first time, I think I’m truly jealous,” she said. “You could charge five hundred pounds for that, you know.”

“And the NHS would keep all but five pounds of it,” Mr. Granger added. “I’ll fetch a clean shirt for him, Molly.” He was fully as collected as his wife.

“Did you say that the Lovegoods were attacked?” Ginny asked from the doorway.

“Mr. Lovegood has a nasty head wound, and Luna...” Fred stopped.

“What about Luna?” Harry asked.

“Oh, Harry – they tore into her something awful,” Fred cried. “Thank Merlin that George can keep his head about him. She... she sent you a note, insisted on it. It looked like she was ready to owl it, before the attack.” He held out a crumpled bit of parchment.

Mrs. Granger took the parchment, and handed it off to Harry. He read it, and then read it again.

“What is it?” Hermione asked.

“They’re coming here next,” Harry said angrily.

“That’s not possible. Wizards can’t even see this house, excepting members of the Order,” Bill said. “I’m proud of these wards.”

“Dad,” Fred said, “They shouldn’t have found the Burrow, either. George had a thought – perhaps they’re looking for gnomes?”

Lupin’s eyes widened. “Does anyone know if...?”

Tonks frowned. “I de-gnomed the garden here last week. The area’s ripe with them; they’re definitely attracted to the wards.”

Mr. Weasley paled for an instant, and then took command. “Remus, rally everyone you can – go!”

“I’ve already put word to Albus,” Lupin said as he hustled out the front door.

“Bill, Fred, you’re with me; we’ll plan a perimeter,” Mr. Weasley went on. “Tonks, get Hestia from the yard – we want to pull in close to the house. Molly, set up a safe room upstairs. Everyone else goes with Molly. We defend Harry and the Grangers to the death, if necessary. If they come, we’ll make sure that they regret that choice.” No one hesitated. Harry was startled by Mr. Weasley’s presence. At some level, he’d always assumed that Molly Weasley was the official cook for the Order and that Arthur Weasley was the parliamentarian or something of that nature.

Harry recovered quickly. “Mr. Weasley, I am an adult. I expect to be put to work,” he insisted.

Mr. Weasley frowned. “You’re sixteen years old,” he said briskly. “Until Kingsley tells us you’re trained up, you’re with Ron, Ginny and Hermione.”

“If Voldemort comes, I have to be with you,” Harry said. Hermione twitched, and her knees buckled. Mr. Granger, who was coming down the stairs, dropped the shirt that he was carrying and rushed to her.

“If Voldemort comes, we’ll need Dumbledore,” Mr. Weasley said.

“In the end, Dumbledore won’t be able to help you,” Harry assured him. “You’ll need me.”

“Harry, dear, we know you’ve faced him, but Dumbledore...” Mrs. Weasley began.

“Dumbledore can’t kill him,” Harry said. “I can. I’m the only one who can. Do you understand?”

Mr. Weasley hesitated. “You?” he asked. “It’s you?”

“Wicked,” Fred said quietly.

“Hermione... wake up, Hermione,” Mr. Granger said gently. When there was no response, he turned and announced, “I think she’s having a seizure! Cordelia, fetch the bag from the study; I need a tongue depressor – now.”

Harry stood and spoke the prophecy, every word of it. “I’m the one,” he added. “I was born on the last day of the seventh month. My parents defied him three times. I was marked with the lightning scar. That’s what all this is about. That’s why everyone around me is in constant danger.” Hermione gasped for air, and curled into a foetal position.

Harry turned to Mr. Granger. “That’s why you need to take her and go, as far away as you can. No matter what happens here, you need to go.”

“Harry, I...” Mr. Granger began.

From the floor, Hermione moaned, “Why don’t you just take out an advertisement in the *Daily Prophet*?”

“Thank Merlin,” Harry said. He moved quickly to help her stand up.

“Don’t you presume to make decisions for me,” snarled Hermione, shaking off Harry’s help.

“Look, you can hate me later,” Harry said. “We need to talk about Luna’s note – now, while there’s still time.”

“What else could it possibly say that outweighs...?” Hermione began.

“Harry, you’ve just given us even more reason to protect you,” Mr. Weasley said. “Upstairs, now – off you go, the lot of you!”

Harry helped Hermione – who was clearly unsteady – ascend the stairs, and he motioned to Ron and Ginny. He led them all into the first guest room, and closed the door before the Grangers or Mrs. Weasley could follow. As soon as she sat on the end of the bed, he thrust the note at Hermione and hoped that he appeared calm... or normal... or something less than flaming crimson. She shot him a dubious look, and then read it.

I’m sure that No-Name knows. We certainly didn’t see the Godfather. Ask the one in the strapless dress. Better still, ask the one in the white bathrobe. I hope you understand, or there

will be terrible trouble – even for the one sorely in need of a longer skirt, I think. Sorry I didn't write sooner – I took quite a long fall, and just awoke.

TTFN,

Butterbeer Cap

The note shook in her hand. “That was... you mean that... we were all there? And he wasn't Sirius... he was... Oh! You... I mean, we... Good Lord, we didn't... we couldn't have... could we...?” Tears formed at the corners of her eyes.

Ginny seized the note. She read it several times, and her face fell further each time. “Gods,” she said at last, “it was real. It wasn't Sirius, it was *Voldemort*. Sirius wouldn't have cut me to the quick like that – I knew it!” She looked at Hermione with an unreadable expression. “It was you, then. I disappeared, and he settled on you.” She turned to Harry. “Unless it was Daphne Greengrass... please lie to me if that's the case!”

“Daphne Greengrass? What the... let me see that,” Ron demanded. He read the note, looked up in confusion, and read it again. “What kind of game is this?” he asked. “Strapless dresses, bathrobes, skirts – this doesn't make any sense whatever. What does she mean, that she ‘took quite a long fall’? And who the bloody hell is No-Name...? All right – never mind that part.”

“Fred said the note was to be owled,” Harry said. “It's intentionally vague – and well thought on her part.” He waited for Hermione to agree – she typically paid compliment to intellect, after all – but agreement didn't come.

Hermione hugged her knees to her chest. “It couldn't have been real. It was just a dream – please tell me it was just a dream,” she said. Her cheeks were damp.

“Luna was wearing a silver dress with sparkles. She had a copy of the *Quibbler*,” Harry said gently.

Ginny shuddered. “I had this horrid strapless thing on. I changed into a jumper and denims. As for Greengrass... what she was wearing is no one's business.”

Ron appeared to suppress a fatuous grin. “In need of a longer skirt, right? Well, that's a matter of opinion... er... sorry, Hermione; no offence meant.”

Hermione snapped at Ron, “How can you sit there and think about Daphne Greengrass's skirt? Death Eaters attacked Luna, in case you missed that bit of news! It was *Voldemort*, you thick prat! *Voldemort* pulled us into Harry's dream, or pulled all of us inside his own head, or who knows what else? *Voldemort* dressed me in Harry's bathrobe, and paraded me around –”

Ron's eyes narrowed slightly. “Harry's bathrobe?” he asked no one in particular.

Harry watched her carefully. He felt a strong urge to wipe the tears from her face, but thought better of it. *‘Please tell me it was just a dream’, she said. That tells me where I stand*, he

recognised.

Hermione glared back at him with pure venom. She shouted, “How could you let him in? How could you let him do this? How could you? I thought you had defences! I thought you would protect us! I thought...” She looked away from him, and quietly finished, “I thought you would protect me.”

“I don’t know how it happened, Hermione. I didn’t know that it happened at all, until just now. I didn’t feel him inside my head,” Harry tried to explain. “I think... I think I had a headache, but it wasn’t the same as – you know – as when my scar hurts.”

“I had a splitting headache when I woke up,” Ginny recalled.

“When you woke up... how is it that you were asleep, anyway?” Harry asked. “It was late morning, right?”

Ginny crossed her arms. “It’s the summertime. I slept in.”

Harry played out his thought. “What about Luna, I wonder... or Daphne Greengrass? We had to be asleep all at once...”

“Then we were inside that monster’s head,” Hermione cried. “We were inside his head – you and I... we were in his head... he was there - *watching!* ”

“Will someone clue me in?” Ron asked. “There was a dream, obviously. All of you apparently thought it was yours, which must have been rather confusing.”

“I still think it was my dream,” Harry said. He described the circumstances in detail, stopping at the point where all but Hermione disappeared. Ron didn’t easily grasp the concept of a game show, but did pick up on the sequence of events. Ginny and Hermione listened with interest, especially to the first portions of the dream.

Ron suggested, “Perhaps you were dreaming about Sirius, and Voldemort found a way in. I rather doubt he subscribes to *Teen Witch Weekly* , but his followers –”

“Or their children,” Hermione said icily.

Harry took the meaning. “There’s no reason whatever to suggest that Daphne set up this situation,” he insisted.

“We’re on a first name basis now, are we? You’d better not be leaving out any prelude to the dream – anything whatever that Ginny or I missed,” grumbled Hermione.

“You’re aware of *anything* that may have been left out,” Harry said carefully. Hermione faced away from him.

“As I was saying, Voldemort found out about the article,” Ron continued. “For whatever reason,

he wanted to narrow the field – but why?”

“He wants to hurt me,” Harry said. “Voldemort said that he wants my rage. Dumbledore didn’t know why – or if he did, then he saw fit not to tell me.”

Ginny appeared confused. “He wants your *rage* ? Whatever for?”

“It was ‘rage’, specifically? Not anger or pain, but ‘rage’?” Ron asked. Harry nodded.

Ron went somewhere else – Harry recognised his chess match demeanour again. “What is it, Ron?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” he said distantly. “It’s...” His eyes focussed on Harry. “It’s a puzzle that I intend to solve,” he said resolutely.

They heard the unmistakeable sound of breaking glass. “You’d best solve it quickly, then,” Hermione urged.

The door to the room burst open. “Come! Now!” Mrs. Weasley barked. She herded Ginny and Hermione and forced Ron down the hallway toward the master bedroom. Harry stood firm.

“I’m going to fight,” he said firmly. “It won’t do to interfere.”

Mrs. Weasley took a half step backward. “Please, Harry... please do as I say.”

He shook his head. “I intend to defend these stairs,” he said.

Her eyes grew misty. “Please,” she begged him.

“I’m with Harry, Mum,” Ron said from behind her, and she sagged in defeat.

“They need you,” Harry said, pointing toward the master bedroom. “You have to protect them.”

“Mum, don’t let Ginny out of your sight,” Ron said. “No matter what happens, keep her away from us.”

“Be safe,” Mrs. Weasley whispered, and raced for the master bedroom. They heard the squelch of the door sealing before they reached the base of the stairs.

“I’m with you to the end, Harry,” Ron told him.

“Seeing as how we’re about to be attacked by Death Eaters, that’s not exactly reassuring,” Harry said casually. “How’s your conjuring?”

Ron shrugged. “I don’t know – not bad. I managed well enough on the O.W.L.s. Why?”

“I need work – nothing that I conjure seems to last very long. I tell you, I’d give a small fortune

for a pocket mirror,” Harry said. He pressed himself against the wall of the stairwell, and Ron followed suit.

“A pocket mirror? I don’t need a fortune,” Ron said. “How about a bottle of Ogden’s?”

“Firewhisky? Are you daft?” Harry asked.

“No,” Ron answered. “Just thirsty.” He tapped his wand to his palm, and called out, “*Creo pocket mirror!*”

“Cripes, Ron! Are you trying to rouse the dead?” Harry whispered frantically. “It’s not an exam – just say it and concentrate... what colour is that - pink?”

Ron frowned. “It’s salmon, I think. Take the damn mirror,” he grumbled quietly. “What do you want with it, anyway? Checking your grooming before battle?”

“Something I saw done the other day,” Harry whispered. *Thank you, Remus*, he thought, as he eased the mirror around the edge of the stairwell.

“That’s clever,” Ron whispered back appreciatively.

As he slowly rotated the mirror, Harry asked, “Why did you tell your mother to stick with Ginny? Did you figure that Hermione could handle her parents?”

“I’m not going to die today,” Ron said with certainty. “That means you’re not going to die today, nor is Hermione. I don’t know about Ginny, so it stands to reason that Mum should focus on her.” Harry wanted to quibble with Ron’s idea of ‘reason’, but thought better of it.

There was no one to the right that they could see. The settee was still in front of the oaken door, but the large window adjacent to the door was broken and the floor of the front room was littered with shards of glass.

“Bloody quiet,” Ron whispered in Harry’s ear. Harry jumped, but stopped himself before he leapt from the stairwell. “Sorry,” Ron added. *Where did everyone go?* Harry wondered. An explosion echoed from the yard, followed by the crackle of powerful spells.

“Shall we?” Harry asked.

Ron hesitated. “I don’t like it.”

“It is *too* quiet,” Harry admitted.

Ron shook his head. “That’s not what I mean... all the pawns have been drawn forward, and the King is exposed... I think it’s a minority attack.”

He looked up the stairs, just as the clatter of shattering glass echoed down from the bedrooms.

“I was afraid of that!” Ron shouted, and he scrambled up the stairs ahead of Harry. A red blast of light shot just over his head, and Ron flattened himself against the steps.

Harry crawled up behind him. “Has it occurred to you that a person can be hurt very badly, without dying?”

Ron grunted, “What doesn’t kill you only makes you stronger, right? *Stupefy!* ” Harry heard the whump of a Death Eater hitting the floor. “Who said that, anyway?” Ron added. He abruptly jumped up and ran madly down the hallway, amidst a hail of red flashes.

Harry scrambled to the top of the steps, and pointed his wand. “*Percussum!* ” he shouted, and whipped his wand across the path of a Death Eater unlucky enough to step out of one of the bedrooms. The Death Eater’s head snapped around, and ground to a halt against the opposite wall.

“I *like* that one!” Ron shouted. “*Percussum!*” The Death Eater he struck shook his head vigorously, and raised a hand to his cheek.

“With authority, Ron!” Harry urged him on.

“*Percussum!* ” Ron roared, and dropped the shaken Death Eater atop one of his felled colleagues. “Yes!” he shouted triumphantly, pumping his fist.

“What’s that sound?” Harry asked, looking up and down the hall for the source.

“I don’t know,” Ron answered.

The ceiling split open, and a Death Eater hopped from the attic into the hall.

“*Stupefy!* ” Harry called from one end of the hall. “*Percussum!* ” Ron called from the other end. The Death Eater spun a full circle, and fell flat on his back.

“I hadn’t thought of the ceiling,” Ron said tentatively.

Harry heard the sound again, and he was certain that this time it came from the master bedroom. He wiped sweat from his eyes with the back of one hand, and waved his wand with the other.

“Move!” he shouted at Ron. The instant that Ron was clear, Harry thrust his wand toward the master bedroom door.

“*Everbero!* ” he boomed. The door shook, followed by a loud squelch, a *pop!* , and a *crack!* It landed inside the room, in five sections and some bits.

One Death Eater lay on the floor, beneath two sections of the door. A second clumsily exchanged wand fire with Mrs. Weasley. Ginny stood in front of the Grangers’, her eyes trained on the doorway and wand at the ready. Hermione called out “*Stupefy!* ” and narrowly missed Harry, who was racing down the hall toward the room; he heard someone behind him fall.

Another Death Eater leaned out of the widening hole in the master bedroom ceiling just as Harry ran into the room. A purple flash narrowly missed Hermione, and the bottoms of Harry's glasses fogged. He barked "*Percutio!* ", with his wand directed at the leaning Death Eater's arm. Hermione recoiled as blood flew in spatters and the Death Eater's wand fell.

It seemed to Harry as if time had somehow slowed. Harry grabbed the bleeding Death Eater by the injured arm, and pulled. He heard a shriek of pain echo in the distance. *Stay away from them – all of them!* he screamed inside. Harry grabbed handfuls of the Death Eater's cloak and threw him. Harry didn't know why the Death Eater, who was obviously taller and larger than he, flew across the room and bounced off the wall. He didn't care. A guttural cry of... of something – not pain... anger, perhaps – resonated in his ears. He picked up the Death Eater and tossed him through the window glass. He turned to see the remaining Death Eater facing him, wand lowered. Mrs. Weasley gaped at him. Ron stood frozen in the doorway.

Mr. Granger stepped out nonchalantly from behind Ginny – who was also unmoving; he walked up and without hesitation swung a cricket bat into the back of the last Death Eater's head.

"Stokely House School, class of '66," he said as he prodded the fallen Death Eater with his foot. "I was a rather good batsman."

Harry heard him distantly, and tried to speak but couldn't. The room swam before it resolved again and returned to a normal speed. Hermione appeared to be holding up her mother, although Mrs. Granger didn't look injured.

Mrs. Weasley spluttered, "I don't... that door was warded... and you threw... how did you...and the window... he should have bounced right off..."

Harry saw movement through the hole in the ceiling. "There's no time for this," he said. There was more movement, in the hallway. "Ron!"

Ron dove to the floor, and began exchanging wand fire with another Death Eater. Ginny moved to join him.

"Get back, Ginny!" Ron shouted. "*Percutio!* " A shriek of pain resounded from the hall, followed by a hail of red flashes.

"Ron! No curses, only charms!" Mrs. Weasley protested in vain. Ron ignored her. It was obvious that there were no longer any rules - no objectives save survival.

"Where are my saddlebags?" Harry asked. "Where were they put?"

"In our closet," Mr. Granger said. "Over there." Harry burst into the closet and tore through his bags.

"Where are they all coming from?" Mrs. Weasley asked. "He can't possibly have this many followers." Hermione tore the hood and mask from the Death Eater at her father's feet.

Ginny covered her mouth in shock. “It’s Vincent Crabbe!”

“He’s enlisting children now,” Mrs. Weasley moaned.

“Let me guess who’s in the hall, then,” Ron shouted. “Why don’t you stick your head out, *cousin* ? It must be you – you’re never far from your goons! Is Goyle in a heap out there, or did Harry put him through the window?”

Harry peered out the door into the hallway. The end of a wand appeared from the guest room door, and pointed toward the hole in the ceiling. A muffled voice drawled “*Morsmordre!* ” and green sparks flew through the hole toward the sky beyond.

Ron yelled, “I knew it! I knew it, you bloody ferret! Is your daddy proud of his little Death Eater?”

Instantly, there was shouting from above. “Who did that? Have you gone mad? Our Lord will have your head for that, whoever you are!”

Harry tried to understand why, and after a moment believed that he did. *This is as close to a cliff as we’re likely to come, Narcissa* , he thought. “There’s a safe *place* !” he shouted. “Don’t forget the safe *place* !” There was the sound of scurrying, and then nothing.

Ron smacked Harry on the top of his head. “What are you thinking?”

“The Aurors will spot the Dark Mark, you git,” Harry said. “It had to be on purpose.” The Bonneville enlarged between the bed and the broken window. Ron pressed himself against the wall near the door.

“I’ll survey our situation,” Harry said. He hopped on the motorbike, grabbed the handlebars, and lined himself up with the window.

“In broad daylight?” Mrs. Weasley piped up.

“It’s a bit late to think of the neighbours now,” Harry said. “I’m surprised that the Muggle constables haven’t yet come.”

Harry heard Mrs. Granger remark, “He should be wearing his helmet,” just as he shot out the window. He immediately turned hard to the left and swooped over the roof, knocking off two Death Eaters before they understood what they were seeing.

Mr. Weasley, Fred, Bill, Tonks and Hestia Jones were all in the yard. Mr. Weasley and Bill were duelling Death Eaters in the open. Tonks had taken position in a tree, and was attempting to pick off the duellers. The high-backed benches were reorganized as cover and Fred and Hestia Jones were crouched behind, taking periodic shots as well. Collectively, they appeared outnumbered by about three to one. One Death Eater at the rear of the yard was clearly in three pieces. It took Harry a few moments to realise that he had seen his first actual splinching – the splinchee must have tried to Apparate directly onto the property, Harry assumed.

Harry buzzed two Death Eaters who were closing in behind Mr. Weasley, which allowed Tonks to drop them both. As he swung around again, he saw two more Death Eaters step through the French door, and stun both Fred and Hestia Jones unconscious. *There are more in the house!* he thought, and panic began to flow through him.

Two red flashes shot out of the master bedroom window. Harry raced toward the window at full speed. When he arrived, no one remained in the room. He tore over the top of the house. There were a half dozen Death Eaters entering through the front door. One looked up and saw him, and fired curses madly in his direction. He slipped back over the top of the house again, to find another Death Eater firing at him. Tonks was the only one still standing; Mr. Weasley and Bill lay unconscious and bound at the feet of the Death Eater who was targeting him. Harry shot toward the tree where Tonks held three Death Eaters at bay, cursing “*Percutio!*” over and over until all three lay still in the grass. The Bonnevillie abruptly lurched, and it occurred to Harry that it had been struck – just before he hit the ground and slid hard into the low wall that bounded the yard.

“Harry Potter? Can you hear me? I’m certain that you can. I know that you’re conscious – I can feel it,” the smooth voice said.

Harry opened one eye. His hands were tied tightly behind his back and his ankles were bound together. He was sitting on the settee in the Grangers’ front room. The figure before him could have been a Dementor – it was clad in long dark robes with head fully cloaked and hands hidden. The voice didn’t sound exactly right, but Harry knew who it was.

“Hello, Tom,” he spat. “You’re late for dinner.”

Soft chuckles emanated from within the cloak. “You’re trying to bait me – how charming. I’m sorry, but that little dig only works for Dumbledore.”

Harry growled, “What have you done with –”

“Your paramour, Miss Granger? She’s alive, for the moment. Wormtail!”

“Yes, my Lord?” Wormtail asked, approaching with obvious caution.

“You have outdone yourself, my slave,” Voldemort said.

“Thank you, my Lord – it was all to your glory,” said Pettigrew.

“Yes, it was. It is a coincidence that so many parties of interest were gathered, to be sure... but I award you credit nonetheless,” Voldemort pronounced. “Which captive would you care to kill?”

Wormtail looked away from his master. “He is not here, my Lord,” he said with obvious disappointment.

“If he arrives, then you may have him. If not, then choose another. You will leave the Weasley girl

– she lives. Consider it payment for services rendered,” Voldemort ordered. He turned his hidden face toward Harry, and added, “It’s a pity she was unable to completely fulfil her role in the Chamber of Secrets, Harry. Everything would be so much simpler now. Oh – and Harry...? *Crucio.*” Harry refused to give Voldemort the satisfaction of a scream, and the curse was ended.

“Just a gentle reminder of who’s in charge,” Voldemort said calmly. “I grow weary of your efforts at control. You see, Harry Potter, I’m very interested in what lies beneath. I suspect that we’re more alike than you know –”

“We’re nothing alike, not in the least!” Harry shouted.

“Ah!” exclaimed Voldemort. “Now *there* was a crack in that reserve of yours. Your outburst at the Malfoy boy was particularly delicious – if no one had stepped in, I think that you just might have killed him.”

“I’m no killer,” Harry said.

“Of course you are,” Voldemort said soothingly. “It’s nothing to be ashamed of. You’ll find it a liberating experience.”

“I’m not a killer, I tell you!” Harry insisted.

“You’ve already done it once today,” Voldemort told him. “Wasn’t it everything you hoped for?”

Harry’s mouth went dry. “You’re... you’re bluffing,” he stammered, “I... I didn’t kill anyone.”

“Travers was practically nothing, but he *was* someone – at least until you were through with him. Your precious little friend’s father seems to think that you did it with your bare hands...”

“What have you done to him?” Harry demanded, struggling at his bonds.

“Nothing, nothing at all,” Voldemort assured him. “It’s scarcely Legilimency with Muggles – all their thoughts and fears are right there on the surface, ripe for the taking. Come. We mustn’t keep anyone waiting. *Mobilicorpus!*” Harry lifted off the settee and drifted ahead of Voldemort, toward the dining room.

“Does she know anything, Mulciber?” Voldemort called out.

A Death Eater at the far end of the dining room answered, “She does, my Lord, but it has been locked in. She is unable to reveal anything.”

Hermione was bound tightly, and sitting in an armchair at the far end of the dining room table. She shook uncontrollably. Harry summoned every last bit of reserve inside himself in order to remain calm.

Voldemort said, “Sit,” and Harry was deposited into the armchair at the near end of the table.

“Leave her alone, you monsters!” Mr. Granger shrieked.

“Enough, you insufferable Muggle!” another Death Eater drawled, and slapped Mr. Granger hard across the face.

“If it isn’t Mr. Malfoy,” Harry sneered. “What an unpleasant surprise.”

Mr. Weasley, who was tied to a chair along the wall, croaked, “Hello, Lucius. I’m surprised you have a cauldron left to piss in after buying your way out of Azkaban.”

Malfoy began to walk slowly toward Mr. Weasley. “Weasley, I’d have you gutted and stuffed like a Christmas goose *if* I thought you merited the effort. As it stands, I think we’ll just toss you out with the rest of the rubbish. Can I have him, my Lord?”

“If it suits me,” Voldemort said imperiously. “Let us see about this locking-in. *Open your mind to me, girl!* ”

Hermione screamed. It was the most horrifying sound that Harry had ever heard, and it tore through his soul. He felt as if the room had burst into flames. She slumped in her chair, and gasped for air between racking coughs.

“Dumbledore is not the virtuous soul you all think he is!” Voldemort sang out with glee. “Do any of you have any idea what he has done to this girl? Oh – Albus, my old, old friend! There may be hope for you yet!”

Voldemort reached out and stroked Hermione’s hair. She tried weakly to pull away, and failed. Harry shook madly against the ropes, but only managed to topple his chair. “Harry Potter, when I first heard that you fancied a Mudblood, I presumed that you were hopelessly underdemanding. Of course, after this afternoon... I better appreciated her charms. But now... Miss Granger, I am enthralled by your mind even as I revile your blood. You may yet be a formidable ally in the fulfilment of my plans.”

Her voice cracked, and she mustered enough energy to cry out, “I’ll die first, you bastard!”

Voldemort laughed. “The latter point is accurate, I admit. The former remains to be seen. Wormtail, Malfoy, I’m afraid that your petty grudges will have to wait for another day.” He strode purposefully toward Harry. “Now, then... to business. I have a proposition for you – a simple choice, one that will allow me to see what Harry Potter is truly made of. If you hold your place while Miss Granger is killed, then you and everyone else present may live to see another day. If you fail to hold your place, then I cannot be responsible for what will happen next.” He waved his wand, and both Harry and the armchair were righted. Harry heard a faint popping behind him, but his eyes were riveted on Hermione.

“Don’t move, Harry,” she moaned.

“They’ll kill us all anyway,” Mr. Weasley managed. “Do anything that you can – all of you.”

Harry felt his left hand drop free.

“Let us take Dumbledore’s handiwork to its natural conclusion,” Voldemort said. “Wormtail, satisfy your blood lust. Ask Miss Granger to reveal her secret. Keep asking... over... and over... and over... and over...”

Voldemort’s voice echoed through Harry’s head, and in his ears. Wormtail’s squeaky tenor joined it, bubbling through deep dark water.

“Reveal your secret! What do you know about Potter? Reveal your secret, girl!”

Hermione began screaming again. He counted heads in a vain effort to block out the awful sound. In addition to Voldemort, Wormtail and Malfoy, there were six other Death Eaters in the room, and an unknown number outside. The entire dinner party and Hestia Jones were all in the room, bound, and without wands.

“Reveal your secret, or die!”

Harry’s hair rippled in a searing draft. *She’s ten feet away – just ten feet*, he thought.

Wormtail forced Hermione off the chair and onto her knees. She shook, but maintained her balance. Her eyes were closed, and she was no longer screaming. She looked strong. It occurred to Harry that he wasn’t seeing strength – she was resolved to die, he knew. He felt his right hand drop free. The child who grew up in a cupboard was no more. The schoolboy who feared his Potions master and his foul classes had forever gone away. The person he had been that very morning was reduced to ashes drifting in a hot wind. He felt the rope binding his ankles fall to the floor. Voldemort had offered him a ‘greater good’ problem, and the decision was made. *I don’t give a damn about the greater good*, he thought. *She’s not going to die today, and neither am I*. Something inside him snapped, and he knew that he would never be exactly the same.

In the same instant, his hands were around Wormtail’s throat. Voldemort took two steps backward, as though he were moving in thick mud. He could hear Voldemort’s heart quicken; the rapid throbbing echoed in his ears. Harry picked up Wormtail by the scruff of the neck, and flung him the length of the table. He whirled, only to see Malfoy advance on Hermione. A blast of blue light rocketed across the room, and flung Malfoy backward. Voldemort pointed his wand, and Dobby was bounced off the wall. Tonks was already free, and she flung the table on its side to create a barrier in the middle of the room. Harry dashed headlong at the nearest Death Eater, and began swinging. He squeezed his eyes shut as he pounded away. There were bits of... something... flying around. *This is for Sirius!* Pound-pound-pound. He opened his eyes, and dove at the next Death Eater. *That is for my father!* Pound-pound-pound-CRASH! He ran to the next, and the next. It was as though they were petrified – unable to move away from him. *That is for my mother!* Pound-pound-thud-THUMP! *This is for the ruddy prophecy!* Pound-pound-pound-pound. *This is for ruining my life!* Pound-WHUMP! *This is for hurting my friends!* Pound-pound-pound. His hands felt warm and slick. *This is for what you did to Hermione, you monsters!* The wind roared in his ears. Everything was so terribly loud.

Suddenly, his scar burned. *It feels good, doesn't it? This is what you were meant to do - it's who you are meant to be! Embrace it! And lest you forget... I'm watching you, Harry Potter... I'm always watching you...* He lashed back with his mind, but Voldemort had already gone. POUND! POUND! POUND! CRASH!

His lungs seared as cool air poured into them. Sweat rained down his face. He dropped to his knees. The room was a haze of shapes and colours, distorted by a dark moist film on his glasses. His hands seemed to be bruised and wet.

No one was moving. It slowly occurred to him that some were still bound, and that no one else dared move. He looked slowly around the room. There was no sign of Voldemort, Wormtail or Malfoy. The head count was wrong, though. There were more people than before.

He walked past one Death Eater, sprawled against the flipped table and bent at an improbable angle. Another was embedded in the dining room wall. Harry thought of the punching bag in the Dursley's cellar, and he felt bile rise in the back of his throat.

Hermione . She sat on the floor, dazed and leaning against her father. Harry approached, and her eyes widened. He approached closer, and she flinched. He stopped.

“Hermione...” His voice sounded terribly distant – he could almost feel it more than hear it.

She folded against her father, shaking in...

Fear , he thought. *There's no mistaking it* . She was terrified of him. He reached out toward her, and saw his hands clearly for the first time. They were stained with blood, nearly to the wrists. It was surely blood on his glasses as well, he knew. The bile rose again, and he dropped to his hands and knees and vomited on the floor.

He felt a pair of hands on his back. *Thank Merlin* , he thought, and he began to relax. He struggled to his knees, and discovered that it was in fact Ron who was helping him to his feet. Hermione pulled her father's arm around her and clung to it. She stared at him – she judged him, he was sure – and he suddenly wanted to die. He craved the release of the Killing Curse; he wanted to be the one embedded in the wall. He saw enough of the room to know that none of the other Death Eaters had made out any better. *She's terrified of me* , he thought, *and she should be* .

Ron walked Harry toward the doorway to the kitchen, past Lupin, Shacklebolt, Dumbledore and a half dozen others he didn't know. Harry avoided eye contact with anyone. Ron led him to the sink. He turned the water as hot as he could make it, and began to scrub. A stream of red swirled clockwise around the drain. His skin blistered and then split as he scrubbed and scrubbed. Ron's hands clutched at Harry's arms, and pulled them away from the water. Harry looked up. Ron's mouth moved but said nothing, and it occurred to Harry that he was unable to hear. Ron stopped talking, then turned, and began talking to someone else.

Dobby stood on the kitchen island behind them. He put his fingers in Harry's ears, and there was gentle warmth. When he withdrew his hands, he looked at Harry sadly.

“Harry Potter wore the wrong socks today,” he squeaked mournfully. He clambered down from the kitchen island, and disappeared into the dining room.

“I have to go,” Harry said.

“We would all be dead,” Ron told him. “All of us.”

“I have to go,” Harry repeated.

“I doubt you’ll be going anywhere for quite some time, Mr. Potter,” ventured an officious voice. Harry turned and nearly walked into the terribly flustered speaker: Cornelius Fudge.

Harry Potter and the Years of Rebellion

Fifteen Seconds

Chapter Fifteen

FIFTEEN SECONDS

Amelia Bones shifted uncomfortably in the low-backed chair behind the Grangers' desk. "Sit, Arthur," she said.

"You look pinched. Shall I conjure a different chair for you?" Mr. Weasley asked.

"Seating arrangements are the least of my concerns," sighed Madam Bones. "In other circumstances, we would dispense with the formalities. However –"

Both turned to face the door, distracted by insistent rapping. A frustrated voice called out, "Amelia, I demand to be present!"

Madam Bones waved her wand, and the door to the Grangers' study opened. Red-faced and frowning, Cornelius Fudge barged into the room. "I am the Minister for Magic, whether or not you find that convenient!" he bellowed. "If I wish to participate in an enquiry, then I shall participate!"

"Minister, may I remind you that I am appointed and serve at the pleasure of the Wizengamot," Madam Bones said coolly. "The separation between the Office of the Minister and the Department of Magical Law Enforcement was not made lightly..." After a pause calculated to make her opponent wither, she added, "...given the rampant abuses that followed the last conflict with Voldemort."

Fudge's ears tinged red. He sought an outlet for his anger, and lit into Mr. Weasley. "You would be in the middle of this – wouldn't you, Weasley? I believe it may be appropriate for you to join Dumbledore's other lackeys on suspension, pending a full enquiry into your professional conduct!"

Mr. Weasley's expression remained implacable. "It seems that two of the three parties present are presently engaged in professional conduct, at any rate," he said evenly.

Fudge jabbed a finger toward Mr. Weasley, but Madam Bones cut him off before he could speak. "Minister, we are questioning more than twenty witnesses. We have taken seven Death Eaters

alive. There are injuries to address. We have more than thirty Obliviators canvassing the area –”

“Why do you think that I arrived here so quickly? We wouldn’t turn out such resources if a Hungarian Horntail landed atop Buckingham Palace!” Fudge thundered.

Madam Bones became positively icy. “My point, *Minister*, is that you are intruding in the middle of an active investigation. You have already accosted and potentially tainted two witnesses –”

“If you mean Potter and Weasley’s boy, they’re not witnesses! They’re the prime offender and his accomplice!” Fudge blustered. He turned to Mr. Weasley, and sneered, “Unauthorized underage magic, Weasley – and curses, no less. I look forward to snapping your boy’s wand in two. Lest you forget –”

“This discussion is at an end, Minister,” pronounced Madam Bones. “Leave or I shall have you removed.”

“You’d do well to remember that you have a conflict of interest in all of this, Amelia. I won’t be able to protect you if this goes awry; it’ll all lay at your feet,” Fudge warned. “I have friends – powerful friends amongst the Wizengamot. You’d best remember that as well.”

Mr. Weasley stood. “Tell me, Minister – would those be the friends who backed Umbridge last year and are now in disgrace?” he asked. “Would you share these friends in common with Lucius Malfoy? Lucius was here, by the way, in full Death Eater regalia. I wonder how that will play in the *Daily Prophet*?”

Fudge gibbered, “You... impossible... lies, I tell you... Malfoy couldn’t have... *slander!* They’d never even consider... unreliable witnesses, all of you... keep in mind for whom you work, Weasley!”

“I was under the impression that I was no longer working for you, Minister,” Mr. Weasley said calmly.

“Suspension, Weasley – I was referring to a temporary suspension, of course... while we get the facts straight...” back-pedalled Fudge.

Mr. Weasley smiled. “Thank Merlin for the inheritance,” he said. “I believe that the time has come when I can be of greater service outside of government. Minister, it has for the most part been a pleasure.”

“You *can’t* ...” Fudge gasped.

“I can,” Mr. Weasley said, with the air of a man lightened, “and I shan’t go quietly.”

“Much as I enjoy Ministry politics, I have witnesses to question,” Madam Bones frowned. “Minister, I shall ask you once more to leave. I shall not *ask* again.”

“I’ll be outside, then, checking on the progress of the Obliviators,” Fudge said imperiously. “I

expect an update the very moment that your enquiry is concluded.” He shook his head as though children and fools surrounded him.

Madam Bones called out “*Colloportus* ” before Fudge was completely through the door; the squelch was accompanied by the unmistakeable sound of stumbling.

“Are you certain about this?” she asked Mr. Weasley quietly.

“Today’s events were... clarifying,” he answered. “There’s enough to be done, without kowtowing to that... that... sodding *bumbler* !”

Madam Bones smiled faintly. “My heart be still – you very nearly cursed!” she teased.

“Sorry,” he murmured. “It’s been a cursing sort of day.”

“I should say so,” Madam Bones said. “I have a number of people to interview and many, many questions about all of this before I meet with Harry. What are we going to do about the boy, Arthur? The situations he finds himself in...” She sat ramrod-straight in the office chair, and took out a Quick Quill. “Let’s begin, shall we?”

Ron fumed at the two Aurors who led him into the Grangers’ study. “I swear – if you think you’re taking Harry to Azkaban, I’ll ... I’ll ... I don’t know what I’ll do, but you’ll never forget it – I promise you that!”

Madam Bones smiled. “I’ll be sure to take note that Harry has loyal friends. Sit down, Mister Weasley. No one has said anything about Azkaban, and no one will. I’m simply attempting to reconcile the different witness accounts.”

“My name is Ron, ma’am,” said Ron, looking around nervously.

“Of course it is,” Madam Bones said. “Please take a seat, Ron.”

“It happened so fast,” Mrs. Weasley said. “I was in shock, really. One instant, Harry was sitting at the far end of the table. The next, he was standing at the near end, with his hands around Pettigrew’s throat.”

“You’re certain that it was Pettigrew, Molly?” asked Madam Bones.

“Deadly certain,” Mrs. Weasley answered firmly.

“The whole thing took a while to unfold. Which interval are you looking for, ma’am?” Tonks asked.

Madam Bones clarified, “Beginning with Harry still seated, and ending when the last Death Eater fell.”

Tonks counted on her fingers, her lips moving wordlessly. “Fifteen seconds, at the outside,” she concluded.

“No, ma’am, I know for a fact that he didn’t have a wand,” Ginny said meekly.

“How do you know that, precisely?” Madam Bones asked.

“Harry’s wand is hard to miss, even in a pile. I saw them take Harry’s wand from him, while he was still unconscious. One of them put all of our wands in that bag, the bag I saw the Aurors holding –”

“Do you know which Death Eater took the wands, Ginny?”

“I think V-Voldemort called him Mulciber,” Ginny said after a pause.

“So, you know that Harry didn’t have his own wand,” Madam Bones concluded. “How do you know that he didn’t have another wand?”

“He used his fists, Amelia – I swear it,” Shacklebolt maintained.

“How much did you actually see, Kingsley?” Madam Bones asked. “You had a poor vantage point.”

“More than enough,” Shacklebolt insisted. “When I arrived, Pettigrew was torturing Miss Granger...”

Madam Bones’ eyes narrowed. “How do you know that it was Peter Pettigrew – you never met him, did you? I need you to be very certain about this. The Ministry’s official position remains that Pettigrew died a hero, whether or not we know better.”

“We did overlap in school – I was four years ahead of him – but I didn’t become truly familiar with his face until I was assigned to search for Sirius Black. I had a picture of the man on my office wall for two years,” Shacklebolt explained. “He looks older now, to be sure, and his hair has thinned, but... I know who I saw.”

“I told everyone to resist,” Mr. Weasley said. “They were going to kill us all – there was little doubt of that.”

“Were you aware that Harry was no longer bound?” Madam Bones asked.

“I don’t believe he was free at that point,” Mr. Weasley recalled. “I saw Dobby – that’s Harry’s house-elf – a few moments later. Dobby also freed Tonks before... you know, before everything went to pieces.”

“Dobby will answer your questions, as best as he is able,” Dobby said carefully.

“Thank you, Dobby. I’ve never known a free house-elf. You serve Harry of your own accord, then?” Madam Bones asked.

“Yes, ma’am,” Dobby said proudly. “Harry Potter is the greatest person Dobby has ever known. He is kind, he is brave, and he made Dobby free...” Dobby sniffed loudly, his enormous eyes watering. “Dobby would do anything to protect Harry Potter.”

Madam Bones considered this carefully. “I see that you would, Dobby. Did Harry kill those Death Eaters, or did you kill them?” she asked.

Dobby said sadly, “Harry Potter killed the Death Eaters, as far as Dobby could see. Dobby was struck by a curse from He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, after Dobby had struck his former master...”

Madam Bones’ eyes widened slightly. “Are you referring to Lucius Malfoy?”

Dobby nodded. “That... person who was once my master moved toward Miss Granger. Dobby defended Miss Granger. Miss Granger is very important to Harry Potter.”

Madam Bones looked at him curiously. “In what manner?”

“Miss Granger is Harry Potter’s closest friend...” Dobby said. The house elf looked around the room carefully and nervously, as though he feared being overheard, and then whispered, “...and perhaps more.” He seized a book from the Grangers’ desk, and cracked himself in the head once. “Bad Dobby! Surely Dobby is not supposed to say that,” he squeaked.

“I was pretty woozy, ma’am,” Fred said by way of qualification.

Madam Bones nodded. “I understand that, Fred. If you’re not up to this...”

Fred sat up straighter. “I’d like to do this now. Anything that I can do for Harry, I’ll do.”

“What did you see?” she asked.

“I saw Harry Apparate the length of the table,” he said. “I thought I was hallucinating. Besides, he went from sitting and facing one way, to standing and facing the other way. If I tried that, at best I’d end up on my arse... urch – sorry, ma’am.”

“I’ve heard worse,” Madam Bones said. “What else did you see?”

“He picked up the first Death Eater, the one who was killing Hermione, and tossed him down the table,” explained Fred. “That’s when I was sure that I was hallucinating. I mean, Harry mustn’t be ten stone soaking wet; how could he throw a grown wizard like that?”

Madam Bones withdrew a photograph from a file folder. “Is this the man that you saw?”

Fred looked closely at the photograph. “If the nasty bugger would just hold still...” Fred flicked the back of the photo with his middle finger, and the man in the picture stopped and scowled at him. “He looked older than this, but I think this is a picture of him.”

“Harry couldn’t have Apparated,” Bill Weasley said firmly.

“Everyone says he moved instantly from one end of the table to the other,” Madam Bones observed.

“I understand that,” said Bill. “I saw the same phenomenon. What I’m telling you is that it couldn’t have been Apparation.”

“You’re terribly insistent,” Madam Bones said. “Why are you so certain?”

Bill explained, “You must have heard about the splinching in the yard. Dumbledore, Shackbolt and I laboured over the anti-Apparation wards on this property. There is no chance that Harry Apparated... by that look, I assume that you already know something.”

Madam Bones held up a parchment. “From Mafalda Hopkirk,” she told him. “Harry doesn’t have an Apparation license; if he had Apparated, the Improper Use Office would have picked it up. You’re right – he didn’t Apparate.”

Madam Bones carefully took in Hermione’s face – the red-rimmed eyes set in hollows, the obvious fatigue. Mrs. Granger hovered, holding her daughter’s hand. Mr. Granger stood near the door, hands in fists at his sides.

“Mr. Granger, I assure you that this is not an adversarial process,” Madam Bones offered.

“We’ll see about that, won’t we?” he growled. “That madman out there calling himself the Minister for Magic threatened me. He said that Cordelia and I should have our memories erased!”

“Minister Fudge has no authority whatever in these matters; I do, and no one will be erasing anything,” Madam Bones assured him.

“I want you people out of our house,” Mr. Granger snarled.

“Sir, I assure you that we will leave just as soon as I have reconciled today’s events with the evidence,” Madam Bones said calmly. “We are also attempting to repair the damage done to your home...”

Mr. Granger scowled, but said nothing. Mrs. Granger sighed, “It’s not that we’re ungrateful for the repair efforts. The events today are crystal clear in our minds. We just want to set about attending to our daughter’s welfare. She’s been hurt terribly, and no one seems to care about that.”

Madam Bones ambled from behind the desk, and knelt down in front of Hermione. The obviously motherly gesture caused Mrs. Granger to release her grip on Hermione slightly. She took Hermione’s free hand, and said, “I want to start by telling you how very sorry I am. There is absolutely no doubt that Voldemort forced himself into your mind. That is a very serious offence – virtually Unforgivable, in fact.”

“It wasn’t the first time,” Hermione whispered without looking up.

Madam Bones raised an eyebrow. “Pardon?”

“He entered a dream,” whispered Hermione.

“Would you tell me about that?” Madam Bones asked.

Hermione looked to her mother and father, and then to Madam Bones, and shook her head slowly from side to side.

“You were upstairs when the attack began?” asked Madam Bones.

“Yes, ma’am,” said Ron. “Harry decided to defend the stairs, and I went with him.”

Madam Bones wrinkled her nose. “What did your mother have to say about that?”

“She was none too pleased, I can tell you,” Ron told her. “We checked the front room, at the base of the stairs, and returned up the stairs just before the Death Eaters.”

Madam Bones said, “That is consistent with the physical evidence. What led the two of you back up the stairs, then?”

Ron shrugged. “The Death Eaters drew our force into the yard. Our King – er, I mean *Harry* – was left exposed. I figured they were staging a minority attack, and I was right.”

“You’re a chess player?” Madam Bones asked.

“Yes, ma’am. It’s too bad that I was playing in two dimensions,” Ron explained.

“I’m sorry?”

“I was playing in two dimensions,” repeated Ron. “I never counted on them coming through the ceiling.”

Madam Bones smiled faintly. “I wouldn’t fret – that was a good observation on your part, Ron. Now then... your mother laid out the scene in the safe room. Tell me, did you do anything to assist Harry in opening the door?”

“No, ma’am.” Ron looked at her questioningly.

“What you’re saying is that Harry blew a heavily warded door to pieces by casting a punching spell,” Madam Bones confirmed. “Where did you learn a piercing curse, by the way?”

Ron lowered his eyes. “Erm... Harry cast that one on a Death Eater in the bedroom.”

“Ah, yes, that would be... Travers – the one that he tossed bodily through a warded window.” Madam Bones jotted notes on parchment. “After that, Harry took off on that rather interesting motorbike?”

Ron gritted his teeth at the mention. “Yes, ma’am,” he acknowledged.

“Thank Merlin it’s not a Muggle artefact,” she said. “We’re left with one less thing to be addressed.”

“So you were pinned down in the tree, then,” Madam Bones observed.

“Yes, ma’am,” Tonks admitted nervously.

“A questionable strategy, Tonks. You couldn’t Apparate from the location, and you had no broom,” Madam Bones said. “How many Death Eaters were you able to take from there?”

“I took down two, and kept three more distracted from Arthur and Bill Weasley for a time,” offered Tonks.

“At this point, Harry comes in?” asked Madam Bones.

Tonks talked with her hands. “He brings that motorbike swooping over the top of the house, see? Now, this is the second time he does that. The first time, he dropped two Death Eaters off the roof and laid down cover for the Weasleys and me. By this time, I’m the last one standing in the yard. Harry shouts ‘*Percutio!*’ –”

Tonks’ recovered wand was concealed in her sleeve. The resulting spell pierced a neat hole through a lampshade.

Madam Bones flinched, and instantly cast a defensive shield. “Tonks, you’re a menace,” she growled.

Tonks grinned sheepishly. “Sorry, ma’am,” she murmured, and instinctively placed her hands behind her back.

“Continue,” ordered Madam Bones as she repaired the lampshade.

“Yes, ma’am. Harry started casting that... particular spell, over and over,” Tonks explained. “Blood and bits were everywhere. I don’t think he ever saw the Death Eater that dropped him off the motorbike. After that, they were on me in a few seconds – it seemed as though they were everywhere.”

“Where would Harry have picked up such a nasty curse?” Madam Bones asked. “It’s not as if he would learn that at Hogwarts.”

“He has a scary library at his house, for one,” Tonks answered. “Kingsley’s been training him up, but they just started a few days ago.”

“How long were you observing the events?” Madam Bones asked.

Shacklebolt didn’t hesitate. “No more than forty seconds, from the time I had a sightline until the time that Potter completed his defence –”

“You keep referring to it as a defence, rather than an attack,” Madam Bones observed.

“I call it what it was,” Shacklebolt said. “I had a wand, and I still spent better than twenty-five seconds simply evaluating the room. From a search-and-rescue perspective, it was a nightmare. You had Voldemort and eight Death Eaters, with eleven hostages, in a constrained space with two doors, three windows and ample furniture for cover. I figured that it would require three Aurors to take the room, and I estimated four or five friendly casualties. I assumed that Miss Granger was a certain casualty. Harry had no wand that I could see, and had a house-elf for help. What he did, he did in no more than fifteen seconds. It may have been only ten, from the time he threw Pettigrew until the end of it.”

“You’re impressed,” Madam Bones noted.

“I saw him jump from point to point twice today, once through his own defensive spell and once inside a warded house. What he’s doing isn’t Apparation – I don’t know what it is. Most of his spells and charms are excessively powerful; thankfully, it seems that no one has ever told him that. He performed some truly exceptional wandless magic three days ago. And in that dining room... I tell you, he took that room like an angry Hit Wizard,” Shacklebolt said. “I don’t know whether to be impressed or terrified.”

“Did you find it frightening?” asked Madam Bones.

“I’ve seen my share of horrors, Madam Bones,” Bill said. “Spend a few days opening cursed

tombs, and you'll understand. Frankly, watching them use Dumbledore's curse to torture Hermione was more frightening than anything Harry did."

Madam Bones frowned. "I understand your concern, but... are you positive about the nature of that spell? I shan't be making unfounded accusations."

Bill sighed. "I've gone over it, and over it again, ma'am. It's a Latinized derivative of the Egyptian servant-binding curse. The old servant binds are still classified as Unforgivable by the Egyptian Directorate."

"Why is it a derivative? How was it materially changed from the original curse?" Madam Bones asked.

"In this case, I think it was supposed to limit the binding to a specific thought or secret," Bill explained. "If he'd just cast the curse, perhaps it might not have turned out badly. Harry described an additional runic component, I'm afraid, that was applied to both he and Hermione."

"Albus *bound* her to Harry?" thundered Madam Bones.

"The intention was to bind Harry's secret within her, I imagine, but I believe that he missed the mark," grumbled Bill.

"You don't think that the runes somehow looped the curse, do you? Merlin... it could be unbreakable," Madam Bones speculated.

"There is no such thing as an unbreakable curse," Bill said flatly. "I have a different concern. The purpose of runic elements or the use of glyphs in ancient Egyptian curses is chiefly punitive. In the servant-binding curse, the principle is to make each violation of the bind more severe. If this curse isn't lifted from her very soon, I'm concerned that there might be permanent effects. Depending upon the particular runic elements, those effects could range from memory loss to a permanent darkening of her aspect."

"This is inexcusable," fumed Madam Bones. "Albus will explain himself."

"He'll say that Harry's protection must be assured at any cost," Bill offered.

Madam Bones frowned. "Then he will be wrong".

"He's in shock, to be certain," Lupin said.

"That would be reasonable," Madam Bones determined. "He can be in shock as long as he wishes, provided that he represents no harm to himself or others. This brings me back to my question, Mr. Lupin."

"I don't believe that he's suicidal," Lupin allowed. "I'm not an expert, of course."

“You know I must ask this – is he a danger to others?” asked Madam Bones.

Lupin hesitated slightly. “Again, I don’t believe that he is. When I arrived, he was just standing there in a daze. I saw only the aftermath, however. It’s hard for me to imagine a circumstance that would take Harry to that place, other than the threat of imminent death.”

Madam Bones nodded. “I’ve assumed from the start that it was self-defence.”

Lupin said, “Defence – not self-defence. Harry would be much more inclined to anger in the face of imminent threat to others than to himself.”

“Do you believe that he requires more supervision – a guardian, perhaps?” asked Madam Bones.

“I think he’s been under terrible strain for the last two months,” Lupin answered. “He needs a light at the end of the tunnel. He needs friends, not guardians.”

“On this, we agree,” Madam Bones said. “I’d welcome your ideas about how to go forward.”

“What – you think Harry wants to off himself? You must be joking,” said Ron.

Madam Bones said, “My concerns are serious. If there is a chance that he will harm himself, then I am required to intervene.”

“Am I worried about him? Of course I am. He’s really broken up about the whole thing. Am I going to hide the knives? No,” Ron said emphatically.

“That’s good to hear –” Madam Bones began.

“I’m much more worried about Hermione,” Ron insisted.

Hermione relaxed slightly, once her parents left the room at her insistence.

“What is it that you wanted to tell me, Hermione?” Madam Bones asked. Hermione proceeded to explain the shared dream, in emotionless and nearly clinical terms.

Madam Bones carefully elicited the essentials, and the identities of all the dream’s participants. “Have you discussed this with Harry?” she asked.

“No,” Hermione sniffed. “I mean, he knows... but I can’t.”

“May I ask why? He didn’t... violate you in some way, did he?”

Hermione’s eyes widened. She snapped bitterly, “No! Harry would never do that! You know who violated whom!” She paused and struggled, and then added, “I just wanted... ma’am, have you

ever done anything in a dream that you wouldn't necessarily do in real life?"

Madam Bones nodded knowingly. "Doesn't that make it even more important that you discuss the experience with him?"

"I can't," Hermione insisted, her eyes downcast.

"Of course you can," Madam Bones offered.

"You didn't see what he did to those people... it was like... like he became someone else. Voldemort said... he said that would happen," she said, wavering between anger and sadness and barely skirting the edge of crying. "I don't know how Harry could... he just kept going... I wanted them to... I wanted them to hurt, I wanted to... to *hurt* them..."

"You wanted to kill them, I imagine," said Madam Bones. "I would have, in your place."

"Maybe... maybe I did want that, but I never... there was... there was so much blood... blood everywhere... it was all over him and he was screaming..." Hermione stopped, and Madam Bones waited patiently.

"You need to talk to someone. Through my department, we have... services that are made available to Aurors after particularly grisly episodes. It would be no bother to extend these services to you," Madam Bones gently offered. "It is all very discreet. I clearly understand the stigma –"

Hermione cut her off. "Thank you for the offer," she said flatly.

Madam Bones asked, "Is there anything else about today's events that you feel I should know, before I speak to Harry?"

"No," Hermione mouthed, as her resolve faded and tears began to fall.

"What are we going to do about this, Amelia?" Dumbledore asked.

"We will not be doing anything," Madam Bones said. "This is out of your hands. You could consider atonement for what you have done to Miss Granger."

Dumbledore said evenly, "She accepted her role in protecting Harry."

"You abdicated your role in protecting *her*," accused Madam Bones. "As a Hogwarts Governor, I shall remind you that you bear an equal responsibility for *all* the students in your care."

"I misjudged the safeguard," Dumbledore admitted, "but I do not believe that young Mr. Weasley has accurately assessed the problem."

Madam Bones eyed him warily. "Explain yourself, Albus. I haven't the time for riddles and

incomplete truths.”

“I instructed Hermione to clear her mind of all thoughts save the secret to be guarded, but I fear that I may have overestimated her ability to comply,” Dumbledore explained. “I fear that she labours under multiple safeguards, of which she is unaware.”

“Bill Weasley wants the curse broken, and I agree wholeheartedly,” Madam Bones said.

Dumbledore stroked his beard. “That may be a complicated request, if I prove correct in my assessment.”

Madam Bones set her jaw. “You misunderstand me, Albus. It is not a request. Shall I tell Fudge that his nemesis is now dabbling in foreign Unforgivables?”

Dumbledore’s eyes flickered for a moment, but his face betrayed nothing. “I hardly think that you will choose any course of action that strengthens the Minister’s position. I do wish he would remember from time to time that he will eventually be going to war with Voldemort, and not me.”

Madam Bones stood and stretched. “It’s time that I speak to Harry.”

“I agree,” Dumbledore said, remaining in the armchair that he had conjured. “He needs to be put at ease.”

“I doubt that he will find ease today, or any time soon,” Madam Bones pointed out. “Surely you realise what will happen when word of these events reaches the rest of the Governors? I don’t need abilities in Divination to foresee another very lengthy meeting.”

Dumbledore sighed. “I have very little left with which to bargain, on that account. Where will you stand?”

“I don’t believe for a moment that he would intentionally harm anyone, not without serious provocation,” said Madam Bones. “Still... Albus, I’m not a fool – though lately you insist upon treating me as one. It’s not as though I lack an understanding of what he means to us all. Do you honestly think that I want to toss Harry to the wolves? I’ll stand by him through all of it. Even if he hadn’t been treated so shabbily last year, family honour would demand nothing less. However, I expect to be in the minority when the Governors convene – and we will surely convene.”

Dumbledore sighed heavily, and requested of her, “Will you assist me in the exploration of contingencies, on his behalf?”

Madam Bones nodded in acknowledgement, and then added, “On your way out, would you please send him in and ask Mr. Lupin to come as well?”

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow, hesitated, and then stood. With a flick and a swish, the armchair disappeared and Dumbledore ambled to the door of the study.

He turned. “Amelia, I do believe that I should at the very least...”

She scowled at him. “Apologise to Miss Granger – and her parents – and make preparations to remove that curse? Excellent ideas, all.”

It had been made clear to Harry that he was not permitted to leave. Madam Bones, who had arrived shortly after Fudge and taken command of the scene, was in possession of Harry’s wand. From time to time, he spied an Auror checking on him. For the most part, everyone gave him a wide berth.

He paced out in the yard for a time, walking from the porch to the far wall and back again. The furniture on the porch had long since been repaired; Ministry personnel had moved on to the roof. Harry sat in the grass and watched them work, framed against the evening sun; one shingle after another popped into the proper place. He spotted Hermione peering at him from her bedroom window, drawn and almost ghostly, and then she was gone. Madam Bones was – interviewing? interrogating? – everyone, one at a time, and it seemed to take forever.

“Excuse me, Mr. Potter?” came a voice from behind him. It was one of the investigators from the Ministry.

Harry stood. “Yes, sir?”

The investigator was nervous and almost deferential, which puzzled Harry. “Well, you see... it’s just that... there’s a question about your motorbike. It isn’t...?”

Harry didn’t follow. “I don’t understand. It isn’t *what*, exactly?”

The investigator wrung his hands. “A Muggle artefact such as that could complicate matters... surely you must be aware...”

Harry nodded, and led the investigator to the fallen Bonneville. Three of the investigator’s colleagues were huddled around. Harry heard one mutter, “The scratch-proofing alone would be a Class One offence.”

“If you’ll pardon me,” Harry said, as he righted the bike and grasped the handlebars. A moment later, the Ministry investigators goggled at the dual sawhorses.

“It’s a broom, more or less,” Harry explained. “Devlin Whitehorn made it himself. I’m certain he could answer any questions that you might have.”

“No, no... erm... we wouldn’t want to bother Mr. Whitehorn, I’m sure,” the first investigator assured him. “Um... thank you for clearing that up. Terribly sorry ... no intention of making any accusations, of course...” His colleagues joined in a chorus of ‘Oh, no’, ‘absolutely not’ and other denials.

Harry frowned. “Is there anything else?” he asked, with an edge to his voice.

“Nothing else, Mr. Potter,” one investigator blurted out; he was matched by crescendos of ‘Not a thing’ and ‘We’re finished here’ that were capped by a brassy fanfare of ‘You can go now’.

Even they’re frightened of me, Harry thought. As he walked away from the Bonneville and trod over the roots of the tree that Tonks had climbed, he looked down. The grass was crushed down where the three Death Eaters had fallen, and tinted red in rolling swaths like a macabre watercolour. Harry averted his eyes. *They should be frightened*, he thought.

A young wizard in a fashionable cloak raced from the side yard toward the porch. “Minister! Minister! I apologize for being tardy. The meeting on importation tariffs ran very long. I’m prepared to take notes, sir.” Harry turned, and felt his blood boil at the very sight of Percy Weasley. He hadn’t noticed that Fudge was sitting at one of the high-backed benches on the porch.

“That won’t be necessary. Madam Bones has everything in hand,” Fudge spat.

“Madam Bones... but, sir! If Potter’s involved, shouldn’t you be leading the enquiry?” Percy asked brightly.

“Shut up, Weasley,” Fudge said. “Now, what position did the Turks take on a secondary fee schedule...?”

There was no way into the house without passing within view of the benches. *Oh, well – didn’t want to go inside, anyway*, Harry thought.

Ron walked out of the house onto the porch, in hushed conversation with Bill. Bill looked up at the benches. From Harry’s vantage, he couldn’t see Percy – but Bill clearly could.

“Why, look who’s here,” Bill snarled. “Come to gloat, have you? Hoping to shed a few crocodile tears over a dead family member, were you? Sorry to disappoint.”

Percy jumped to his feet. “Maybe you people will finally come to reason. Everything I’ve maintained about Potter has borne out, hasn’t it? What has he got himself into this time?”

Ron started to rush Percy, but was held back by Bill. “He saved us all from Voldemort, you arse!” Ron shouted. “Of course, you weren’t with us. You’re too busy with your important friends and your important job to have a family anymore!”

Fudge chose that moment to come into view. “Good evening, gentlemen,” he oozed. “Is there a problem here?”

Bill said curtly, “Good evening, Minister. This is a family affair, not Ministry business.”

“It looked to me as though my assistant was about to be assaulted,” Fudge observed. “That would make it my business, I believe.”

Fred came out of the house. “I *thought* I heard a pretentious git out here. It’s positively cracking

to see you, Percy.” Percy nodded stiffly in recognition.

“Perhaps you would excuse us, Minister?” Bill said evenly. “It’s been quite some time since we’ve had occasion to speak to our brother.”

Fudge crossed his arms. “Perhaps my assistant and I should retire inside the house.”

Fred’s eyes narrowed. “Which brother haven’t we spoken to recently, Bill? I only see you and Ron... ah, you must mean *Harry*. Oy, Harry!” Fred waved at Harry, and Harry wished that he weren’t standing in the open.

Percy snapped, “Always the comedian, Fred. I see none of you have learned a thing.”

Bill advanced on Percy quickly enough to startle Fudge. “You’ve taught us quite a lot, Percy. Where were you when Dad lay dying at St. Mungo’s last winter? It’s a miracle that he survived – and it was largely thanks to Harry, by the way. What about when Ron was injured at the Ministry? No sign of you – not even an owl post, for Merlin’s sake! Fred has a point. Harry’s become more of a brother to us than you.”

Fudge raised an eyebrow. “You never visited your father in hospital? Or your brother?”

Percy showed hints of fear. “But, Minister! You said...”

Fudge looked sternly at Percy. “I said that your family was exercising poor judgment in allying themselves with Potter, and that you should distance yourself from their choice. I stand by that advice. I *never* told you to abandon your duties as a son and a brother, Weasley. Bad form... *bad* form!”

Percy begged, “Minister... please...”

Fudge turned to Bill. “I believe you’re correct, gentlemen: This is a family matter. If you’ll excuse me?” With that, Fudge quickly strode into the house and closed the French door.

Bill’s wand was out before the catch on the French door clicked. “*Sit!*” he ordered. The force in his voice was such that Harry took a seat on the grass, almost as quickly as Percy retreated to the bench.

Bill began to deliver what could only be described as an in-person Howler. “You arrogant twit! It’s practically a matter of luck that you have any family left to insult... except for Charlie, of course, but even you’re smart enough to know that he’d cheerfully feed you to the dragons! The Aurors were here almost an hour ago. If you were any kind of brother, you would have been here with them! But *no* – where’s dear Percy? Sitting in a trade mission meeting, or some such rot! I’m sure your only regret was that you nearly lost the opportunity to kiss up to your boss! What kind of ghoulish have you become? You come here not to see how your mother or father or brothers or sister fared –

“Sister?” Percy asked quietly.

“Yes – *sister* . You have one, in case you didn’t remember. Her name is Ginny, and she was a few seconds from being killed along with the rest of us! Fred’s the family standard bearer – he almost managed to get himself killed twice today. After they took the Burrow, he came here, and –”

“Took the Burrow?” Percy asked in disbelief.

Bill looked at Fred. “Do you think that he has difficulty hearing me?”

Fred shrugged. “Maybe he’s been in government too long – I’m sure that’s what Dad would say.”

“Look at what you gain by association with Potter,” Percy retorted. “Your lives are in danger, and now you’ve lost the few possessions that the family had.”

“You mean you haven’t heard?” Fred asked.

Percy cocked his head to one side. “Heard what?”

“About the inheritance,” Fred answered.

When Percy remained blank, Bill explained smugly, “We were each left twenty thousand Galleons.”

Percy’s eyes lit, and Fred added, “Not you, you thick prat. Sirius did leave you something in his will -”

“Sirius Black?” Percy gasped.

“No, I meant Sirius Sappington... *of course* it was Sirius Black,” Bill snapped. “I’ll have to send you the rubber Galleon, but I’d be pleased to administer the kick in the arse.”

Percy sank, and Bill glowered, “Greedy... self-serving... *and* cowardly. The Sorting Hat did a number on you, didn’t it? If it weren’t for the hair and the freckles, I’d believe that you were accidentally switched at birth. I’m sure you’re right at home with Fudge and his friends. Lucius Malfoy was here along with *his* boss, by the way – complete with mask and Dark Mark.”

Percy babbled, “Wha... but Mr. Malfoy was... it couldn’t have been...”

The French door opened, and one of the Aurors leaned out. “Bill Weasley? Madam Bones will see you now.”

Bill scowled. “Pity – I was so looking forward to personally demonstrating some interesting things that I picked up from a Salish shaman. Keep a wide berth, Percy; pray that you don’t see me in passing.” He stomped into the house.

Percy turned to Fred. “Look... I –”

Fred cut him off. “Stow it. You had your chances to mend things. When you weren’t there for

Ron in June... that was the last straw for me. We're through."

"Ron?" Percy ventured.

"Has anyone told you what happened to me in the Department of Mysteries, Percy?" Ron asked.

Percy stammered, "Well... I know you were injured, of course... that there was an attack... it appeared that, erm... uh, You-Know-Who was present, perhaps... and... uh... Ginny was there... not badly hurt, thank Merlin..."

"I was attacked by brains," Ron said. "They're called cognivores. They feed on your thoughts, and they give you back visions of death – my death, everybody's death." His voice changed to sound more like Trelawney's eerie trill. "All I must do is touch, and it is revealed," he warbled.

Everybody's death? Harry wondered. *He never said that!*

Fred searched Ron's face, saw a kernel of truth, and said, "Bloody hell... is that what's been eating at you? I didn't... Ron, I'm so sorry."

Percy drew himself up. "I know fiction when I hear it," he insisted.

In his misty voice, Ron continued, "All I must do is touch, Percy. Do not resist!"

Percy twitched, and stepped backward. "That's quite enough, Ron."

"I don't think he's playing," Fred said. "You don't know what he's been like. He's been to St. Mungo's, and they couldn't help."

Percy's eyes widened. "Stay away from me," he insisted.

"Do not resist," Ron whispered. He lashed out and grabbed Percy's arm. He twitched, and his eyes rolled back. He released Percy's arm as though shocked, and dropped to the porch.

"What? What was it? What did you see?" Percy demanded, his voice quavering.

Ron said in a chilling monotone, "She will betray you to him. She will betray you, Percy, and that will be the end of it."

Percy squeaked, "Excuse me... I have to... I'm sure that the Minister... excuse me..." He dashed to the door and scurried into the house.

Ron lay there quietly. Harry jumped up from the grass, and ran to Ron's side. His eyes were closed. Fred hovered over them both.

"Is he gone yet?" Ron asked quietly.

Harry said, "Sure, he's gone..."

Fred cut in, “Who’s ‘she’ and who’s ‘he’? And what’s ‘the end of it’?”

Ron opened his eyes, and smiled broadly. “How should I know? I hope he has nightmares for a month, the wanker!”

Fred burst into hysterics, rolling on the porch. “Ooooh... unbelievable... that’s classic!” he moaned.

Harry whispered to Ron, “Did you really see other people’s deaths?”

Ron shook his head, and whispered in return, “Only mine. I just couldn’t resist – he deserved that.” Harry smiled a little, despite himself – he had to admit that it was a spanking good and well-deserved prank.

Ron sat up, and clapped Harry on the shoulder. “*There’s* a smile,” he said. “Happy to see it, mate.”

Fred ruffled Ron’s hair. “I wish my brother George were here,” he laughed. “I’ll be telling this one for years!”

The more that Ron and Fred carried on, the more that Harry’s unease grew. Ron was behaving like himself for the first time all summer, precisely *because* he’d acknowledged what the cognivores had done to him. It seemed as though he had warmed to the idea of dying; he wore his old sense of humour like an overcoat atop something newer and darker. Harry didn’t like that thought in the slightest, and felt a strong impulse to escape.

Harry awkwardly excused himself, and returned to pacing in the yard. After a time, he perched atop the wall at the rear of the yard and watched the shadows lengthen. Others came and went from the porch – Tonks, Hestia Jones, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. He saw Dumbledore once. Aurors, Obliviators and investigators continued to swarm over the house and surrounding area. The world had apparently reached an agreement with Harry, a mutual pact – you ignore me, I ignore you. No one on the porch acknowledged Harry, and he chose to sit quietly. There was movement in Hermione’s window, and then nothing.

A solitary figure crossed the yard, lit here and there by waning orange light. Harry couldn’t tell that it was Lupin until the figure was almost upon him.

“Would you tolerate some company?” Lupin asked.

Harry inclined his head indifferently. Lupin took that as affirmation, and clambered up to sit next to Harry atop the wall.

“The house looks as if nothing happened,” Lupin said. “We know better, of course.”

“What did you see?” Harry asked quietly.

“Blood, sadness, fear, guilt... all the sorts of things one sees in times like these,” Lupin gently

replied.

“Did you see what... what I...?” Harry asked.

Lupin set his hand on Harry’s shoulder. “Only the aftermath,” he answered.

“Good,” whispered Harry.

A dozen or so Aurors remained – Harry assumed that they were probably protection against a repeat visit. He watched three of them pacing the walk just beyond the wall, menacingly eyeing each passing auto and pedestrian. “How many people had their memories modified today, do you suppose?” he asked.

Lupin sighed. “Scores, I should imagine. It was quite a display.”

“I wonder if it’s worth it, all the secrecy – all of this,” Harry mused.

Lupin said, “You know perfectly well what would happen if we were found out. The Muggles would try to exterminate us. Those of us so inclined would retaliate. In the end, only the very worst of both our kinds would survive. It would make their Second World War look like a parlour game... and Voldemort would win. There might not be anything left worth winning, depending upon your point of view – but he would win.”

“Perhaps that’s his plan,” Harry speculated.

Lupin shuddered. “Be sure to practice Occlumency, Harry. That’s not an idea that I care to share with him.”

Harry asked the question that he didn’t want to ask. “What’s happening in there?”

“Amelia Bones was with Hermione when I came outside, for the second time at least,” Lupin told him. “I’ll give her credit – her reputation for thoroughness is well earned. She has a reputation as a fair jurist and a brilliant mind. I also have it on reliable authority that she tacitly supported Umbridge’s anti-werewolf initiatives. I’m not exactly looking forward to this: I expect she’ll spend her time castigating me for my involvement in your life, or some such thing.”

“How much longer, do you think?” Harry asked.

“I believe she’s talked to everyone save me and Dumbledore,” Lupin answered.

They sat silently. Lupin shifted as if to speak several times, and then said nothing.

Two Aurors crossed the lawn. “Mr. Lupin, Madam Bones requests your presence,” one called out.

Lupin slid off the wall. He stopped, and faced Harry. “Give yourself time,” he said. “We’ll talk again later.”

After what seemed like a suitable delay, Harry crossed the yard to the empty porch and sat on one of the high-backed benches. It felt like the right place to wait his turn.

“May we join you?” Mrs. Weasley gazed down at him. Ron was with her. The look on her face was painfully kind, Harry thought. He decided against turning them away, and gestured toward the other bench.

Mrs. Weasley took the opposite bench, but Ron sat beside him. She said, “If you’re worried about lasting consequences from this afternoon, Harry, you can set aside your worries. Amelia was clear on that point. If it weren’t for Fudge, I’d suspect that the Order of Merlin was a possibility.”

“I wouldn’t accept it,” Harry said flatly.

“I wouldn’t take anything from him either,” Ron barked. “Fudge treated you and me like criminals – he as much as called you a lunatic.”

Harry said, “I wouldn’t accept it from anyone. I just want to forget it, all of it... but I can’t... it’s right there...” He bit down hard on his lower lip, unwilling to say more.

Mrs. Weasley reached across the table to take Harry’s hand. “Harry, at some point you have to let this out. Not just this afternoon, dear, but the rest as well. It’s eating a hole right through you.”

“I let it all out today. You saw the result,” Harry said coldly.

“Yes, I did,” Mrs. Weasley acknowledged. “They would have killed us without a second thought. You saved ten lives. Three of the boys, and Ginny... he would have killed them... and Arthur... just like the b-b-boggart and my d-dreams...”

Ron paled. “A boggart... I remember that you were going to have Moody check for a boggart, last summer at Grimmauld Place...” Mrs. Weasley stiffened, and shot Ron a sharp glare that clearly stated his place.

When she regained her composure, she spoke slowly and carefully. “When you... did what you did, the only thing I remember thinking was that I was going to lose a son. Shame on me for not treating you that way, particularly this summer. Sirius was right – shame on us.”

Harry struggled to respond. A small part of him still bridled at her interest in matching him with Ginny – he hoped that was in the past now – but she was still the closest thing to a mum that Harry had ever known. “You’ve treated me as a part of your family,” Harry said at last. “There’s a stack of handmade Christmas jumpers to prove it.”

Mrs. Weasley smiled. “You kept your jumpers,” she said wistfully. “They weren’t much, but they were what we could give.”

“They were enough,” Harry said. He looked about impatiently.

“You’ve nothing to fret about with this enquiry, Harry,” Mrs. Weasley insisted.

Harry began, “I just want it to be finished. I want to go...” He stopped the instant that he looked at Ron, and remembered that the Burrow had been sacked. “Goodness! I should have asked Dobby to make up the guest rooms – what have I been thinking? Surely you all need a place to stay –”

Mrs. Weasley gently rested her hand on Harry’s arm. “We’ve been looking into that already. I’ve spoken to Remus and briefly to Cordelia. Arthur, Ginny and I will stay here tonight; I just can’t leave the Grangers without help. Remus has already arranged rooms for Bill, Fred and Ron. I believe that Dobby’s already returned to Grimmauld Place.”

“You can make good on that drink you promised me,” Ron whispered with a smirk.

Lupin returned to the porch. Harry looked at him expectantly. Ron moved to sit beside his mother, and Lupin settled onto the bench in his place.

“The matter seems largely settled,” Lupin told him. “There are some lingering concerns about you and your welfare, but your legal status renders them moot.”

“What do you mean?” Harry asked.

Lupin hesitated. “Harry... Madam Bones seems concerned as to whether you might do anything rash. It hasn’t gone without notice that you’re a bit withdrawn – not that you haven’t every right to be, under the circumstances –”

“Withdrawn? Everyone’s been steering clear of *me* ! Even the bloody Aurors are skittish!” Harry boomed.

Lupin frowned. “You’ve been known to hold yourself to an unattainable standard now and again. Some concern has been expressed that you might do yourself harm.”

Harry gaped at him. “That’s rot, and you know it,” he scoffed.

“I do know it, and I told Madam Bones as much,” Lupin said. “I told her that you need a light at the end of the tunnel, and certainly not guardians and Ministry personnel prowling every minute of the day.”

Harry carefully regarded him. “You said that?”

“I did,” Lupin answered.

“Who expressed the concern, then? Was it Dumbledore?” Harry asked.

“I don’t know,” replied Lupin. “What would cause you to think that?”

“He wouldn’t want his weapon damaged, now would he?” Harry fumed.

Mrs. Weasley asked, “Isn’t that a bit harsh, Harry? Dumbledore has never demonstrated anything

but care toward you.”

Harry fought the urge to shout, and won. “I question that this summer,” he said, carefully enunciating each word. Mrs. Weasley fidgeted.

“He’s not at all pleased about your... mass disclosure,” Lupin informed him.

Harry grumbled, “Heard about that, did you? I’m glad that it’s out.”

“It’s out, all right,” Lupin agreed. “There’s a decent chance that Voldemort now knows, I imagine.”

“Good,” Harry said flatly. “He’ll focus on me, then.”

Lupin shook his head in frustration. “He’ll focus on whatever is required to achieve his objectives, whatever that may be. That is the only certainty, Harry. You can’t direct his focus.”

Harry immediately thought of one way that he might, but remained silent.

Ron motioned to Harry with a subtle roll of his eyes, and Harry understood. It was the sort of gesture that only close friends share. Harry stood. “Excuse me,” he said, and stalked off into the yard. Ron followed shortly afterward.

“Mum means well,” Ron said.

“I know,” sighed Harry.

Ron stammered, “Madam Bones, she asked me whether... you know... if you might off yourself.”

“What did you say?” Harry asked.

Ron answered quickly, “I said I wouldn’t bother to lock away the knives.” Harry snorted.

“Do you really think that’s all you are to Dumbledore – the ultimate weapon, or something?” Ron asked.

“I don’t understand him,” Harry said. “He seemed so genuinely concerned about Hermione, the night that she found out about the prophecy... but he was perfectly willing to use a curse that could kill her, as far as I can see.”

“Bill’s surely angry about it,” Ron allowed. “He explained it to me and Ginny – nasty business, that. I don’t understand why she agreed to it in the first place. What did you have to say about it?”

Harry shook his head. “I thought it was a bad idea from the start. I didn’t want to tell her anything – she guessed that I knew the full prophecy, and started pressing. I tried to stop her, but she *asked* Dumbledore for this safeguard.”

Ron frowned. “She’s been acting strangely since Sirius’ will was read. I still wonder exactly what he wrote to her.”

“You were right that night,” Harry admitted. “You shouldn’t have signed, and she shouldn’t have signed. Dumbledore destroyed her parchment – did you know that?”

Ron’s eyes widened. “You’re kidding! She agreed to that?”

Harry nodded. “He said it was moot anyway, since she’s not of age.”

“Did you see it – the parchment, I mean?” Ron asked.

Harry blushed slightly. “I did.”

Ron stopped walking. “I have to know – what did it say?”

Harry weighed his request. It stood to reason that the parchment had at least fed the row between Ron and Hermione, and at least part of it was bound to come out sooner or later. “It had a number of things in it – I think they all did. She was supposed to break at least one rule a month at Hogwarts –”

Ron’s eyes lit up. “She agreed to that?”

“Well, it did say that the rule could be minor...” Harry trailed off.

“What?” Ron asked.

Harry said, “I was just waiting to see if I’d be hexed.”

“We were both there that night,” Ron reasoned. “I suppose we’re in the clear.”

Harry cleared his throat. “Right, then. Anyway, there was the bit about the rule... Oh, you’ll love this. She was supposed to help me find and keep true love.”

Ron gaped at him. “What the bloody hell does that mean?”

Harry shrugged. “She seems to think she’s supposed to be my matchmaker. Apparently she has lists, charts... a scoring system...”

Ron cringed. “A scoring system – that figures, doesn’t it. You’re in for a trial, mate...” He stopped. “What is it? There’s something else, isn’t there?”

Harry frowned. Ron knew him too well. “It also said that she wouldn’t forsake me, even if there was a... a terrible price... and... and she didn’t... she didn’t forsake me, no matter what... but now...” He turned away from Ron. He could feel his resolve slipping, and that was the last thing he wanted. Ron’s hand clenched his shoulder.

“I need to know what’s going on between the two of you. I think you owe me that much,” Ron said, his voice cracking.

Harry turned around, prepared to tear into Ron for his presumption. As soon as he met Ron’s eyes, the anger was gone. “Do you love her?” he asked Ron.

Ron took a step back, startled – almost frightened by the question, Harry thought. “I... I don’t... you know I’ve had feelings... I should have asked her to the Yule Ball before that wanker Krum. This is about what happened at the party, right?” Harry looked down at his feet.

“I just needed to know where she stood,” Ron continued. “I needed to know. I’m not afraid to die, you see? It took me a while to realise that, but I’m not. I just don’t want to be... anyway, she made me understand what I’m looking for. She’s my friend, she’s been my friend for a long time, and of course I love her. You do, too. But Lavender... Harry, you don’t know...” He looked at Harry curiously. “At least, I don’t think you know. I suppose that I don’t know if you know – you know?”

Harry chuckled, “I don’t know, Ron – do I?”

“All right... all right... that was a mess, wasn’t it?” Ron admitted. “Look, with Lavender there are no strings whatever. She listened to me, I was there for her, we had great fun, and that’s the end of it unless we both decide otherwise. I’m beginning to appreciate Bill’s outlook on life, you know?” He added nervously, “Can you imagine what being with Hermione would really be like? I mean, could anything be more complicated?”

Harry said quietly, “She’s afraid of me now.”

“I think everyone was afraid,” Ron ventured. “It certainly seemed like we were done for.”

“She flinched,” Harry said. “I reached out to her, and she flinched.”

“You were soaked in blood,” Ron reminded him.

“She *should* be afraid of me,” Harry whispered.

“I’m not afraid of you,” Ron said.

“Thanks,” Harry said, his eyes downcast.

Lupin strode toward them. “Harry, Madam Bones is asking for us,” he said.

Harry Potter and the Years of Rebellion Uncontrolled Descent

Chapter Sixteen

UNCONTROLLED DESCENT

An Auror showed Harry and Lupin to the Grangers' study. "Madam Bones will meet you here," he said to them. "She stepped out for a moment."

To either side, the walls were lined with heavily loaded bookshelves. Harry turned as the door was closed behind him, and saw that there were more shelves to either side of the door. A large desk faced the door. Lupin peered at the computer that sat on the desk. A bay window and pictures – scores of framed pictures, of all shapes and sizes – dominated the wall opposite the door. Harry rounded the desk and began looking at the pictures. They quickly showed Harry two things that he already knew: that Hermione was an only child, and that the Grangers were well travelled. There were few pictures of all three Grangers – most were of Hermione, her mother, or the both of them. A handful of pictures showed a young Hermione with people who Harry presumed were her grandparents. He began to notice other things, like how Hermione was alone in so many of her childhood pictures – there were no signs of friends or schoolmates – or how she seemed terribly serious, even as a small child.

The door creaked open. "Hello, Tom. A computer, isn't it?" Lupin asked, pointing at the Macintosh.

"It *was* a Mac, at any rate," Mr. Granger said. "Arthur tells me that all this magic is rather hard on electronics. We couldn't raise a thing on the telly, either."

Harry turned and acknowledged Mr. Granger. "Hello, sir," he mumbled cautiously.

Mr. Granger's expression was neither friendly nor unfriendly. It was sad in a way, but not so sad as to mark pity. Harry had seen that same expression on a number of people over the summer, and wished that he could firmly place it. "I favour that picture," he said, pointing to where Harry had left off. Hermione looked to be a toddler, perhaps three years old. She was holding a worn-looking copy of *The House at Pooh Corner*, open and propped against her knees. Her eyes were like saucers and her mouth was slightly open, as though she were reading aloud.

"I'll never forget that moment," Mr. Granger reminisced. "Out of nowhere, she began to read on

her own. At first, I was certain that she simply remembered the stories. Then she picked up that very book – she knew the characters but we’d never read aloud that particular one – opens to the first page, and calls out, ‘In which a house is built for Eeyore at Pooh Corner’! I very nearly fell out of my chair, I can tell you – dashed off for a camera, and there you have it.”

Harry nodded, but was already drawn to another picture. It looked to be very recent. Hermione was in profile, seated at one of the high-backed benches. Her feet were propped on the table between the benches, and she was reading – of course. Her hair was pulled back in a way Harry had never seen before, but windswept wisps fell against her face; orange light – sunset? – lent a slightly reddish cast to her hair and to the rest of the scene.

Mr. Granger said, “That was her first week back – the only evening without rain, as I recall. She didn’t feel well at all, though she was pretending otherwise. I didn’t want to bother; I just wanted to be near, you know? When I developed that shot, I was bowled over... I thought to myself, ‘good Lord, she looks like a grown woman’.”

Harry felt an odd tightness in his chest simply looking at the picture. He felt a desperate urge to talk to her, to explain somehow, so that he could breathe again. She did look terribly grown up. “I never noticed how much she looks like her mother,” he observed.

Mr. Granger smiled wistfully. “In the end, I suppose that’s why I framed it up,” he said. “Would you like to have it?”

Harry reeled for a moment. “I’m sorry?”

“Would you like it?” Mr. Granger asked. “It’s obvious that you fancy the picture. I can always print another. I can always take another.” He hesitated for a moment, and then added in a strained voice, “I still have the genuine article, you see... and... and I have you to thank for that.” He removed the frame from the wall, awkwardly thrust it at Harry, and quickly left the room. Harry stood dumbfounded.

Without looking away from the computer, Lupin said, “I believe that the correct response was ‘you’re welcome’.”

Harry gazed at the picture. “He should hate me. Why doesn’t he hate me?” he asked bitterly.

Lupin appeared stung. “Hate you? Whatever for? You saved his daughter’s life today, and you seem intent upon ignoring that fact.”

Harry dropped heavily into one of the two chairs that faced the desk. “I killed those people, and I didn’t have to kill them. I’m a murderer,” he said flatly.

A hand fell firmly atop his shoulder, and gave what felt like a friendly squeeze. Harry hadn’t heard the door.

“You are not a murderer, Harry – despite anything that Minister Fudge or anyone else may have

said or implied,” Madam Bones said. “I think that all of us have a mounting interest in *how* you did what you did. I haven’t interviewed a single person this evening that failed to understand why you did it. Mr. Lupin, you may sit behind the desk if you like.”

Madam Bones slowly settled into the chair that faced Harry. She carefully adjusted her monocle, and appraised him from head to toe. Harry shrank back slightly – he was left with no doubt about who was in charge at that moment.

“When you took action, was Hermione Granger about to be killed?” she asked abruptly.

“Yes,” Harry answered.

“Why are you so certain?”

“The look on her face.”

“What look was that?”

“She was resigned to it – at peace, in a strange way.”

“I see. Who was going to kill her, then?”

“Wormtail. He was trying to... he was using a spell that Dumbledore had cast on Hermione. He was using it as a weapon against her.”

“Wormtail, you say? That name refers to Peter Pettigrew, does it not?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You also claim that Peter Pettigrew was actually responsible for the deaths of your parents, and the deaths of twelve Muggles currently attributed to Sirius Black. Is that correct?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“How are you certain that it was Pettigrew?”

“It was his voice – I have no doubt about that. He also has a metal arm, given to him by Voldemort.”

“How would you know that this metal arm came from Voldemort?”

“I was present when it was given, ma’am, after the Triwizard Tournament at Hogwarts.”

“Yes, of course. I am familiar with those events. So... Mr. Pettigrew was about to kill Miss Granger, using the secondary consequences of a curse that Professor Dumbledore had previously cast upon her. Is that correct, Harry?”

Harry began, “Yes, ma’am...” He froze. The rapid-fire pace of Madam Bones’ questions left him unsteady. He carefully added, “I don’t believe that I called it a curse.”

“No, you did not,” Madam Bones confirmed. “Let us continue with the events of the day, shall we? In addition to Mr. Pettigrew, I understand that Voldemort was present. For which other Death Eaters can you directly account?”

Harry recounted, “Another Death Eater called Mulciber also tortured Hermione. Lucius Malfoy was there as well – he spoke to Mr. Weasley, and I know his voice better than I’d like. Mr. Granger knocked Vincent Crabbe unconscious. Voldemort told me that the Death Eater I... the one I threw from the window was called Travers. I took down three of them who had pinned down Tonks in the yard... Ron and I took down three of them upstairs, perhaps more... I knocked two from the roof... another one cast the Dark Mark, but wasn’t supposed to do it –”

Madam Bones cut in, “Ron Weasley believes that may have been Draco Malfoy.”

Harry fought to remain expressionless. “I thought so, at the time. Whoever cast the Mark knew that they would be summoning Aurors, and knew that they weren’t supposed to cast it.”

“You have doubts that it was young Mr. Malfoy?” Madam Bones asked.

“As I’ve thought about it, the voice seemed too high – it could have been a woman,” Harry said.

Madam Bones continued, “You were bound in the dining room. How were you freed?”

“By Dobby – he Apparated into the dining room, or whatever it is that house elves do.”

“Once you were freed, you moved from a seated position at one end of the dining room table to a standing position at the other end. How did you accomplish this?”

“I don’t know. One instant, I was sitting. The next instant, I had my hands on Wormtail’s throat.”

“It seemed like an instant to you?”

“Yes, ma’am. The ropes came off my ankles, and then I was choking Wormtail.”

“I see. You were furious, then?”

“Yes.”

“Wormtail was killing Miss Granger.”

“Yes.”

“She was in terrible pain.”

“Yes – she was...”

“She was screaming.”

“Yes – it was terrible, it was...”

“It was the most terrible thing you’ve ever heard?”

“Yes – she didn’t even sound human.” Harry’s eyes felt moist.

“You had to do something, didn’t you?”

“Yes!”

“You had to save her, didn’t you?”

“Yes! ”

“You had to get to the end of that table, didn’t you? But there wasn’t time, was there?”

“No! I... I didn’t have a wand, and there were seven of them besides Wormtail and Voldemort, and everyone else was there, and Voldemort was going to have them all killed if I –”

“If you so much as moved while Wormtail killed Miss Granger, then everyone else would die, wouldn’t they? Isn’t that what Voldemort told you?”

“Yes! All the Death Eaters had their wands out and –”

“They were going to kill them all, weren’t they? They were going to do it no matter what you did, weren’t they?”

Harry’s hands shook, and he began to sweat profusely at the temples. “They were going to kill everyone there – the Weasleys, Tonks, Hermione and her parents... I couldn’t let them... I couldn’t... I had to stop them... all of them...”

“Yes, you did. You had to get to Wormtail in an instant, and then get every last one of them before there was a single moment to respond, and you had to do it without a wand. You had to get to Wormtail in an instant, didn’t you? You had to get him, didn’t you?”

“Yes, *damn it!* ” Harry shouted as sweat dripped down his nose. “I had to get him! He was hurting her... Voldemort hurt her – he... he forced himself into her mind... I had to get Wormtail... I had to... I had to *hurt him!* He had to pay for... for *everything!* ” He gripped the arms of his chair, and they fell to pieces in his hands. The glass in the frame on his lap exploded into tiny shards. Madam Bones never flinched.

Lupin put one hand on each of Harry’s shoulders. “It’s over, Harry,” he said soothingly. “It’s over now.”

Madam Bones appraised him again, even more deliberately than before. “I apologise for

provoking you. As some of my younger Aurors would say, I was ‘playing a hunch’. You would not be human if you felt no sense of vengeance, given the circumstances. It is also clear that you are not suffering from simple adolescent control problems. Harry, tell me honestly... do you believe that you’re a danger to others?”

Harry picked up the picture frame, cutting his hands in the process. He looked intently at the picture of Hermione, now peppered with small rips and tears. “I don’t know anymore,” he croaked. “I didn’t know that I could become angry enough to kill. Hermione flinched when I... she...” His fingers left droplets of blood on the picture, and he dropped it. “She’s frightened of me,” he whispered, and he began to cry.

He cried for his parents. He cried for Cedric Diggory, and he cried for Sirius. He cried for everyone who had ever been hurt because of being with him or knowing him. He cried for Ron, and for Ginny, and for Luna and Neville. He cried for Hermione, because she had been hurt so badly on his account, and because their friendship seemed lost. He noticed that Lupin repaired the glass and the frame and the picture, and he was glad for it. In the picture, Hermione appeared as she should – in his mind, he still saw her screaming in agony. Lupin handed him a tissue, and wrapped a gentle arm around him.

After a seeming eternity, Madam Bones asked quietly, “Harry, what are we going to do with you?”

Harry looked at her questioningly through a haze of tears. “What’s that supposed to mean?” he spluttered.

Madam Bones explained, “This is the third time in one week that I have been called upon to intercede in your life. First, there was the will. I think that Albus was dead-on in his assessment, though I am increasingly convinced that Sirius Black may have had his heart in the right place. Then, there was the issue of your status at Hogwarts. As a Governor, I found myself in a very awkward position –”

Harry sat bolt upright. He wiped tears from his face with the back of his hand, and asked angrily, “You’re one of the Governors?”

“Yes, I am,” Madam Bones said. “We were left with little choice in the matter. When addressing matters relating to you, I consider six of the thirteen votes to be bought and paid for. If not for public relations considerations, I believe that the Governors would have dismissed you outright. But now... Harry, you’ve been misled enough. I shan’t contribute to that pattern. I believe it is highly likely that the Governors will be called to reconvene. I do not expect that we will be able to hold together all seven of the votes available to us.”

“Are you saying that I’ll be dismissed over this?” Harry asked apprehensively.

“I discussed the possibility a few minutes ago with your Headmaster,” Madam Bones answered. “He asked me to consider possible alternatives, and I will do so. I find that I have mixed feelings about your options, especially where Headmaster Dumbledore is concerned. On the one hand, I believe that there is no one more capable than he to help you understand and harness... well...

whatever it is that is happening to you. On the other hand, my confidence in his motives has been shaken of late. There is no secret sufficiently important to warrant what he did to Miss Granger. Rather than concentrating on your needs, he appears to have spent the evening preventing others from revealing the secret that Miss Granger kept.”

“I had to tell everyone, in order to protect Hermione from the curse,” Harry said.

“I don’t suppose that you care to share the same information with me?” Madam Bones asked. “The information might clarify his motives in cursing one of his own students.”

“Dumbledore wouldn’t approve, I’m sure,” Harry groused.

Lupin said to Madam Bones, “I daresay that Albus might feel better about it, were you prepared to join in his efforts to resist Voldemort.”

Madam Bones ignored Lupin’s point. “Harry, I know that there was a prophecy kept in the Department of Mysteries which pertained to you, and that it was destroyed in the fighting,” she said. “I assume that you must have heard the entire prophecy. Its contents, whatever they may have been, are of no material bearing upon the matters at hand. The Headmaster’s first obligation is to the welfare of his pupils. He has violated that obligation in relation to Miss Granger, and to you as well.”

Harry’s eyebrows rose slightly. “I understand that I’m in difficulty with the Governors. Are you hinting that Dumbledore might be...?”

Madam Bones smiled faintly. “The Headmaster is in perpetual difficulty with the Governors. It is very nearly a state of being. You appear concerned, Harry.”

Harry sighed. “He’s done his best, I’m sure.”

Madam Bones regarded him with some sympathy. “The Headmaster’s relationship with Hogwarts extends back into the previous century – you shoulder responsibility far too readily. I know that he takes that into account, as do many of us with a hand in your welfare. We’ll come up with something, Harry.”

“I don’t care anymore, ma’am. I just want to go home,” Harry said dejectedly.

He felt himself being appraised through the monocle yet again, before Madam Bones said, “Very well, then. I presume you are interested to hear my findings?” Harry nodded nervously.

Madam Bones drew up in her chair, and Harry decided that she could easily make Professor McGonagall seem like a cuddly kitten. In a very formal tone, she announced, “Harry James Potter, I find that you bear neither criminal responsibility nor legal liability in the deaths of at least seven and perhaps as many as ten so-called Death Eaters earlier today. Your actions were undertaken principally in the defence of others. I do not believe that you represent any public danger sufficient to warrant action by the Ministry, though I would suggest that you avoid stressful

situations until such time as you are able to... er... establish control over your recently manifested abilities. As you are emancipated and you have acted legally in this matter, I am limited in my ability to mandate your future actions. I very strongly recommend that you make arrangements for some type of counselling. Mr. Lupin, you hold a very important place in Mr. Potter's life, and I fervently hope that you will provide any assistance in this area that Mr. Potter may require. I recognise that such services carry a strong stigma in many segments of the wizarding world, but there are ways around almost everything. As inveterate rule breakers, both of you should know that. Speak to Miss Granger about the events of the past week, at the earliest opportunity – I simply ask that you trust me on this point. Do you have any questions of me?"

"No, ma'am," Harry said nervously.

"Good," Madam Bones said. "Minister Fudge is surely skulking about. He is going to be less than satisfied with my findings. I propose that we both see him and address his unhappiness straight away." She stood, and motioned toward the door.

Madam Bones proved astute; Fudge nearly fell into the room as the door was opened. "Outrageous, Amelia!" he cried. "This is wholly unacceptable. The people shall demand satisfaction!"

Dumbledore closely followed him into the room. "Which people and for what purpose, Cornelius? It may prove personally and politically disadvantageous to consort with those who would demand satisfaction for the loss of a few notable Death Eaters."

Fudge jabbed his index finger toward Harry. "You are a menace to society, Potter – a grave danger. You endanger anyone with the misfortune to be near you, and you have risked the security of our entire world with this sort of brazen skirmish. Even Amelia admits that you are out of control, and it is my sworn responsibility to maintain control and order. I can very easily have you committed to St. Mungo's until such time as we sort out these dangerous powers of yours!"

Mrs. Granger pushed past a beefy Auror and into the study, with a dazed-looking Hermione in tow. She spat at Fudge, "We've had enough of you! If you represent the best of what wizards have to offer, then it's little wonder that this Voldemort of yours is running rampant. I demand that you leave this house, sir!"

Fudge quickly recovered from hearing Voldemort's name spoken aloud, and he attempted something that Harry suspected was supposed to be charm. "Mrs. – ahem – Granger, is it? – I do apologise for the inconvenience all of this has spawned. You're certainly not the first people who have suffered because of Potter, but I will do my level best to assure that you're the last. Of course, my earlier offer remains open. Surely, it would be easier for you if today had simply never happened..."

Mr. Granger glowered at Fudge from the doorway. "Cordelia and I want you and your... your *henchmen* out of here – now," he warned.

Fudge peered down his nose. "I do hope that was not intended as a threat. My associates do not

take kindly to threats.” He motioned at the beefy Auror in the doorway.

Madam Bones moved toward Fudge until he was forced to take a step backward. “I will remind you that the gentleman in the doorway works for me,” she said.

Dumbledore quietly suggested to Fudge and Madam Bones, “Perhaps the three of us can agree upon a solution that would be in Harry’s best interests.” Harry crossed his arms and glared.

Mrs. Granger’s eyes narrowed. “I’ve had my fill of *you* , as well,” she said to Dumbledore.

Fudge aimed a sugary-sweet glance toward Hermione. “My dear girl, I’m certain that you can explain this situation in a manner that your parents are able to understand. I realise that the Ministry has stumbled in its efforts to protect your kind, but I promise you here and now –”

Harry saw Hermione’s eyes flash at the mention of ‘your kind’. She pulled herself from the daze, and cut off Fudge. “Minister, to what *kind* do you refer?” she asked acidly.

Fudge stammered, “I’m sorry – I don’t –”

“You suggested that the Ministry has made efforts to protect ‘my kind’, though I rather doubt that,” Hermione continued. “I think that you should specify the *kind* to which you refer. I believe that everyone here would appreciate a thorough explanation.”

Fudge blustered, “Well, miss, I think that you may be making too much of... it’s common parlance, of course...”

Hermione raised an eyebrow. “It’s common parlance among whom, exactly – certainly not among the Muggle-born? Minister, we await your explanation. In fact, I look forward to reading it in the *Daily Prophet* tomorrow.”

Fudge looked to Madam Bones, who said flatly, “You ought not to leave Miss Granger waiting, Minister.”

Harry was enjoying the spectacle of Hermione slowly strangling Fudge with his own remark, when he noticed Lupin looking curiously at the carpeting.

“What is it, Remus?” he asked quietly.

Lupin replied, “Blood.”

“Is it mine?” Harry asked.

“No,” Lupin said. He knelt, and cautiously sniffed. “Definitely not yours...”

Fudge turned to watch, clearly relieved by the distraction. Mr. Granger peered over Lupin’s shoulder. “That blood wasn’t here this afternoon,” he said.

“I’ve been in this room for the better part of two hours, and I didn’t see it,” Madam Bones added.

Lupin touched the carpet with his finger. “Damp... fresh,” he muttered. He buried his nose to the carpet, and sniffed again. He growled and crawled along a widely scattered trail of droplets, which led from beneath the desk toward the foot of one of the bookshelves. He began tearing books from the shelves wildly.

“Remus! What’s got into you?” Mr. Granger cried out. He tried vainly to catch books as they flew.

Lupin stopped. There was a small hole behind some of the books, which appeared to lead into the wall. He sniffed again, and whirled to face everyone. He looked wild, and his teeth were bared.

“*I smell a rat!*” he snarled. When he received blank stares, he snapped, “Peter is a rat Animagus! He’s still here!”

Madam Bones’ monocle fell to the end of its chain as her eyebrows shot upward. “Pettigrew is still here!” she exclaimed. She barked to the Auror in the doorway. “Haversham! I want the yard blanketed. Get Arthur Weasley and his sons, and Shackbolt and Tonks as well – we need everyone looking for a rat. Merlin only knows what he may have heard!”

Harry watched Fudge puff up, in a manner very reminiscent of Uncle Vernon. “Peter – Pettigrew – is – *dead*,” he firmly insisted.

Dumbledore said calmly, “That statement bears a strong similarity to your attitude regarding Voldemort, prior to recent events. You may wish to exercise some caution in this instance.”

Percy burst into the room and sidled up to Fudge. “Minister, the press are assembled in the front room as you requested. They’re awaiting your statement.”

“In my front room? There are *journalists* in my front room?” Mr. Granger fumed.

Fudge said hurriedly, “Tell them that I’ll be there presently. We need a moment to tidy some loose ends.” He turned on Madam Bones. “We must reconsider an untenable decision on the part of one of my subordinates.”

Mr. Granger advanced on Percy. They were the same height, but Mr. Granger possessed the presence that Percy lacked. “They will wait *outside*,” he ordered.

Percy muttered something about mad Muggles, and fled the room. He was rudely bumped by Bill as both passed through the doorway. Bill immediately drew his wand and flicked it toward the far wall. Part of the bookcase became transparent, and the inner workings of the wall behind it were revealed. Shackbolt peered into the bay window from the outside, and Bill gestured for him to come around the corner of the house.

“What is directly above us?” Lupin demanded, his expression still feral.

“Hermione’s bedroom,” Mrs. Granger answered quickly.

Hermione erupted from the daze to which she had returned. “Ginny’s up there!” she gasped.

Somehow, despite standing several feet farther from the door, Harry beat the others out of the study and up the stairs. Lupin was very close at his heels – a low continuous snarl rumbled from his throat. Harry Disillusioned himself, silenced the floor, and carefully entered Hermione’s bedroom.

Wormtail stood with his back to Hermione’s writing desk, opposite the door and away from the window. His silver fingers were wrapped around Ginny’s neck tightly enough to leave reddening dimples.

“Hello, Harry,” Wormtail said. “I can smell you, just as I can smell Lupin in the hallway. It’s a useful consequence of spending twelve years in my rat form. I congratulate you on your prowess. You truly surprised me earlier – it’s safe to say that you surprised my Lord, as well. I dare say that James and Lily would have been proud.”

“Never – say – their – names – again ,” Harry warned as he caused himself to appear.

“I’m sorry, Harry,” Wormtail said mournfully. “There’s been enough dying here today. Arrange my passage from this house, and I assure you that your friend will live.”

“You’re pale, Wormtail,” said Harry. “You’ve lost a lot of blood, haven’t you?” Wormtail’s hair was matted with blood, apparently from a head wound. There were deep bruises on each side of his throat, where Harry’s thumbs had dug in.

“I’ll live, Harry, and I do appreciate your concern,” Wormtail mumbled. “Let me repeat... safe passage off this property – in exchange, the girl lives.”

“You won’t be going anywhere, Pettigrew,” Madam Bones called from the hallway, which was rapidly filling with people.

“Hello, Madam Bones,” Pettigrew said. “I truly enjoyed your classes. It’s a shame you’re no longer teaching at Hogwarts. I assume that the Headmaster is here, as well?”

“Mr. Pettigrew, there are no words that adequately express my disappointment in you,” Dumbledore said sadly.

Harry stepped toward Pettigrew. Pettigrew smiled slightly. “Come into my parlour, Harry,” he said. Harry felt his hair crackle with a sudden static charge.

“Did you try to ward against us?” Harry asked.

“I’m rather good with wards,” Pettigrew said. “Not quite as good as Sirius, but better than James was.”

“You defile their names ,” Lupin growled as he pushed his way into the room.

“It’s not as though I’m speaking ill of them – simply the truth,” Pettigrew said.

“You know that warding won’t keep me out,” Lupin warned.

“You know that my hand is silver,” Pettigrew reminded him. “A standoff, I think.”

“I would be satisfied to take you with me,” Lupin said darkly.

“Ah... but what about young Miss Weasley?” Pettigrew asked. He tightened his grip slightly. Ginny, already mute from the pressure, gagged audibly. “Shall all three of us journey beyond the veil, Remus?” He called out more loudly. “I suggest that you keep any Aurors or Hit Wizards clear, unless you want Miss Weasley’s blood on your hands.”

“Get him a broom,” Fudge called out from the hallway. “There shall be no more killing today. Pettigrew – or whoever you are – we will allow you to leave, provided that you hand over the girl.”

The hallway fell into bedlam, as half a dozen separate arguments broke out. Harry could see Fudge and Madam Bones snarling at one another. Dumbledore appeared impassive, but Harry realised that he was assessing Wormtail’s wards. He decided to do the same. Harry suspected that he could easily pass through, but he was worried about the hand. For all he knew, it might have a mind of its own – perhaps it would crush Ginny’s throat of its own accord, even if Wormtail were taken out. Lupin looked wilder by the minute, but held his ground near the door. Harry wondered how much longer the threat of silver would hold him at bay.

The crowd in the hall parted and Ron entered the room, bearing his Nimbus. “You didn’t think I went anywhere without it, did you?” he said to Harry.

Wormtail lifted his silver index finger from Ginny’s neck, and the Nimbus sailed through the wards into his human hand. *No wonder I didn’t see him with a wand*, Harry thought. With another waggle of his index finger, the window flung open. He dragged Ginny by the neck toward the window. The ward seemed to move with him; Harry felt a surge of static energy, and took two steps back and one to the side.

“She’ll be dropped off somewhere suitable,” Wormtail said. “After all, my Lord was insistent that her life be spared. I would hate to incur his wrath – though I shall risk it, should any of you interfere.”

Ron spat, “If you harm her, you won’t have to worry about Voldemort. I will find you, and I will kill you *very* slowly.”

Wormtail said quietly to Ginny, “It’s a rare treasure to have such a loyal family.” He eased up behind her, and managed to settle both of them onto the Nimbus without losing his grip upon her neck. Through the window, Harry saw a figure sprinting across the yard.

Wormtail laughed. “Ah... I see that Lucius is making his escape!” The hallway erupted, and even

Harry was distracted for a moment – just long enough for Wormtail to launch the Nimbus into the darkening sky.

Harry angrily crashed through the lingering ward, which crackled and sizzled before collapsing. The running figure was certainly blond-haired. Madam Bones rushed up behind him. “Merlin!” she shouted. After a quick *sonorus*, she boomed through the open window, “Stop that man, by any means necessary!” Wormtail continued onward over the neighbouring houses. She cancelled the spell, and turned toward the hallway door. “I want six people in the air after Pettigrew, now! Take shifts – track him, but do nothing to endanger the girl. Kingsley, I hope you’re up to tagging along?”

Fudge said, “I believe the Wizengamot will frown upon the use of suspended personnel, Amelia.”

Madam Bones glared at Fudge. “I believe the Wizengamot will have a number of questions about today’s events, Minister – beginning with Lucius Malfoy and ending with Peter Pettigrew.”

As he strode down the hall toward the stairs, Fudge called out, “Weasley! Inform the members of the press that the next briefing will be held tomorrow at eight o’clock, at the Ministry. Tell them... tell them that two additional Death Eaters have been rooted out, and that I am supervising the pursuit. When you’re finished, get me a car!”

“Why didn’t Wormtail set down and Apparate away?” Harry asked.

Dumbledore stroked his beard. “A fair question, Harry. I don’t recall him as a confident flier – he wasn’t fit for Quidditch. Any wise wizard is apprehensive about Apparating with an untreated head injury, of course.”

Madam Bones nodded. “That certainly does raise the chance of a splinching. There’s another possibility – he may intend to take her to Voldemort.”

Harry thought about Voldemort’s comment in the front room, when he ordered Ginny’s life spared. He thundered, “*Accio Triumph!*” The Bonneville shot across the yard and bounced through the open window and into the bedroom. Ron and Madam Bones barely stepped back in time to avoid being struck, as the motorbike landed roughly on its side and bounced to a stop at Harry’s feet. He added “*Accio helmet*” and his helmet struck him in the chest like a medicine ball, sending him reeling.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Madam Bones demanded. “How did you summon that... that *thing*?”

Lupin snarled, “I’m coming with you.”

Harry snapped, “Not a chance, Remus. You’re not coming anywhere near that hand of his.” Lupin glared at Harry and angrily ran from the room, presumably to join the chase after Lucius Malfoy.

Hermione and her mother remained in the hallway. Hermione said quietly, “Harry, stay away from

it. It's *Voldemort's* hand. Do you understand? It's *Voldemort's hand* ." Harry took a step toward her, and she folded against Mrs. Granger.

Mrs. Granger cradled Hermione. She looked at Harry mournfully and said, "Be sure you come back, young man. Be safe."

"Harry, remove that helmet at once," Madam Bones ordered.

Ron said nervously, "You can't chase after them alone. Did you bring *your* Nimbus?" Harry understood immediately – Ron intended to come, but not on the motorbike.

"No. Were you wearing a helmet?" Harry asked.

Ron goggled at Harry in confusion. "What?" he managed at last.

"In your vision – were you wearing a helmet?" Harry asked again.

Ron thought for a moment and then grinned. Harry fished for the second helmet in the saddlebag, enlarged it, and tossed it to Ron. Madam Bones stared at Harry in disbelief.

Harry gave what little explanation he could. "I don't understand any of it – the punching, the wandless charms," he said. "If I think about it, I can't do it – that's all I really know."

"Harry..." Dumbledore began.

"What?" Harry blurted, his jaw set.

Dumbledore smiled slightly. "Ride with care, would you? Mr. Weasley, see that Harry keeps hold of his senses."

Seconds later, they rocketed across the midnight blue sky after Wormtail and Ginny. They tore past six Aurors and Shacklebolt, giving chase on Nimbus 2000 brooms. Shacklebolt gave a terse wave as they passed.

"Do you have a plan?" Ron called out.

"No," Harry said. "Any ideas?"

Ron suggested, "You're looking for the Snitch, right? Start climbing, then."

"Right," Harry said. He began climbing higher and higher, to survey the area around them.

"Did you feel that?" Ron asked.

Harry was in Seeker mode, and didn't welcome the interruption. "Feel what?" he snapped.

"Something happened to my ears – it's like they popped or something," Ron said. "I don't think

I've ever been this high above the ground before. Do you suppose that has something to do with it?"

"I've heard that people's ears pop on aeroplanes," Harry said absently.

"You mean those Muggle flying contraptions?" Ron asked. "You haven't been on one, have you? My dad would go spare over that."

Harry ignored him, instead concentrating on sorting out the sights before him. He saw a flash of movement that was definitely airborne. He carefully pointed. "What do you think?"

"Moving a bit slow, isn't it?" Ron pointed out.

"He probably doesn't think that anyone give chase," Harry surmised. "Besides, Dumbledore did say he wasn't a great flier. We'll stay high and close the distance."

After a few minutes, both Harry and Ron were certain they had found the Nimbus. Wormtail was flying a few thousand feet above the ground, heading north. He hadn't yet made good on his promise to drop off Ginny – they could clearly make out two figures.

"How can we sneak up on them?" Harry wondered aloud. "Either he'll hear us coming, or he'll have a Perimeter Charm of some kind. If we come up from behind, chances are good that he'll toss Ginny over the side."

"That might not be a bad thing," Ron said nonchalantly.

Harry spluttered, "Do you care to explain that, or should I turn toward St. Mungo's now?"

"Could you catch a person in mid-air, given a few thousand feet to do it?" Ron asked.

"I expect so. I certainly wouldn't want to..." Harry mused. "What are you doing?"

Ron turned on the seat until both legs were hanging over the right side of the bike. "I'm going to do Dangerous Dai's Death Drop, more or less," he said calmly. "Either Wormtail drops her, or I shove her off. When she falls, you're going to be below and in position to pick her up."

Harry shrieked, "*Dangerous Dai's Death Drop* ? Have – you – gone – *barking – mad* ? You do that with a *broom* , for Merlin's sake!"

"I *am* doing it with a broom – *that* one," Ron said, pointing down in the direction of the Nimbus.

Harry began, "Dumbledore said..."

Ron laughed, "Dumbledore told me to be sure that *you* kept hold of your senses – I was listening, you know. He didn't say a thing about me. Pity, isn't it?"

Harry turned at the waist, and frantically grabbed a handful of Ron's shirt. "We must be two

thousand feet above them!” he shouted. “What you’re considering – it’s like diving into a teacup!”

“Didn’t you ever jump off roofs when you were a kid...? Oh! I suppose you didn’t, did you? Trust me – you’d be surprised just how much you can manoeuvre.” Ron tightened the chinstrap on his helmet until it dug into his flesh. “We can talk to one another with these things, right? You spot me, then – make sure I’m heading in the correct direction.”

“The only direction you’d be going is *down* ! How would I spot you, anyway? It’s almost dark!” Harry protested.

Ron stared deeply into Harry’s eyes. His face was etched with anger and pain, and a muscle in his neck twitched. “I’m not losing my sister today,” he snarled through clenched teeth.

Harry shouted, “I will not help you commit suicide! You *stay – on – this – bike ! Do you understand me?* ”

“If you don’t catch her, you may as well head straight into the pitch. *Do you understand ME?* ” Ron elbowed Harry’s hand free.

Harry quickly reached out, and caught thin air. “*Ron ! Damn it – RON !*”

Ron shouted back, his voice trailing off as he fell away, “Last one down buys the butterbeer!”

The Death Drop was how Dangerous Dai Llewellyn first received his nickname from the Caerphilly fans. In 1956, Caerphilly had been losing to the Karasjok Kites 130-to-nil when Llewellyn spotted the Snitch. Like Harry, Llewellyn liked to search for the Snitch from the highest possible vantage. That particular time, Llewellyn was a solid five hundred feet above the top of the stands. He spotted the Snitch twenty feet behind the Karasjok Seeker. If he made a move, he knew that the other Karasjok players would catch on, alert their Seeker, and the game would be over. So, Llewellyn intentionally fell off his broom. Dangling the broom in one hand by its end, he dove headfirst toward the Karasjok Seeker. Everyone in the stands and everyone on a broom froze in place, certain that Llewellyn would have to be scraped off the pitch. Even the Snitch was fooled. He was less than twenty feet above the opposing Seeker before he hooked his foot around his broom, sat up, and fell hard atop the Snitch. The Karasjok Seeker slipped from his broom, broke his arm, and immediately cried foul. Karasjok didn’t get the foul; Llewellyn never actually touched either the other Seeker or his broom. Llewellyn got the Snitch; the win; two broken ankles from his 30 miles-per-hour impact into the pitch; and worldwide acclaim.

This version of the Death Drop went far beyond dangerous – one broom, two players, in the twilight... in addition to the aerial stunt that Ron was asking of Harry. Harry expected that Wormtail would be unenthusiastic about giving up the Nimbus in mid-flight. He pointed the Bonneville nearly straight down, aiming for a point below and beyond Wormtail and Ginny’s position.

Harry passed Ron and shot wide, to avoid being seen or detected by Wormtail. Ron looked to be head-down, arms out – he was a little off vertical.

The wind tore at Harry. “He’s about five hundred feet down and fifty ahead of you, give or take,” he shouted against the din.

Ron’s voice crackled inside Harry’s helmet. “I see him! This is... *urgh* ... a wild... *oof* ... ride, Harry...”

“You’re too far behind!” Harry gasped. He tried to imagine how he might catch both Ron and Ginny, if it came to that.

Harry could barely hear Ron – he wondered if the helmets had a limited range, or if Ron was actually having difficulty speaking. Ron’s voice was strained and staccato. “Did I ever – tell you that – Charlie – taught me – how dragons – glide?” he managed. Harry saw an iridescent flash, and guessed that Ron was using his jacket as a kind of airfoil.

Wormtail either saw a flash of motion or a Perimeter Charm went off, when Ron was no more than twenty feet away. He looked back, and flung Ginny roughly away – just as Ron had predicted. Ron grabbed the bristles of the Nimbus and pulled, just as Wormtail was pointing his silver hand. Harry was already more than a hundred feet below the Nimbus; he immediately rolled to one side, and set after Ginny. In one of his mirrors he caught a brief glimpse of Ron and Wormtail – both freefalling and grappling for the broomstick, framed against the last glow of sunset against the high clouds. Harry had no options left for helping Ron, and he completely focussed on Ginny.

Harry was grateful that her shirt was white, as it periodically caught the light from the Bonneville’s cat’s-eye. She flailed wildly – the billowing of her shirt in the wind kept her from tumbling out of control, but rocked her from side to side. He could descend far faster than Ginny – he just had to adjust and close in before they both fell too far. He dropped at ever-higher speed, and the motorbike began to shudder from the buffeting of the wind and the uneven drag. He was little more than a thousand feet above the ground when he caught up with her.

Ginny was emitting a continuous guttural howl; her eyes were squeezed shut. She heard the eerie whistle of wind and drag coming from the falling Bonneville, opened her eyes, saw Harry, and stopped flailing – she just stared at him. At the same moment, Harry reached out one arm – nearly losing control of the falling motorbike in the process – and shouted, “*Accio Ginny!*” She sprung into his grasp, and he tugged back hard in an attempt to slow the bike and level its descent. The handlebars shook so violently that Harry began to wonder if the Bonneville might break apart.

The moment she was in his grasp, Ginny latched on tightly and closed her eyes. Intuitively, she slid around and behind him. She managed to stay more-or-less on the seat as the bike rocked and shook. At some point he assumed that she reopened her eyes, because she resumed howling. Harry considered joining in, if it would help. As they passed the treetops, the bike was still not quite level; Harry hoped they would strike grass rather than pavement. The Bonneville reached level at almost the same moment as it careened off the surface of a local carriageway. Harry was over-eager with the brakes, and the bike spun 180 degrees as it came to a quick stop.

A middle-aged woman walking a small, yapping dog shook her fist at them. “Ruffians!” she shouted. “Can’t be about at night without you biker maniacs racing down this roadway! Dropping

from the sky at a hundred miles an hour and skidding along ..." She trailed off into a dumb stare, and then promptly fainted dead away. The little dog yapped and pranced and licked at her face.

Harry whipped off his helmet, and turned his head. "Ginny, are you all right?" he shouted.

Ginny rubbed at her bruised throat. Her hair was like tangled red straw from the windy fall, and her eyes seemed permanently wide.

"Ginny, are you all right?" Harry repeated.

She gave a shaky nod and pointed over his shoulder. He whirled around to look. The Nimbus was drifting down the quiet carriageway, its single unsteady rider framed against the ghostly glare of the streetlamps. The broom abruptly nose-dived and the rider bounced and rolled in the thick grass of an unmowed yard. The rider tore his helmet off with one hand, revealing a shock of red hair. Harry and Ginny approached at a dead run.

Ron's mock turtleneck was torn as though a wild animal had attacked him. The remnants of his jacket were wrapped around the Nimbus, which had come to rest several feet away. His left arm dangled awkwardly at his side, as he staggered to his feet.

"Ron!" Harry shouted excitedly.

Ron returned the greeting with a crooked smile. "I guess the butterbeer's on me," he groaned.

"Where is he? What happened?" Harry asked.

Ron took a step and winced. "I snatched away the broom," he said. "We were falling, and... and he smiled at me – can you believe that? – and then... and then he disappeared. I can't explain it; he was falling, and then he was just gone." He reached out to Ginny, and gave her a one-armed hug. "Thank Merlin you're all right," he said.

She pulled back, and cleared her throat. Her eyes flared; she managed a few hoarse croaks and pops, frowned, and took a deep breath. With two hands she shoved him at the chest, and squeaked, "Lunatic!"

Wincing, Ron demanded, "What the bloody hell was that for?"

"All your idea," Ginny squeaked painfully. "Too crazy for Harry."

"What were we supposed to do – let him carry you off to Voldemort?" Ron asked.

"Could have been killed," Ginny croaked, jabbing her index finger toward him.

Ron smiled. "Not today," he said.

"You!" Ginny squealed at Harry.

Harry stepped back, raising his hands in surrender. “Look, I tried to stop him. I mean, you could hardly call it a plan. I –”

Ginny enveloped him in a hug, and buried her head against his shoulder. He awkwardly draped his arms around her. She raised her mouth to his ear, and said in a strangled whisper, “You *do* know how to sweep a girl off her feet.”

“Thank Merlin you’re all right,” Harry whispered back. “There’s been enough lost today.”

Ginny cleared her throat. “We’re still friends, then,” she said quietly.

Harry pulled away gently, and turned to Ron. “We need to get you some help,” he said. “Is your arm broken?”

“Shoulder, I think,” Ron said. “He squeezed it with that metal hand.”

“That should be a simple fix,” Harry said hopefully.

Ron nodded and winced. “Just a basic Quidditch injury... speaking of which, let me fetch my broom. I’m not about to leave a racing broom lying about. Besides, that jacket had a lifetime guarantee; indestructible, they said. I’m taking it back.”

Ginny exclaimed hoarsely, “You must be joking!”

“Here’s the Nimbus, Ron,” Harry called out. “I don’t see anything left of the jacket, though... hang on – I see some bits over there, under that tree.”

A flurry of broom riders appeared from two directions. Shacklebolt dismounted, nodded in recognition, and quickly Apparated away. Two of the Aurors immediately rushed toward Ron. One called out, “We need a medic!”

The Auror that Madam Bones had called Haversham strolled toward them. “That was the most outlandish thing I’ve ever seen!” he boomed, pointing at Ron. “You should be a stain on this roadway!”

Ron soon found himself seated at kerbside in a conjured chair, attended by three Aurors and a young mediwitch who fawned over him. Harry was suddenly accosted by a gaggle of reporters, who had obviously followed the Aurors. Ginny stayed close to Harry, seemingly frozen by the onslaught.

“Mr. Potter! Mr. Potter! Chazz Barksdale, *Daily Prophet* !” called a reporter with an accent that Harry couldn’t place. “Can you confirm that you personally eliminated six Death Eaters today?”

“Mr. Potter! Ellen Winslow, *Daily Prophet* ! Sources claim that you demonstrated extraordinary powers in your battle with the Death Eaters, including ward-breaking and some new kind of Apparation. Would you care to comment?” asked another reporter who sounded American to Harry.

A flash went off, and then another. Ginny flinched, and clutched at her neck. Harry began to lead her away, but the cluster of reporters closed tightly.

“Is it true that Voldemort was present in the house?”

“There’s a rumour that Lucius Malfoy may also have been present. Do you have a comment?”

“Do you have any idea why Minister Fudge refused comment this evening?”

“According to a Ministry spokeswizard, two Death Eaters escaped. We presume you were in pursuit. Did you capture one of the remaining Death Eaters? If so, did you kill him, and where is the body?”

“Mr. Potter! Mr. Potter! Dianna Bragg, *Teen Witch Weekly* ! You’re in the company of Ginny Weasley – is this a sign that you’re spoken for, and have we interrupted a secret tryst?”

Harry made an exasperated attempt to answer the hail of questions. “Yes, he was present... I saw and heard Lucius Malfoy, and so did others... talk to the Minister yourself... we were; it was Peter Pettigrew – that’s right, you heard me – and he took Ginny hostage... you must be joking! Did you hear the last answer, for Merlin’s sake? I’m not spoken for, and I won’t be spoken for. It’s not even safe to be around me!” The writer for *Teen Witch Weekly* madly scribbled notes, muttering something about dark, brooding, and an extra press run.

Shacklebolt appeared in the midst of the crowd of reporters, and glared menacingly. “Miss Weasley’s parents are here,” he said. “You will excuse us now.” He led Ginny away by the hand, and Harry used the distraction as a means to slip away. He hid behind a tree.

More reporters crowded around Ron and his entourage. Two were talking to the Aurors who had witnessed Ron’s drop, and the rest were firing questions at Ron. Bill had arrived, and seemed to provide Ron with some opportunity to breathe between questions.

“What do you think of the *Daily Prophet*’s new ghouls?” a familiar voice asked from behind him.

Harry didn’t bother to turn around. “I didn’t see any rocks. You must have crawled out from beneath something, Rita.”

“We’re on a first-name basis now? Does that mean you’ll give me another exclusive?” Rita Skeeter cooed.

“What do you mean by ‘new ghouls’?” Harry asked, ignoring her implication.

“Tough times at the *Prophet*,” Skeeter said sorrowfully. “New management, you know. They sacked nearly everyone yesterday. That’s how Vox operates – bin the old, and bring in the new from their stable. I have it on good authority that the new look starts tomorrow. The old society biddies are in for a shock, I can tell you. You lived with Muggles, Harry – did you ever see a tabloid?”

“So you’re out of a job? What a pity,” Harry deadpanned.

“I’m just a humble free-lancer, Harry – no connection whatever with the former management,” Skeeter insisted. “I admit to being a bit of a fan of Vox. Who knows what may come next? I think that I’d fit rather well. Perhaps you could put in a good word for me?”

Harry’s nose wrinkled. “I’m just happy that I don’t subscribe,” he said.

Skeeter snorted. “Given the size of your investment, I would have assumed that MacLeish threw in free subscriptions.”

Harry stared at her. “Wha...?”

“There he is! Mr. Potter! Mr. Potter – a word, please!” The reporter with the unusual accent waved his arms wildly.

Skeeter crossed her arms. “Give me an exclusive, and I might be able to save you,” she offered.

Harry eyed her dubiously, but the oncoming horde of reporters represented the devil he didn’t know. He nodded in agreement.

Skeeter took out her Quick-Quote Quill. “You say that Weasley was the last to see Pettigrew?” she asked very loudly.

“Erm... I suppose so. He *did* throw him off the Nimbus,” Harry said. The reporters stopped moving as one.

“I heard something about a Death Drop – I assume that was a reference to Dai Llewellyn?” Skeeter continued.

“It was a Death Drop, all right – without a broom!” Harry responded. “Two thousand feet, in the dark! I tried to stop him, but he had none of it.” The reporters at the back of the group were already rushing madly toward Ron. The reporter with the unusual accent looked at Harry curiously, but eventually followed his colleagues.

“Nicely done,” Harry acknowledged.

Skeeter shrugged. “Your friend looks to be enjoying the attention. I’m very clear about *your* feelings on that point. You’re almost as clear as Granger.” She looked around nervously. “*She* didn’t come with you, did she?”

“Hermione wants very little to do with me, at the moment,” Harry said flatly.

Skeeter’s eyes narrowed into slits. “Really? How *very* interesting –”

Harry cut her off. “Go there, and we’re finished – understood?”

“Fair enough,” Skeeter said. “Your love life’s been overdone of late. Let’s discuss six dead Death Eaters, then.”

Harry gave an emotionless account of the events at the Grangers’ house, omitting any references to the prophecy and downplaying Hermione’s ordeal. Skeeter betrayed little reaction, until Harry described the climactic moments in the dining room. She prodded him for more detail about the scene, and winced when it came.

“I received the strong sense that Fudge didn’t care for Bones’ assessment,” Skeeter said. “He doesn’t walk out on the press unless he failed to get his way.”

Harry shrugged. “Fudge said I’m a menace. He threatened me with a stay at St. Mungo’s.”

Rita Skeeter flashed an evil grin. “I’ll have to use that. It comes from an unidentified Ministry source, of course.”

“Not a fan of Fudge?” Harry asked her.

She sighed. “I bought the Ministry line on you. It was far easier to believe that you were a liar than to believe that You-Know-Who was back. That said, you were in the right, and I’m certainly no fan of Fudge.”

“You’ll love this, then,” Harry said. He recounted in detail Fudge’s exchange with Hermione.

“‘Your kind’? He said ‘your kind’?” she gasped. “You’re not paraphrasing – that’s a quote?”

Harry nodded.

Skeeter rubbed her hands together in glee. “I’ll have my own by-line on this one – Lovegood won’t be able to resist me,” she cackled.

A large bird raced out of the darkness toward Harry. As it neared, Harry determined that it was a raven. When it cawed, Harry noticed that some of the new *Daily Prophet* reporters quickly stopped what they were doing – they watched for its destination with a certain wariness. The raven settled on the ground at Harry’s feet, and deposited a letter. The envelope was addressed:

Harry James Potter, Earl of Bercliffe

Beneath The Large Oak

Grantham Lane

Cottington

Skeeter peered over Harry’s shoulder. “Begging your pardon, milord,” she said sarcastically.

“This must be some kind of joke – one of Ron’s brothers, no doubt,” Harry guessed. He turned

over the envelope. The wax seal was ornately stamped with a filigreed “M” and a shield crest. He carefully examined the seal and the remainder of the envelope, before choosing to open it.

The envelope contained a printed card:

You and a guest of your choosing are cordially invited to celebrate

the acquisition of the Daily Prophet

by Vox Populi, Ltd.,

a subsidiary of Vox International, LLC

Saturday, September 21

MacLeish Manor

Pevensey, Sussex

Social hour – 5:00 PM

Dinner – 6:00 PM

Musical performance – 9:00 PM

Vox Humana recording artist Heather Magruder

and the Edinburgh Festival Orchestra,

at Queen’s Hall in Edinburgh

RSVP by August 31 to Catriona Wilton at the Daily Prophet

via owl post, or catriona.wilton@voxpathuli.co.uk

“What’s that babble at the end – some kind of company post, perhaps?” Skeeter wondered aloud.

Harry shrugged, and turned over the card. There was a handwritten note on the back:

Mr. Potter (or Lord Black, if it suits your fancy) –

I am most anxious to meet you. I regret that there is no earlier opportunity. I accept very few business partners, and I am accustomed to cultivating close relationships with those partners. We have much to discuss, you and I. My daughter and I would be pleased to host you for the weekend, if you wish – you may consider it a gesture of thanks for the fine castle. Make your arrangements via Miss Wilton.

Best,

Harry stared at the card, shocked and terribly confused.

“I’d love to be a fly on the wall at that party,” Skeeter mused. When Harry shot her a menacing look, she added in protest, “My Animagus form is *not* a fly, thank you very much.”

“I’m so tired of all of this... I’m just so tired. Can you understand that?” Harry sighed.

Skeeter looked at him curiously, but nodded. “You held up your end of the bargain,” she said. “We’ll be seeing one another soon, I expect.”

“I doubt that,” Harry said absently. He looked around at the massed crowd, which was chiefly composed of reporters, Aurors and Weasleys. A nondescript car pulled up. Percy dashed out, absently opened the door for Fudge, and quickly sought out Ginny. Mrs. Weasley made her way to Ron, and alternated between hugging him and beating him with a small handbag. Harry took advantage of the confusion by making his way to the abandoned Bonneville. He righted the motorbike and rode quickly through the madding crowd and into the darkness.

Harry Potter and the Years of Rebellion Moving On

Chapter Seventeen

MOVING ON

August 5, 1996

Mister Harry James Potter

In care of Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Dear Mister Potter:

The Board of Governors is pleased that you survived the August 4 attack upon your person by so-called Death Eaters, and joins the Minister for Magic in commending you for your efforts to save the lives of three Hogwarts students and several members of their families.

It has come to our attention that the powerful abilities manifested in response to this attack are not under your conscious control. We bear responsibility for the welfare of all Hogwarts students, and are gravely concerned by the risk that you may unwittingly pose. Upon consultation with Ministry-approved experts, we have concluded that you cannot reasonably expect to gain control of these abilities in the near term; in fact, their basis and genesis are wholly unclear.

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry reserves the right to dismiss any student whose conduct is considered harmful to himself/herself or to the school (HSWW Charter, Article IX, Sec. LVII, Par. XXIV [amended]). Given the uncertain and dangerous nature of your abilities, and the minimal chance that you will gain control of these abilities within the normal period of your attendance at Hogwarts; the Board of Governors orders the Headmaster to dismiss you forthwith from your program of study at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

This dismissal is not a reflection upon your academic or practical performance in any fashion, nor does it abrogate any commendations or awards earned as a consequence of your attendance. To that end, the Chair of the Board of Governors is authorised to prepare a letter of recommendation for inclusion in your permanent record.

Your superior performance on the Ordinary Wizarding Level examinations, your collected behaviour and skilful action in the face of adversity, and your formidable reputation throughout the wizarding world are all indications that you will have excellent prospects despite this decision. The Board of Governors wishes you well in your future pursuits, and fervently hopes that you will be able to make alternative educational arrangements. To that end, we authorise the Headmaster to place the full force and resources of the institution at your disposal.

Sincerely yours,

Edward Parkinson

Vice Chair, Board of Governors

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

August 6

Harry picked up the coffee table that sat before the fireplace. He hefted it by its end, and sent it flying through the bay windows. Glass rained down into the small yard below. It felt good.

Hedwig flapped mournfully about the bedroom, and attempted to remain clear of Harry's rampage. Her cage was toppled and bent. Harry dragged his school trunk out of the closet. He lifted the empty trunk high over his head, and tossed it through the broken window. The remaining bits of glass that clung to the cracked frame lost their hold.

The previous nine days played through his mind, fast then slow, slow then fast, clear to distorted to clear. The letter from the Governors hurt him deeply, but Madam Bones had predicted it. In the end - the bitter end - all he could see before him was Hermione's agony, and all he could hear were her screams as Voldemort had torn into her mind.

"I'm going to kill him, Hedwig!" Harry raged. "I'm going to kill him, and I'm going to put an end to all of this!"

He toppled the couch. The anger coursed through him so strongly that his entire head burned and his vision darkened around the edges. He methodically shredded the cushions with his hands. The fabric blackened and heat licked at him. When there was nothing left he cried out in fury and pain, and the plastered walls cracked in several places.

He wrapped his hands around the sides of the writing desk, pulled and swung. The desk shattered against the headboard of the bed. Loose papers flew and then fluttered to the floor. He pulled at the red and gold hangings that framed the headboard and tore them from end to end, then tossed the remains atop the bed. Brandishing a broken leg from the writing desk, Harry swung at the bedposts until they cracked and fell.

He gulped in great heaving breaths as he looked around the ruined room. Another pane of cracked

glass slid from its frame and broke into slivers that blanketed the wooden floor. It didn't feel good anymore, he decided. Hedwig settled atop the intact armchair, and the room went silent except for a gentle but insistent rapping.

Harry was spent. "Go away," he said.

"I need to see that you're all right," Lupin called through the door. "It doesn't sound good in there, Harry. Would you please let me in?"

"Suit yourself," Harry said. The door unlocked.

Lupin opened the door and peered in cautiously. "No structural damage, I trust?" he joked. Harry said nothing.

"The Weasleys are very grateful for Ginny's rescue, you know," Lupin told him. "Ron, Bill and Fred are still here, if you care to know that. They would tell you the same."

"It was all Ron. I just had to catch her," said Harry flatly.

"Dumbledore wishes to see you," Lupin told him.

Harry felt the rage stir inside. "I don't want to see him," he spat. "I'm not sure who I hate more – him or Voldemort."

Lupin stared at the floor for a long time. Finally, he said, "He will doubtless stay here until he sees you. Would you please let him come in?"

Harry barely nodded. Lupin rose and opened the door, and Harry saw Dumbledore at the head of the stairs.

"I'll see him *alone*," Harry ordered. Lupin looked as though he were about to say something, but stopped himself and left the room.

"Good morning, Harry," Dumbledore said, his eyes slowly moving across the damage. "Your taste in décor has changed somewhat since I last visited."

"Say what you need to say, and then *go*," Harry snarled, his fists balled.

"Ah... the letter from the Board of Governors must lie somewhere amidst the debris. No, Harry – the Board's work speaks for itself. I had thought that I might return your wand," Dumbledore said calmly, "but your demeanour in recent hours suggests otherwise." He waved his hand and the door closed behind him.

"I don't need it, and I don't give a damn about the letter or the bloody Board of Governors," Harry said murderously.

"Mind your language, please. You most certainly do need your wand," Dumbledore said. "I shall

leave it with Remus.”

Harry refused to look at him, for fear of what might happen next. “Snap it in two, for all I care.”

Dumbledore regarded him carefully. “Surely you do not mean that.”

“It’s done nothing but bring trouble, to me and everyone else,” Harry fumed.

“I see. Would you have preferred spending your adolescence in the Dursley’s cupboard?” asked Dumbledore.

Harry felt the anger rise again. “You’re the one who chose them, who insisted on them,” he growled.

Dumbledore appeared to be weighing something in his mind. He waited for a time, and then said, “I understand. We shall not be discussing your wand, or the friends you have made, or the lives you have saved, or any of the positive experiences that you have had over the last five years. We shall be discussing the ways in which I have brought you grief.”

Harry moved toward Dumbledore menacingly. Dumbledore did not move. “You could have killed her,” Harry snarled. “You knew exactly what you were doing to her!”

Dumbledore said nothing as Harry closed in. He waited until Harry came to a stop, inches away. “I have missed the mark, it seems,” he responded. “Our conversation is to be focused on Miss Granger. It seems that you require an apology. Very well, Harry. I am sorry that the safeguarding charm –”

“Sorry doesn’t wash! That was no charm, it was an effing *curse* – and don’t you dare lecture me about my language,” Harry seethed through clenched teeth. “If I had understood, I would have tossed you out that night.”

Dumbledore remained implacable, which irritated Harry all the more. “Miss Granger is a brilliant witch. Do you not think that she understood the risks associated with a spell of that nature? Do you not think that she understood what was at stake?”

“‘*I am loathe to employ it...*’” Harry mocked. “What rot! She asked because you offered – you baited her into it!”

“I did no such thing, Harry,” Dumbledore assured him. “I trusted that Miss Granger possessed the maturity to consider her options. I withdrew an option, and she refused to have it withdrawn. That was my first mistake; I should have persisted. It was necessary that she clear her mind of all but the secret to be safeguarded. I overestimated her ability to do this, and that was my second mistake. I admit to you that it could have been catastrophic in her case. Would you believe that Miss Granger was possessed of at least twenty-six discrete conscious thoughts at the time that I cast the spell? I share Professor Flitwick’s admiration of her intellect. The professor devoted a good portion of yesterday to sifting through the shadows of the intended safeguard. When

unconscious thoughts were taken into account, the number of facets was formidable.”

“I don’t want to hear your excuses. When were you planning to remove it from *ME* ?” Harry seethed.

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow. “Did you feel any sensation yesterday in the vicinity of the runes, Harry? It may have been an itch you couldn’t seem to scratch, or tingling, or even burning.”

Harry crossed his arms. “I had a lot of time to think yesterday. I imagine I would have noticed if my hand hurt.”

“That is most curious,” Dumbledore said. “May I?” He reached for Harry’s hand, and gave his wand a complex wave. Three runes appeared in ghostly blue.

“Well?” Harry asked impatiently.

“These runes should not be present... and they are not the same runes that were cast in the safeguarding,” Dumbledore said. He sounded apprehensive, and Harry suddenly felt cold.

“I... I didn’t do anything,” Harry insisted. “Did... did Voldemort...?”

Dumbledore continued to carefully examine Harry’s hand. “One of the runes gives me pause, but I do not believe that Voldemort is responsible. The changes are quite interesting... have you studied Ancient Runes, Harry?”

“No, I took Care of Magical Creatures,” Harry said.

“Ah, of course. I shall attempt an explanation. Magical runes are divided into three categories, known as aetts,” Dumbledore explained. “Runic spellcrafting typically draws one rune from each of the three aetts. The safeguarding spell employed *uruz* to strengthen the will, *perþ* to keep mysteries hidden and secret, and *inguz* for grounding – to keep the mind from ascending unfettered. Do you understand?”

Harry thought hard. “All three sound related to Occlumency,” he offered.

Dumbledore smiled. “Very good. It was *perþ* that we believe caused Miss Granger’s discomfort. Tell me – why were the runes cast on the both of you?”

Harry struggled for an answer, and one came to him. “Because she couldn’t practice Occlumency, and I could. You... you tied us together.”

“Excellent – you may take to spellcrafting rather easily,” Dumbledore complimented him.

“So why did they change?” Harry asked nervously.

“That is the question of the day, is it not?” Dumbledore took the tip of his wand, and highlighted the first rune. “*Uruz* has been replaced by *gebo* , the gift. This typically strengthens a relationship.

It implies the acceptance of a debt – not a wizard’s debt, but one that does not require repayment. *Perþ* has been replaced by *naupiz*, the need. This indicates an imbalance, a need to be fulfilled. *Inguz* has been replaced by *eihwaz*, the sign of change. *Eihwaz* usually reflects the process of unearthing mysteries, of confronting one’s deepest fears.”

“That third one, it looks like a tree,” Harry noticed.

“*Eihwaz* signifies the yew tree,” Dumbledore said gravely.

Harry pulled his hand free. “Voldemort’s wand...”

“*Eihwaz* also refers to death and immortality, but only when used alone. Again, I do not believe that Voldemort is responsible for the change,” Dumbledore assured him. “What were you thinking of, yesterday afternoon?”

“A lot of things,” Harry said sullenly.

“Of that I have no doubt. I shall have Professor Flitwick enquire after Miss Granger. I wonder if perhaps the runes have returned to her hand?” Dumbledore asked no one in particular.

“As long as the safeguard is gone, I’m satisfied,” Harry snapped.

“It is removed to the greatest extent possible. Miss Granger may have had more on her mind than either Professor Flitwick or I could discern,” Dumbledore told him, and then added curtly, “In any case, the safeguard is no longer necessary or even useful. Voldemort will shortly be aware of the entire prophecy, if that is not in fact already the case.”

“I don’t regret what I did,” Harry insisted.

“When Miss Granger –” Dumbledore began.

Harry cut Dumbledore off. “I see that you’re no longer on a first-name basis with Hermione, by the way,” he sneered. “Why is that, I wonder?”

Dumbledore’s reserve seemed to crack a bit, and he frowned. “I committed an error that put her at risk, and I have acknowledged that to her – and to you. It is painful to realise for the first time that authorities are imperfect, but that experience is part of leaving childhood behind. You would do well to remember that. I am fallible, Harry. I have always been fallible. Until recently, you have possessed neither the sophistication nor the inclination to notice. I will have to once again earn Miss Granger’s trust.” He paused, and added for emphasis, “We may share that burden in common.”

“I know that,” Harry said darkly. “Every time I think of her, I see her flinching at the sight of me. She was my best friend. She was the best friend I could ever have hoped for, and now... I don’t know. I don’t regret it, though. She’s still alive, and that’s enough.”

“You most certainly regret your actions, Harry,” Dumbledore chided him. “I could feel the pain

of your regret the moment that I entered the Granger's home. In fact, I would be concerned if you were not regretful. However, there is more that weighs upon you."

Harry crossed his arms, and sneered, "You understand me so well – go on, then."

Dumbledore explained, "You saved Miss Granger's life, without question – and the lives of everyone else confined within that room – but you were not able to protect her from harm. Voldemort and his servants violated her mind in unspeakable and unforgivable ways, and you were forced to sit idly by. Her pain injured you nearly as much as you would have been injured by her death. I believe this may be part of the reason that the runes were perpetuated and changed. Even that is not the worst of it."

"Oh, I can hardly wait," Harry said in a scathing monotone worthy of Snape.

"Miss Granger may have been the only person in whom you vested absolute trust. Your trust has been shaken. You feel that there is no one left to trust. You believe that you are alone," Dumbledore concluded.

Harry shouted, "*I should be alone!*"

"You cannot be alone. We must assume that Voldemort possesses the entire prophecy. We know that he performed Legilimency upon Mr. Granger. It is possible that he holds a connection of some kind with Miss Weasley; I am surprised that you did not consider that possibility. You no longer possess any margin of safety. He will come for you," said Dumbledore.

"He wants something from me," Harry mused. "He could easily have killed me, but he didn't."

Dumbledore said forcefully, "Harry, Voldemort will know that I cannot kill him. He has no reason to fear me, or anyone other than you. The lives of his followers are meaningless to him. Can you envision the horrors ahead?"

Harry nodded. "That's why I have to kill him soon," he said calmly.

Dumbledore's eyebrows rose. "You are unprepared for single combat with Voldemort. He would surely kill you."

"Then I'll take him with me," Harry blustered.

"You must not do that, Harry. I must be sure that there is no confusion in your mind on this point. You must *not* do that. You must defeat him, and you must survive," Dumbledore insisted.

"What – is there another prophecy? Something else you've neglected to tell me?" Harry sneered

"None of which I am aware," Dumbledore answered. "It is very likely that Tom's death will drive his remaining followers to ever darker and more desperate acts. The side of light will need your skills and your leadership for some time to come."

Harry's voice quaked with barely restrained anger. "Your masters don't agree."

Dumbledore sighed. "Do you refer to the Board of Governors? I am accountable to the Board; that is not the same as servitude. You must know that the Board of Governors is of more than one mind, Harry. Could you not read between the lines of the letter that you were sent? Did you not notice that the vice-chair, and not the chair signed it? Did you not see that –?"

"*It's done*," Harry snarled.

"You will be trained, Harry. You will be trained, you will defeat Voldemort, you will live, and you will lead," Dumbledore said matter-of-factly. "That path may seem unattainable to you at this moment, but it is not."

"That's ridiculous," Harry said dismissively.

"You will be trained. You can still become a truly great Auror, just as Professor McGonagall promised you... perhaps the greatest to ever serve," Dumbledore promised.

"No," Harry said.

Dumbledore insisted, "I mean that sincerely. You possess all the talents required –"

"*No!*" shouted Harry.

Dumbledore was clearly taken aback. "I am sorry, but I do not understand."

"I don't want to be an Auror anymore, and I certainly don't want to work for the ruddy Ministry," Harry raged. "I know what I am. Don't worry; I'll be your weapon. I'll learn to kill him, and I'll do it for you... but that will be the end of it, do you hear? *I'll be done with all of it, and all of you!*"

Dumbledore appeared profoundly sad. "How is it that you have lost yourself so easily?" he asked quietly.

"How would you know if I were lost? *You don't know me at all.* You know the *Boy-Who-Lived*," Harry shot back.

Dumbledore regarded Harry for quite some time, long enough for Harry to descend from anger to hard breathing to uncomfortable stillness. Then the Headmaster of Hogwarts drew himself up, and once again became the very image of poise and control. "I do not believe that to be true," he said. "If it proves to be true, however, then I hope to rectify that shortcoming over the next two years. The Board of Governors promised the full force and resources of the institution in support of your alternative education, and I intend to hold them to their promise. You *will* be trained, Harry – as my apprentice."

Harry was stunned by the offer. "Erm... I don't know..."

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled. "You seem resistant to my proposition. Perhaps I should demonstrate my bona fides." Dumbledore withdrew his wand, and handed it to Harry. He slowly turned, his gaze carefully drawn across every surface of the room. When he completed a full rotation, he closed his eyes and again slowly turned, drawing slow and deep breaths as he moved. At the end of the second rotation, he held out his hands, palms out, and said in a lingering whisper that shattered the quiet, "*Reparo...*" As he turned a third time, the room reassembled itself in a slow-moving wave that followed the lead of Dumbledore's outstretched hands. At the end of the third rotation, there was no evidence that anything in the room had ever been touched. The contents of the desk and bookshelf were returned to their rightful places. Even the coffee table and the school trunk flew back into the room, before the windows were reconstructed. Dumbledore stopped, and slowly opened his eyes.

Remembering the night when Dumbledore had cast the safeguard, Harry quickly fetched one of the armchairs. Dumbledore lightly sat, and smiled kindly at Harry. "That was pure Light magic, Harry. I feel mildly refreshed, in truth."

Harry clumsily returned Dumbledore's wand. Deep inside, he was tremendously impressed. He knew full well that Dumbledore might be the only wizard who could prepare him to kill Voldemort. Still, he remembered reading or hearing about apprenticeship arrangements. They were employed widely through the nineteenth century, and they struck Harry as being a step removed from enslavement. Being bound to Dumbledore was not something that Harry found appealing in the slightest.

"I might be interested," Harry said, "but I'm not cut out to be a servant."

Dumbledore patted him on the shoulder. "I lack the ego for a traditional apprenticeship arrangement, Harry. All of that fawning and bowing and scraping... I simply have no use for it. You say that you are interested in considering apprenticeship. I am glad for the opportunity. You will report to my office at nine o'clock on August the 30th. At that time, we shall decide whether to put an apprenticeship agreement into force. There are faculty meetings scheduled for the remainder of that day, which you should plan to attend. I will visit you at least once prior to that time, so that we can discuss the apprenticeship and whatever else may be on your mind. We will also address your living arrangements at that time."

"I said I'm interested. I didn't say I'd do it. As for living arrangements, *if* I do this, I expect that I'll be commuting from Hogsmeade or elsewhere," Harry said firmly, and surprising himself.

Dumbledore said, "We will discuss that point. It may be necessary for you to remain on the Hogwarts grounds –"

Harry instinctively reacted. "What's the point in that, if I can no longer be kept safe?" he demanded.

"If Voldemort no longer fears me, then your presence may be the only barrier to a direct attack upon Hogwarts," explained Dumbledore.

Deflated, Harry simply said, “I see.”

Dumbledore’s clear blue eyes bore into Harry. “I remain curious about the runes. Is there anything else that you need to tell me?”

Harry clearly felt Dumbledore’s presence drifting at the edge of his thoughts. Legilimency was little more than a lie detector unless forcefully directed, Harry understood, but he wondered how many times over the years Dumbledore might have silently tested his honesty. Angrily, Harry summoned his memory of Hermione’s agony as Wormtail used the safeguard to torture her – it was very easily recovered. Dumbledore recoiled slightly, and Harry felt his presence withdraw.

“Yes, there is,” Harry said, a sharp edge to his voice. “I want you to stay out of my mind. Please leave now.”

“Your Occlumency abilities are improving rapidly, Harry,” Dumbledore said. “I shall see you within a few days. You would do well to stay close to Grimmauld Place, for the time being.” He left Harry’s bedroom without a backward glance.

Harry closed and locked the door. The idea of remaining in the house on Grimmauld Place was little more appealing to Harry than it had been to Sirius. He looked to the box that Sirius had left to him, and then to his mother’s school chest. *Not yet*, he thought. *I just can’t*. He opened Sirius’ box, and his eyes stopped upon the envelope labelled ‘Orion’s Belt’. Unable to resist, Harry took out the envelope and opened it. Inside were three loose keys and a full page of parchment that looked as if it had been torn from a journal. Harry removed the page and began to read.

March 25

Harry –

Hello, there. You must be tiring of correspondence from your dead godfather, but it can’t be helped. If you’re reading this, then it’s summertime and my will has been enforced. Good. Not the dead part, of course. You’re free now, but freedom requires both the opportunity and the proper place. Grimmauld Place is a mausoleum, as far as I’m concerned. Luckily, I’ve a better alternative for you.

The House of Black used to hold an enormous amount of property. We played all sides in Scottish politics, wizarding and Muggle alike. We stole cattle with the MacGregors; in fact, the word “blackmail” originated with my ancestors. Under the law they’re your ancestors now as well, though that’s as much curse as blessing. We also conspired against the MacGregors with the Campbells. As a result, we ended up with fiefs and peerage. The principal male heir of the House of Black technically holds the title Earl of Bercliffe. Since I’m dead, that makes you the Earl. It means little, as the wizarding titles were hidden from the peerage rolls long ago.

I’ve charged Diggle to unload most of the property held by the Black Trust, including the

family manor in Sussex. Most people would rather receive money than land, and even the Weasleys couldn't use a 40-room manor with a keep and thousands of acres (not to mention that manors are drafty, expensive to maintain, and frequently riddled with boggarts and other lovelies). He's to restock the coffers of the Trust with the proceeds, and put the rest in investments for you. I'm sure Gringotts will have all the details. Diggle's a bit dodgy, but he means well and I think that he has your interests at heart.

There are two properties from the Trust for you, besides the mausoleum. Both are on the family's ancestral lands in Scotland. One was the place where we would summer with our cousins. Andromeda was my favourite, of course. I know Narcissa's a Malfoy now, and I know I had unpleasant things to say about her last summer, but you need to understand that she was different when I was a lad. Bellatrix was born a bitch, I'm afraid. My brother Regulus was around in those days, as well. Reggie was wild like me, but whip smart like Andromeda. It's a shame he turned out as he did. I have a few good memories. The family situation only went to hell when I set off to Hogwarts, not that I regret parting ways with dear old Mother and Father. The portrait shows Mother on one of her better days, truth be told. The main building is a tower house, built around 1500. It had a few ghosts, but they were fairly tame. It was leased to Muggles in the '80s, as I understand it, but has been vacant for a few years. The house is on about a thousand acres, south of St. Ebb on the coast. You have a quarter-mile of your own beach at the base of the cliffs. There are two huge stacks, one at either end of the beach. You could follow the beach behind the northernmost stack if you like.

The other property is called Orion's Belt. It's a bothy atop the cliffs to the south of the tower house. It was always my favourite part of the place. Moony, Prongs and I used to sneak there from time to time. Wormtail (the rotten bastard) was always too much a coward for that. Prongs and I spent part of the summer after graduation there. I lived in it periodically after that. Your parents used it a time or two. Who knows? Perhaps you've been there, in a fashion.

I was lusting after Muggle women in those days, so there's not a magical thing to be found inside. It's even set for power and plumbing and such. It has wards, but they're cast around it rather than against it; don't move any boulders or flagstones placed in the area. The wards are unusual. Muggles can see the bothy, but wizards can't see it unless you give them permission. Think of it as a limited Fidelius. Phineas Nigellus came up with it (he was a total bastard, reputedly, but definitely a genius). Mother and Father were a quarter mile away from me for an entire summer, and hadn't the slightest idea. I don't think there's anyone left alive except Moony who had permission from me. You should know that the wards also dampen spells and block Apparation. If you take your wand or anything else that's charmed, then be sure to stow it in the lead box beside the wood stove.

There were times when I just needed somewhere to get away from all the scheming and the fighting and the rubbish. The bothy was perfect for that. I reason that you'll need that, more than I ever did. In the event of my death, you'll find that both the tower house and the bothy have been fixed up and made ready for you. Tell Dumbledore and his watchdogs to sod off, and have a visit. Toss a pebble or two over the cliffs. Walk the beach. Watch the sunrise. Howl at

the moon. Share the place with someone special, live it up with your friends, or keep it all to yourself. Drink a toast for me. Better yet, drink one for all of us. I assure you, we're watching.

Good luck, lad.

- S.B.

Harry shook the envelope, and the keys fell into his hand. A small scrap of parchment covered with loop script fell along with them. It said:

The tower house is located at 1 Lissance Lane, Bercliffe. Stand at the main entry to the tower, and face directly toward the southernmost stack. You will see the bothy, which is exactly one-quarter mile away.

Harry presumed that he had to read the message on the scrap before he could see the bothy, just as he'd been shown the address to Grimmauld Place before his first visit there. He tucked the scrap and the keys into one of his pockets. Insistent pounding at the door pulled Harry from his thoughts.

"Go – away !" Harry shouted.

Ron called through the door, "We just want to see that you're all right, Harry. We've been bloody patient about it!"

Bill added, "It sounded like a brawl in there. Remus isn't talking, and Dumbledore left. That leaves us to assume the worst, you know."

"Bill, I was fond of Chapter 11 in *Scandalous Tactics for Duelling* . Don't test me," Harry growled. On the other side of the door, Bill snorted.

"What about it?" Fred asked.

Bill explained with a chuckle, "It's a very memorable chapter. The title is 'Why Challenge Your Opponent's Manhood, When You Can Remove It Instead?'"

Fred howled, "Harry, if you come within a foot of my manhood, I will personally prepare all of your meals for the next year! Get accustomed to feathers!"

"I'm not joking. Go – away ; all of you!" Harry snarled. As he began to walk away, he noticed the thin trail of an Extendable Ear peeking under the door. He dropped to his hands and knees, crept forward, put his mouth to the end of the Ear, and shouted, "GO AWAY!" There was a shriek, accompanied by the telltale thump of falling-body-against-wooden-floor.

"Harry, don't be like this," Ron pleaded.

Harry snapped, "Like what – at wit's end? *Too late*, I'm already there!" He heard a popping

sound and spun, fists raised. Dobby cowered, and Harry lowered his hands.

The house-elf surveyed the room, and called out, “Harry Potter is all right, sirs.”

“See? I’m fine. *Go – away !*” Harry yelled toward the door.

Dobby shook his head. “Professor Dumbledore must have brought house-elves to repair Harry Potter’s room... Dobby is grateful, but Dobby could have fixed everything on his own.”

“You can leave now,” Harry said firmly.

Dobby’s face fell. “Dobby does not wish to leave. Dobby has sworn to serve Harry Potter.”

Harry took a deep breath. “I meant that you should leave the room,” he said. “I don’t want you to leave Grimmauld Place, unless that is what *you* want.”

Dobby put his hands on his hips, striking a caricature of Mrs. Weasley. “Dobby does not serve this house,” he insisted firmly. “Dobby serves Harry Potter. It is important that Harry Potter understand the difference.”

Harry simply couldn’t bring himself to be angry at Dobby. *Perhaps there is someone I can trust completely*, he thought. He moved to kneel beside Dobby, and Dobby shifted nervously from one foot to the other. “You saved my life again, Dobby. Those Death Eaters would have killed all of us. I’m accumulating a very large wizarding debt to you, you know,” Harry said.

Dobby’s eyes widened. “It is not possible for Harry Potter to owe a wizarding debt to Dobby,” he said in awe. “Harry Potter surely does not know what he is saying... not that Dobby questions!”

Harry smiled slightly. “You may question as often as you like,” he said. “How can I repay you?”

Dobby asked, “Re... pay?” as though he were chewing on the word. “House-elves are not repaid. House-elves are forever paying.”

“Fine – a gift, then,” Harry insisted. “I want you and Winky to take a room for your quarters.”

Dobby gaped at Harry. “This is Harry Potter’s house, not Dobby’s or Winky’s,” he managed after a long pause.

“Pick a room. Fix it to your liking,” Harry continued. “You both deserve a proper place of your own. You shouldn’t sleep in that hovel off the kitchen.”

“But... but... where would Harry Potter’s friends stay?” Dobby spluttered.

“Erm... you can move as soon as the Weasleys leave. I’ll be at Hogwarts soon, of course,” Harry replied unevenly.

Dobby looked uncertain. “Dobby is grateful, but...” he began.

“I’d like to be alone now, if you don’t mind,” Harry said firmly.

Dobby immediately skittered toward the door. “As you wish, Harry Potter,” he said.

Harry struggled with an impulse, and gave into it. “Dobby?”

The house-elf stopped just shy of the door. “Yes, Harry Potter?”

“Would you please send in Ron?” Harry asked. “Just Ron and not his brothers.”

Dobby nodded. Ron was obviously waiting near the door, because Dobby quickly pulled him into the room before closing the door.

“How’s your shoulder?” Harry asked.

Ron wound around his arm a few times. “Good enough,” he said. “Look, mate... I just wanted to say that you made a smashing save. I didn’t think any of it through, you know? If you hadn’t been able to snatch her... well, Ginny’s tiptop and I’m grateful. You should have heard Mum. I think she’s ready to mint you your own Order of Merlin medallion.”

“How did you make out with her, anyway?” asked Harry. “She was whacking you with a handbag the last that I saw.”

Ron grimaced. “The whole thing was pure Mum – hug, then punish, then hug, then punish. We ended on a hug, thank Merlin.” He slowly walked around, taking in the fixtures and furnishings, and observed, “This is a very nice room.”

Harry sighed. “I suppose you’ll be asking me why all the fuss, and that sort of thing?”

Ron came to the armchair, and sat. “No,” he said.

Harry was thrown. “I’m sorry?”

“No,” repeated Ron. “There’s no point. You’ll either deflect the question, or throw out a reason that any fool can see through.”

“I deserve that,” said Harry.

“Damn right,” Ron agreed. “Besides, erm... I already know you’ve been dismissed. I imagine it’ll make the *Prophet* tomorrow.”

Harry closed his eyes, and saw the same thing he’d seen for the better part of two days. He blurted out, “I can’t get it out of my head. The scream that came out of her, it wasn’t even human. All I could do was sit there...” His anger rose simply by talking about it.

Ron said quietly, “If I’d been approached by an Obliviator, I might have taken him up on the offer.”

“I want him to suffer like that,” Harry seethed. “I want him to feel that pain! I –”

Ron stood up. “That’s enough, mate. I don’t fancy ending up like the bad end of a brawl.”

Harry’s throat tightened. “Was I...?”

“Ready to pop off?” Ron asked. “Dunno. You had the same look at Hermione’s house, before... you know...”

“Believe me – I know,” Harry grumbled.

Ron dismissed him. “Look, Dad was right; they would have killed us all. You had a chance, you took it, they’re dead, and that’s too bad for them. Any of us would have done the same, given the chance. If you don’t see that, it’s only because you don’t want to look.”

“I didn’t want to kill,” Harry insisted.

“You didn’t want Hermione to be killed,” Ron countered, “and that won out. I’m capable of killing to save her, or you, or my family. I happily tossed Wormtail off that broom, because he took Ginny. I hope that he’s dead.”

“It feels so wrong,” Harry said.

“I don’t think you really care that you killed them. You were out of control, and you didn’t like that at all,” Ron concluded.

Harry thought about that for a long while, and Ron stayed silent.

“Who are you, and what have you done with the real Ron?” Harry finally asked.

Ron laughed. “He’s on holiday. Maybe it has to do with the brains? Seriously, I think Hermione’s finally rubbed off on me.”

Harry dangled the letter from Sirius. “I don’t want to hold out on you. You have to read this,” he told Ron.

Ron scanned the letter. “Sirius does keep popping up, doesn’t he...? An Earl – is that like a prince, or something...? There was a 60-room castle, and he gave it up? I *never* understood him... *Merlin! Your own beach?* This sounds like quite the bachelor flat. I expect Bill would be jealous... *no magic*? Gods, I don’t know about that...” He slowed down at the last of it, carefully reading the final paragraph. “He understood you, didn’t he? He really understood.”

“It gets better,” Harry said. He found his saddlebags, and pulled out the invitation from Keith MacLeish.

Ron read the front of the card quickly. “Doesn’t he own every wizarding paper in the world, more or less?”

Harry nodded. “You might want to read the other side,” he suggested.

Ron read the handwritten note, and his face beetled into confusion. “Care to explain this?”

“I don’t know. I assume that Diggle sold him the manor that Sirius mentioned in his letter. Somehow, I’ve ended up his business partner as well – Merlin only knows what that means. I’m sure that Remus can help sort it out,” Harry said hopefully.

“Nothing’s ever simple for you, is it?” Ron observed.

Harry surveyed his room. *Sirius was right – this house is a mausoleum*, he thought. “I have a proposition for you,” he told Ron. “I doubt that it’s a good idea.”

“We’re good at bad ideas, aren’t we?” Ron laughed. “Let’s have it, then.”

“We need to get out of here,” Harry said.

“Brilliant!” Ron agreed. “What did you have in mind – popping down to Diagon Alley, or something?”

“I thought we might pop up to the new house,” Harry explained. “I was thinking about leaving tonight, with a couple of stops along the way. After all, it’s nearly four weeks until you need to catch the Express.”

Ron stared at him, eyes wide and unblinking.

“Ron? Hello? Are you with me, Ron?” Harry asked.

“You’re... you’re asking if I want to... to run off... for the rest of the summer?” Ron stammered.

Harry chuckled. “All right – for a week, then. What do you think?”

Ron deadpanned, “Let me get this right – you want me to take off tonight on a 300 mile jaunt, presumably with no permission and certainly with no protection, to an unfamiliar house in an unfamiliar place, in the company of a known Death Eater magnet?”

Harry said, “That covers it. I figured it would be more like twice that far, though. I’m concerned about Luna, and I think that I should try to see Hermione.”

Ron mulled over Harry’s plan. “Checking on Luna... I suppose that’s a good idea. George is still staying there. Do you, um, think that Hermione’s ready to see you?”

Harry shrugged. “I’m not planning on coming back here, and I imagine she’d never forgive me if I disappear again for a month.”

Ron fumed, “It’ll be more than a month, mate. I mean, we can see you on Hogsmeade weekends...”

Harry smiled faintly. “Dumbledore has an idea about that. We have to work out the details, but... I’ll be close by. You’ll see enough of me, I think.”

Ron brightened. “There’s a bit of good news! An apprenticeship, then?”

Harry’s jaw dropped. “Wha... how did...?”

“It’s the obvious solution, Harry,” Ron shrugged. “It’s not as if you’d be packed off to trade school, or left to self-study. No one apprentices anymore, of course – leave it to Harry Potter to be original.”

Harry watched Ron’s face, to see if he was jesting or being cynical. Satisfied that Ron was simply being Ron, he explained, “Dumbledore managed to get the Board of Governors to offer support for my ‘alternative education’, or something like that. I think he plans to make them eat their words.”

Ron grinned. “Good show. So, you’re planning on a few weeks at Sirius’ other place, and then back here to catch the Express?”

“I’m not planning on coming back at all,” Harry answered. “I can’t stay in this house anymore. I’ll likely give it to Remus.”

“Really?” Ron asked in surprise, adding, “So you’ll go straight to Hogwarts from the new house, then?”

Harry said delicately, “Ron... I don’t know precisely how this is all going to work. I don’t know how the apprenticeship will work. I don’t know if I ride the Express. I don’t know where I’ll be living... Nothing is decided.”

Ron frowned. “I hadn’t thought... I suppose you wouldn’t stay in our dorm anymore, in any case.”

“I’m leaving tonight. What do you think?” asked Harry.

“I think we’ve both gone mad – that’s what I think. I’m in,” Ron answered. “I don’t know if I can afford to travel, though...”

Harry smiled. “You’re good for it. You can repay me from your share of the inheritance... unless your Mum and Dad disown you for doing this, in which case you can work it off.”

“I hope you can cook something besides Yorkshire pudding,” Ron said. “No magic – that’s roughing it!”

“See if you can sneak your things up here, later – say, after eleven?” Harry suggested. “I hope that Hermione doesn’t throw a fit.”

“I know that *I* wouldn’t be upset if you showed up at my window in the middle of the bloody night,” Ron wisecracked.

“She’ll probably be awake,” Harry mused. “I would be.”

“It’s a good thing Mum and Dad are early sleepers,” Ron said. He added by way of explanation, “They’re still at the Grangers’ house. Dad’s been out to the Burrow a few times. I... I guess it’s quite bad.”

“We’ll just have to play it quietly,” Harry said.

“If we get to the Grangers’ between midnight and one o’clock and spend an hour there... we should make the Lovegoods’ before sunrise,” Ron calculated. He stopped at the door, and cracked a smile. “Harry... it means a lot to me that you’d think to ask me... look – it means a lot, right?”

Harry took his dinner with Lupin and the three Weasleys. He accepted some of Bill and Fred’s praise, and deflected most back to Ron. George had reported that Luna was definitely going to pull through, according to Fred. Harry was pleased to hear the news, but hadn’t realised that her survival had ever been in question; that only increased his certainty about looking in on her. Lupin told him that the Aurors had just missed Lucius Malfoy, and that there was no sign of Wormtail – dead or alive. Lupin seemed almost wary, but Harry counted the days and knew that the werewolf would put his special room to use in a night or two.

Harry retired early. He tried napping, to no avail. Every time that he closed his eyes, he was assaulted by the same memory. He sat on the couch before a flickering fire and began to write a letter for Remus. He crumpled the first three sheets of parchment in disgust. He was in the process of butchering the fourth, when the floor creaked behind him.

“You’re a bit early,” Harry said without turning around.

“You’d be referring to the *other* one planning to sneak out in the night, I believe?” Remus scolded. “Ron’s loyal, but not very subtle. I see you’re writing a letter. Shall I save you the effort?”

Harry felt his face flush. “I need to get out of here. I hope that you understand.”

“See? That was so much simpler than a letter,” Remus said. “Let’s try it a second time. This time, stand up and turn around. The least you can do is speak to me, and not to the floorboards.”

Harry set aside his quill and small stack of parchment. He stood, and nervous shoved his hands into his pockets. “I need to get out of here,” he repeated. “I can’t stand being in this house anymore.” He looked into Lupin’s eyes, and hastily added, “Not because of you, of course! It’s just that I expect to see him around every corner. And now, when I close my eyes... I just know I’ll never be able to settle things here.”

Lupin looked at him thoughtfully. “I wondered how long you’d last in this house,” he said. “Even I find it difficult at times, I must admit. Will you want the Trust to dispose of it, then?”

Harry already had an answer. “Sirius promised the Malfoys that they could be safe here, and you

need a place to live. I'll sell the house to you for a Galleon, if you want it."

Lupin smiled faintly. "I'll remain a tenant for now. I may find it difficult at times, but you and this house are the last remaining connections to my friends. I have no interest in giving up either connection."

Harry felt his eyes moisten, and he didn't care. Lupin had already seen him break down; there was no point in pretence.

"I'm glad for that," Harry said in a strained voice. "You're all right with my leaving, then?"

Lupin gestured toward Sirius' box. "I am. Dumbledore won't be, but that's between the two of you. Besides, I have a fair idea where you're heading. You'll need this, of course." He withdrew Harry's wand from within his robes, and handed it over. "You left this at the Granger's as well," he added, and produced the framed picture of Hermione.

Harry pocketed the wand, and set aside the picture. "Sirius said you'd been there before," he noted.

For the first time that summer, Harry didn't feel badly at the sight of Lupin's smile. Lupin closed his eyes as the smile spread from ear to ear. "Oh, I've been there. It's beautiful country, in a rough sort of way. We started slipping out during seventh year, you see. It was a little over an hour by broom. We'd drink and tell lies half the night, and then fly back before morning. We were usually half asleep and half pissed; it's a wonder none of us ever flew smack into a tree or a building."

Harry grinned at the image of Sirius and Lupin wildly weaving across the sky. "He said that he lived there for a while, after Hogwarts."

"The bothy was... well, it was what we called a 'pad' back in the 70s. Sirius had, erm, an active social life – *very* active. Too active for my liking, I admit... *and* he had hideous taste in music," Lupin explained. "Still, I spent a fair bit of time in St. Ebb, especially during the summer following Hogwarts. I imagine the bothy is in serious need of redecorating. It was very 'in' at the time, but styles have certainly changed over the years."

"What about Ron, then?" Harry asked apprehensively.

"I suggest that he informs his parents by morning," Lupin answered. "When Bill and Fred find his room empty, they'll ask and I'll have to answer. Ride carefully, the both of you – be sure to wear the helmets!"

"Remus...?" Harry called just before Lupin reached the door.

"What is it?" Lupin asked.

Harry struggled to say, "I just wanted to say... I know you didn't want to be a father... but this week..."

“I’m glad that I could be there for you,” said Lupin.

“Will you still be there?” Harry asked.

Lupin smiled. “For as long as you like,” he said. “Let me know that you’re safe, from time to time.” He quickly left the room.

Harry loaded his trunk with books and clothes and effects and his two brooms, and reduced it. He walked quietly down the stairs to the cellar, and packed away his weights and bags. With the two cases reduced and dropped into his saddlebag next to his trunk, he headed back up the stairs and into the kitchen. He thought that he spotted Dobby peeking out from the pantry; if so, the house-elf didn’t venture out. He nearly ran into Ron.

“Ready?” he asked.

Ron swallowed a mouthful of cookie, and held up a small athletic bag. “Not much to take along,” he said.

Harry reduced the bag, and dropped it into his saddlebags. At the front door, he enlarged both helmets and offered one to Ron.

Ron’s Nimbus racer was propped next to the door. “I’ll ride this, if it’s all the same,” Ron said.

“We can talk if you wear the helmet,” Harry pointed out. “Probably safer that way, right?”

Ron nodded, and slipped on the helmet. Harry enlarged the Bonneville, and they headed toward Winchester and the Grangers' house.

Harry Potter and the Years of Rebellion

There's No Place Like Home

Chapter Eighteen

THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME

Harry stood on Hermione's roof and balanced against the dormer while Ron continued to tap lightly on her window. He could vaguely hear music, and he could see two figures through the pulled sheers, one in bed and one in a chair. There was movement. Someone stopped just behind the sheers, and looked cautiously through them.

“Any sign of her?” Harry asked.

Ron grimaced at him. “It’s just Ginny. Can’t you hear the bloody violin?” he said, much more loudly than Harry liked. He shook his head, rapped hard on the window, and said in full voice, “Oy, Hermione!”

Harry shushed Ron, who waved him off just as Hermione raised the sheers. She stood there in a dressing gown, hands on hips. After she shook her head at Ron for a long while, she opened the window.

“Ron Weasley, you are a complete nutter,” she said. “Get in here before you fall off the roof.”

“I brought a friend – do you mind?” Ron asked.

“Is it Lavender Brown?” Hermione snapped.

Ron harrumphed. “You’re not starting on that, are you? Perhaps we should leave...?”

“Get in here, before we wake the entire house – and the neighbourhood in the bargain,” said Hermione. As Ron clambered through the window, she added hesitantly, “You too, Harry.”

Harry clambered around from the side of the dormer. Hermione had walked away from the window, and he watched her for a moment. Her arms were crossed rather too tightly. She jumped at the sound of his feet landing against the bedroom floor, but didn’t turn to face him.

Ginny sat in a rocking chair in the far corner, clad in light jumper and denims, violin in hand. She gave a tired wave. “I was beginning to wonder if you’d ever show up here,” she croaked. The

strain showed on her face; Wormtail had obviously squeezed harder than Harry had ever imagined.

Harry looked to Ron, and spluttered, “Wha... did you...?”

Ron shook his head fervently. “Not a word, mate, not a word.” He gave Harry a nudge. “Are you going to cast some silencing charms, then, or do we just stare at each other all night?”

Harry withdrew his wand, and blanketed the room.

Hermione looked at a clock hung on the wall. “It’s a quarter to one. I can’t believe Professor Lupin let you do this.”

“He didn’t exactly let *us*,” Ron said proudly. “We’re on the lam.”

Hermione looked at Ron blankly for a moment, and then her eyes bugged. “You’re *what*?”

“On the lam – newly escaped,” Ron chuckled. “We’d had enough of Azkaban, so I thought I’d break Harry free, and –”

Hermione gasped sharply. “Don’t you... don’t even joke about that, Ron! It’s not funny, not at all!”

Ron fidgeted. “Erm... right, I won’t joke about escaping. I didn’t mean to wind you up...”

Hermione lit into him. “Your parents are sleeping two rooms away, and your sister’s sitting a few feet away. Strange choice of destination for a jailbreak, isn’t it?”

“I’m not returning to Grimmauld Place,” Harry said. “I thought you should know before I left. I didn’t want –”

Hermione fumed. “Didn’t want what, Harry? Didn’t want me to worry? Didn’t want to give me a fright? It’s a bit late on both counts!”

Harry frowned. “This was a mistake. I’m sorry to trouble you.” He started for the window.

Hermione said quickly, “I didn’t ask you to leave.”

“You didn’t ask me to stay, either,” Harry snapped. The rest rushed out of him. “I’m sorry I frightened you so badly. Should I have just sat there? Is that what you wanted? Did you want to die?”

“You’re out of line, Harry,” Ron warned.

Harry glared at him. “Stay out of this.”

Ron stepped between Harry and Hermione. He sneered, “What are you going to do about it, Harry

– are you going to hit me?” Hermione covered her mouth with her hands, and she shook.

Harry felt as if the wind had been knocked out of him. “I don’t want to fight with either of you. Hermione, I disappeared on you once this summer, and I didn’t want to do it twice. I just wanted to see that you were all right, before I left. I should go. Ron, come or stay – whatever.” He started for the window a second time.

“I’m not all right,” Hermione said. “I... I don’t know if... if I’ll ever be all right.” Harry turned and moved toward her, but she waved him off. Her jaw twitched, and her face coursed with a rush of pain and anger.

She shouted, “You don’t know what he did! You don’t know what he took from me! He took *everything* !” Tears ran down her face. Harry moved closer, and she waved him off again.

“I might know more than you think,” Harry said. “He’s been running around in my head for five years. I wanted to stop him, but I didn’t know how. You don’t know how it felt to watch... what they were doing to you... it was... it was...” He closed his eyes, and fought back the images.

“It was the most awful thing he’s ever seen,” Ron said. “I know, because I felt the same way. I wanted to kill all of them for hurting you. I didn’t know that Harry could actually do it.”

“Harry... I...” Hermione began.

His reserve broke. He took her hand, and tried to draw her to him, but she whipped her hand free.

“Dumbledore was right to curse me; I *was* the weak link... I was *weak* !” she cried. “And when I saw you... there was so much... so much *blood* , and I – I – I just couldn’t... I couldn’t understand how... I was on my knees and he was... he wouldn’t stop, and I couldn’t... and you were watching, and – and then you were... you were choking him, and then the blood, it was *everywhere* – I never thought... I don’t know what I expected... it was *exactly* like he... *oh God, I’m so sorry* ...” She cried until she shook. Harry stood there, and felt as useless as he’d ever felt.

After a time, she looked up at him with red face and dampened eyes, and then quickly looked away. He said quietly, “You were right to be afraid; I’m afraid of myself. I don’t know how I’m doing any of these things. When we were chasing Wormtail, I summoned Ginny.” He looked to Ginny. “*I summoned you!* I don’t know what’s happening to me.” Ginny’s eyes moistened.

Hermione wiped at her eyes with the backs of her hands. “It... it has to be good, right? Somehow this has to be good. Maybe... maybe this will help you to defeat Voldemort. We’ll figure it out somehow, Harry.” She looked to Ron. “We’ll figure it out together.”

“I’m back on your good side, then?” Ron asked.

Tears still trailed from Hermione’s eyes. “It’s a wonder you’re alive, and on anyone’s side,” she sniffed. “What on Earth were you thinking?” Ginny snorted at that.

“About halfway down, I was thinking that this wasn’t the smartest thing I’d ever done,” Ron said

seriously.

Hermione managed to look reproachful. “So, you thought you’d compound that by running off in the middle of the night – *clever* .”

Ron frowned. “Harry asked, and I said yes. I’ve done enough crying and moping for a lifetime this summer. A lot of things seem clearer now. I’m willing to fight for my friends and my family, and I’m willing to die for them. I would rather have been splattered against the ground than let that monster Wormtail make off with my sister. I would rather have died fighting than let you be killed. Harry *asked me* , and that’s worth a bit of heat from Mum and Dad.”

Hermione fumbled for a tissue. “You would have died for me?” she asked quietly.

“Without a second thought,” Ron insisted. “So would Harry. For Merlin’s sake, he charged half a dozen Death Eaters with his bare hands! You were ready to be killed rather than give up on Harry. I’d like to think you would have done the same for me. We really are friends to the end, right?”

Hermione looked to Harry, who shrugged. “I’ve already asked who he is, and what he’s done with Ron,” he said. Ron grinned at them both.

“Where do you go from here, then?” Hermione asked.

“I thought that we should look in on Luna,” Harry said.

Hermione lowered her eyes. “Ginny’s been communicating with George. I feel... I haven’t treated her the way that she deserves to be treated. Don’t misunderstand – I certainly haven’t been like the Ravenclaws, stealing her things and the like. I’ve mocked her, though. I’ve treated her as poorly as everyone has. I hope that she’d be open to an apology on my part.”

Ron sighed. “I was cruel to her, the last time that she talked to me. She was trying to be nice to me, and I was really cruel. At least you’ve been decent to her, Harry.”

“If she hadn’t sent that note, we would have been caught surprised by the Death Eaters,” Hermione observed. “I expect that they would have killed everyone immediately, except for Harry and me.” She looked to Ginny. “You’ve always known Luna for who she really is, haven’t you?”

“All anyone had to do was talk to her,” Ginny said with effort.

“It was a good thing she was drawn into the dream, wasn’t it? She recognised what was happening, when we didn’t,” Harry said.

“Harry, about the dream...” Hermione began.

“I’m fine with it,” Harry said hastily. “Are you?”

“No,” Hermione said firmly. Harry’s stomach rumbled and he tried to maintain a neutral

expression.

Ron jumped in, to Harry's delight. "Much as I hate to break this up, Harry, do you want to make Ottery St. Catchpole before sunrise?"

Ginny stood and put her violin in its case. "Been fancying a ride on that Nimbus," Ginny croaked. "Better company this time."

Ron raised an eyebrow. "What in the devil are you talking about?"

"Coming with you," Ginny managed, "or should I bang on Mum's door?"

"Why do you want to come?" Ron demanded, in the tone that older brothers reserve for younger sisters who tag along. Hermione frowned at him.

"To see my friend," Ginny said.

Ron sighed. "Can't argue with that, I suppose."

Hermione summoned her most determined look – the look that warned Harry and Ron against any argument. "I'm coming with you," she repeated, "as far as Luna's. I want to make things right. It's the least I can do. I just need a minute to pull myself together. Wait outside, would you? Go on – *shoo* !" She herded them to the window, nudged both Harry and Ron out, closed the window, and drew the heavy drapes.

Five minutes later, Ginny leant out the window. She looked to be very much on edge, Harry thought. "We'll meet you on the patio," she said.

Harry set down the Bonnie next to the high-backed benches. He looked warily at the shadows that draped most of the yard. Reflected moonlight glinted off the grass, and for a moment Harry thought he saw bloody streaks beneath the tree. *Ridiculous*, he assured himself, *the people from the Ministry would never have let that by*.

Ginny came out first, in a heavier jumper and a raincoat. Hermione had also changed into a heavy jumper and denims, as well as a heavy waistcoat – a lesson learned from the last motorbike ride, Harry presumed. Harry took their small travelling bags, reduced them, and dropped them into his saddlebag. Ginny had attached a long strap to the violin case; it was slung over one shoulder and across her body.

Hermione looked hesitantly at the Bonnie. "Erm... maybe I should take a broom. You have yours here, Ginny – don't you?"

"A broom? Have you gone 'round the twist?" Ron gasped. "You couldn't manage Ginny's broom three hundred yards, let alone three hundred miles! Just get on the back of the motorbike, and... oh."

Sweet Merlin – even RON caught it, Harry thought as he looked into Hermione's eyes and his

stomach sank. It was painfully obvious that her problem was not with the motorbike but with its owner.

Harry took out his trunk, enlarged it, brought out his Nimbus, and repacked the saddlebags. He forced a smile and told Ginny, “You take Hermione on the Bonnie, and I’ll ride this.”

Ginny’s eyes were saucers. “I don’t know... I mean, it’s really fast, and... do you think I can...?”

Harry nodded. “Yes, I think you can handle it. It’s really quite simple, and I know you won’t overdo it with Hermione riding pillion – *will you ?*”

Ginny quickly shook her head. “No, no, of course not! Gods, Fred and George will have kittens when I tell them!”

Ron quickly handed his helmet to Hermione. “The two of you should have these,” he offered.

“Thank you,” she said quietly. She looked to Harry, “I’m sorry...”

“So am I,” Harry returned. He quickly gave the permission incantation that would allow Ginny to ride without him.

Ron smirked, “Let’s get on our way, before Hermione has a fit and leaves a note or something.”

“Oh, I already did that,” Hermione said. “Short and to the point – ‘Mother and Dad: Ginny and I left with Harry and Ron. Be back soon. Love, Hermione.’ I slid it under their door.”

“You didn’t... you *did* !” shrieked Ron. He nearly dove onto his broom, and shoved off hard from the patio. Hermione took the pillion position on the Bonneville, and Harry lagged behind to be sure that Ginny could manage.

It was a long ride, made longer by the lateness of the hour. They flew as high as the last time that Ron and Harry had flown, and Harry wondered if that had occurred to Ron. Ron flew close to Harry, and proceeded to sing at the top of his lungs. Even Harry knew he was terribly off-key, and the singing lost its novelty very quickly. It might have been different if the songs were familiar; Harry didn’t recognize a single one. *Maybe he is singing well, if it’s wizarding music* , he thought.

Hermione sat far back from Ginny, at first. After an hour or so, Harry noticed that she was slumping forward a bit; Harry wondered if it was out of fatigue, or simply for need of a windbreak. A few minutes later, he saw her trembling.

He hollered to Ron, “We need to set down for a bit. Let’s make for that roadway.” Ron darted to one side until he was inches from Ginny, flashed her some rapid-fire hand signals, and then shot toward the earth.

Ron and Harry came to the ground behind some trees adjacent to the narrow country lane. Ginny set down, and pulled to a stop on the shoulder. Hermione was obviously exhausted and very windblown.

Harry swung around to face her. “Are you all right? We’ll stop here a while, if you like.”

She pulled off her helmet, squinted at him, and made futile attempts to brush her hair back. “I wasn’t prepared for the wind,” she sniffled.

“Is that all?” Harry asked cautiously, hopeful of avoiding open wounds.

“I’m just so tired,” Hermione yawned.

Harry didn’t believe that was all, but doubted that he was prepared to hear the truth – whatever that might be. “You probably should have stayed behind,” he said, “but I’m glad that you’re here.”

Ron stepped out from the trees. He held his helmet in one hand. After a cautious look up and down the lane, he crept to the motorbike. “Hermione, you look a mess!” he exclaimed.

“Ron, you’re a prat,” she shot back.

“She does have a point,” Harry offered.

Ron snorted. “There you go, taking her side. Some things never change, eh?”

Hermione managed a weary smile. “It warms my heart to hear the two of you bickering.”

Ron crossed his arms and shuddered. “It’s bracing up there, isn’t it? I admit it, though – I sort of like the wind whipping at me.”

“Good thing, now that you’ve taken up skydiving,” Harry retorted. “I wish you hadn’t taken up singing.”

Hermione raised an eyebrow. “You were singing?” she asked Ron.

“Like an angel,” Ron insisted. “I could be on the WWN.”

“Precisely the problem,” Harry grumbled.

“*You* weren’t singing, were you?” Hermione asked Harry.

“Not a chance; I couldn’t possibly compete with Ron,” Harry answered.

“You don’t want to switch to a broom, do you – maybe ride with Ron?” Ginny asked Hermione.

“I... I feel more secure where I am,” Hermione said.

Ginny said, “Look, the bike is smashing, but it’s not an easy ride. Harry, I’m sorry but I have to switch off. Hermione...”

“It’s fine,” Hermione whispered. Harry reluctantly mounted the bike, and even more reluctantly

put on the helmet.

“The Lovegoods live in the village, on the green,” Ron said to Harry. “I’ll set down in the gardens; it’s a short walk for us from there. You two can ride in, I suppose. Look for the *Quibbler* sign, and we’ll meet you there.” He looked around carefully once more, and sat atop his Nimbus. Ginny settled in on Harry’s broom, and impulsively shouted, “Race you!” She quickly climbed away and disappeared. Ron shrugged and tore off after her.

Hermione latched onto Harry tightly. Harry said, “I won’t put you through that,” and slowly drifted up into the dark and clear night.

“Thank you,” she said, so quiet that he could barely hear.

“Ginny should know better,” Harry said.

There was a lengthy pause, before Hermione said, “That’s not what I meant.”

“You’re welcome,” Harry offered, hoping to forestall the inevitable. It seemed to work, because she nestled into him and her breathing became slow and even. Harry rode at a gentle speed and took no chances. He made no effort to rouse her until they were rolling along the carriageway into Ottery St. Catchpole.

“Hermione? Hermione, do you hear me?” Harry said.

“Unnh...wha... erm, must have dozed off,” Hermione murmured. She yawned, and asked, “Where are we?”

“The village is just beyond the next rise,” Harry said. “How do you feel?”

“Horrible,” Hermione admitted. “You?”

Harry blinked hard. He was sore, and his eyes were tired. “I’m holding up. It’s good that we’re arriving soon.”

Ottery St. Catchpole was silent and empty at half past four in the morning. The shop fronts surrounding the village green were all dark, except for two – a bakery and *The Quibbler*. The front door opened, and Ron peered out as they pulled up. Rather than risk being seen reducing the motorbike, Harry used the Unbreakable Chain and Lock to lash it to a light post, and took the saddlebags with him.

The front room of the shop was dominated by an enormous piece of noisy, churning machinery. Most of the rest of the room was empty, except for a few shelves cluttered with stacks of papers and small boxes, a rack of tools and other curiosities, several enormous rolls of newsprint, and a modest pile of debris pushed into one corner. Harry saw a pair of feet jutting from beneath the machine.

Ron wore a heavy apron over his clothes, and his hands were streaked black with oil. He called

out, “Mr. Lovegood, they’re here!”

There was a *clunk!* followed by loud cursing. Mr. Lovegood slid from beneath the machine and descended upon them in a flurry of handshakes, flecks of oil spattering everywhere. He wore grease-stained coveralls and a dark cap with a bill on the front, emblazoned with a stylised N and Y stitched in white. Gauze wrapping stuck out from beneath the cap, and Harry remembered something about a head wound. “Harry! What a great pleasure! And *you* must be Hermione Granger – Luna speaks fondly of you. I’m Oddment Lovegood. People call me Odd.”

“Is that so?” Hermione said with a faint grin.

“Erm, what is that thing?” Harry asked, pointing at the clanking machine.

Mr. Lovegood wiped his hands on a towel. Harry couldn’t see the point – the towel was as dirty as his hands. “It’s a printing press, of course. It was a little dodgy before, but thanks to those Death Eater bastards... pardon the language. It’s funny how things work out, you know? If Ron hadn’t come along tonight, I’d have had no chance of getting this week’s *Quibbler* out. Everyone’s been wonderful, really. George Weasley’s been looking after Luna for two days, and Rita Skeeter helped with the typesetting...”

“How can you be in the open this way?” Hermione asked. “Hasn’t the Ministry confronted you?”

Mr. Lovegood appeared puzzled. “Whatever for? The *Quibbler* is England’s leading weekly for the dog show trade.”

Harry spluttered, “*Excuse me?* ”

“The dog show trade,” Mr. Lovegood repeated. “The *Quibbler* produces a perfectly respectable weekly paper for people who show dogs. I also print handbills, signs, brochures, and invitations – whatever is needed, more or less. As for the rest... let’s just say that an understanding was reached.”

Hermione cleared her throat, and said uncertainly, “May I ask, sir... why?”

“Why live among Muggles, or why dog shows?” Mr. Lovegood asked.

Hermione giggled, taking Harry completely by surprise. “Both, I suppose,” she said.

Mr. Lovegood answered, “To the first, I find that I prefer the company – though I’m happy to have all of you here, of course. To the second... I like dogs.”

Ron picked up one of the newsprint rolls. “Are we ready, then?”

Mr. Lovegood barked instructions. “Hoist it up there just like I showed you, Ron. Mind the feeders... remember to keep your fingers back... I don’t want to trouble Pomfrey again... *that’s* it. Now pull the blue lever – *perfect* – and set the valves. You remember the rest?”

“Cross my fingers and cover my head?” Ron confirmed.

“After you drop the switch, of course,” Mr. Lovegood said.

Ron grasped a large handle and pulled downward; Harry saw that Ron had indeed crossed the fingers of his other hand. Everyone took several steps back as the large machine shook and shuddered and filled the room with pops and clunks and squeaks. After a few anxious minutes – and a few strategic swings with a large wrench on Mr. Lovegood’s part – printed papers began appearing at the far end of the press.

“Success!” Mr. Lovegood cried out. He dashed over to Ron and clapped him on the back. “You have the touch, my boy!”

Ron beamed. “My dad will be so jealous,” he said.

Mr. Lovegood grinned sheepishly. “You know... your dad’s been up a time or two to poke about. He... well... he lacks a certain grasp when it comes to Muggle machinery. He means well, of course.”

The glass panes of the front door banged and rattled. An owl was battering the door.

Mr. Lovegood fished out a pair of small wire-rimmed glasses. They reminded Harry of the glasses Sirius wore when he recorded his will. “Ah, that must be the *Prophet*. Shall we sample the competition, then?”

He opened the door, paid the owl, and held up the rolled newspaper. He held it up to his line of sight, peered down the length, and then rocked it in one hand as though he were weighing it. “Cutting costs already, I see. Feel the thinner paper? The ink smudges to the touch, as well,” he said. He sniffed his fingertips, and continued, “Plant-based ink, probably soy. They’re obviously using commercial presses. I’ll wager they’re running it along with the *Daily Mirror*. Shall we?”

Harry, Hermione and Ron all huddled around as Mr. Lovegood unfurled the *Daily Prophet* atop a cluttered worktable.

“This new format must be sending some of the society crowd to their graves,” Mr. Lovegood said; he added under his breath, “Good riddance.”

The *Daily Prophet* had always reminded Harry of the daily that Uncle Vernon read each morning – very formal, very small print, very few pictures. The paper before them was a very colourful tabloid. It took a moment for the headlines to sink in, at which time Harry contemplated whether he should faint or explode.

‘*BLOODY HARRY*’ *DISMISSED FROM HOGWARTS!* the enormous headline screamed. It was positioned over the top of a half-page photo of Harry, apparently taken shortly after he and Ron had rescued Ginny. He looked windblown and angry. In one corner was an inset box, which read:

EXTRA COVERAGE INSIDE:

Fudge's flip-flops – a sign of rough political waters ahead?

Aurors goggle over Potter pal Ron Weasley's daring 'Death Drop'

Does the daring daylight assault signal a new wave of Death Eater activity?

Ron grinned from ear to ear. “Do you see that? I made the Aurors goggle,” he said proudly.

Hermione looked at Harry, her eyes wide. “Dismissed? You were *dismissed*? Why didn't you say anything? I can't believe that Professor Dumbledore would ever –”

“He didn't,” Harry said flatly. “The Board of Governors ordered him to toss me.”

Hermione erupted. “But they *can't*! We'll fight this, Harry. A well-calculated campaign can rouse public opinion! They'll regret this!”

“Dumbledore has a plan,” Harry said. “Everything will work out, I promise.”

Ron added, “Don't get your knickers in a twist, Hermione. He'll be there in the fall.” Hermione threw the *Daily Prophet* at him.

Mr. Lovegood grunted. He snatched a copy of the *Quibbler* from the end of the press, and set it next to the *Prophet*. “And now for something completely different,” he said smugly.

The *Quibbler's* headline read *VOLDEMORT'S ATTACK FOILED; POTTER DISMISSED*, with a subheading that said, “*At least 7 Death Eaters killed in attack on prominent Muggle-born student; Potter rewarded for bravery with dismissal from Hogwarts*”. The lead article, under Rita Skeeter's by-line, was entitled “*Harry Potter's Dark Day... In His Own Words*”. The headline below the fold read “*Fudge Attacks Potter for Fighting Death Eaters, Insults Muggle-borns*”. On page two, a large article was entitled “*For Love of a Sister: Why Ron Weasley Took the Death Drop*”, which was also under Skeeter's by-line. Ron smiled at the sight of that headline, and Harry wondered why Ron had decided to talk to Skeeter. Below that, Odd Lovegood's own column asked, “*Does Voldemort control the Hogwarts Board of Governors?*” On page three were articles about nargle infestation and a Stubby Boardman sighting in Greater Hangleton – curiously, Harry found that they lifted his spirits a bit.

Hermione said, “I have to admit that the *Quibbler* is clearly the better paper.”

Ron flipped back to the front page. “I can't believe you printed his name,” he said, seemingly in awe.

Mr. Lovegood said sternly, “If my daughter can say it, why can't grown wizards and witches do the same? Every time we print ‘You-Know-Who’ or ‘He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named’, we lend him power. If his name is Voldemort, then I intend to use it.”

Harry said darkly, “His name is Tom Riddle, not Voldemort – and certainly not *Lord* Voldemort.”

Mr. Lovegood asked excitedly, “Did you say ‘Tom Riddle’?” He pulled a battered and chewed pencil from his coveralls, and scribbled on the front of the freshly printed *Quibbler* .

“There’s something that you have over him, Harry,” Ron laughed. “Now he’s messing with a *real* Lord.”

Hermione didn’t seem to hear Ron over the clatter of the press, but Mr. Lovegood did. “Rita told me about that – congratulations, milord,” he said, and bowed with a mock flourish. Hermione looked up abruptly.

“It’s not mentioned in here, is it?” Harry asked.

Mr. Lovegood answered, “We agreed to hold that aside. She felt that we should wait until the end of September, for some reason.”

Hermione shouted over the din, “What in Merlin’s name are you going on about? What do you mean, ‘milord’?”

Harry went to his saddlebags, which he had set by the door. He found the letter from Sirius and the note from MacLeish, and thrust them into Hermione’s hands. She began with the letter. Her lip quivered as she read it, and Harry couldn’t fathom why. She quickly read both sides of the note, and her brow wrinkled in confusion.

Harry waited and waited. “I wasn’t trying to hide it from you. Say something, please?” he finally said.

“She insisted on seeing who was down here,” Ginny croaked from the stairs. “I could use some help here!”

“I knew that I heard talking,” Luna called out in a very weak voice.

“Luna! Gods, you shouldn’t be up and about!” Mr. Lovegood exclaimed.

Luna saw Harry, Ron and Hermione, and said calmly, “This is an unexpected pleasure,” just as she lurched to one side and draped against Ginny. Hermione dropped the letter and the note, and rushed up the stairs.

There was no question that Luna had been badly hurt. Her lower lip was split, and her left cheek deeply bruised. She had two severe black eyes. She stood awkwardly, leant slightly to one side; Harry wondered if her ribs had been cracked or broken. He chose not to imagine the state she’d been in before Madam Pomfrey had seen her. At some point, she had cut her hair very short; the mix of dirty blond and lighter coloured tips looked like something Tonks would favour.

Hermione said firmly, “You’re bleeding. We need to help you back up the stairs.”

Luna attempted to turn around on her own, and wobbled dangerously. Hermione caught her at the shoulders, and ordered, “You just mind your feet. I’ll steady you from this side, and Ginny has

the other side.”

Luna acquiesced but said nothing. Ron and Harry started up the stairs, but Hermione commanded, “Wait downstairs – we’ll need a few minutes to change these dressings.”

“Can I get you anything?” Ron called to Luna. “Some juice, something to eat?”

“Apology accepted,” Luna said without turning back. Ron looked at her strangely, but said nothing. The press let out a terrible grinding sound, and Mr. Lovegood whacked it soundly with his wrench.

Hermione fetched Ron and Harry fifteen minutes later. She stopped them at the top of the stairs. “She’s very tired. She wants to see you both, though I’d prefer it if she’d just sleep. I... I contacted Madam Pomfrey. There are half a dozen potions, and I wanted to get them straight. I thought about waking George, but he’s surely exhausted. Luna definitely shouldn’t have survived. Madam Pomfrey kept her here for fear of Flooing her to Hogwarts.”

“Why not call St. Mungo’s?” Harry asked. “Surely they know how to deal with that sort of thing.”

“Mr. Lovegood wouldn’t allow it,” Hermione frowned. “He has issues with St. Mungo’s, apparently.”

“Is she going to get well?” Ron asked nervously.

Hermione answered, “Madam Pomfrey insists that the worst is past. I’m presuming, however, that neither of you will talk her to death. Five minutes, understood?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Ron said, and Hermione groaned.

The door at the top of the stairs opened into a cluttered open room with a small kitchen, a hearth, and a sitting area. There was a narrow hallway off the end of the room. Luna lay on the couch, heavily propped with pillows. The table before the couch was strewn with books. Ginny sat on a wooden dining chair. She played a slow, gentle tune on her violin, and Luna smiled with one side of her mouth.

Luna saw them standing there, and turned. Ginny stopped playing. “Hello, Harry. Hello, Ronald. I’m pleased to see that you’re both intact,” Luna said matter-of-factly. There was an odd sort of rattle to her voice.

Ron cringed at the sound of his given name. He knelt before the couch, and awkwardly took Luna’s hand. “I’m sorry to see you like this. Does it hurt?”

Luna rolled her eyes. “Only when you state the obvious,” she said.

Ron grimaced. “Quite a lot, then.”

Luna started to laugh, but coughed instead and winced. “I’d take that juice now, if you’re so

inclined,” she told Ron. Ron rose, and Harry took his place.

Harry could scarcely look at her. He felt sad and guilty and angrier by the moment. “Why?” he asked. “Why would anyone do this to another...?” Visions of six dead Death Eaters ran through his mind, and he couldn’t finish asking the question.

Luna answered, “Because this is what they do... who knows, really? Why does it matter?”

“You’re my friend,” Harry said. “I’m tired of my friends being hurt because of me.”

“As far as I am aware, the solar system rotates around the sun – not around Harry Potter,” Luna chided him. “Sometimes we see things, and sometimes we become caught up in events, but in the end we all choose our fate.”

Harry stiffened. “I wish that were true.”

“You know the prophecy, then,” Luna said.

“Wha... how could...?” Harry spluttered.

Luna explained. “It’s a logical conclusion, given the events of the last few weeks as I understand them. Based upon your reaction just now, I presume that I’m correct.” Hermione smiled at her.

“You deserve to know,” Harry said. “Do you want to hear it?”

“Only if you wish to share the knowledge,” Luna answered. “I take it that Hermione, Ginny and Ronald have already heard?”

Ron brought a glass of pumpkin juice. “Telling the prophecy, are you?”

“Yes,” said Harry.

Ron handed Luna the glass. “Good,” he said. “I’d say she’s earned the right to hear it.”

Harry waited until she sipped and swallowed, imagining the pain that a choking fit might cause. He took the glass, set it on the table, and recited the prophecy. Luna pursed her lips while he spoke.

When he finished, she nodded, and said, “That explains rather a lot, doesn’t it?”

Harry goggled at her. “That’s it? Nothing more?”

“Not at the moment,” Luna said. “Thank you for telling me, Harry – your confidence in me is appreciated... is that why you all came here?”

“I really believed that it was just a dream,” Harry said. “If you hadn’t sent that note -”

“There were at least fifteen of them. If they’d surprised us...” Ron added.

“The rest of us would be dead, and Voldemort would have Harry,” Hermione summed up.

“I’m your friend,” Ginny croaked. “Friends look after one another. You certainly did that for us.”

Luna blushed slightly, and fiddled with a chain of butterbeer caps resting in her hands. “You should be thanking Ronald’s brothers. I don’t know how Alfred understood what I was trying to tell him – thank Merlin that he did. I couldn’t really speak; George had to use one of those amusing candies of theirs to hold my throat closed.” Harry hadn’t noticed the heavy dressings around Luna’s throat.

Ron paled, but demanded, “I want to know everything about the attack. How many were there? Did you recognize any of them? And where in the bloody hell are the Aurors, anyway? Why is there no protection here?”

Luna shrank slightly into the pillows. “There were three of them; two men who I didn’t recognise and Bellatrix Lestrange.” Harry’s temples throbbed at the name.

She went on, “Daddy never stood a chance. He was leant over the press when they came in. They stunned him and he cut his head on the machinery. I went for my wand, and stunned both of the men before I was disarmed. Lestrange said that she was going to enjoy punishing me. She said that she was going to make me pay for casting my lot with all of you.”

With a ferocity that Harry would never have associated with Luna Lovegood, she added, “I wouldn’t give her the satisfaction. She tore at me with curses, and I wouldn’t cry out. She put me in a body bind and beat me, and I wouldn’t give in to her. So she did this.” Her fingers traced the dressings around her neck.

“It must have been *iugulo*,” Harry seethed. “I ran across it in one of the books at Grimmauld Place.” Luna nodded slowly.

Hermione moved in next to Harry, and put her hand on Luna’s shoulder. “It’s a miracle that you didn’t bleed out entirely,” she said. Ginny sat silently, deathly pale.

“Where are the Aurors?” Ron repeated.

“Daddy didn’t want the Ministry involved,” Luna said. “Professor Dumbledore was here with Madam Pomfrey. That fellow with the gold earring – Shacklebolt? – he was here for a time. Then Professor Lupin came, and they left. Professor Flitwick was here for a long while, I think. The next thing I remember clearly was Rita Skeeter talking to Daddy. That’s how we found out what had happened with Harry and Voldemort... and Ronald’s impulsiveness, of course.”

Harry said, “Luna, you’re going to... you’re going to hear things about me, about what I did. I hope that you don’t –”

Luna had closed her eyes, and settled deeply into the pillows. She firmly cut him off. “I know

that you've been dismissed. I know that they're wrong and you're right. Some of them are fools, and some others are simply evil. There are too many fools, and too many evil people, aren't there? Remember this, Harry – no one who matters will ever stand against you." Harry squeezed her hand firmly, and swallowed hard.

Hermione said, "You need to rest. I'll be here when you wake, I promise. You're one of us now, Luna. Like it or not, you're one of us. We won't leave you alone again – someone will always be here for you."

"I'm here to stay, obviously," Ginny added. "It's time that we spell George."

"There's no need to overcompensate, but I appreciate the company," Luna said quietly. She opened her eyes, and looked at Hermione. "When you told me that Harry and Ronald were running off, I assumed that you were going with them."

"I told them I was coming here," Hermione said.

"What do you think, Ron? Catch a nap here, and then move on?" Harry asked.

"Erm... we need to talk," Ron said, and he headed for the stairs.

By the time Harry and Ron reached the print shop below, Ron was positively fidgeting.

"I'm not forcing you to go," Harry said.

"I'll feel guilty standing you up, but I'll feel guiltier standing up my family. We flew over the Burrow, on our way into the village," Ron explained. "I don't know what we're going to do, Harry. I knew it was bad, but to actually see it... Mum and Dad are going to need all of us, I think."

"I could stay, if it would help," Harry asked.

Ron shook his head. "You should go," he said.

Harry sighed. "Will you come up, before the summer's out?"

"Send an owl in a week or two and I'm as good as there, mate," Ron promised. "You *are* going to catch some sleep first, aren't you? I'm about ready to drop, myself." Despite that, Ron set to helping Mr. Lovegood again.

Harry sat quietly on the stairs for a long while, before he climbed the stairs to peek into the living area. Luna was asleep on the couch. She looked more peaceful than Harry would have expected; she seemed so small and fragile, but she was stronger than he ever could have imagined. Hermione was asleep in an adjacent chair. Her brow was furrowed and she was stirring, but seemed asleep. Harry knew that Hermione was happiest when there was a purpose or a cause at hand; Luna would provide her with that for a time, provided that Hermione didn't drive her mad first. He hoped that Ginny might be able to keep the peace, if it came to that. He hoped that

Hermione would stop hurting. He sat in the chair next to Hermione at half past five, and closed his eyes.

August 7

It was a quarter past nine. Both the flat above and the shop below were quiet. Ron was asleep on the floor beside the couch. Luna and Hermione were still asleep as well, and Harry assumed that Mr. Lovegood was in his bedroom. The door to the second bedroom was cracked, and Harry saw George lying face down on Luna's bed. He made his way down the stairs.

Ginny sat on the bottom step. "Good morning," she said. There were dark circles under her eyes. The violin case was in her lap.

"Did you get any sleep at all?" he asked.

"A little," she answered.

"Liar," Harry teased. Her eyes widened, and she appeared hurt. "I didn't mean it that way," he quickly added.

"You're ready to leave. Don't let me stand in your way," she said morosely.

Harry sat next to her. "How long has it been since you've had a full night's sleep?" he asked.

Ginny clasped her hands together and stretched her arms. "Sometime in June, I suppose," she answered under her breath.

"Smashing summer, isn't it?" Harry observed. "Look... the other night... I'm just glad I got to you in time."

"You should have let me fall," Ginny said, her eyes fixed on the violin case.

Harry felt a nervous chill run through him. "You don't mean that," he insisted, but part of him suddenly suspected what was wrong.

"Voldemort got at us through me, didn't he?" Ginny asked.

Harry desperately wanted to tell her that it was impossible, that she was certainly free of Riddle, that he and only he was responsible for letting Voldemort in. He couldn't. "I don't know," he answered.

"What if it's me?" she whispered. "Wormtail said that... he said I was to be spared. Why would Voldemort spare me?"

"He told me it was in payment for services rendered," Harry admitted to her, his voice choking on

the words. “I assume he was talking about what happened in the Chamber of Secrets.”

Ginny began to cry. Harry sat beside her, and wrapped an arm around her as a brother would. She leant into him and held him in a way that she would never hold one of her brothers. He didn’t know what to do, but he didn’t push her away.

“I just sat here so that I could say good-bye,” she sobbed. “I know that I need to stay away from you, as far away as I can manage. I... I shouldn’t know anything... I can’t be told *anything*.” She pulled away from him, wiped at her face, and added fiercely, “Do you understand? Not *anything*!”

Harry brushed her bangs away from her eyes, and wiped away a streaking tear. “Last year, you told me what it felt like to be possessed by him. Do you feel as though you’ve been possessed again?” he asked.

She hesitated, and her jaw worked from side to side as she contemplated. “No... no, I haven’t felt that. I haven’t felt like myself, either. Sometimes... sometimes it feels like someone else is looking through my eyes. Have you ever felt that?”

Harry said carefully, “I’ve felt something like that. Perhaps the diary left you something, some kind of connection... like the one he has with me. I can block him now, most of the time; you’d need to learn how.”

After a long pause, Ginny looked at him with something like hope in her eyes. “I suppose that could be possible,” she ventured. “I hadn’t thought of it that way.”

“Do you feel like someone’s there all the time?” Harry asked.

“Not all the time. Do you know when it’s best? When I play this,” she said, patting the violin case. “Maybe he doesn’t like my music.”

Harry smiled. “He has poor taste, then – just like Ron.”

Ginny looked away, in a shy gesture that would have been commonplace for her just a few weeks earlier. “You... you like it when I play?”

“You’re very good,” Harry said. “At least, I think so. I suppose I don’t really know anything, but it certainly sounds very good to me.”

Ginny stood up, and walked to the front door. She strolled outside and sat down on the public bench in front of the *Quibbler*, along the High Street. She took out her violin, and began to play. Harry picked up the letter and the note from the shop floor, and put them in his saddlebags. He took out Ron’s bag and then Ginny and Hermione’s things, enlarged them, and left them near the door before he joined Ginny outside. Her playing became more and more energetic. Passers-by slowed to watch and listen. Harry sat beside her. When she finished whatever piece she had called from her memory, a half dozen onlookers applauded.

“See? You must be very good,” Harry said.

“It’s amazing, Harry. It feels so good to play,” Ginny said. “It’s as if I were meant to do it, somehow. When I start, I really don’t want to stop.”

“Then don’t stop,” Harry encouraged her.

She looked at the violin, and then at Harry, and sighed. “When I play, I feel like... like maybe I’m who I was meant to be... *finally*. I understand what it must be like for you, to be the Boy-Who-Lived. Do you know why I have so few friends? Do you know that Hermione was the only Gryffindor girl who talked to me for almost a year? Do you know that you’re not the only one who screams in the night? I’m the Girl-Who-Was-Possessed, Harry.”

“I suppose that I don’t really know you,” Harry admitted. “I should fix that, you know? Look... you should talk about this with Dumbledore. Even if you were the way in, there may be a solution.”

Ginny nodded vigorously. “I’ll Owl him. I promise.”

Harry stood, and so did she. She hugged him tightly; he wished it felt a little more sisterly. “Thank you,” she said softly in his ear. “Thank you for not quitting on me.”

“I wouldn’t do that to you. It’s not just Ron and Hermione and me anymore,” Harry said. “It’s all of us now – you, and Luna, and Neville too. The trip to the Ministry sealed it, I think – we’re all together now, whatever may come.” He gently disengaged. “I’ll see you in the fall,” he said, and headed to the Bonnevillle. He felt her watching him, but no one else paid him any mind as he rode slowly toward the carriageway that led north.

St. Ebb was completely overrun with automobiles and tourists on foot. It wasn’t at all what Harry had expected of a small fishing village. Harry had to carefully weave and dodge, as he made his way through. The High Street ran for just a few blocks; it faced the sea, like everything else in the village. The tourists looked at him with curiosity, or unmasked lust for his motorbike in a case or two. The few people who looked to be local watched him with expressions that ranged from disinterest to scorn. He rushed into a haberdashery, purchased a few sundries, and sought some general directions. As he described the tower house, the tone of the elderly proprietor shifted from tolerant to unpleasant. Harry figured that the man was fed up with tourists – he had heard at least half a dozen ridiculous questions while standing on line. He listened carefully to the directions – the proprietor’s brogue was thick and harsh, and he seemed in a hurry to show Harry out.

Half a mile beyond the village, a girl walking along the edge of the roadway stopped and watched

him pass. She looked to be about his age, he thought, with longish dark hair and bright eyes. She had a nice shape and a pleasant face, he decided - a pleasant and somehow familiar face. Her expression was one of puzzlement, almost surprise. As he passed, he began to believe that she might have been one of the watchers back in the shop district. She couldn't possibly have walked that far that quickly, he thought. He sped up, and paid close attention to his surroundings. He rode in a wide circle along different country lanes for half an hour, until he was satisfied that he wasn't being followed.

A rutted lane joined the carriageway about five miles south of St. Ebb, which ran for the better part of a mile toward the sea. The trees that lined the lane at uneven intervals were the only visible foliage larger than a bush. The tower house was poised at the end of the lane. It stood fully five stories high, in an "L" shape. The roof was steeply pitched and adorned with turrets. The property formed a high promontory. From the drive in front of the entry, Harry could look left and see St. Ebb in the distance. Bercliffe was apparently a place name and little more; he couldn't see a single substantial structure between the tower and the village. Ahead and to the right, he could look down toward the low cliffs and the sea below. At last he understood what Sirius meant about the stacks. Two rock spires, carved by the twin forces of wind and water, erupted from the water a quarter-mile apart.

At least, Harry found an entryway that breached the wall around the tower. Harry stood there for quite some time, keys in hand. The massive oaken door was painted black. It had the same silver serpent knocker as the house on Grimmauld Place. The stone trim that framed the door was carved to resemble intertwined snakes. He couldn't shake the feeling that he was exchanging one prison for another, however well appointed. He fished out the scrap of parchment with the directions to the bothy, and looked toward the southernmost of the two stacks. In a moment, he could make out a low log-and-stone structure with a reddish roof that stood near the cliffs. He looked around cautiously before he reduced the Bonneville, settled it inside one of the saddlebags, and set off toward the bothy.

The heights of the promontory appeared flat from the tower house, but were in fact rolling. He followed a low stone wall, pierced here and there by wooden posts that bore an electric line. As he drew closer, he crossed muddy ruts that led from the lane toward the bothy. They were deep grooves, from a good-sized vehicle. A hundred feet from the front door, Harry felt a familiar energy brush past him; he immediately recognised the sensation as having come from a ward. He saw haphazard stacks of rocks and stones here and there, and understood Sirius' admonition that they should be left alone. It looked as though the wards were positioned to provide an ample private yard. He tried all three keys before successfully opening the door.

Harry walked into an open living space that appeared to take up half the structure. A compact kitchen dominated the far side of the space. To the right, the entire wall was taken up with loaded shelves. There was a wood stove in the centre. A settee, two chairs and a low table sat between the stove and the wall with the shelves. A dining table with four chairs sat opposite the stove. To the left, a narrow hall led past a bath with water closet and a small mechanical space to a bedroom. A very large bed overpowered the modest bedroom. There was barely room for a small writing desk and an armoire. A hatch in the bedroom ceiling opened to reveal a sliding ladder. A

very clean and mostly empty attic ran the length of the bothy. There were a few boxes stacked in the far corner. The rooms were decorated in oranges and blues – they were clean but very dated, Harry thought.

A wax-sealed envelope sat on the small kitchen counter. Harry fumbled with it while he perused the wall of shelves. The shelves were filled with books and records. Harry assumed that the massive silver metal box labelled “Marantz” was a stereo, though he’d not seen one quite so large before. There was a phonograph atop the box. Large speakers hung in the corners of the room. His eyes ran past a heavy-looking box next to the wood stove, and he remembered to place his wand and the saddlebags inside. There was a single folded piece of parchment inside the envelope.

August 3

Dear Mr. Potter:

Per Mr. Black’s instructions, I have engaged some Muggles to assure that the secondary building is prepared for occupancy. Some necessities were replaced – I have no idea which or for what purpose. I cannot imagine why Mr. Black would have chosen to live in the manner of a Muggle, or why you might choose the same. However, he was most insistent in his instructions. As I am unable to see or even locate the building in question, I do hope that the Muggles performed adequately. I found their services excessively expensive and their manner quite rude.

In my opinion, the main house is a more satisfactory environment by any measure. At such time as you may decide, I will be happy to have this building leased to Muggles, outfitted for livestock, or dedicated to some other suitable purpose. You may owl me at your convenience, or I can be reached via Floo from the main house.

Respectfully,

Dedalus Diggle, Esq.

“I don’t care for your attitude – not one bit,” Harry said aloud. There was no food to speak of; he made a mental note to dash back into the village. He turned to the shelves again, and began to read book spines and record jackets. There was a milk crate set on the shelf beneath the phonograph, which held an assortment of records. He recognised two of the records from Uncle Vernon’s modest collection: one by the Beatles and another by the Bee Gees. He carefully put the Beatles album onto the phonograph’s spindle, lowered the tone arm, and experimented with the silver stereo until music poured from the speakers.

It took Harry a while to figure out how to enlarge his trunks and boxes. Ultimately, he had to do it outside the wards and drag them back to the bothy. By the time he had listened to both sides of *Yellow Submarine*, he had managed to hang his two punching bags from an exposed beam, and had set up his weights. He made it through two songs from the Bee Gee’s album, before deciding that they were nearly as screechy as the Weird Sisters.

He thumbed through the records in the milk crate. To Harry, the records were another example of how little he really knew about Sirius. He imagined Sirius sitting in that very room, listening to the Beatles whilst writing with a quill on parchment. Harry was unfamiliar with most of the names on the jackets – Talking Heads, Steppenwolf, Peaches and Herb, Billy Joel, Blondie, Peter Gabriel, Rod Stewart. One record was by The Police, who Harry had at least heard of. The name Jimi Hendrix was vaguely familiar to him, as was Pink Floyd.

The last record was entitled *Can't Get Enough*, by a very large man with long thick hair called Barry White. The song titles seemed dubious to Harry – “love” seemed to be in every one of them. Curious, he put the record on the phonograph and proceeded to unpack his trunk. The singer had a terribly deep voice, and at one point in the second track he stopped singing and began to talk suggestively. Harry listened to the words for a moment, and felt himself blushing. It was obvious what Barry White couldn't get enough of, and both the jacket and the record were quite well worn. Harry thought back to Sirius' letter – “lusting after Muggle women”, he had said. *Whitehorn did say he would have a woman on each arm*, Harry thought, *and what did Remus call this place – a 'pad'?* The thought of a young Sirius shagging to the sounds of Barry White left Harry rolling on the floor with laughter.

When he recovered, he took the Barry White record off the phonograph, and stuffed it randomly onto one of the shelves. He replaced it with the record by Steppenwolf – it seemed appropriate to listen to a wolf, he thought. Unlike the previous record, Harry had absolutely no trouble at all imagining Sirius listening to “Born to Be Wild” at maximum volume. In fact, he had difficulty getting the song out of his head all the way back to St. Ebb. He picked up a few sundries and some perishables, and quickly returned to the bothy.

Harry ate and listened to two more records. He finished unpacking and put away his remaining personal effects. He went through the stretching routine that Dudley had taught him, and progressively worked away the stiffness that came from several hours on the Bonnevillie. From there, he moved into a light free-weight routine. Instead of calming him, the work brought his mind squarely back to the events of the last several days. By the end of the routine, he was more than ready for the bags.

He put on the elastic hand wraps, and pulled on his boxing gloves. He worked the speed bag for a long while, just as Dudley had shown him. He felt raw, as though the slightest scratch would bring forth waves of frustration and rage. He switched to the heavy bag, hitting it hard.

Pound. *Why does everyone have to be hurt because of me?* Pound-pound. *Some friend I am.* Pound-pound-pound. *If I were a real friend, I would have stayed to help the Weasleys.* Pound-pound. *I drag poor Ron to the Ministry, and he comes home with nightmares and a death wish.* He couldn't think of the Ministry without seeing Bellatrix Lestrange, and now he couldn't think about Bellatrix Lestrange without seeing Luna. *Who would have guessed she was that strong?* Pound-pound-pound.

He saw Hermione, promising to protect the prophecy and then screaming in agony. *I hurt everyone that I love – everyone! I hope her father listened to me. They should go away, as far away as they can.* Pound-pound-pound-pound. Even the Aurors were frightened of him, he

remembered. *They should all be afraid. It's dangerous to be close to me. Pound-pound. If the Death Eaters don't get you, maybe I will. Pound-pound-pound. I might tear you apart with my bare hands . Pound-pound. I can't love anyone . Pound-pound-pound. Even if it was safe, I don't know how . Pound-pound. Hermione had a point – what if this has something to do with how I might kill Voldemort? Pound-pound-pound. I have to control it! Pound-pound-POUND-pound-pound. Dumbledore must know what's happening to me. Pound-POUND-pound-pound. He's just not telling me. Pound-pound-POUND. If he knows I'm going to die, I wish he'd just tell me. Pound-pound-pound. He can't know that. Pound-pound. Luna was right – she has to be right . Pound-pound-pound. We choose our fate. Pound-POUND-POUND. I choose to live! POUND-POUND.*

He saw Dumbledore, fending off Voldemort at the Ministry. He knew that Dumbledore was the key, whether he liked it or not. *Dumbledore has to show me how – he must know! POUND-pound-pound. I'm going to kill Voldemort. POUND-POUND-POUND. I'll show Dumbledore. POUND-pound-pound-pound. I'll show all of them. POUND-pound. I'll kill Voldemort and Wormtail and Lucius Malfoy and Bellatrix Lestrange and every last one of them, if I have to. POUND-POUND-POUND. Nothing else matters now. POUND-pound-pound. I have two years to learn it all, everything I need. POUND-pound-pound-POUND. I can figure out love and friends and life later. POUND-pound-pound. Sirius lived without love for twelve years, and he was a hound. POUND-POUND-pound. Remus has been alone for most of his life. POUND-pound-pound-POUND. Dumbledore's probably been alone for a hundred years. Pound-POUND-pound-pound. If they could manage it, then so can I. Pound-pound-POUND. I can do this. Pound-pound. Damn it, I can do this. Pound. How am I going to do this? Pound. Who am I trying to fool? Pound. I don't want to be alone, not all the time.*

Harry lowered his hands. He looked up at the ceiling, and shouted, “All right, Mum! All right, Dad! This is when you're supposed to magically appear and tell me what to do next! You're supposed to tell me that this is all going to work out somehow! You can come any time now – I'm waiting!”

He stripped off the boxing gloves, and threw them across the room. “Come on, Sirius! You wanted to be my guardian! Tell me what to do! Where do I start?” He waited. No apparitions appeared, no ghostly presences, no voices – nothing at all. He hadn't expected any, but would have welcomed them just the same.

He went into the bedroom. He had hung the framed picture of Hermione next to the armoire. “You'd tell me what to do,” he said to the picture, “but I probably wouldn't like it.” Hermione's presence had been the greatest certainty in his life for five years. Now everything felt as though it were falling apart around him. He wondered whether there were any certainties left.

Harry tried to sleep for some time, but sleep wouldn't come. It wasn't that the bed was uncomfortable, or that the room was stuffy. He got up from the bed, took Hermione's picture off the wall, and set it face-down atop the armoire. *I'm sorry, but I need you out of my head for a while*, he thought. That left Ginny and Luna, much to Harry's chagrin. Thinking about Ginny made him nervous and left him unsettled, and thinking about Luna made him sad and left him upset.

He sat up in the bed, and clutched his knees to his chest. “I need a little Muggleness in my life,” he said aloud. He grabbed his pillow and a throw, and carried them to the living area. He put a stack of Sirius’ records on the phonograph, curled up on the settee under the throw, and just listened. He found himself thinking about the girl with the dark hair at the edge of the village, and he wondered if she was in fact a Muggle. He wondered what she might be doing – whether she was sleeping – and wondered what she liked and disliked, and who her friends were, and what hope and dreams she might have. He imagined that all of it might be fairly mundane, and he decided that mundane likes, dislikes, hopes and dreams sounded very pleasant indeed. Thoughts of perfectly ordinary aspirations led him into sleep now and again, until the sky had lightened from black to midnight blue.

Harry rubbed at his bleary eyes and slipped on his trainers. He looked around the living area. It wasn’t perfect, but it felt right. He’d had places to live, to be sure – the Dursleys’ house, Grimmauld Place, the Burrow from time to time, Hogwarts. Hogwarts had been home to him, but that felt broken now in some fashion. The bothy just felt right, he decided.

He walked briskly toward the cliffs. There was a narrow switchback that led him to the expanse of beach below. He stretched his legs, and then began to run back and forth along the beach. He hadn’t run in nine days, and it felt good. The sky continued to lighten, until it matched the dusky blue of the rolling sea. A thin line of darkness split the sea and the sky, shifting from midnight blue to brownish to deep red to crimson. A growing spectrum of oranges and yellows emerged between the blue sky and the crimson dividing line. Harry stopped running, and watched.

A single point in the crimson line grew brighter and brighter, and Harry was sure that the sun would emerge in that very spot – it was certain, he knew. He was afraid to blink for fear that he would miss the moment, but it lagged as though the sea was unwilling to give up the sun to the sky. Just as the bright spot in the crimson and orange line turned to blinding white, a thin green line burst along the whole of the horizon – and then it was gone, and the sun had arrived. The sun overcame the green flash and banished the night. He drank in the salt air and felt the burnt orange glow of the morning sun on his face. He felt the breeze ripple his shirt, and he listened to the churning of the water.

The cold tide rushed over his feet. He was awash in certainties – the power of the wind and the water, the daily victory of light over dark. A more personal certainty broke through the surface, and he smiled. He closed his eyes and gave it voice, with two words offered up to the sky.

“I’m home.”

Harry Potter and the Years of Rebellion

L'Oiseau Chanteur

Chapter Nineteen

L'OISEAU CHANTEUR

August 18

Harry loved the way that the Bonnie hugged the A328. The ride back from Edinburgh was a rush of winding curves, roller-coaster hills and sharp breaks. There was little need for him to mind the wet pavement, since the motorbike never actually touched it. He felt as though he had mastered riding at last, with a little help from Devlin Whitehorn's manual. He preferred keeping the Bonnie in very-low-level flight; it played well to his broom-riding instincts. He could easily manage a hundred in flight, even through the curves if no one was watching. When he was 'riding', the motorbike bucked and wobbled and slid just like the real thing.

The manual had been very helpful indeed. He had found, for example, that the saddlebags were fashioned from dragon hide. He could put magic-sensitive things like Muggle electronics in the bags, and carry them without risk of damage. He also found that he could change the colour and detailing to match his whim; he had immediately tweaked the red tank into proper Gryffindor crimson.

He found that he liked Edinburgh very much. It was big and noisy and busy, but felt accessible to him in a way that London did not. He had made the journey to and from St. Ebb five times now in eleven days. It was nice to be close to the city but still able to retreat from it, he had decided. One of his saddlebags was filled nearly to overflowing with compact discs. His purchases were a smorgasbord, rather like Sirius' album collection – pop, metal, jazz, classical. He'd even purchased a disc by Heather Magruder, the performer that Keith MacLeish had scheduled for the *Daily Prophet* party in September. She didn't seem to be terribly wrapped up in self-promotion – the case wasn't adorned with her picture, unlike nearly every other disc that he purchased. He felt a bit self-indulgent after a week and a half of spending; there had been a new compact disc player, clothes, books, artwork, and many gifts for friends. He'd arranged for Hermione's birthday present, and he hoped that she'd appreciate it. He'd watched three sunrises and a half-dozen sunsets, thrown some pebbles from the cliffs, walked the beach, and thoroughly soaked up the newness of being on his own. On the main, he thought that Sirius would be pleased.

The other saddlebag was filled with groceries – things that Harry wanted but couldn't purchase from the little market in St. Ebb. He didn't need much, since he was only taking breakfast and snacks at the bothy. Mr. Granger had called him a 'foodie', he recalled. Perhaps that was true, because Harry had fallen hard for L'Oiseau Chanteur.

He came across it unexpectedly, in the way that true loves are often found. He was acquainting himself with St. Ebb, and tarried until early afternoon. Hungry and knackered, he stumbled into a small restaurant. A French-influenced restaurant in a Scottish fishing village – however ridden with holidaymakers that village might be – seemed unusual even to Harry, and he was very uncertain whether to give it a go. It was terribly busy, even at a quarter past two – a good sign, he had suspected – but a waitress took pity on him and seated him at a tiny table jammed into a nook that faced into the kitchen. A swarthy fellow with expensive-looking shoes thrust a menu at him and demanded an order. Harkening back to the carts in the London market, Harry closed the menu and asked for the most interesting thing that the kitchen served. The swarthy fellow – 'The Greek', everyone called him – told him that the most interesting things wouldn't be found on the menu.

The chef was a woman called Shona. Harry guessed that she might be a bit older than Bill Weasley, but he was a poor judge. She had dark hair pulled back in a braid, and powerful hands. She seldom smiled, and her eyes were hard – many members of the Order had eyes like that. She had quickly appraised him, and told him matter-of-factly what he would be eating. Her food was wonderful, he decided instantly.

Watching her work was a lesson in command, he decided. She was ruthless, and her language made him blush at first. She knew everything about everyone in her domain – likes, dislikes, boiling points, ambitions – and she played them, just as surely as Ginny played the violin. Most of the kitchen staff seemed fanatically loyal to her, and the waiters and waitresses appeared to love her or fear her – either way, they did their best. He watched her push people right to the edge, and then offer something – praise, sympathy, instruction – which they needed in order to go on. The kitchen was a combat zone, Harry learned; knives blazed, plates flew, and it was hot as a boiling cauldron. It was only appropriate that the chef was a general, he thought – a general who had mastered every part of the work. Harry watched carefully, and he learned by watching.

He came back for the evening meal, which caused The Greek – the swarthy fellow who Harry had since decided was a manager of sorts, or a representative of the owner, or something like that – to raise an eyebrow. Harry drew a smile from him by the third evening meal, which was as rare as a unicorn if the staff were to be believed. He also fell into a very interesting dance beginning that evening, which caused him to return just as surely as the food.

Harry rated a good table, The Greek had decided. Harry's table was secluded, off to one side, but afforded him a clear view of both the kitchen and the whole of the seating area – the 'floor', they called it. He saw her peeking out from the kitchen, and recognised her immediately – longish dark hair, bright eyes, pleasant face. It was terribly obvious that she was trying not to be obvious, and he knew then that she was neither Auror nor Death Eater. *I wondered what you were doing*, he thought, *and now I know*. She disappeared from view, and returned wearing a server's apron and a nametag. She waited his table that night, and he enjoyed it. If he hadn't been able to sense the ebb and flow of her emotions, he wouldn't have known that she was covering any nervousness at all;

she was, in fact, as nervous as he was. He wondered why her thoughts were so open to him, and worried that he might be accidentally intruding in her mind. He resolved to learn more about Legilimency, and he wondered if Dumbledore's drifting around the edges of his own mind was sometimes an accidental intrusion.

He came back for the midday meal the next day, and – to his surprise – so did she. As the days passed, it became easier for him to remain outside of her feelings and thoughts. She was obviously related to Shona in some way, though he hadn't yet summoned the nerve to enquire as to the specifics. He guessed that she was near his age, most likely a little older. He thought that Shona was probably too young to be her mother, but he'd heard stories via Dudley of pregnancies at Smelting and among the Stonewall crowd. She possessed a softer version of Shona's features. She also possessed a similar irreverence, though not the same vocabulary. She had a Scottish accent, but it was a gentle lilt next to Shona's chain-saw burr. Her voice was strong and smooth; it was the kind of voice that easily carried, and she seemed self-conscious about it. Harry decided sometime during his fifth evening meal that he liked listening to her.

She wore a different nametag every day, and therefore used a different name. She hadn't asked Harry his name the first evening, and so he decided to play along once it was clear that a game was afoot. It was an integral part of the dance now. She would be Margaret – 'that's Your Highness to you', she insisted – and he became Philip. She was Merry, and he decided to be Chris. The previous day, she had been Lily. She took note of his surprise, he knew, though he hoped she hadn't seen flashes of anger or sadness – she didn't know what she'd done, of course, and he didn't want to hold it against her. It took him until the end of the first course to decide upon James. He hadn't yet used Harry, and he doubted that he had ever heard her real name. She had missed two of his meals, and he had missed her both times. He knew that he was surely a bit thick when it came to girls, but even he couldn't help but take notice that she only waited on one table – his table – while the other servers took several each.

At some point, one of the older waitresses had kindly explained to him that he left rather large gratuities. He felt it was easier in the evenings to simply leave a 50-pound note; he preferred to slip out when he was finished, and didn't want to trouble anyone for change. The Greek actually suggested that if Harry wanted to toss about large notes, he could pay for both meals of the day in the evening; this had caused quite a stir. The previous evening, he had peeked into the kitchen to see 'Lily' divide his entire gratuity amongst the kitchen staff; she didn't keep a pence.

He was determined that he would summon the courage to ask about that, among other things. He wondered what name she would choose for the day, and debated whether he should choose to be Harry. He wanted to know her name, and he didn't; he enjoyed whatever was happening very much, and didn't care to do or say anything that might end it or even threaten it. He cleared the last curve of significance on the A328, and sped along the straightaway that took him to the turn for St. Ebb. There was most likely a table being held, and he didn't care to be late.

Everyone knew who he was, and the bartender let him in well before the start of the midday service. The Greek was nowhere to be seen; Eduardo, one of the kitchen staff, waved and pointed

at the small table near the kitchen. *Perhaps they're full today*, he thought, and he made his way across the floor.

Shona addressed a huddle of servers in the kitchen. He knew that she was frustrated by the midday servers, who were a younger and less experienced lot than the evening servers. She berated a young woman who Harry hadn't seen before, because she didn't know what prosciutto was. Harry knew, but only because he'd bothered to pick up a good text on the culinary arts at a book shop he'd happened upon in Edinburgh.

"What effing good are yeh? Yeh cannae fool English knobdobbers without the details! Once more – it's Italian ham, with a light cure!" she hollered, slapping her own forehead. "I'll run the effing features good and slow, then!"

She spoke slowly, hanging on each syllable with obvious contempt. "The fish is baked halibut, with baby red potatoes, asparagus, tomatoes and leeks. The meat is roast capercailzie with port wine sauce and braised red cabbage. The soup is soupe de poisson with rouille. Any of you need 'rouille' explained – *again*? Pasta is farfalle with roasted vegetables, garlic, baby artichokes, basil and extra virgin olive oil, and the dessert is tarte Tatin. Questions?" She glowered at them, and no one dared open their mouth.

Shona ordered beneficently, "Taste everything, my little numpties. Stand ready by twelve. There are at least a dozen six-tops in the book." She peeked out into the house, and caught his eye.

He grinned. "The features sound good," he said. "I'll have a hard time choosing."

She shook her head. "Slumming, are yeh? Didn't The Greek give yeh Table Ten?"

Harry shrugged. "I didn't see him; Eduardo waved me over. All the action's back here, anyway." He smirked, and added, "Besides... I wouldn't want to be out there with all those English knobdobbers, now would I?"

Shona nearly smiled. "Yer exempt... for the moment." The Muggle papers in London and the news readers on the telly had gone on about 'the Scottish problem' all summer, and he could sense the unease. Harry knew that Shona had strong feelings about the holidaymakers who overran the area, and tended to agree with her; he'd seen some rather ugly behaviour along the High Street.

She turned to her station in the kitchen, and he turned to a book. Bill Weasley had sent him a charmed copy of *Mastery of the Sword* by Sun-Tzu as a belated birthday present; it appeared to Muggles as though it were *The Art of War*.

"Och, here's trouble," Shona called out. Harry peeked over the top of his book. She was there, and Shona awkwardly returned her light hug.

"Thought I'd pitch in a bit," the hugger offered, and added with a chuckle, "You've been prattling on about the day staff in your sleep."

Shona unpacked saucing spoons. “Yer startin’ ta sound like the English, little bird. The bufties are rubbin’ off on yeh.”

The hugger – lacking a consistent name to remember, Harry simply thought of her as *She* – pulled back her dark hair, and efficiently twisted it into a knot. “Do you want the help, or not?”

“Not if yer covering *one* table,” Shona growled; she turned and shot a pointed look at Harry, who dove behind his book.

She glared at Shona, and Shona sighed, “*Fine* – it’s *yer* holiday.” She stalked over to a supply rack, rifled through a bin, and held out a nametag. “Yer ‘Madeleine’ today,” she spat, and added in a whisper loud enough for Harry to hear, “He seems a decent one, but yeh don’t know him. Dinnae get caught with yer breeks down.”

‘Madeleine’ tied on a server’s apron. “Charming,” she deadpanned.

“Yer head’s full o’ mince,” Shona muttered disapprovingly.

“I’ll take Table Four,” ‘Madeleine’ said, gesturing to one of the six-tops, “and Table Twenty-Six, of course.” She smiled at Harry, who had already decided that he liked her smile very much.

The intercom buzzed and Shona picked up, annoyed.

“Telephone call for Chef,” the hostess’ voice crackled over the speaker.

Shona groused, “This had better be good! It’d better *not* be that baldy bastard with the purple hat – Digger, or whatever his effing name is! If it is, yeh tell him to go off and bugger the very first...”

There was a loud squelch, and the hostess cut her off. “It’s Bruce MacShane, about the tomatoes. He’s waiting on line one, Chef.”

She pushed the blinking red light, and screamed, “Crackin’ ta hear from yeh, MacShane! What kind of glue-sniffing subhuman trash yeh got working for you? I wouldn’t feed the tomatoes they trucked over to a boatload of... *yer mental!* They’re pure *shite!* I’ve got three effing greengrocers – *three!* It’s always *you* that BENDS ME OVER AND ... *four* crates, and yer talking some sense... NO! I dinnae need *three* greengrocers any more – I can call Tim right now... *four hours?* I need them for the first seating tonight! *Two hours*, and NO EFFING EXCUSES!” She jabbed at the light, and turned her full attention to the sauces.

Harry was still stuck on ‘purple hat’ and ‘Digger’. *She couldn’t possibly mean Dedalus Diggle*, he assured himself. *It’s hard to imagine Diggle touching a telephone.*

She stood before him, notepad in hand. “Good afternoon, sir. Apparently, my name is Madeleine,” she chuckled.

He smiled. He couldn’t help himself, really. “Hello, Madeleine. I’m Harry.”

She surveyed him carefully, and he had no idea what she was thinking. After her slow appraisal, she said definitively, “No question about it – you certainly are. In fact, I’d say you could use a trim – especially in the back.”

Harry playfully scowled. “It’s a boring name, I know, but I’m rather attached to it. So... what will I be having today?” he asked.

“*You* will be having the pasta feature,” she answered immediately. “Two of Shona’s meals per day, and you’ll end up with a tyre ‘round the middle unless you mind your choices.”

Please, don’t let another one start mothering me, Harry silently plead to any powers-that-be who might be looking on. He grumbled, “I run five miles a day. That should allow me the fish, I think.”

She smiled approvingly. “You’re a runner?”

He shrugged. “It’s something I picked up this summer. I...” He stopped himself. The real reasons were completely out-of-bounds, he knew. “I need to stay fit,” he tossed out.

“I’ve taken it up over the last year or so,” she pouted. “It’s boring, but... it was recommended to me.”

An unseen, unknown force compelled him to respond, “Perhaps it would go better with some company?” He darted behind his menu before he finished the sentence, blushing furiously.

“Perhaps it would,” she said, and left. He felt her uncertainty as clearly as his own, and quickly shifted his concentration to the menu in his hands. He wished that her mind was completely closed to him, but control in that area was up to him.

She returned fifteen minutes later with the pasta feature. As she set it before him, she said, “I typically go out around three. That way, I’m sure to be back in time for...” She stopped, and her cheeks coloured slightly.

“Do you have a favourite route?” he asked quickly.

She regained her composure. “I prefer the single-track roads in the countryside. I usually avoid walking around the village. Why? Do you have a good spot?”

“I run on the beaches, south of here a few miles,” he said. “There’s an unbroken stretch that must be about a mile long.”

Her right eyebrow rose slightly. “Down by the tower house?” she asked.

“South of it,” he answered.

“That’s.... private property, you know,” she told him hesitantly.

He wrestled with his choices for an explanation. “I have permission to be there,” he decided.

She crossed her arms. “I thought you said you ran five miles a day. It’s five miles just to get there.”

“You saw me riding, didn’t you?” he asked.

Her eyes lowered, and she chewed on her lower lip. At length, she answered, “I did. That’s why I noticed you. You looked... familiar.”

Harry’s curiosity was piqued yet again, but he was afraid to question her; he felt as though she might simply fade away if he did.

She said quickly, “Pick me up at three, at the far end of the High Street – by the chemist’s shop.” She walked purposefully into the kitchen, tossed aside her apron, and disappeared into the maelstrom of servers and runners and cooks.

Harry lingered over the pasta. He felt a bit dizzy. He wasn’t quite certain what he was getting himself into, or why he was getting himself into it.

By a quarter to three, Harry was so flummoxed that he nearly forgot to enlarge both helmets before setting out from the bothy back to St. Ebb. He carefully tethered the second helmet to the back of the seat and – with a careful look around – slipped into low-level flight across the rolling promontory to the narrow lane that ran between the tower house and the carriageway.

She watched him glide down the High Street, from a bench next to the druggist. She wore black sweatpants, an oversized grey sweatshirt emblazoned “Indiana University”, and trainers that looked new and expensive. Her hair was pulled into a short ponytail that flowed out the back of a plain white baseball cap, and her eyes were hidden behind black sunglasses. He reached for the tethered helmet, and handed it to her. She dropped her baseball cap into one of his saddlebags, flipped on the helmet, and climbed onto the back of the motorbike in a businesslike manner that suggested this wasn’t her first ride.

She was clearly in a hurry, and her unsettledness rubbed off on him. He found himself looking for Death Eaters, Aurors, Order members and other unwelcome faces. That was when he spotted the black Ford Anglia. The brim of a hat obscured the driver’s face, and the front-seat passenger was leant over as though he were hiding something. It pulled off the kerb just as they passed, and it trailed too closely. Harry thought he saw flashes of white light directed toward them.

“We’re being followed,” Harry said aloud, and she nearly lost her grip on him. She cursed, and he cringed – it was hard to keep track of all the things she wasn’t supposed to know, he thought. “Erm... sorry – I didn’t think to tell you about the radios in the helmets,” he offered by way of cover.

“Is it a black Anglia?” she asked.

“Did you see it pull out behind us?” he asked in turn.

“I didn’t have to,” she answered curtly. “They’ve been sniffing around for the last day or two.”

Bloody hell! he thought. *They’re following her?* Aloud, he settled for asking her, “Erm... should I lose them?”

“I was so hoping I wouldn’t have to deal with this,” she sighed. “It’s probably too late, but if you can manage it...?”

Without hesitation, he said, “I can handle that. I hope you don’t mind high speeds.”

She replied just as he twisted the throttle hard. “Go as fast as you... YEEEEOOOWWW!” He took the curves faster than the Anglia could possibly manage, though not so fast as to arouse any immediate suspicions in her. The pursuers were nowhere to be seen by the time that Harry pulled onto Lissance Lane and gently ascended toward the tower house.

Harry felt her grip on him tighten. She asked him, “Are you... are you absolutely sure that it’s all right to be here?”

“Yes, absolutely,” he assured her. He rode up to the circle at the entry to the tower house, and stopped. “We’ll need to walk from here.” He had sought a way for them to ride to the cliffs without betraying the true nature of the Bonnie, and could think of none.

He tied the two helmets to the seat, and she retrieved her baseball cap. As they began to pick their way across the tall grasses, he caught her looking up at the parapets atop the tower. She crossed her arms tightly, as though she were cold. “I’ve never been up close before,” she said ominously.

She was making him nervous, and Harry tried not to snap at her. “What do you mean by that? It’s just a house – a big one, but just a house!”

She looked at him as though he had just arrived from another planet. “I’ve been away, but I was raised here – I know that you weren’t. Trust me when I say that this is *not* just another house,” she insisted.

Harry wasn’t at all sure what he should ask about next – the mysterious pursuers, her reaction to the tower house, or perhaps her real name – so he settled for silence. She stopped at the rise that marked the beginning of the narrow path down the cliff face. “What’s that, over there?” she asked, pointing south along the cliff line.

“Just a bothy,” Harry answered. *You passed the test – you must be a Muggle*, he thought.

She squinted and hesitated. “Must’ve been a trick of the light,” she concluded.

“What?” he asked.

She began to answer. “At first, it looked like it was... forget about it – it’s silly.”

“What did you see?” he pressed.

She frowned. “It looked like it was flickering or something, right? It had to be glare off the water, or something.” He moved nearer to her, peered at the bothy, saw no sign of a flicker or a glare, and wondered.

She looked over the edge of the rise. “Looks like a good place for a run,” she decided, and trotted onto the path.

She wasn’t a natural runner. She held her arms too close to her sides, and looked uncomfortable though obviously committed to the effort. He wondered who had recommended that she run, and why. *She’s a puzzle, and I want to figure her out*, he thought, which in turn made him think of Ron. He thought of the Burrow, and hoped that the Weasleys were recovering.

He considered asking one of the many questions in his mind, but the look of grim determination on her face caused him to hold back. She was there to run, he recognised, and it wouldn’t do for him to get in her way.

She was reticent to run past the northernmost stack, away from the tower. They went a few hundred yards before she insisted that they turn back. He still got in his five miles, though it took nine trips back and forth across his portion of the beach. She stayed with him doggedly; he slowed his usual pace a bit by way of accommodation, but wasn’t shy about making her run hard. He didn’t think that she would appreciate being coddled.

She stopped at the centre of the beach, equidistant from each stack, and turned to face the cliff. The face was nearly vertical there; the terrain softened from sheer rock to steep moss-covered hills on either side. She breathed hard for a while, and then slowly settled. She seemed to be listening for something.

“Do you hear that?” she asked.

Harry was still for a moment, and then shrugged. “I don’t hear anything... well, there’s the surf and a few birds. Beyond that, it’s quiet.”

She nodded brightly. “Exactly – you can scarcely hear the surf. It’s as though the cliffs absorb sound. I think this would be a *fantastic* place to sing.” She put her hands on her hips, and surveyed from left to right. “It’s wonderful – it really is. I can see why you run here.”

Harry smiled. “It grew on me very quickly,” he said. “I’m glad you like it. So go ahead and sing, then.”

Her eyes grew wide. “What... are you talking about?” she asked hesitantly.

“You said this would be a great place to sing,” he explained. “Don’t let me stop you.”

She looked around nervously. “You’re joking, right? What if someone heard me?”

“We have to be a mile from anyone,” Harry said. “Who would hear you? There’s me, and the birds.” Surprised by her expression, he added reassuringly, “I promise I won’t make fun. I mean,

we all think we sound good in the shower – right?”

Her eyebrows climbed even higher, and she laughed nervously. “You... don’t have any idea who I am, do you?”

“Should I?” he asked honestly.

She began to smile. “I assumed that you were toying with me... well, you *were* toying with me... that is, we were toying with each other, and... you *really* don’t know who I am?”

“I assumed that you never actually used your real name, of course,” Harry admitted. “I didn’t use my name until this afternoon.”

“So you *are* Harry, then?” she asked, and faintly blushed. “Sorry – I shouldn’t have made fun. I thought we were still having our game.”

He grinned. “It was good fun, our game – wasn’t it?”

“It *was* fun. I haven’t had as much fun in a long, *long* time.” She extended her hand, and added, “I’m Heather, by the way.”

Harry took her hand. “Heather... Heather who sings... I’ve been invited to hear someone named Heather perform next month. Do you mean to say... are you telling me that’s *you* ?” he asked.

She laughed. “I think there may be something to my pet theory, I think.”

“Which pet theory is that, exactly?” Harry asked dubiously.

“That you very recently fell to Earth,” Heather answered.

Harry’s brow furrowed and he pulled his hand free. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Heather rolled her eyes. “You’re obviously well-to-do, but you’ve rarely eaten out –”

“Wha... what would make you... that’s not true...erm...I mean, I’ve been in a few...” Harry spluttered.

Heather began, “Do I need to go over all the reasons why *everyone* knows that...?”

“That’s not necessary,” Harry cut her off sullenly. He was intensely curious to know what ‘everyone’ knew, but wasn’t prepared for a list.

“Right, then – back to my theory,” she continued. “You’ve seen little or nothing on the telly in at least the last five years, and I wonder if you’ve *ever* seen a movie. Trust me on that; it’s amazing how much idle conversation revolves around the telly and the latest movie... I’m sorry, I’ll stop.”

“Why?” Harry muttered.

“You look uncomfortable,” she said. “I wasn’t trying for that. I just... I just wanted you to know why I think you’re interesting.”

Heather had reminded him eerily of Hermione until the last; Hermione would have pressed her point beyond the pale. *She thinks I’m interesting*, he thought, and he rather liked the idea. He watched her face, more boldly than he had managed before with a girl – except for Hermione, of course, who was an exception in so many ways.

She seemed uncomfortable with silence, or perhaps with his gaze. “The Greek thinks you’re either an angel or a demon. He claims to have a wealth of experience with both. Shona... well, she isn’t sure what to make of you.”

Harry had answers to two of his big questions, at least implicitly. He chose to go after a third. “Can I ask what she is to you?”

“Who... you mean Shona?” Heather asked. When Harry nodded, she said, “It’s a bit complicated.”

“How complicated can it be?” Harry asked. “Is she your sister? Your cousin? Your aunt?”

“It’s complicated,” Heather frowned.

“Uncomplicate it for me, then,” Harry said with a grin.

She seemed disarmed. Her frown faded, but she sighed. “I was raised by a cousin who I thought was my aunt – Auntie Fiona. I was given her last name, in fact. I found out about Shona when I was ten, but by then I was already boarding with Madame Hartmann six months a year, and... anyhow... when Shona came back to Scotland, my cousin was all too happy for me to summer here. I’ve managed at least a month with her every summer since I was eleven.”

The questions mounted in Harry’s mind, but he stuck with Shona. “She’s your mother, then?” Harry confirmed.

“She gave birth to me,” Heather corrected him firmly. “I don’t call anyone my mother.”

Harry began, “I take it that your father...”

“Shona won’t talk about it,” Heather said. “I don’t think that I want to know.” She sat down cross-legged on the sand. “So... tell me about *your* happy family?”

Harry sat beside her and struggled to sort out the details that he could share; what remained was rather vague, he realised. He answered her with as little emotion as he could manage. “My parents were killed when I was a baby. My aunt and uncle took me in, but only because they had to do it... that’s as nicely as I can put it. I was sent to boarding school, and I spent as much of the summers away as I could.”

She didn’t tell him that she was sorry, she didn’t try to comfort him, she didn’t make excuses for his aunt and uncle – she just nodded, searched his face with sad eyes, and briefly set her hand atop

his. He didn't pull away.

"Did you make any friends, at this boarding school of yours?" she asked. He noticed her hands now, and how she moved them when she talked.

"A few," Harry answered. "Ron and I have been tight since the first time we... well, since we first arrived at school, I suppose. Hermione has been my closest friend, to tell you the truth. There's Ron's sister, Ginny... and Neville... Luna, of course..."

"Luna? That's an interesting name," she said.

"She has an interesting father," Harry chuckled.

"You're fortunate to have a lot of friends," Heather remarked. She sifted sand and pebbles in her hands. "I've been tutored privately since I was nine. Fiona couldn't have known what it would be like – always around adults, studying and practising all day, working in the evening." She sighed. "To hell with it – the truth is that she wouldn't have cared even if she knew. I've been back here for about three weeks. That's the longest I've been in one place for two years."

"Who watches out for you, then?" Harry asked.

"I do," Heather answered.

Harry said, "That's not right. What about Shona?"

Heather snorted. "Shona went to the School of Hard Knocks, and she worships at the Hard Work Kirk. 'No chef should be above pot-scrubbing,' she says. She expects me to work hard, because I'm likely to have one shot. She's right about that part, of course."

"Are you doing what *you* want to do?" Harry asked.

Heather hesitated. "What a question!" she said. "It's what I do, and it's what I know. Sometimes... sometimes I want to just run, right? Just throw my passport and some money in a bag, and run for it – right through the Chunnel, and on to Italy, or Greece, or... you get the picture. Shona's usually on my arse about practicing, and Julian's been on the phone every day asking when I'll be back to work, and Madame Hartmann's crabbing about arrangements, and... anyway, it never ends. This summer's been grand, though. I told everyone to sod off until the end of August, and so far I've been able to hold the line."

"But you'll be back to work in September," Harry assumed.

Heather nodded. "People depend on me; I don't want to disappoint them. I *do* like the work, you know. I like being on a stage, and I do like singing and performing. I'm lucky enough to work with great musicians most of the time. I've done some songwriting lately, and I've picked up a few instruments along the way. I really like the business end of it as well, but everyone still thinks they should be able to take advantage."

“Why? Because you’re young?” asked Harry.

Heather’s expression darkened, and she fumed, “They see a teenager. They forget that I’ve been doing this for half my life. I’m more than ready to take charge of my own career. Another ten months, and I get to make the decisions for a change ... oh, my God! *Hide me!* ”

Harry looked around the beach, and suddenly felt very exposed. He felt for the tip of his wand in his sleeve. “What? Hide you? Why? *Where?* ”

“I told them I wouldn’t be working this month – *I told them!* ” she groaned.

Harry looked to the north, and saw two men walking onto the beach from behind the stack. “You work with them, then?”

“You could say that,” Heather growled. “It’s more like working *for* them, most of the time. Of course, dear Julian always knows best – after all, he has my best interests at heart. At least I know where Burke stands; he only has a job because I’m doing well, and he probably hates me for it.”

Harry said ruefully, “I understand you better than you might think. You know, I think that we’re both owed a decent summer holiday for a change.” He stood, and added with certainty, “I’ll take care of this.”

She eyed him curiously. “How?”

“You might want to head in another direction,” Harry suggested. “You’re a bit conspicuous sitting here, right?”

She stood, brushed the sand from her sweatpants, and strolled slowly toward the cliff face. Harry walked confidently, almost aggressively, toward the two intruders.

The man on the left was tall and lanky, with long blond hair cascading to his shoulders. He wore a black shirt that looked expensive, casual pants, and boat shoes over bare feet. He tossed his hair back twice while Harry walked toward them; Harry thought he looked vain. The other man was shorter and older, with closely cropped greying hair. He wore a sport coat and slacks, and shoes that were completely unsuited for walking on a beach.

The tall man on the left flipped back his bangs and waved genially. “Hullo there! Smashing walk, isn’t it?”

The shorter man grumbled, “Yeah, bloody great.”

Harry had no desire for uninvited guests on his property to begin with, and the fact that Heather didn’t seem to care for the two men sealed his mood. He clenched his jaw. “You’re on my property,” he said flatly.

“Sorry?” the tall man said.

“He said we’re on his property,” the shorter man said, with a note of exasperation in his voice.

“*I heard him* . I understood that this was MacLeish’s beach,” the tall man told Harry confidently.

Harry pointed at the stack behind them. “To there,” he said. “Between the stacks, it’s mine.”

The tall man raised an eyebrow. “I see. Perhaps we should introduce ourselves. I’m Julian Sumner, and my associate is Burke Preston. We’re associated with one of Mr. Keith MacLeish’s recording concerns. And you are...?”

“The owner of this beach,” Harry growled.

The older man quietly reminded his companion, “Wilton did say that the former owner of Mr. MacLeish's lands retained the adjacent property.”

The tall man – Julian – appraised Harry. “She didn’t warn us that the former owner might be unfriendly.”

Burke, the older man, countered, “She *did* say that he valued his privacy, Julian... and it appears that we’re interrupting, besides.” He squinted. “You... look familiar.”

Harry froze inside for a moment, and then blustered, “I doubt we run in the same circles.”

Julian saw Heather’s back in the distance and winced. “Er, sorry. I failed to take notice, and... look, we really would appreciate being able to walk the entire beach –”

Burke cut in crossly, “*He* would. It’ll require the better part of the evening to extract the sand from my shoes.”

“Whoever told you that I value my privacy was correct,” Harry said darkly. “No one is to come on this property without an invitation from me. I have taken some... *interesting* security measures.” He hoped that he was successfully preying on their imaginations.

Burke quickly turned around. “Terribly sorry to bother you. We’ll be heading back the way that we came.”

Julian groused, “I understand the desire for privacy – believe me, I do – but there’s no need to be so inhospitable!” He hesitated until Burke had moved several paces away, and then quickly dashed after him.

Harry waited until the two men rounded the stack, and then strode quickly toward Heather. He was more than a little satisfied with himself. “See? All taken care of,” he called out.

Heather turned to face him, and she radiated barely-suppressed anger. “This is *your* property?” she asked accusingly.

Harry was taken aback. Instinctively, he snapped, “We *were* keeping a few secrets from one

another – our *names* , for example? It hadn't occurred to me that I should detail my living arrangements, up to now."

"You live in *that*? " she demanded, inclining her head toward the top of the cliffs in the direction of the tower house. She was red-faced, and she clenched and unclenched her fists. He wondered if she had more of Shona's disposition than he had realised.

"I'm living in the bothy, actually. I haven't worked up the nerve to go in the tower yet," he admitted.

"Then you're a *Black* ," she spat.

"My godfather was a Black," Harry said nervously. "It's complicated... he died, but I was... he... I suppose you could say that he adopted me, but he was already dead when... anyway, I ended up his heir, and inherited part of the estate."

She let her eyes bore into him for a while, and seemed to weigh his explanation. "Do you understand what else you've inherited?" she said icily.

He held up his hands in surrender. "Care to explain it to me?" he asked.

Her eyes were narrow and cold. "The Blacks bled these parts dry for *centuries* ," she explained. "They owned nearly everything, and held sway over the rest. They used to collect assessments on most of the property in the village – like it was still some kind of medieval fiefdom or something. After they disappeared, some English came up and tried to run the tower as an inn. People swore it was haunted. They didn't last. Most of the people in the village will tell you the whole place is cursed; they won't come near the place. Of course, you *know* what happened last month." She reached out and angrily shoved him. "*I can't believe you!* You send that little monster around to start everything all over again, and then you have the *nerve* to prance in here and get everyone to like you? How *evil* do you have to be...?"

Harry tried to calm himself, but failed. "*What happened last month? What little monster? What are you talking about?* " he shouted.

"*Don't play dumb with me!* " she shouted back. "I hate it when people play dumb with me! He works for you, for God's sake! The little freak wears nothing but purple... what's his name...?"

Harry closed his eyes. "Diggle," he said. "Dedalus Diggle."

"I knew it! He *does* work for you!" Heather had a wild look in her eyes.

Harry fell to his knees, and buried his head in his hands. "What was he thinking? Why can't anything ever be simple?" he muttered.

"*Well?* What do you have to say for yourself?" Heather demanded, and kicked sand at him.

Harry shielded his eyes, and waited for her to stop. He brushed sand from his hair, looked up at

her, and said as calmly as he could manage, “You have no reason to trust me, but I’m going to ask you to try. I want you to tell me, as best you can, exactly what Diggle has done.”

She stared at him for a long time. He tried to return her gaze, but something about it felt incredibly uncomfortable – like she was judging him. After a long time, she sat down with obvious reluctance. “You swear to me that you have no idea what’s going on?” she snapped.

“I’ve only just received the inheritance,” Harry explained. “Diggle would have been working on behalf of the Black Family Trust a month ago.”

“Fine, then. This Diggle started collecting back assessments, on behalf of... on behalf of you, or this Trust you mentioned, or whomever,” Heather fumed. “I’ve seen the papers that he gave to Shona. He wanted ten years’ back assessments, with interest. Most people just rolled over and paid; even the idea that the Blacks had returned scared them into it. Shona wouldn’t let The Greek pay him. She wanted proof.”

“What kind of proof?” Harry asked.

“She wanted to see one of the Blacks, in the flesh,” answered Heather. “Diggle said that wouldn’t be possible, and threatened to evict her – to have the property seized! I... I stepped in, and told The Greek to pay him off and be done with it.”

Harry looked at her in surprise. “How did you manage that?”

Heather said, “He’s rough around the edges, but he really wants to succeed. I’m lucky to have happened on a good manager.”

“Excuse me?” said Harry, who was now quite confused.

“He works for me,” Heather explained. “Well, he works for the company that Burke set up on my behalf. I own L’Oiseau Chanteur, you see?” A look of concern spread across her face. “You won’t tell Shona, will you?” she asked.

Harry stammered in reply, “Erm... no, I won’t... I... er, I suppose that’s between you and... she doesn’t know? She really doesn’t know?”

“She worked in Edinburgh when I met her,” Heather said quietly. “She was sous chef for one of the large hotel and meeting concerns. She hated it. She never wanted to live in the city; that’s not why she came back to Scotland. When the money began to come in, after my first release, she refused to take anything from me. So it couldn’t be from me, get it? In comes The Greek, working for this faceless investor. She jumped at the chance to come back home. I wanted to do something for her... it just seemed right, you know?”

Harry found himself smiling, despite himself. “You’re a good person, you know,” he said earnestly.

Heather took a deep breath and asked hopefully, “You really didn’t mean for this to happen, did

you? I see that... in your eyes. Can you straighten it out, then?"

Harry looked deeply into her eyes. "I would never be part of anything like this," he said. "I'll fix it, somehow – I swear it."

The corners of her mouth turned up slightly. "I... believe you... but if you don't come through, I'll lock you in a closet with Shona and her cleavers."

Harry returned to the bothy after dropping Heather near the village; she felt it would be better to walk back alone. He examined each scrap of parchment that addressed his own finances and the Black Trust. He understood less than half of it, and his temples throbbed after four hours of slogging through endless detail. He understood enough to piece together part of what Diggle had done – he couldn't fathom why Diggle had done it, however.

He stepped outside the bothy, and called for Hedwig. She was unsettled by the peculiar wards, and preferred to perch on a rock outcropping that faced the door from a distance. She flew toward him hesitantly. He knew better than to bring her inside; he had done that once, and she had pecked at him mercilessly. He looked over his letter. It was brief and indirect; he had no way of knowing who might be seeing or screening his posts.

Mr. Wolfe –

It's important that I see my conservator tonight. I've received some very disturbing information about trust arrangements, which must be addressed immediately. I'm certain that my conservator knows exactly where I can be found. Tell him that Barry White won't be singing tonight, even though I'm "Born to be Wild".

Mr. Black

He figured that if Remus knew that the bothy had been a 'pad' and had spent time there, then he was certainly familiar with Sirius' album collection as well. He rolled up the parchment, and carefully tied it to Hedwig's leg.

"Hedwig, I need you to get this to Remus," he said, as he gently stroked her feathers. "It's very important that he get this tonight. Do you understand?"

She flapped her wings in acknowledgement, and raced southward. Harry watched her until she disappeared against the darkening sky, and then returned inside. He would repair whatever damage had been done, no matter the cost. He wouldn't have Heather or Shona or Hermione or Luna or anyone else think that he would ever condone what Diggle had done. He knew that Ron and Ginny and the rest of the Weasleys wouldn't be able to sleep at night if they knew. He punched the speed bag three times – hard – and thought of ways to make Dedalus Diggle squirm.

Harry spent the evening tidying up, reading, and listening to his new compact discs. He hesitated at listening to Heather's disc. He had no idea what it would be like; he only knew that she sang.

For all he knew, it might sound like the Weird Sisters – although only the Bee Gees had come close to that, after nearly two weeks of listening to Sirius’ record collection. He found Hermione’s picture face down atop the armoire, and cursed himself for forgetting where it was. After the glass was cleaned and the frame dusted, he replaced it on the wall.

Hedwig impatiently tapped at the window just before midnight, and barely held still long enough for Harry to retrieve the envelope attached to her leg. She screeched and quickly retreated beyond the wards.

Mr. Black –

You seem to share an old friend’s taste in music. My concern has escalated in recent days. Your conservator has information regarding your trust arrangements, which should be shared in person. The conservator has solicited professional assistance. Please meet the conservator and his associate in the village tomorrow at one o’clock. He asks that you make suitable midday meal arrangements for three. I am told that you have developed a taste for French cuisine.

Fondly,

R. John Wolfe

In the back of his mind, he had suspected that his minders had somehow followed him to St. Ebb. He wasn’t comforted by Lupin’s confirmation. He succumbed to a morbid interest in what Voldemort might be doing, and wondered whether he was hatching yet another plan. His scar hadn’t even tingled for nearly two weeks. He sensed vague feelings of irritation or frustration, but nothing more.

Harry fetched another piece of parchment and his quill. The summer was coming to a close, and it was time to make good on a promise. He wrote an invitation to Ron.

Harry Potter and the Years of Rebellion On The Beach

Chapter Twenty

ON THE BEACH

August 19, 1:00 am

Harry ran faster and faster until his lungs seared and the salt air scorched his throat. He slowed to a walk, hands on hips and head hanging low, and took notice of the burning in his legs. He didn't know why he kept pushing; he simply pushed. He had run as far as the beach would take him – to the property that Diggle had apparently sold to Keith MacLeish, property that was covered by massive tents and large construction vehicles the likes of which Harry had never seen before – and then back and forth, over and over, a mile at a time. Time and distance didn't matter to him; it was all about the effort, the release of energy. Running drained him, but it brought no relief. The roadways of his mind still ran freely from one association to the next, and all dark roads led back to Voldemort. He wondered what the healers at St. Mungo's would say about the sanity of wizards who ran in the night.

He sat on the sand, and slipped off his trainers. Sand spilled from them, and he removed and vigorously shook his socks. An insistent breeze blew in from the sea, cool but comfortable. The retreating waters had revealed a rocky outcropping, and the stones glittered here and there in the pale moonlight. Leaving his trainers and sandy socks behind, Harry walked through ankle-deep water across mucky sand and onto the rocks.

The outcropping stretched for a good fifty feet before it faded into a jumble of jagged boulders and smooth stones awash in the surf. Harry watched the collision of earth and water, and was bewitched by it. He had dim memories of a day at the seaside cut short, typical of his few experiences in public with the Dursleys. In a mad fit, Uncle Vernon had packed all of them off in a questionable boat to a remote island upon the arrival of Harry's Hogwarts letter. That was the sum total of his exposure to the sea, prior to St. Ebb. The sight and the sound of it, the salty tang of the air, the cawing of the birds – it called him for some reason that he didn't need to understand. The night sky had been his friend for a long time, but when combined with the siren call of the water... he began to understand his nighttime forays.

There was a light splash behind him, and then another, and then another – *footsteps*, he concluded. His wand was instantly in hand, and he was Disillusioned in the next instant. He turned to face the

beach and nearly fell into the surf out of sheer surprise.

Albus Dumbledore wore a loose white cotton shirt that rippled in the breeze, tan pants rolled up to mid-calf, and a wide leather belt from which a leather pouch hung, with his hair pulled into a ponytail, and a shorter beard than Harry remembered. His bare feet splashed in the water and slurped in the sand. He looked directly at Harry, and smiled broadly. With a wave of Dumbledore's hand, the illusion that concealed Harry was lifted.

"I was beginning to wonder whether you would voluntarily end your run, or would continue until such time as you fell unconscious," Dumbledore said.

Harry pointed his wand and summoned a menacing look – it was difficult, as he was more inclined to gape at Dumbledore's clothing. "Tell me something that only the two of us would know," he demanded.

"At the Department of Mysteries, Voldemort possessed you, in the hopes that I would sacrifice you in order to destroy him," Dumbledore said calmly. "Of course, Voldemort would also be aware of that. Perhaps... ah, of course. You offered me Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Beans shortly after the recovery of the Philosopher's Stone. I rarely indulge, as I have a rather unfortunate history with them. On that particular occasion, alas, I selected earwax."

Harry lowered his wand. "I knew there were minders about, but I didn't expect to see *you* here," he grumbled.

Dumbledore walked to the edge of the outcropping. Surf collapsed against the rocks, and a fountain of spray and foam shot upward. He laughed as the spray splattered him. "Did you hear what the surf said, Harry?"

Harry's brow furrowed, and he wondered if the healers at St. Mungo's might advance Dumbledore ahead of him in the queue. "I... er... wasn't aware that surf had anything to say," he managed.

"The surf said, 'I await your return'. It calls us home. When you reach a certain stage of life, the surf is quite easy to hear," Dumbledore explained. "That is one of the reasons why I spent many of my summer holidays at the seaside."

Harry was left even more confused by the explanation. "You're here on holiday, then?" he asked.

"I am many years removed from the luxury of extended holidays," Dumbledore answered. "When your destination became apparent, I personally took charge of your watch."

Harry stammered in surprise, "You... *you've* been my... my *minder*?"

Dumbledore chuckled. "I would point out that it is you, and not I, who has chosen to characterise the members of your protection detail as 'minders'. I have personally provided protection for a portion of each day since your arrival here. You keep rather difficult hours, even by the usual standards of young men, and you have been more mobile than I would have anticipated. I have

deployed several others, in addition to myself.”

“I’m sorry to have been a burden,” Harry said with a tinge of bitterness.

“It has been a challenge, but not a burden,” Dumbledore assured him. “Your excellent taste in dining has been a welcome surprise.” He patted his stomach. “I shall have to expand the house-elves’ repertoire. If I do not soon return to dining at Hogwarts, I shall have to expand my robes as well.”

Harry felt a blush creeping into his cheeks. “You’ve been taking meals at L’Oiseau Chanteur?”

Dumbledore nodded. “I have been present for all but two of your meals there. The name of the restaurant is quite appropriate, is it not?”

Harry asked apprehensively, “What do you mean?” He had guessed that ‘chanteur’ had something to do with music, but hadn’t bothered to enquire after the meaning of the name.

“Loosely translated to English, ‘l’oiseau chanteur’ is ‘the songbird’,” Dumbledore explained. “As I said, the name is quite appropriate.”

Harry’s cheeks grew still warmer. “Then you’re aware of... erm... that is, you know who... erm...”

Dumbledore’s eyes gave off their familiar twinkle. “I have been fully briefed by Tonks, who has conducted research on my behalf,” he said. “I trust you understand that it was necessary for us to ascertain the young lady’s identity, as well as that of other persons with whom you have associated.”

Harry’s focus remained fixed. “How much did you... that is to say, erm... what was heard, exactly?”

“Were things said of which I should be aware?” Dumbledore asked gravely.

“Look, I don’t think that a small bit of privacy is out of bounds...” Harry began to bluster. He stopped when Dumbledore snorted.

Harry glared at him. “Are you enjoying this?”

Dumbledore thoughtfully stroked his beard. “I do believe that I *am* enjoying your consternation, Harry... quite so, in fact.”

“I should toss you in the surf,” Harry growled.

“You could certainly try to do so,” offered Dumbledore; when Harry stood his ground, he added, “No? Perhaps I shall allow you the opportunity at another time.”

“Are you going to tell me what you heard, then?” Harry asked with some anxiety.

Dumbledore smiled. “I overheard several days’ worth of delightful flirtation, Harry. It was rather unexpected on your part, at least to me. Were you concerned that I might disapprove of your behaviour?”

Harry shuffled his feet. “I... erm... well, I expected a lecture of some sort,” he muttered.

“I see. Very well... a lecture, you say? I shall give one to you, then,” promised Dumbledore. “In future, I would appreciate personal notification should you decide to decline my advice. This is particularly important when your whereabouts are at issue. It was terribly inconvenient to redeploy so many Order members. I have had to rely on Hogwarts faculty from time to time, a choice that you shall surely hear about. As for your new residence and current social life, I would ordinarily frown upon such close relations with unrelated Muggles on the part of a Hogwarts student. However, you are no longer a Hogwarts student. As an adult, you may keep your own counsel on matters of fraternization. I ask that you remain mindful of the secrecy rules and regulations. Juggling two divergent lives has vexed not a few wizards over the years; Sirius was one of them for a time. You should also remember that many other wizards and witches will not share my open-mindedness. Have I satisfied your requirements?”

Harry looked at the surf, the rocks, and the sky – anywhere but at Dumbledore. “Why *you* ? You could have ordered someone else to spy on me.”

Dumbledore turned away from Harry and began to walk back toward the beach. As he picked his way across the rocks, he called out, “You made an assertion when we last met, Harry... an assertion that has remained in my mind since that time. You said that I did not know you. That statement, in part, led me to assume direct responsibility for your protection. Your assertion has proven true, to a point. You have grown up, in ways that I have not had occasion to appreciate. You are noble, charitable, trusting, quick-witted, and a host of other things that serve you well. Do not misunderstand me and thereby presume that I consider you fully mature – you are too quick to anger, quite rash at times, and you lack the experience required as a foundation for good judgment. We must address the last part in earnest.”

Harry slowly walked along the edge of the outcropping, paying as much mind to the surf as to Dumbledore. The old wizard slowly eased himself down to the sand, and extended his feet toward the water.

“I have endeavoured to leave you to your time away, but there is news that should be shared – disturbing news, Harry. The first concerns Grimmauld Place. Have you shared the secret with anyone outside of the Order?” Dumbledore asked.

“No,” Harry said immediately. “I haven't even thought of it recently.”

“Our mutual friend Tom paid an unexpected visit, you see?” said Dumbledore.

Harry's eyes bugged. “Voldemort was at Grimmauld Place?”

“He left a message for you, two messages actually. One was written in ink, the other in blood.

Your owl was gravely injured -”

“Hedwig!” Harry gasped. “Oh, no! Is she -?”

“She is in the excellent care of Madam Eeylops, and I am told that she will recover fully. No one else was present in the house at the time Tom made himself known, thankfully,” Dumbledore said.

“The dream...” Harry realised. “He got the location in the dream.”

“The dream? What sort of dream was this? I understood you to say that you had not felt any intrusions,” Dumbledore said with not a little alarm. Harry explained the circumstances of the dream with 'Sirius'; he went into more detail than was comfortable, but wanted Dumbledore to understand that he hadn't been the only one present.

The Headmaster stroked his beard in thought for a long minute. “I do not believe that Miss Weasley was the conduit, but I shall meet with her – if nothing else, to allay her fears,” he said. “This was a most unusual visit, indeed. I must discuss this with a colleague, someone whom you have not yet met. Is this acceptable to you?”

“Yes,” Harry said, then added, “I'm not used to being asked.”

“Let us see if we cannot change that,” said Dumbledore. “I will return Hedwig to you for convalescence as soon as Madam Eeylops allows... and now I must convey the other news, and I ask that you keep your calm. There is a reason that I delayed in sharing this with you. Miss Granger took a disturbing turn for the worse not long after you left for Scotland.”

“WHAT?” Harry shouted. “WHY WASN'T I TOLD?”

“She is under excellent care, Harry, under the same colleague whom I mentioned previously,” insisted Dumbledore. “There were certain risks required for her benefit, and I felt it best to wait until there was positive news to share. Miss Granger is recovering nicely, and I have every reason to believe that she will be in attendance on the first of September.”

“I want to see her,” Harry said immediately.

“She needs time to heal,” Dumbledore said. “I am confident in speaking for Dr. Covelli when I say that it would be best for you to wait. In any case, the permission of Mr. and Mrs. Granger would be needed for you to visit, or in fact for me to provide any more information at all.”

“But she's going to be all right?” Harry asked nervously.

“What happened to Miss Granger was a horrible thing,” said Dumbledore. “Are you the same person that you were before witnessing Mr. Diggory's death and Voldemort's rebirth?”

“No... I wish I'd not seen any of it, that none of it would ever have happened,” Harry said.

“So it will be with Miss Granger, I am certain,” explained Dumbledore. “She will eventually be

well, but most likely changed in some ways. I say this not to frighten you, but to prepare you for the likelihood.”

Harry didn't want to talk about what had happened at the Grangers' home; he didn't even want to think on it. “I guess there are no worries about going back to Grimmauld Place, then. What's the Order going to do – meet at Hogwarts?”

“Given the climate within the Board and the Ministry, that would not be a wise course of action,” said Dumbledore. “We fear that one or more of the safe houses has been compromised, as well, by a different channel. Alastor has recommended that we adopt the cell structure that was used during the First War, and I agree. The larger meetings will be limited to those who coordinate cells and the general leadership.”

“Are there that many people in the Order?” Harry asked.

“We have engaged in careful growth,” Dumbledore said. “Though you will not be returning to Grimmauld Place, I do however ask that you resume training with Kingsley whilst you remain here. I have asked Tonks to provide some additional training, and she will be taking charge of your protection detail as well. I find myself drawn into an ever increasing number of meetings, which I consider to be bad for both body and mind. Alas, it is a consequence of the life I have chosen.”

“Kingsley and Tonks are fine with me,” Harry said.

“Excellent,” said Dumbledore. “Tonks?”

Tonks called out, “Wotcher, Harry!” inches from Harry’s ear; he failed to hear so much as a *pop!* in advance. He shrieked, tottered to one side, and fell awkwardly from the rocks into the water. Pushing off against the bottom, he staggered to his feet just as a wave caught him from behind. He came up a second time, coughed and spluttered, and shouted, “TONKS!”

Tonks winced. “I know, I know... I’m a menace,” she pouted. “Make your way over, and I’ll help you back onto the rocks.”

“I’ll just head for the beach, thank you!” Harry snapped, just before another wave caused him to lose his footing. He spit salty water, and reconsidered; instead he swam toward the rocks. The current was stronger than he expected, and the water was bracing.

He stood chest-deep next to the rocks, and Tonks offered her hand. “I’ll give a tug while you walk up the side,” she said.

Harry took her hand, and a wicked impulse came upon him. He grinned at her, and pulled as hard as he could. He found her shrill shriek and thunderous splash most satisfying. She came up cursing coarsely and thrashing madly. From the beach, Dumbledore’s laughter rang out in waves.

Tonks glared at Harry murderously. “I can’t believe you... *look at me!* ” Her hair had turned three

different colours, and her face was a different skin tone and shape than when she first appeared on the rocks. “I suppose you think morphing is simple, then? Just a walk in the park, is it? *Urgh!* ” She launched into another round of cursing, and Harry began edging toward the rocks.

Her expression grew feral, and she bellowed, “Do you have any idea how much effort it takes to set and hold a new face? *What were you thinking?* I am a *high-maintenance woman!* ” She erupted into a splashing fit, arms swinging and feet kicking. Harry turned to avoid the flood of water flung toward him, and considered the potential cost of impulsiveness.

A second laugh echoed from the rocks; its tone suggested polite amusement. Kingsley Shacklebolt called out, “High maintenance, Tonks? This comes from a woman who considers Weird Sisters tee-shirts to be the height of fashion?”

“Don’t interrupt, Kingsley; I’ve yet to reach a boil!” Tonks declared, before she resumed loudly cursing and splashing at Harry with all the strength she could muster.

Shacklebolt began to laugh again, and Harry protested, “This isn’t... *glub* ... funny, Shacklebolt... *grgl*... she’s trying to... *glrb*... drown me!”

Shacklebolt looked back at Harry smugly. “From where I stand, it’s rather amusing.”

Harry splashed Tonks into temporary submission, turned back to face the rocks, pointed, and said, “*Accio Shacklebolt!* ” The tall Auror stumbled, scrambled for balance, and then slid slowly and inexorably to the edge and into the water.

Harry turned back to Tonks. “Now *that’s* amusing,” he said, rather self-satisfied. She started to chuckle.

Shacklebolt broke the surface with clenched teeth. “Potter, you’ll pay for this. In a thousand small ways, you’ll pay,” he promised in a dead even tone.

Dumbledore strode back to the rocks. He flicked his wand, and Shacklebolt rose from the water. “Your deep sense of calm has long been a source of strength, Kingsley,” he said quietly. “You would do well to remember that.”

Shacklebolt bowed his head slightly, and muttered, “Of course, Albus.”

Dumbledore turned to Tonks and Harry with twinkling eyes. “Are you ready to come out now?” he asked.

Tonks nodded fervently. “The water’s on the brisk side,” she said. “Just one last thing...” Before Harry could fully react, Tonks closed the distance between them, planted her hand atop his head, and pushed. By the time he shot to the surface, she was standing on the rocks. She laughed so hard that tears streamed down her face.

Dumbledore lifted Harry from the water and cast a drying spell, smiling broadly all the while. “It does my heart good to see you acting your age – you have had precious few opportunities for

that,” he said.

Shacklebolt also smiled, though faintly – a rare sight that summer, Harry thought. “It is too easy to forget that you’re sixteen,” he said. “I trust you’re prepared to resume our training?”

Harry felt the weight of obligation slip back onto his shoulders, and didn’t entirely care for it. “That’s right,” he responded.

Shacklebolt was impassive. “There must be sufficient space in the tower for practice,” he said.

Harry shrugged, “I have no idea. I haven’t been inside.”

Shacklebolt looked at Harry as if he were mad. “What are you on about? We know you’ve been staying here. Would you have us believe that you’re sleeping on the beach?”

Dumbledore asked, “Why haven’t you entered the tower, Harry?”

Harry hesitated before he answered, “It didn’t feel right.”

Dumbledore appeared to weigh the answer. Harry concentrated on building a mental wall around his own thoughts, but felt no intrusions. Eventually, Dumbledore said, “We will enter the tower together, tomorrow.”

Harry heard a voice from the darkness that he would as soon have forgotten. “Potter, it goes without saying that you lack any respect for your protectors. If you possessed the barest scintilla of respect, good sense or even common decency, then you would *sleep* from time to time,” sneered Severus Snape. Harry summoned cauldrons of boiling oil to the ramparts of his mental walls and silently dared Snape to advance.

“Severus, I have taken all the evenings with Harry thus far,” Dumbledore said. “Your complaint would seem to lack merit.”

Harry gasped when Snape came into view. The relative cleanliness of his hair was shocking enough; its sandy brown colour was nearly incomprehensible. He simply couldn’t process the sight of Severus Snape in casual Muggle clothing. Harry had never seen Snape wear garments of any colour other than black. The combined effect of hair and clothing took decades from Snape’s face; for the first time, Harry could imagine Snape as his parents’ peer.

“Of course, Potter’s new pet Muggle *would* have to be pathologically incapable of sleep as well,” Snape grumbled. “Why would the world visit upon me *another* chronic rule-breaker who, in abject violation of reason, beguiles all comers *and* who is profoundly ungrateful for the gift of raw talent? The two of you are unpalatable peas in a pod, boy.”

“*Pet Muggle?*” Harry asked dangerously, his fists balling.

“You will refrain from derogatory comments, Severus – is that understood?” commanded Dumbledore. “If you are here, then who is maintaining watch on the young lady’s residence?”

“There was hardly a point, given that she is no longer within her residence,” said Snape. “She is coming up the lane toward the tower as we speak. I suggest that we disperse.”

Harry quickly shed his thoughts of Snape. “Up the lane... what would she be doing here at this time of night?” he wondered aloud.

“The same as you, Potter – destroying the lives of those around her via sleep deprivation,” spat Snape.

“Your point has been amply made,” Dumbledore said with pronounced impatience. “You may return to Hogwarts; thank you for your assistance.” Snape glared at Harry. When Harry slowly started toward him, Snape stalked off into the darkness and disappeared.

Dumbledore turned to Tonks and Shacklebolt. “Eleven o’clock should be a sufficiently late start, wouldn't you say, Kingsley? Tonks, if you would be so kind as to check the perimeters?” Tonks playfully swatted at Harry’s arm and disappeared in silence. Shacklebolt nodded respectfully and also disappeared.

Harry flexed his hands. “You can take the grease from the git...” he began to mutter.

“You shall have to overcome your enmity,” Dumbledore gently chided him.

“Tell him that,” Harry grumbled.

Dumbledore said calmly, “I have, and I shall do so again.”

They walked across the beach in silence. Harry walked up the switchback to the top of the cliff. Dumbledore disappeared with a faint *pop!* and awaited Harry at the top.

“I suppose I’ll see you in the morning,” Harry said evenly.

Dumbledore nodded, and conjured an armchair and a light blanket.

“What are you doing?” Harry asked.

“I am making my arrangements for the remainder of the night,” answered Dumbledore.

Harry hadn’t contemplated the living conditions of his minders. “I’d invite you in, of course,” he said hesitantly. “It’s just... the place where I’m staying is warded against wizards. I could grant you permission, of course...”

“...But you would prefer to hold onto something that is truly your own,” Dumbledore finished for him. “The bothy appears to have remained in excellent condition. I can certainly understand –”

Harry cut him off in a flash. “*Appears to be... you can see it?*”

Dumbledore lowered his eyes. “There is nothing to be gained by misleading you. Yes, I can see

through the wards that Sirius placed on the bothy. In fact, I could see through them twenty years ago, when I followed Sirius and Remus and your father here. They are well placed; it was truly extraordinary work on the part of a sixth-year student. There are no more than a handful of wizards or witches who could visually penetrate such a ward. It is a unique ability that I have developed over time.”

Harry asked, “You followed them here, when they slipped out of Hogwarts? Sirius didn’t mention that in his letter.”

“He would not have known, for I took no action,” returned Dumbledore. “Sirius desperately required an outlet, and there was little that could be done within the confines of Hogwarts.” Seemingly sensing what Harry was thinking, he added, “You have similar needs, Harry. I will not come to the bothy without your knowledge, and I will never knowingly disclose its location. You have my word.” Harry satisfied himself with that, in part because he had no alternative. He led Dumbledore toward his home.

When Harry put his wand in the lead box, Dumbledore remarked, “How quaint,” before following suit. Dumbledore was particularly interested in Sirius’ record collection, and Harry’s new collection of compact discs. He confessed to having charmed a Muggle phonograph so that it would function within his chambers at Hogwarts.

Harry showed him Sirius’ stacks of photographs. Dumbledore identified a number of people in the magical photographs. Others were familiar, mostly members of the original Order. Dumbledore was at a loss with most of the Muggle photographs. Many had been taken in and around the bothy, or on the beach. Half were pictures of Sirius alone with women, sometimes one and sometimes more. A few faces recurred, but most did not. The rest were various combinations of Sirius and others – Harry’s parents, Remus, and many who Harry didn’t know; he thought that one face might have belonged to Devlin Whitehorn.

Harry felt compelled to guide Dumbledore on a tour of sorts – it felt like he was showing off his first flat. Dumbledore seemed to sense this and he bubbled on in a very positive vein. In the bedroom, his gaze paused on Hermione’s picture.

“This is a fine photograph of Miss Granger,” said Dumbledore. “From whom did you receive this?”

“Her father gave it to me... you know... afterward,” Harry returned. Even thinking about that day made his blood rise; it was still easy to summon images of Hermione’s pain and of bloody Death Eaters strewn across the dining room.

“It is the only item you have placed on the walls,” Dumbledore observed.

Harry was inclined to blurt out that he had no other frames, and no other pictures of his own. Something stopped him. He simply said, “It’s a smashing picture of her, isn’t it?”

“It captures her essence in that moment,” Dumbledore allowed. “I am aware that you have owed

Mr. Weasley. Have you been in contact with any of your other friends?"

"No," said Harry.

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow. "May I ask, why not?"

"This has been my time," Harry answered quickly. "I don't have to be the Boy-Who-Lived here."

"Do you believe that your friends see you solely through that lens?" asked Dumbledore.

Harry sighed and said, "It's what they know." He rooted through the wardrobe and pulled out a spare blanket, took a pillow from the bed, and trudged toward the living area.

"Thank you," said Dumbledore. "I may indulge in a short rest. I am certain that Alastor would not approve, of course."

"These are for me," Harry explained. "I'm not very tired. You can have the bedroom, if you like."

"Ah, of course. You might like to invite the young lady in," Dumbledore said. "I shall accept your kind offer. I have confidence that you will behave appropriately."

"I can't imagine why she would be out at this hour," Harry fumed. "She's trying to avoid the press, I think, and I'd think Shona would explode if..." He stopped. "Wait... if she was already on the lane... that's been quite some time..." He snatched his wand from the box and said absently, "Excuse me," as he rushed out the door.

With a pang of dread in his stomach, Harry started up the worn path of grass toward the tower, wand extended. There was a bicycle laid down on its side where the path veered near the cliff's edge. He heard something, and stood as quietly as he could. It was the faint echo of a voice, coming from the beach. As soon as he reached the top of the switchback that led down to the sand, he smiled.

Heather was standing at the centre of the beach, singing toward the sheer cliff. Harry knew very little about music – he wasn't certain of exactly what he was hearing, in fact – but Sirius' record collection had greatly increased his appreciation. He knew with absolute certainty that he had never in his life heard a voice like the one that filled his beach with song.

He strained to understand the words, until it dawned on him that they were in a language other than English. Her voice soared and fell, from impossibly high down to mellow and throaty, from gentle trill to powerful roar. He disillusioned himself and quietly slipped down the path. He didn't stop until he was close enough to see her clearly in the moonlight.

She sang with her eyes closed, swaying from time to time, then wringing her hands, even twirling around once. Her face shone with emotion – no careful control, no hint of frustration, just unabashed joy. *It must be like flying*, he thought.

The song came to an end. She stood there with her eyes closed, and a satisfied smile spread across

her face. *I could cancel the spell*, he thought. *She wouldn't see, if I did it right now*. He wanted to tell her that she was brilliant, that he was terribly impressed... and then it hit him. *She doesn't want to be the Girl-Who-Sings. That's why she came home; that's why she's dodging the press and those two director-types*. He wondered what she would think, if she understood how much they had in common – but there was no way she could ever know that. He understood that this was her time, free of pressure and free of her sort of minders, and he remained hidden.

She began to sing again, this time in English. Harry recognised the tune; he even knew that it was called the Coventry Carol. Church at Christmastime had been one of the few destinations where the Dursleys had gladly taken Harry; it had been an opportunity for them to appear charitable. He didn't recall the song having been sung, though – only played by the organist – so the words were unfamiliar. Heather sang the carol slowly, almost mournfully, and Harry felt the power of the words and the emotions surge through him. His urges were pitted against one another – on the one hand, he desperately wanted to reveal himself; on the other, he felt almost guilty for watching her – for intruding on something very personal. *Now I understand why sirens are so dangerous*, he thought.

After another song, again in a different language, she stopped and opened her eyes. She looked directly at him, but showed no sign of recognition. He realised that she was done, and dashed up the switchback ahead of her. She stopped at the top of the path, and stared at the bothy for nearly a minute before she picked up the bicycle. *I could come out of the bothy*, he thought; *I could say that I heard something and came out for a look*. He settled on following her home, to be sure that she arrived safely. He dashed to retrieve the Bonnie.

“Aaaahhh!” Heather shrieked, and then gasped, “Harry! Where in the bloody hell did you come from?”

Harry cursed himself for being completely thick – the moment he'd crossed the wards, the Disillusionment had been dampened. “Erm... I heard something and... I, uh... well, you certainly don't expect to hear anything out here in the night,” he stammered. “I thought I should have a look.”

She crossed her arms, and asked with a smirk, “What did you plan to do if you happened on an intruder – poke him to death?”

“Funny,” he said, before he realised that his wand was in his hand. His mouth went instantly dry, but he managed to say, “Er... forgot to set down my drumstick... that's it, erm, my drumstick... anyway, I'm tougher than you might think.” He reached behind his back and awkwardly jammed the wand into his back pocket.

“You're a drummer? Full of surprises, aren't you?” Heather stopped, and relaxed her tone. “I didn't mean to suggest that you couldn't look after yourself. That's not what I... I suppose what I'm trying to say is that I'm sorry. I should have asked you first, you know, before I came out here.” She worried her lower lip, and watched him expectantly.

“You were on the beach, then? Is that what I heard?” Harry asked, hoping that nothing in his voice

betrayed him.

She looked away from him; he thought she seemed embarrassed. “I was right,” she said, “it’s a fantastic place to sing.”

“It’s yours,” Harry said impulsively, “anytime you like. Just tell me some time – I’d... erm, I’d like to really hear you.”

“I’d like that,” Heather said softly, and a smile crept onto her face.

Harry swallowed back growing nervousness. “It’s a long ride back,” he said. “If you like, you could leave the bicycle here and I’d give you a lift. I can get the bicycle back to you tomorrow.”

“I wouldn’t want to be a bother,” Heather said. “It looks as if you have a guest.” Harry turned. Dumbledore was standing next to the door of the bothy. Harry couldn’t make out his expression in the darkness.

Harry motioned to her. “Come on. I’ll just tell him I’m stepping out for a bit. It’s no bother at all – really.”

As Harry and Heather drew closer, Dumbledore appeared surprised for a moment, but quickly composed himself. He extended a hand to Heather. “I certainly did not anticipate visitors at this late hour,” he said. “I am Harry’s professor. My name is Albus, but I am typically called Al... for obvious reasons, I should think.” Harry averted his eyes from Dumbledore and turned away from Heather.

“You’re a professor? What do you teach?” Heather asked brightly.

Dumbledore smiled. “My chief interest is history,” he said. “I direct my focus toward the Victorian era. I’m intimately familiar with that period. It almost seems as though I lived it.” Harry broke into a mild coughing fit. Dumbledore looked at him with concern. “Are you all right, Harry? A sherbet lemon, perhaps?” Harry’s coughing increased.

“I didn’t realise that Harry was at the uni,” Heather said. “Where are my manners? I’m sorry – I’m Heather Magruder.”

Dumbledore slowly raised an eyebrow. “Would you be the same Heather Magruder who performed at the Prince’s Trust concert last year?”

“Um... yes, I would,” she said shyly.

“I was not in attendance, of course,” Dumbledore said. “A... friend... who is more familiar with these sorts of things described to me the event and its aftermath.”

“I... neglected to curtsy,” Heather said, rather cautiously. “You’d think the world ended.”

“I suspect that your unexpected decision to sing in Gaelic at the height of the Scottish referendum

effort played a greater role in the public reaction,” Dumbledore laughed. “I am most curious – was it your intention to send a message?”

“We’ve been made to neglect our heritage and asked to forget who we are for centuries,” Heather said stridently. Harry noticed that the burr in her voice was suddenly more pronounced; she sounded rather like Shona, he thought. “It shouldn’t require a wee song in our own tongue to make that point, sir.”

Dumbledore held up his hands. “I have no position on the matter one way or the other,” he offered. “I have dealt with sufficient politics for two lifetimes. It is simply fortunate that you were able to continue performing.”

Heather snorted. “After that concert, my gates doubled and record sales quadrupled. Scandal sells.”

Dumbledore turned to Harry. “Harry, I trust you did not suggest to Miss Magruder that you were studying at university?”

Harry snapped back to attention; his main hope to that point had been that he wouldn’t pass out. “Uh... no, I didn’t. The subject hadn’t come up.”

“I see. Harry has been educated in a small boarding school for the last several years, where I am a professor and the Headmaster. We are assembling a private tutorial for him for his remaining two years,” Dumbledore explained.

“Two years...” Heather stopped, and she looked at Harry curiously. “Wait a minute – you’re sixteen? You *can’t* be sixteen! I mean, you’re living on your own, and... and the motorbike... and... you’re *sixteen* ?”

Harry nodded mutely. *So ends my summer holiday* , he thought.

Dumbledore made a show of frowning, at first. “Harry has always been something of a rule breaker. I choose to tolerate the motorbike, as it was part of his recent inheritance and has considerable sentimental value. We all give him latitude, perhaps more than we should at times. However, he is an adult insofar as Scottish law is concerned. He has overcome a very difficult life, to become a gifted student and a good man.”

“Why a tutorial? What are you studying?” Heather asked Harry.

Before Harry could begin to stutter his way through some kind of explanation, Dumbledore answered for him. “His tutorial is in a branch of physics, relating to the manipulation and quantum transfer of energy. It is quite obscure, but terribly important.”

“Rich and brilliant – that’s not really fair, is it?” Heather said. “Thank God you don’t act the part. I’ll have to get used to the idea that you’re a year younger than me, though.”

“You’re... not angry with me?” Harry ventured.

“For being younger than I am?” Heather asked. “We weren’t exactly trading information, you know? Makes me rethink the lift home a bit, though.” Harry thought that she was serious until she rolled her eyes.

“Professor... erm... I thought that I would give Heather a lift back to the village,” Harry explained. “It’s rather late to be riding a bicycle.”

Dumbledore stroked his beard, and Harry’s mouth went dry. At length, he said, “Indeed it is, Harry. I suggest that you make haste. There are preparations to be made in the morning. It would be advisable that you get some sleep, however little that may be.”

Harry added in a mutter for Heather's ears, “Remember the, uh, problem that I’m to resolve for Shona? The people that I need to help me are coming.”

Heather whispered in return, “I suppose she can set aside her cleavers, then.”

Dumbledore stepped inside the bothy for a moment, and then returned. “Perhaps we should keep the bicycle inside,” he said to Heather. “If you bring it to me, I shall set it aside for you. Harry can go around the back and fetch his motorbike.” He reached out to shake Harry’s hand, and said, “You will ride with care, I trust?” Harry felt the shrunken Bonnie slip into his hand.

“Absolutely, sir,” Harry promised. He dashed around the side of the bothy, and then ran to the edge of the wards before enlarging the motorbike. He rode it around to the head of the path, and waited there. He tried to imagine Heather’s reaction if he accidentally passed the wards and the Bonnie turned to wood; it was too horrible to contemplate.

Harry waited, and waited some more. After quite a while, Heather strolled toward him with two helmets in hand. He wondered how Dumbledore had pulled that off; they had been reduced inside his saddlebags, which were safely inside the lead box.

Heather smoothly slid onto the seat behind him, and clasped his sides with her hands. He struggled to put on his helmet - catching his glasses twice in the process - and she laughed. That was enough to settle him. He left the Bonnie in riding mode, and purposely made the trip across the grassy field as rough as possible. She had surely seen and heard enough to justify some difficult questions, and he had no interest in adding to her prospective list.

“Your professor seems like a fine fellow,” she said as they pulled onto the lane leading to the roadway. She seemed to have accepted that the helmets had radios in them, which was a relief to Harry.

“He has his moments,” Harry said. His stomach fluttered, and his hands and arms tingled – likely from fatigue, he reckoned. As he turned onto the roadway and accelerated, Heather wrapped her arms around him and pulled close. It left him a bit short of breath, and he was certain that he needed sleep. Thankfully, she had nothing else to say; he doubted that he could readily speak.

As they rode through the quiet and empty village, Harry silently regretted the authenticity of the

Bonnie in riding mode; the faux engine sounded like a jackhammer. Heather directed him to a ramshackle cottage on the edge of the village proper. She released him, and his breath returned somewhat.

Heather took off her helmet, and handed it to him. “Thanks for the ride,” she said loudly enough to be heard over the idling Bonnie. “You’ll get my bicycle to me, then?”

Harry nodded. “Tomorrow,” he said.

Heather pointed at her ears. When Harry didn’t respond, she reached out and took off his helmet. “I said, tomorrow,” he repeated.

“Are you warm?” she asked. “Your face is red.” *Is she mocking me?* he wondered.

“I’m fine,” he answered.

Heather said, “Get some sleep.” She leant in and casually kissed his cheek, to the accompaniment of the cottage’s front door slamming open.

Shona pounced. “Where the hell have yeh been? It’s past three o’clock in the morning!” she roared.

“Hello... I, uh... that is, she... erm...” stammered Harry.

Heather scowled. “I rode out of the village a fair distance. Harry found me and gave me a lift back.”

“An’ then yer arse fell off,” Shona snapped. “Try another?”

“Heather found a spot on my land this afternoon where she thought she might like to sing. I didn’t know she was coming back tonight. All she did was sing,” Harry insisted.

“I told yeh not ta get caught with yer breeks down,” Shona growled. “Get yerself inside - *now* . I set aside some stovies for yeh... suppose yeh worked up an appetite!”

Heather protested, but Shona roared and growled and frothed until Heather complied. She told Harry, “I’ll see you soon,” before a last snarl from Shona drove her through the door.

“Little chance of that,” Shona muttered as she turned on Harry. “Found a spot on *your land* , did she? I’ve a good idea where yer land lies, yeh *thievin’ English bastard* ,” she spat.

Harry reached his limit. He shouted, “Look, I don’t know what you *think* you know, but you’ve no right to accuse Heather of doing anything other than sneaking out! I didn’t know she was going to do it, and nothing happened between us! Do you think she’d have kissed me on the cheek otherwise?” Lights turned on in several neighbouring cottages, and someone shouted at them from a window. Shona responded to the shouting with a crude gesture.

“I needed her ta go inside. Now *talk* , if yeh know what’s good for yeh,” Shona demanded. “*Where’d – yeh – get – this – BIKE?* ”

“It was a gift,” Harry snarled back.

Shona winced with impatience, and then tried again with mock-sweetness that didn’t become her. “It’s a classic, yeh know? Who gave it to yeh, then?”

“I inherited it,” Harry answered, an edge still in his voice.

Shona’s eyes slowly widened, and the colour drained from her. “Inherited... like from a will? Like... when yer... dead?” she asked quietly. Harry nodded.

She squeezed her eyes closed, and breathed hard for a solid minute. She rubbed at her eyes, and it seemed to Harry like she was on the edge of sobbing. Her breathing steadied, and she clenched and unclenched her fists, over and over again. Harry had absolutely no idea what she was thinking, or what he should do; he settled on standing still. When she opened them again, her eyes were cold and empty.

She moved in on him until her face was inches from his. Her throat twitched and her chin quivered, and she wailed, “I know where yeh live, and I know what yeh are. Stay away from her, or so help me, I’ll send yeh ta meet him. *Go.* ”

Harry started, “Who do you think I am? You don’t know me...”

Shona erupted, “Are yeh tellin’ me I won’t find yeh in that little bothy down from the tower? Tell me she dinnae fall in love with the beach... that’s the spot, innit? Yer just like him, yeh little bastard... yeh Blacks are all alike!”

Harry gripped the handles of the motorbike hard, and fixed Shona with a withering glare. “My name isn’t Black,” he said in a low, even voice.

Shona flopped to a seat on the kerb, and whispered anxiously to herself; Harry made out the word ‘dead’ several times. At length, she looked up at him – at first surprised and then angry.

“*Why are yeh still here?* ” she screamed. “*GO! Go as far as that effin’ bike will take yeh!* ” The neighbour again broke into angry shouts, and Shona stood and returned verbal fire curse-for-curse.

Harry slammed on his helmet, and streaked down the lane. When the lane unexpectedly turned into a darkened cul-de-sac, he quickly rendered himself and the Bonnie invisible and took to the skies. He shot out to sea, throttle wide open and low to the water, and waited for the act of flying to transport him somewhere else – somewhere without a past. The moment never came, and he turned west to race the lightening sky back to the bothy.

He thrust open the door, tossed the reduced Bonnie and his wand into the lead box, and unceremoniously dumped out Sirius’ box on the counter – all before he spotted Dumbledore seated on the small couch with a serene expression, and before it dawned on him that Heather’s

voice was coming from the speakers.

“Would you please turn that off?” Harry grumbled.

Dumbledore looked at Harry curiously. “She possesses a remarkable talent,” he said as he stood and lowered the volume to zero. “Your trip into the village took considerably longer than I would have anticipated. Is there anything that you would care to tell me?”

Harry glared at Dumbledore, red-faced. “I’m sure the minders have already reported back,” he snapped, and then began to sift through Sirius’ Muggle photographs. *She must be in here somewhere*, he thought.

“Even members of the Order must sleep from time to time,” Dumbledore told him impassively. “I will ask again – is there anything that you would care to tell me?”

Harry flipped through the photographs quickly, looking for long dark hair and bright eyes. “She knew him,” Harry growled. “She knew Sirius...” He stopped cold. “Merlin... she must have known my dad, and maybe my mum...” he whispered, and tore through the photographs with a new urgency.

He scarcely noticed that Dumbledore moved to peer over his shoulder. “*Who* knew Sirius?” Dumbledore asked.

“Shona, Heather’s... well, whatever she is to Heather,” Harry answered impatiently. He flipped past a photograph, and then abruptly returned to it.

Sirius was on the beach, laughing – he was often laughing in the Muggle photographs, Harry had noticed. Harry’s father was furiously brushing sand out of his hair, his mouth contorted into a snarl; his mother appeared to be sneaking up behind Sirius, with a small bucket in her hands. Remus was sitting off to one side – *of course Remus was there*, Harry thought. He was rolling his eyes at Sirius; Harry suspected he’d done quite a lot of that in those days. A dark-haired woman sat next to Remus, wide-eyed and pointing toward Lily. Harry peered closely at the image. It was slightly fuzzy, but he had no doubts – the woman was a thinner, sharper-faced version of Heather. He handed the photograph off to Dumbledore, and started through the stack again with a particular face in mind.

She was in several of the Muggle photographs, but never appearing with anyone consistently – here her arm was around Remus; there she and Lily wrangled an enormous umbrella; in one image she was with Sirius, James, the man who appeared to be Devlin Whitehorn, and another woman; in another she was free-climbing one of the stacks that bounded the beach, while Sirius, Remus and two other women cringed below.

More surprising to Harry, she was in the background of two of the magical photographs. In the first, Lily and Remus were playing what looked to be Muggle chess in the foreground, seated at a table in a kitchen that Harry didn’t recognise. Shona was cooking; Sirius reached for something from a bowl on the counter, and she slapped his hand hard with a spatula. James was behind

Sirius, and he laughed heartily each time that the spatula struck and Sirius scrambled backward. In the second, Sirius was mugging for the camera from a dizzying angle. He had a pack on his back, and a rugged Highlands vista behind him. Remus was on a path behind and below, clearly labouring; he gestured upward in a manner that could not be described as friendly. Shona was behind Remus; she glared up at Sirius, and held a hand on the side of Remus' pack. It looked as though she was trying to prevent Remus from lurching over the side in exhaustion. The fourth face in the picture stopped Harry cold – it was Wormtail.

Dumbledore placed a hand on Harry's shoulder. "Harry, this woman obviously knew Sirius. Did she know that he was a wizard?"

"I don't know," returned Harry. "She told me that she knew where I lived and that she knew *what* I am. She thinks I'm a Black... Sirius' son, I suppose."

"By saying that she knew *what* you are, could she have been referring to membership in the Black family?" Dumbledore speculated aloud. "The Blacks had a prominent reputation amongst Muggles in this area for centuries."

"They have a reputation, all right!" Harry fumed. "Now I'm not to see Heather, and when Shona's through with me I probably won't be able to even walk down the High Street... and it's all thanks to *Diggle!* "

Dumbledore said, "Thus we return to your impending guests. Remus has expressed concern regarding Dedalus' handling of your funds and the Black trust." He sadly shook his head, and sighed. "What has Dedalus done now?"

"He's been collecting money all over the village, apparently," Harry told him. "Heather called the payments... what was it?... assessments. She said that the Blacks did this for years, and that it only stopped when they disappeared."

Dumbledore closed his eyes and frowned. "The Blacks were collecting relief. I am quite surprised that they were not subjected to legal proceedings. In feudal times, landowners paid relief to their lords in exchange for property inheritance rights. The right to collect relief still exists in a few places, but the right is a technicality that is almost never exercised. Dedalus reinstituted this?"

Harry nodded. "I don't know who he charged, or how much. Heather made it sound as though the restaurant could close over it."

"I understand why you are so displeased, Harry," said Dumbledore. "Unless this situation is resolved, it will become virtually impossible for you to remain here. Take heart in the fact that Remus has secured assistance befitting the circumstances. Mister Tonks and I have had a challenging relationship over the years, but I have always held his skills in the highest esteem. He will help you to identify the best possible solution."

Harry resisted the urge to crumple the magical photograph in his hand. He was tired, frustrated and angry, and it seemed reasonable to him that crumpling Wormtail would somehow help

matters.

Dumbledore set the first Muggle photograph atop the counter. “We will discuss this particular situation with Remus as well,” he said. “He will mostly likely know what, if anything, Sirius may have revealed. Bellatrix Lestrange has been an obvious security concern, given her familiarity with the area and the property. If we must also give consideration to Pettigrew, then we shall have to reconsider whether or not this location can be reasonably secured.”

Harry closed his eyes tightly – he was trapped between fatigue and anger and frustration and couldn't move toward or away from any of them. “Wards? Charms? Another go at the *Fidelius* , maybe?”

“With the Burrow and Grimmauld Place out of order, those may represent the best of a less-than-ideal set of alternatives,” admitted Dumbledore. “Are you hungry?”

“Hungry?”

“Yes, hungry – in need of food,” repeated Dumbledore. “You have not eaten since the midday meal. Fellowe?”

A house-elf appeared abruptly in their midst, clad in a Hogwarts towel. Something about the elf suggested fastidiousness, though Harry was hard-pressed to put words to it. “May I help you, Headmaster?” Fellowe asked.

“Would you be so kind as to bring my young friend and I something light to eat – perhaps fruit, some breads and a spot of hot chocolate?” Dumbledore asked.

“Of course, Headmaster,” said Fellowe. “Will you be wanting the letter set aside for Mr. Potter?”

“An excellent thought – always a good Fellowe, aren't you?” said Dumbledore. “Please bring the letter as well.”

“As you wish, Headmaster,” the house-elf said. Within moments, he returned with the desired items, placed them at Harry's counter and left wordlessly.

Dumbledore picked up the letter, adjusted his pince-nez glasses and read, “To Harry James Potter, in care of Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry: from Griselda Marchbanks, Wizardry Examination Authority, Ministry of Magic, in regard to Ordinary Wizarding Level examination results.”

Harry instantly trained his eyes onto the plate of fruit. There was no reason to be nervous, he knew; now that he was dismissed from his formal studies, the results probably weren't as important. He hadn't felt the need to ask after his results, but couldn't completely push back his excitement at knowing.

He caught a quick look at Dumbledore, who peered through his small silver spectacles at the parchment in his hand. “Astronomy... Acceptable on the theoretical examination and Poor on the

practical examination, but there is a notation... yes, of course – your practical examination *was* rather disrupted. All practical results were increased by one mark, which left you with an overall mark of Acceptable.”

Harry continued to look away because he was afraid that Dumbledore might see his shocked expression. *Didn't see that one coming*, he admitted to himself; *I thought that I had failed theory as well*.

“Care of Magical Creatures... Outstanding on the practical, with an overall mark of Exceeds Expectations,” Dumbledore said. “Charms... Outstanding on the practical portion, and... Acceptable on the theoretical portion, for an overall mark of Exceeds Expectations.”

Harry turned his focus to the breads as Dumbledore continued, “Defence Against the Dark Arts... Outstanding overall, with a Commendation awarded for performance on the practical. Well done, *very well done*.” If there had been any of the examinations he was dead sure about, it had been the Defence practical.

Dumbledore cleared his throat. “Now, then... Divination... is best left unmentioned. Herbology... Acceptable on the theoretical examination, and Exceeds Expectations on the practical, for a mark of Exceeds Expectations. History of Magic... good heavens... it has been many years since I have seen an overall mark of Troll.”

“*Troll?*” Harry groaned.

Dumbledore laughed loudly. “I see that students still believe such a mark actually exists! No, you were merely Dreadful. Moving on... ah, here it is – Potions... Acceptable on the theoretical examination, and Outstanding on the practical, for a mark of Exceeds Expectations.”

“No wonder Snape was in a snit!” Harry smirked.

“Harry...” Dumbledore tut-tutted. “That leaves Transfiguration... Exceeds Expectations on the theoretical examination, and Outstanding on the practical, for a mark of Outstanding.” He lowered the parchment and smiled. “Under any circumstance, this would have been a commendable result. Given last year’s tribulations, it is remarkable. I offer my congratulations.”

Harry quickly and efficiently ate; he could feel Dumbledore watching him, waiting for him to speak. When the last strawberry was gone, he mused, “I wonder how Ron did? I suppose he might be afraid to say; he'll probably figure I'll be upset, being dismissed and all. I'd guess that we scored about the same. As for Hermione, I'm sure she had the top marks... she always has... the top marks, you know...”

“Harry...” Dumbledore began.

“She’s gone ‘round the bend, hasn't she? That's what happened,” Harry said flatly.

“That is a rather crude way to put it,” said Dumbledore, “and she is well on the way to being

recovered. Few people are as adept at handling trauma as you, Harry.”

“Adept? I don't know what I'm doing; I just keep going on,” Harry said.

Dumbledore sighed. “We appear to be locked into a circle, and there are some very difficult truths with which you must come to terms. I believe it is time for us to take a brief journey, one that I had planned for the first week of the term.” He retrieved his wand from the lead box and transfigured his casual clothing into a dark raincoat over slacks and a formal shirt.

With a flick of the wrist, Dumbledore turned the letter into a second dark raincoat for Harry. “Coats may not be needed,” he said, “but it is always best to anticipate the rain.” He picked up a biro from the counter and waved his wand in a complex fashion. “Come – place your hand upon the portkey.”

The navel-tugging sensation began at the instant that Harry placed a finger on the biro. When he regained his footing, he and Dumbledore were standing beside a stone colonnade that opened to a reflecting pool. Under a three-quarter moon and slowly lightening skies, Harry looked beyond the pool toward a wide, grassy mall. It was covered with row after row of white markers. There were a handful of Muggles wandering about in the pre-dawn mist, but none paid them any mind. It was breezy, but reasonably warm; Harry draped the raincoat over his arm.

“Where are we?” Harry asked.

“We are in France,” Dumbledore said quietly. He walked slowly and reverently along the end of the reflecting pool, turned, and headed down a long path that ran toward the sea. At the end of the path was an overlook, perched on a jut of land atop a cliff. Below was a narrow and wide beach that divided the cliff and the sea. Dumbledore stared down at the sand with watery eyes.

Harry waited until a group of elderly Muggles passed, and then asked, “What’s important about this beach?”

Dumbledore gestured at the beach below. “One year before Grindewald was defeated, thousands of men died here. Many of them are buried on the plains behind us.”

“This is Normandy, isn’t it? You’re talking about D-Day,” Harry said. “Last summer, I would sit in the corner of the television room beneath the Invisibility Cloak; there was nothing better to do. I found out that Uncle Vernon’s dotty about the Second World War – if there was a programme on it, he was watching.”

Dumbledore nodded sadly. “Tell me, do you feel it?” he asked.

“Feel what?” Harry wasn’t sure what Dumbledore was talking about, but thought he should make an effort. He closed his eyes, and concentrated on the breeze blowing off the water, and then he felt it. “Pain... sadness... and something else. I don’t understand – these *were* Muggles, right?”

“Powerful events leave powerful imprints – even Muggle events,” Dumbledore said. “Sensible

wizards avoid certain places in Germany and Japan entirely – it is simply too much to bear.”

Harry tried to sort out the ‘something else’ that he felt. It seemed like a combination of things: fear, courage, resolve and death. He shuddered. “Why did we come here?” he asked in a whisper.

“Walk with me,” Dumbledore commanded, and Harry followed him back along the path. They walked into the grass and into the midst of the sea of white marble markers. Most were crosses; a few were fashioned as six-pointed stars. *There are so many*, Harry thought. The raw feelings - the imprint of the place - grew stronger and stronger as they walked on.

“Once, I tried to count them all,” Dumbledore said, as though he had heard Harry’s thought. “I felt quite foolish later, when I happened upon the actual number engraved on a plaque.”

Harry shuddered again. “Please... why are we here?” he asked.

Dumbledore said nothing until they reached a circular stone structure amidst the markers. It was a chapel. Dumbledore paused at an inscription on the exterior:

These endured all and gave all that justice among nations might prevail and that mankind might enjoy freedom and inherit peace.

“We are here because this is where I come from time to time in order to contemplate war. There is nothing remotely like this place in our world – in the wizarding world,” Dumbledore said.

“Where are my parents buried?” Harry asked abruptly. His hands shook, and he wished that he could take back the question.

Dumbledore fixed upon him a look of regret so profound that Harry could scarcely bear it. “Harry, we do not bury our dead – we can not. I am sorry... it never occurred to me that you would not know this. When we talk of wizarding things, I too often fail to consider your circumstances.”

“What... what do you mean, we ‘can not’? I don’t...” Harry stopped himself. He thought of how Voldemort had used his own father’s bones. “Of course - a dark wizard could use the remains,” he muttered.

Dumbledore nodded gravely. “The most potent use of remains would be against the family of the deceased. We were very fortunate that Voldemort did not spirit away the bodies of your parents.”

“Is there a stone...? Is there anything?” Harry asked.

Dumbledore shook his head. “It is not our way. There was a sending – I insisted upon that. Your mother would have agreed with me.”

“A sending...” Harry murmured. He tried to remember where he’d heard that word before, and then it came to him. “Sirius said he didn’t want a sending.”

Dumbledore smiled faintly. “Your father would have agreed with Sirius, until your mother talked sense into him. It is an old custom, sending... one that should not have fallen out of favour. Very few remain who are trained in the art and practice of it.” He disappeared into his thoughts for a few moments, and then added, “I believe it would be a useful discipline for you to learn, even if the intricacies remain beyond your grasp. I shall think on that.” He sat down heavily on a low stone bench that backed the chapel wall.

Harry took a deep breath, and allowed himself to feel the pain in the air. “You haven’t really answered my question. Why are we here?” he asked again.

Dumbledore stared straight ahead. Harry thought that everything about the man seemed ancient at that moment. “You will lose people close to you, Harry. That is an inescapable part of war.”

“I know that,” Harry snapped.

“Do you?” Dumbledore asked. “In a century and a half, I have seen four Dark Lords come and go and now contend with a fifth, and I have lost more friends and colleagues than you could imagine. We may not have places like this, but the markers in my mind’s eye are as hard and as cold as marble. You will lose people close to you, Harry, and you will have to carry on. You will lose your resolve at some point, and you will have to carry on.”

“I get it – I’m the weapon. I know what I have to do,” Harry said coldly.

Dumbledore looked up at Harry, and his eyes blazed. “We know what must be done. Neither of us knows what you must do,” he snarled. “As for the rest, let me be clear: you are *not* a weapon.”

Harry was dismissive. “I have to kill him. That makes me a weapon.”

Dumbledore’s voice remained low and powerful. He rumbled, “You have been marked by evil, and you are the one who can rid the world of that evil. If you were a weapon, then I would wield you. I would decide how to best put you to use, and train you for that and only that. When a weapon has satisfied its purpose, it is made ready for future use or discarded.” He closed his eyes, and added gently, “You are not a weapon, Harry, not to me.” He moved to stand, and Harry quickly extended an arm to help.

Dumbledore grasped Harry’s arm and lurched to his feet. “There are so many shadows here, so many unrequited hopes and dreams. Voldemort would have found a bosom companion in Adolf Hitler; Grindewald and his followers were supportive of the Nazis, in fact. The people buried in this place were determined to stop Hitler; they believed that they were saving the Muggle world, and they died to that end. Tell me, Harry – do you think that the Muggle world was worth saving?”

“Of course it was!” Harry spluttered.

“Was it? Did the defeat of the Nazis put an end to Muggle atrocities?” Dumbledore asked.

“Well... no, but they couldn't very well surrender to Hitler. Can you imagine what the world would be like? I mean, it's far from perfect now, but...” Harry trailed off.

“Do you understand?” Dumbledore asked.

“The wizarding world isn't perfect, but the wizarding world under Voldemort would be a nightmare,” Harry answered.

“If you save the wizarding world, then you will have the opportunity to shape it. Perhaps it will change, and perhaps it will not. If Voldemort prevails, he will not stop with the wizarding world. There would be no places like this, however – no one who cared would remain to commemorate the dead,” Dumbledore said. “He will not prevail; you will defeat him. There will be losses along the way, but you will learn to bear them.”

Harry began to protest. “But –”

Dumbledore waved him off. “You will learn to bear the losses, because there is no other choice. For five years, you have felt responsible for any harm that befell those close to you. Soon, it shall not matter whether wizards are close to you or far away. All that shall matter is whether they stand for or against Voldemort. Those that stand in opposition shall be in harm's way. If your friends choose to stand against Voldemort, then no one shall be able to completely assure their safety. Hogwarts remains a very safe place, but not perfectly so.”

“What are you asking me to do?” Harry sighed.

Dumbledore's voice rose. “Stop pushing away those who care for you the most. You succeed in isolating yourself, and you gain nothing – no comfort for yourself and no added safety for others. Do not attempt to bear the burden of everyone's safety. You cannot offer such a guarantee, and the weight of this burden has left you sullen, angry and at times thoroughly unpleasant. If you are unable to break this pattern on your own, then I will intervene. Is that understood?”

“I know I can't protect everyone,” Harry said, “but Ron... look, I'm worried that he'll do something completely mad, and... Hermione... I... I just can't stand not knowing, right?” His stomach lurched, and he felt himself begin to come undone.

“Harry, Miss Granger is in a safe place. She is surrounded by people who care for her,” Dumbledore offered.

“You've said that already,” Harry snapped.

“I do understand what you're feeling under these circumstances -” Dumbledore began.

“Hardly,” scoffed Harry.

“I said that you could not imagine my losses. I have not always been alone,” said Dumbledore. “One hundred and ten years has not been long enough to atone... or to forget.”

Harry was caught completely flat-footed. “You were married, sir?”

“Yes,” Dumbledore said.

Harry waited for more but it never came. Instead, they took the path back to the overlook and watched the beach in silence as the sun rose to their right. At long last, Dumbledore cleared his throat. “Severus was right in one respect,” he said; “You live a young man's schedule, Harry. I do hope I can have a kip on your sofa.” He moved stiffly and Harry helped the Headmaster steady himself.

For the first time he could recall, Harry landed on his feet at the end of a Portkey ride; it was Dumbledore who lurched to one side. As he had intended, Harry gave up his bed. He was so tired that he couldn't find rest, and settled for wandering until fatigue led him to sit down. Shacklebolt was shocked a few hours later to find that Harry was indeed sleeping on the beach.

Harry Potter and the Years of Rebellion Downside Up

Chapter Twenty-one

DOWNSIDE UP

August 19, noon

“Take your time, Harry,” Dumbledore said, his voice calculated to reassure. Harry wasn’t terribly interested in reassurance; he wasn’t terribly interested in entering the tower at all.

Shacklebolt criticised, “You’re letting your imagination run away with you – it’s dictating your actions. Get hold of yourself.”

Tonks stood beside Harry and gently put her arm around his shoulders; she touched him almost gingerly, as though she were afraid of hurting him. He was surprised by the gesture, and even more surprised by the pain in her eyes. “He’s not here,” she said quietly. “It’s yours to take.”

“I don’t know if I want to take it,” he admitted.

Her eyes flared and her hand tightened on his shoulder. From someone else, Harry might not have taken notice. Coming from Tonks, the power of the gesture lay in its unexpectedness. “Show him respect,” she said harshly. “He gave this to you, so you’ll take it.”

Harry fumbled with the key and walked toward the black painted door that breached the wall. He thought of what he’d told Hermione – it seemed so long ago, he thought – *Gryffindors go forward*.

He said idly to the silver serpent knocker and the snakes carved into the stone trim, “This is mine now.” Tonks abruptly pulled her arm from him; he understood why when the sibilance of Parseltongue echoed in his ears. He turned the key, and strode through the door and into a courtyard.

He walked around the outside of the tower first. Shacklebolt watched the turrets above, Dumbledore paused to look periodically at various plants, and Tonks followed Harry at a distance. Inside the wall, the tower was surrounded by unkempt and overgrown gardens on part of three sides. In the back, where the wall began to follow the promontory downward toward the sea, there was a huge walk-through trellis, fully enclosed by winding vines and in the shape of a cross. A

thick knot of trees filled out the remainder of the backside. Continuing around, Harry came upon a carriage house and then a stable, separated from the remainder of the yard by additional walls. The huge doors that led from the carriage house through the wall were concealed by thick brush – both inside and outside.

“I see why my mum liked it here,” Tonks said, just before she caught her toe on a raised flagstone and nearly fell atop Harry.

“How did you ever manage to become an Auror?” Harry laughed. Tonks’ face grew stern, almost McGonagall-stern. Harry winced, and added, “I know, I know – I’m a prat.”

Her expression softened slightly. “You’re not a prat, Harry,” she told him. “A thoughtless git, perhaps...”

“Ouch,” he deadpanned.

They resumed their walk around the tower, with Tonks following more closely. As they neared the door that entered the tower itself, Tonks said casually, “When it matters, everything comes together. That’s why I survived Auror training. That... and Kingsley took pity on me at first, in his way.”

Dumbledore spotted Harry and Tonks waiting before the tower, and turned his attention away from the plants. Shacklebolt appeared next to the door. “I should have brought a broom,” he said. “Someone could be hiding behind the turrets or the parapets.”

“You’re spending too much time around Moody,” Tonks chided him.

“Are you ready to enter?” Dumbledore asked Harry.

Harry turned to Tonks. “This really should be yours,” he said.

Tonks shrugged. “I’m not a Black. I wasn’t even raised as one; my mum saw to that. Besides, inheritance is arranged to favour men.” With a smirk, she added, “Compensation for your shortcomings, I suppose.”

Harry raised an eyebrow in mock-consternation and asked, “Was that a short joke?” He did his best to keep a straight face as Tonks squirmed.

She babbled, “I meant men generally... I wasn’t... it wasn’t about you... I would never... you’re of perfectly normal height!” He snorted, and then laughed at her predicament. She swatted his arm, but smiled.

“What do you think - should we go in together?” he asked.

“The door’s wide enough for one,” Tonks returned. “Age before beauty, then.” She stepped in front of Harry, wand extended.

“In that case, allow me,” Shacklebolt offered, and eased Tonks aside. “Harry, you turn the key. I’ll open the door.” As Harry turned the key, Shacklebolt moved past him and into the darkness, wand extended and lit.

Harry peered in from behind. The door opened into a small irregular foyer. To the left, an opening appeared to lead into a spiral staircase. Ahead was a door. To the right, a hallway opened.

“Where are the sconces?” Shacklebolt wondered aloud.

Harry pushed in behind him, followed by Tonks, who advised, “Look up.” Over the heads was a small chandelier formed of brass and glass.

Shacklebolt pointed his wand, and Tonks grabbed his arm. “No!” she insisted. “It’s an electric light.”

Shacklebolt frowned. “The Blacks used Muggle lighting? I find that hard to believe.”

Harry found and flipped a switch on the wall, and the foyer was brilliantly lit. “Sirius’ letter said that Muggles leased the place after his parents were gone. Heather told me they tried to turn it into an inn of some kind.”

Shacklebolt’s frown remained. “Calling her by first name, are you? Albus, I know you want to afford Harry more freedom, but surely you’ve had a talk about the dangers of familiarity with...”

Harry felt a ripple of rage, the first he could recall in days. “If you have a problem with my choices, then you talk to *me*,” he warned.

Shacklebolt appeared ready to snap in return but stopped himself. Instead, he sighed, “I speak only out of concern. If you’re insistent upon spending valuable time consorting, then it should be with your own kind –”

Harry cut him off. “What *kind* would that be?” he snarled.

Shacklebolt attempted to explain himself. “I wasn’t trying to besmirch anyone. Consorting with Muggles takes so much more effort, Harry. There’s the double life, of course – not to mention the lack of familiarity with customs and such. I don’t expect you’ll have the energy to waste, or the opportunity when you move back to Hogwarts in September.”

Harry advanced on Shacklebolt, who took a step backward and gripped his wand. “Remember where I was raised? I’m a bit light on Muggle culture, but sometimes I’m lost around wizards. As for September, I don’t plan to be trapped at Hogwarts.”

“We have not yet decided where you will live in the fall,” Dumbledore said from the doorway.

Harry whirled around, and glared. Anger seemed more painful now, he thought; it felt as though a half-healed wound had torn open. “We haven’t, but *I* have,” he growled. “Let’s get on with this.”

“Harry, we’re just trying to help,” Tonks offered.

“We’re trying to keep you alive,” clarified Shacklebolt.

“And we all know why you’re doing that,” Harry grumbled.

Tonks appeared stung, whilst Dumbledore looked on with evident disapproval. She blurted out, “I’ll start with the garret, then,” and dashed up the spiral stairs and out of view.

In short order, Harry decided that his fears about the tower might have been unfounded. The Muggles had extensively remodelled; anything reminiscent of the Black residence in London save the door knocker had long since been expunged. Dumbledore and Shacklebolt combed the first floor, looking for traps, boggarts, ghouls, and residual dark magic from the days of the Blacks. Harry chose to follow along casually. He felt no sense of foreboding, he felt no comfort; he felt nothing from the place at all. It was just a building to him. Home was a quarter-mile to the southeast.

The ground floor was taken up with a large area for eating and food preparation, adjacent to a long and narrow vaulted kitchen. One cellar held all the Muggle mechanicals – the laundry equipment, a walk-in freezer, huge water heaters, and the like. The other cellar was set as storage or pantry, and also contained a water closet. It had its own separate spiral stair. Harry split off from Dumbledore, and ascended.

The stair rose for two flights. The first flight opened into a great hall; the second to a loft that overlooked the hall. The high ceiling of the hall was boldly painted and patterned. A large dining table, with seating for twenty, dominated the centre of the hall. From the loft, he looked right to an ornate fireplace, straight ahead to a series of tapestries and an opening to another spiral stair, and left to tall windows that overlooked the sea. The loft itself was set as a sitting area, with settees and softly padded armchairs.

Harry descended to the hall itself. Atop the dining table was an envelope, with a small box adjacent. Harry’s name was written on the envelope in Dedalus Diggle’s florid strokes. He resisted the urge to shred the envelope and instead tore it open.

Dear Mr. Potter:

Per Mr. Black’s instructions, I have engaged assistance to assure that the tower has been prepared for occupancy. This did require the contracting of Muggles with expertise in the repair and replacement of various machines. I suspect that they were overpaid. I do not understand why Mr. Black wished to have these Muggle features restored, as opposed to returning the tower to its prior condition. Nonetheless, I have carefully followed his instructions.

The Lord of the manor’s bedchamber has been prepared for your use. I have contacted a former caretaker of the property, to seek his services for instances when the property may be unoccupied. I shall contact you with more information on this matter forthwith.

I was unable to enter or even find the Lord of the Manor's study. Mr. Black explained to me that this would be the case. Inside the box you will find the Black signet ring, per Mr. Black's request. Only the heir to the Black clan title may wear the ring; it will reject all others. According to Mr. Black, the ring will be required to gain entry into the study.

It should be a straightforward matter for you to return the tower to its former state. I am happy to contract for house-elves, craft mages, or other servants who may assist you in that endeavour. All the resources that you will ever require are at your disposal, having been amply replaced in keeping with Mr. Black's desires. Acting on your behalf has been an honour and a pleasure beyond my wildest imagining. I may be reached by name via the Great Hall fireplace, at any time that you may require.

Respectfully,

Dedalus Diggle, Esq.

Harry read the last paragraph several times. His eyes stuck on ‘... having been amply replaced in keeping with Mr. Black's desires’. *Sirius wouldn't have asked Diggle to take money from Muggles*, Harry assured himself. He pounded his fist against the table, and let out a guttural shout.

Shacklebolt raced from the far staircase, wand at the ready. “What is it?” he boomed. He picked up the letter that Harry had flung, quickly read it and said, “Reached by name via the...? Why in Merlin's name...?” He lowered the letter, and shook his head. “Apparently, Sirius' instructions have preempted those of the Order.”

Harry growled, “I'm glad we're hooked up. Any time, he said? Smashing! How about *now*?” He pointed his wand at the huge fireplace, and green flames erupted. There was a small unobtrusive container of Floo powder set on the mantle, amongst the bric-a-brac. Harry tossed a pinch, shouted “*Dedalus Diggle!*”, and thrust his head into the fire.

“Oh!” Diggle squeaked. He was seated at an ancient desk that dwarfed him, and his violet hat fell off as he quivered in fright. “Mr. Potter, what an unexpected... please come in!” He looked at Harry, and his anticipatory smile faded. “You look a fright! Is something the matter?”

Harry gritted his teeth. “I'm at the tower. I need you here *now*,” he snapped.

“Of course, of course!” Diggle said brightly, as he bounded from his chair. He gathered his things, and sauntered through the fire almost before Harry could back away.

Diggle pulled out his own brush, and expertly flicked the soot from his valise. “What is it that you need, Mr. Potter...? Oh! Hello, Kingsley... er... didn't anticipate seeing you here...”

“I didn't anticipate seeing anyone Floo into this tower,” Shacklebolt glowered.

Diggle swallowed audibly. “Look here, Kingsley,” he offered nervously; “I have an obligation to my late client, an obligation that I swore to fulfil. I'll have you know that it hasn't been easy,

either. Sirius was a fine fellow – he didn’t deserve anything that befell him – but he had absolutely no idea of the complexity involved in his requests. If I’d levied a typical percentage for my efforts, I’d be quite wealthy now.”

He turned to Harry. “But I didn’t do that,” he said proudly. “I would have paid *him* for the opportunity to serve you, Mr. Potter. I owed your father a tremendous debt from days gone by, a debt that I feared I should never have opportunity to repay. I take solace in knowing that I have played a small part in assuring that his son shall want for nothing. You will never again have to grovel in the presence of those *horrible* Muggles.”

Harry clenched and unclenched his fists. “Those horrible Muggles, as you call them, are my concern and not yours,” he said. His voice gained power with each syllable.

Diggle looked at Harry and then Shacklebolt uncertainly. “I... I didn’t mean to imply... er... that is...”

Dumbledore strode onto the loft that overlooked the hall. “Dedalus, what an unexpected surprise!” he said warmly. “How is it that you came to join us?”

“Mr. Potter... er... contacted me through the... erm... I can explain, you see...” stammered Diggle.

Dumbledore seemed to glide to them, moving effortlessly down the stairs and across the hall. “It was decided that the tower would not be connected to the Floo Network, Dedalus. It was decided, and it was agreed upon by all present. I believe that you were present, were you not?” Diggle seemed to shrink before Harry’s eyes. He squeaked about professional responsibility and sputtered about contractual obligations, and Dumbledore gazed at him impassively.

Harry turned to Dumbledore in frustration. “Who decided that? *I* certainly wasn't there, and this is my property. Now if you'll excuse me, Mr. Diggle and I have business to discuss,” he snapped.

Dumbledore remained calm. “Would you not prefer to await Remus?” he asked. “As your conservator, he should be present. In addition, I understood that he possessed some information that might pertain to the matter at hand.”

“I know everything that I need to know,” Harry answered angrily.

“In the absence of Remus, perhaps I should remain,” Dumbledore said.

Harry reached for the box containing the signet ring. “Mr. Diggle, we can continue *our* conversation in the study,” he said forcefully as he opened the box.

Dumbledore placed his hand over the box. “Harry, I have conversed with Phineas Nigellus through the door to the study. You would deeply regret taking Dedalus into that room whilst in your present state of mind. If and when you choose to enter that room for the first time, you shall do so

calmly. Please respect my opinion on this matter, if nothing else.” Harry met his eyes, debated for a moment, and then closed the box.

Tonks bounded into the room from the main stairs. “I think they’ve arrived,” she said with a smirk. “My dad should be in fine form. I hope Remus kept him from killing Odd.”

“Mr. Lovegood? I thought Remus was bringing Mr. Tonks,” Harry said.

“Oh, he did,” said Dumbledore. “Mr. Tonks and Mr. Lovegood shared quarters at Hogwarts for seven years. Despite what I or others may think, Mr. Lovegood does bring valuable perspective from time to time.”

“That doesn't explain why he's here,” Harry said.

“I believe your friends wanted to see you,” Dumbledore returned. “Miss Lovegood wished to convey her thanks, young Mr. Weasley wanted to answer his post in person, and Miss Weasley is... along for the ride, I believe the saying goes?”

“It was supposed to be Remus and one other person. *I should have been told*,” Harry snapped.

“Yes, you should have been informed,” admitted Dumbledore. “The matter slipped from my mind. There was rather a lot to go on about last evening – this morning, to be proper about it.”

Before he followed Tonks to the front door, Harry glared at Diggle, and barked, “*Sit!*” From the corner of his eye, he saw Diggle comply.

A van was parked just outside the wall, like no van that Harry had ever seen plying the streets of Little Whinging. It appeared well kept, down to the blue and white paint, but the style was surely quite old. A spare tyre projected from the front, centred beneath the square divided windshield. A chrome circle held the tyre in place, marked with an interlocking V and W. The top bubbled up, as though it could be raised. A huge white poodle was painted on each of the two side doors.

The two doors flung open, and Remus Lupin emerged. He was clad in his Muggle clothes – looking every inch the tired Oxford don – and his face was etched with fatigue, horror and relief. “Harry!” he called out. “We’re here at last, thank Merlin!”

Harry clasped his hands. “I take it we're to meet here, rather than L'Oiseau Chanteur?” he said curtly.

Lupin’s brow furrowed. “Look, Harry, I apologise for the extra guests. Quite a few people were anxious to see you. I hope...”

“You owe me a drink,” Ron called out, “and I could really use it right about now!” He coughed as he clambered from the back of the van.

Harry shook his hand, and sized him up. Ron looked as relaxed as Harry remembered him from years past. He wondered if Ron had permanently adopted Bill's look, minus the earring and ponytail. "Good to see you, mate," Harry offered.

"Good to be alive," Ron laughed. Quietly and with a conspiratorial look, he added, "I'd have been bloody terrified, if there were a van in my vision. Did you know that thing is actually *burning* when it moves?" Harry briefly considered an attempt to explain petrol but thought better of it, and then thought better of it. He was still uncomfortable with Ron's casual acceptance of the visions of death.

"That drink will be butterbeer, Ron – *butterbeer*," Bill Weasley warned, though in a friendly way. He turned to Harry, hand extended. "How are you, Harry? Tonks told me that you were faring well up here."

"Another minder, I see?" Harry grunted.

"That's right – Ron and Ginny's minder," Bill said with a frown.

Harry heard Ginny's voice. "Leave it," she said, "I'll carry everything in. You just concentrate on walking."

"I am not an invalid, Ginny. While it is true that I could feel better, I am perfectly capable of carrying my own bag," Luna protested.

Ron rolled his eyes. "Ginny's been taking a test run at being Mum," he explained. "She's rather good at it. I think that Luna's had her fill."

Harry winced. "Between Ginny and Hermione, I'd wager Luna hasn't had a moment of peace."

Ron's mouth tightened. "Harry... er... about Hermione - "

"Dumbledore already told me," Harry cut him off.

Odd Lovegood and Ted Tonks came around the side of the van. "For the last time, there are no such things as nargles!" Mr. Tonks spluttered.

Mr. Lovegood said kindly, "Ted, you're simply incapable of believing anything that you can't see. I'm sure that's a useful trait in your line of endeavour, but... well, it leaves you a bit stiff. Not that that's necessarily bad, of course... being a bit stiff, that is. I mean, you always were that way. You wear it well, truly." It was obvious that Mr. Lovegood's tone was only leaving Mr. Tonks more exasperated; it was equally obvious that Mr. Lovegood either failed to notice or simply didn't care.

Lupin cut in. "Ted, Diggle's here," he said.

Mr. Tonks frowned and wondered aloud, "How on earth did that come about?" He shook Harry's hand and went on, "Pleased to see you, Harry, though I wish it were under more settled

circumstances. I'm too often the bearer of unpleasant news; it's a professional hazard."

"I've already had my fill of bad news where Diggle's concerned," Harry grumbled. "I called him here so that I could sack him."

"It's a shame that Sirius didn't save you the trouble," Mr. Tonks said. "What's prompted you, specifically?"

"He's been collecting money from the residents around here – some kind of assessment," Harry explained. "He was doing it in my name, more or less."

Mr. Tonks nodded. "Relief payments – they were an ugly practice a hundred years ago; they should be illegal now. I surmised as much from the ledger entries. I'm pleased that Andromeda rejected our monies from the Black Trust."

Lupin shook his head. "Diggle has quite a lot of explaining to do, Harry," he said sadly. "What you've described is deplorable, but not the worst of it."

Harry's eyebrows rose. There was a tap on the back of his shoulder. He turned to face Luna, who was smiling at him. "I am pleased to see you, Harry," she said. "This place must suit you; you appear rested. I do not believe that you have ever been well-rested, not in the time that I have known you."

She wore denims and a high turtle-neck. Harry's eyes drifted to the collar and then to Luna's face. "How are you?" he asked

Her smile never dimmed. "Scars fade, given enough time," she said. "I am not ashamed of mine; it is sensitive to the breeze, so I choose to cover it."

"I'm sorry," Harry mumbled. "You didn't deserve..." He wondered how she could possibly continue to smile. Ginny hovered in the background, and carefully watched Luna.

"This ground has already been trod," Luna said. "Might we go inside? I would like to sit for a moment." *She's so pale*, he thought. Before he had an opportunity to offer any assistance, Ginny and Mr. Lovegood moved in and spirited Luna into the tower.

Ron shook his head. "Your own bloody tower," he said.

"Yeah, I guess so," Harry said glumly.

"Professor Lupin told us you had some business. I guess it's to be taken care of right now?" Ron said. "There *must* be some food around here. Meet up with you afterwards?"

"Wouldn't miss it," Harry called back absently.

Mr. Tonks reached into the van, and pulled out a crate filled with papers. "Carry this, would you?" he asked Harry. He handed off a second crate to Lupin, and took two valises himself. As they

walked inside, Mr. Tonks advised Harry, “Before you do anything rash, Diggle needs to validate as much of this information as possible.”

Lupin added, “I’m very angry with Diggle, Harry, but we also need to consider his other recent work. He needs to remain on our side at the conclusion of this. Do you understand?”

Harry mulled this over. It made sense to him, when he thought about it – as a member of the Order, Diggle surely knew too much to be safely driven off. “I don’t like it, but I understand,” he answered.

Lupin entered the great hall just ahead of Harry. “Hello, Dedalus. We have so much to discuss that I hardly know where to begin,” he growled. He set the crate on the dining table, and crossed his arms sternly. Harry set his crate next to the first.

“Hello, Ted,” Diggle said curtly as Mr. Tonks entered the room. “I take it you’ve hired him, Lupin?” Lupin’s glare provided an unmistakable answer.

“Good afternoon, Dedalus,” Mr. Tonks said crisply. “It would seem that you’ve really cocked things up this time. I have made a minor career of tidying up after you, but this is a corker. The fact that it concerns Harry, of all people, makes it that much worse.”

“No sense at all, Dedalus,” Lupin accused.

“Had I known that I would be walking into an inquisition, I might have prepared a few notes,” Diggle fumed.

“I doubt that it would make the slightest difference,” Lupin shot back.

Mr. Tonks leaned against the side of the dining table. “About three weeks ago, Remus asked if I would review the financial statements that Gringotts provided him. Frankly, it took a week to make any sense of them whatever. He and I, along with Amelia Bones, have put in another week or two evaluating your various decisions and have drawn some rather pointed conclusions. Let’s begin with the Black ancestral castle and properties, not to mention the ownership stake in the *Daily Prophet*. You must realise, of course, that you were completely taken by Keith MacLeish? You couldn’t possibly have evaluated comparable properties.”

“You make the castle sound like a hobby farm,” Diggle said defensively. “What comparable properties do you have in mind? In any case, ready currency was required. Mr. Black laid out a whole raft of requirements that were to be fulfilled prior to the reading of the will. There wasn’t time to wait for the perfect client. Do you honestly believe that people are lined up to purchase something like that?”

Mr. Tonks insisted, “People *are* lined up to buy, Dedalus! With the boom in the Muggle economy and high interest in historical properties... for someone whose livelihood is dependent upon interchange with Muggles, you’re utterly blind to them!”

Diggie said through clenched teeth, “My livelihood is dependent upon assisting wizarding families *forced* to deal with Muggles, for whatever reasons that may arise.”

“So it was better to be grossly underpaid for the castle than to put it in the hands of a Muggle?” Mr. Tonks asked. “It *is* MacLeish, after all; many of our friends and colleagues no longer consider him to be one of us.”

“Mr. Black wanted the castle liquidated. Can you imagine what would have happened if the castle itself had been divided into shares? Would you have preferred to share ownership of a castle with the Malfoy family? Perhaps I did undervalue the castle, but I was able to liquidate it in two weeks’ time, *and* MacLeish substantially undervalued Harry’s share of the *Daily Prophet*,” Diggle said defiantly. “The escalation of that share value over time –”

Mr. Tonks cut him off. “You were misdirected – intentionally misdirected. He gave you a fair value on a modest investment, but managed to get your approval on a contract that you obviously failed to read, *and* received a castle and thousands of acres for pence on the pound! As icing on the cake, you moved all of it to Galleons in a single business day. The effect of a transaction of that size on the exchange rate probably cost a quarter of a million pounds!”

“As I said, ready currency was required...” Diggle repeated. He stopped, and looked up sharply. “What do you mean about failing to read the contract?”

“You gave MacLeish a limited license to use Harry’s name and image,” Mr. Tonks said. “The undervaluation of the investment was essentially payment for those rights.”

Harry cut in. “My name and image... what do you mean?” he asked apprehensively.

“For the next two years, MacLeish owns limited rights to use your name and face,” Mr. Tonks explained. “He’s also asserted rights to the phrases ‘The Boy-Who-Lived’ and ‘Bloody Harry’.” Diggle winced, and Harry’s eyes bore into him.

“You sold my *name* ?” Harry snarled.

Mr. Tonks gestured for Harry to relax. “It sounds a bit worse than it is, Harry,” he said. “For example, he hasn’t the right to use your name as an endorsement for any product, although he can theoretically prevent you from making your own endorsements. When the rights lapse, you can refuse renewal of the agreement.”

“This is *unbelievable*,” Harry glowered.

“Mr. Potter, I apologise for my oversight,” Diggle said hastily. “I had understood that the assignment of rights only related to promotion of your partnership in the *Daily Prophet*.”

“Don’t refer to it as a partnership,” Mr. Tonks interjected. “Harry is a shareholder, not a partner. He has no decision-making authority, and no effective ability to oppose the decisions of management. After selling Harry fifteen percent, MacLeish still holds sixty-nine percent of Vox

Populi.”

“MacLeish has consistently described Harry as a partner,” Diggle pointed out, “both privately and publicly.”

“MacLeish doesn’t *have* partners!” Mr. Tonks cried out. “If he’s painting Harry as a partner, it’s only because he gains something from it. How could you possibly put Harry in business with him? *What were you thinking?*”

“Keith MacLeish is a wealthy and powerful man. He is well connected in the wizarding world, and well respected by those who actually matter. His connections to our government are growing daily. It is to Harry’s benefit to have a relationship with someone like that,” Diggle insisted.

Lupin said acidly, “You could have applied that description to Lucius Malfoy until this summer.”

Diggle’s eyebrows shot up, and he said excitedly, “MacLeish is *not* a Death Eater. He is not a supporter of Voldemort simply because he is wealthy and powerful. I do *not* conduct business with Death Eaters.”

Mr. Tonks opened one of his valises, and removed a folder. “I see,” he said offhandedly. He flipped a few sheets inside the folder, adjusted his spectacles, and began, “You made a number of short term investments in June and July, with respect to the Black Trust. Two of them were in partnership with Global Ventures, Ltd... one on July 3 for a little less than a million pounds, supposedly repaid with interest on July 9... and another on July 10 for just over a million pounds, supposedly repaid with interest on August 2. You made three short-term investments in July with respect to Harry’s personal funds... one was with Global Ventures, on July 29 for just over a million pounds... supposedly repaid with interest last Wednesday. Was there anything suspicious about these particular transactions?”

Diggle crossed his arms. “I’ve used short term investments frequently in the past – and I know you have as well. Muggles are forever pinching their cash flow, and they’ll pay dearly to get around that.”

“Did you bother to check up on Global Ventures?” Mr. Tonks asked.

“It is a holding company for a shipping concern,” Diggle answered. “I’ve worked with them a few times over the years. They borrow on liberal terms, and they pay off early.”

“Global Ventures, Ltd. is owned by Echo Partners, Ltd., by way of about a dozen corporate shells and cul-de-sacs,” Mr. Tonks said. “Exactly how many times have you worked with them?”

“Don’t play the barrister with me, Ted – it’s childish,” snapped Diggle.

“I suppose it’s reasonable that you could have been fooled,” Mr. Tonks sighed. “Andromeda spent the better part of two weeks chasing the ownership trail. I might have asked her to drop the search, but she began to run into familiar threads. Shortly after that, we happened upon Echo Partners,

Ltd. Regrettably, we're quite familiar with that company. Are you familiar with Greco-Roman mythology? Given your name, I would have assumed –"

"What in Merlin's name are you playing at? Get to the point, would you?" Diggle demanded.

Mr. Tonks pressed on. "In mythology, Echo was a nymph. She was hopelessly in love with a beautiful youth by the name of *Narcissus*. Echo Partners, Ltd. has one owner, and you can surmise who *he* is."

Diggle's mouth slowly began to drop. "It's not possible," he said hoarsely.

Mr. Tonks delivered the deathblow. "One of the shell companies was called LXM Corporation. You wouldn't have had to dig nearly as deeply for that one, though I admit that it didn't strike me on first or even second viewing. L – X – M. Lucius – Xavier – *Malfoy*."

Diggle slumped in his chair; his face paled, and his breathing turned increasingly agonal. "Not possible... *Malfoy* ... not possible... couldn't be... sweet Merlin, it's not... what have I done?" he cried.

"Dedalus, what you've done is to launder money for a Death Eater," Mr. Tonks said. He went on dispassionately, "On July 5, my dear brother-in-law successfully bought his way out of prison, using the money borrowed from the Black Trust. The repayment was made in marks, and drawn off an Albanian bank – you can figure it out from there. On July 16, some very dangerous rune stones were stolen from a Muggle museum in Athens. It was a sophisticated bit of thievery, I was told – quite expensive to pull off. One of the thieves was caught by Greek magical law enforcement. He said that a tall British man with long blond hair financed the job, and he described the buyer of the runes as a British man with a metal hand. Again, the repayment to the Trust was in marks, drawn from a different Albanian bank. On two occasions, the Hogwarts Board of Governors issued adverse findings regarding Harry. The first action took place three days after the last Global Ventures investment. Both times, the same voting bloc supported the findings. Three of those members are now under investigation, suspected of having taken bribes that total an amount quite similar to that last investment of yours. That one was repaid directly from Lucius Malfoy's accounts; since his estate is again subject to impound by the Ministry, chances are good that Harry will have to return that money. When you put it all together, Dedalus, that's not a very good run ... not a very good run at all."

Harry stood frozen in horror. His face felt hot as a flame. As Diggle cried out, Harry heard his own voice as if from a distance. "Let me get this straight... Lucius Malfoy borrowed *my money* to get me dismissed from Hogwarts?"

"That's the long and short of it, Harry. I'm terribly sorry," Mr. Tonks said. Harry laughed nervously, almost hysterically.

Diggle stammered, "M... M... Mister Potter, I... I don't know what to say. You can't... you can't believe that I'd willingly lend money to Lucius Malfoy?"

“What *should* Harry believe, then?” Lupin growled.

Diggle fumbled clumsily through his valise. “I admit, I made mistakes, but... I want you to take a look at this, Ted. I want you to take a look at this, and tell me what you’d do differently.” He pulled out a thick file, and waved it frantically in Mr. Tonks’ direction. Diggle looked to Dumbledore, and Dumbledore returned the look impassively. Harry noticed that Tonks was watching her father with appreciation; he also thought that Bill Weasley was prepared to roast Diggle on a spit.

Mr. Tonks scanned the first page inside the file, flipped it aside, scanned the second page, and frowned deeply. He pulled a chair out from the dining table, sat, and spread the contents of the folder across the table. “This is unbelievable,” he muttered. Lupin peered over his shoulder, and then pulled up a chair of his own. Diggle began to take on the air of a man being vindicated. He glanced at Harry, and Harry glared back because everyone seemed to be missing the point.

After several minutes, Mr. Tonks looked up at Dumbledore, who stood across the table from him. “These are perhaps the most contradictory instructions I have ever read,” he concluded.

“See?” Diggle trumpeted. “You see what I had to deal with?”

Mr. Tonks frowned deeply. “Yes, Dedalus, I see what you had to deal with. You were in over your head on this one. You could have sought help. I would gladly have helped you, if you’d asked. You could have pulled additional resources from Gringotts. Even Carlo Greengrass might have helped you on the property matters. You could have done *something*. You were in over your head, and look what happened as a result!”

Harry reached his boiling point. “Mr. Diggle, why did you collect money from the people living in the village?” he asked.

Diggle failed to recognise the quaver in Harry’s voice. He answered, “In order to provide for the estate corpus that Mr. Black desired, while still satisfying his requests regarding personal property and inheritance, additional funds were required. I wasn’t about to obligate your personal funds, and I was not authorised to use funds from the Potter Trust. The principal source of income for the Black Trust over the last two centuries has been recurring relief payments. I simply reinstituted a long-standing practice.”

Harry’s voice shook. “Did you ever think to ask what *I* might think about this?” From the corner of his eye, he saw Tonks and Bill Weasley edge closer.

“At the time I reinstituted the payments, you had not yet accepted the inheritance,” Diggle explained. “Mr. Potter – Harry – they owed you this. The Muggles owe you for your suffering... I’m sorry, are you feeling ill?”

Harry advanced on Diggle, who nearly knocked over his valise in fright. “The only Muggles who have treated me poorly are my own family, and they’re *my* problem. The people who live here have never done anything to me. How am I supposed to live here, when all of my neighbours *hate*

me because I'm *taking their money* ? *Did you think about that* ?”

Diggle said hesitantly, “You make it sound as though you would be living here *among* them. As Lord of the manor, well, you live *above* them of course. Collecting relief payments on these lands is a perfectly legal –”

Harry stopped inches from Diggle, who looked into Harry's eyes and clearly began to panic. “It may be legal,” Harry said, “but that doesn't mean it's right. *No more* – it's *done* , do you hear?”

Diggle spluttered, “I... I'm... I'm sorry... I didn't seek to offend you... I only wanted to...”

Harry ignored him. He said flatly, “Mr. Tonks, I'd very much like to hire you, and I figure I'd have Madam Bones' blessing to do it. Mr. Diggle, as soon as you've answered every question that Mr. Tonks and Remus have for you – and I mean *every* question – I want you to leave. I have nothing else to say to you. If you'll excuse me, please?” He picked up the small box from the dining table, pocketed it, and rushed blindly up the stairs.

It was right there, if I'd known to look , he thought as he sprinted upward. ‘*Tell Malfoy to continue his efforts*’ – *that's what Voldemort said to Wormtail. Everyone said there were Galleons influencing the Board of Governors... I never would have believed that they were mine* .

He heard Dumbledore call after him – something about avoiding the study. *That's fine* , he thought, *I don't even know where it is* . He simply wanted to find the highest point in the tower. At Hogwarts, at the times when everything seemed to be falling apart, Harry had scaled the Astronomy Tower, or climbed atop the Owlery – anywhere, provided that it was high above the earth.

The stairs ended at the second floor, and a small passage led to another narrow stair that continued upward. He sat at its base and just breathed, and hoped for calm. *I just hope that Remus and Mr. Tonks can straighten things out* , he decided at length.

When he felt more settled, he took the narrow winding stair that ended at the garret. An open door to the left revealed a library. He wandered past the shelves, and saw many titles that he recognised from Grimmauld Place. To the right, a handful of steps led to a short corridor that in turn led to two bedrooms. Harry looked in the first; he sought a window that would accommodate him, or a service door that led to the roof. He heard voices in the second room, and quietly peered inside.

Luna sat in an armchair, facing the window. Ginny fluffed a pillow, and eased it behind Luna. “There, that's better,” Ginny murmured.

“My back is uninjured,” Luna said dismissively, as though she were focussed on something outside.

Ron leaned against the wall. “She's just concerned, that's all. You shouldn't be travelling yet.”

Luna turned to face Ron. “I lost a fair amount of blood, and thus I tire easily. My neck is sensitive

and slightly sore. The bruises have subsided. None of these preclude me from travelling..." She stopped and inclined her head toward Ginny, and added, "... or walking, or picking up after myself."

"I wonder where Harry's off to?" Ron said. "When all hell broke loose with Diggle, I thought he was running up here."

"Perhaps you should look for him, Ronald?" Luna offered. "I imagine he could use a friend at the moment." She added with a sigh, "He certainly has suffered this summer, has he not?"

"*You've* suffered," Ron returned. "Harry, he's just... I don't know... star-crossed, I suppose. This must be what that sodding prophecy is about – you know, the part about not being able to live."

"Ron, I don't think we should discuss it," Ginny warned.

"What is it with you?" Ron snapped. "You act like he doesn't exist any more... bloody hell, it was the *snog*, wasn't it? But that doesn't figure... *you* were the one that shoved *him* off, right?"

"It's nothing to do with that," Ginny said darkly. "Drop it."

"Ronald, you sound hungry," Luna said. She affected an ethereal tone, and intoned, "Treacle tarts are in ascension... and the tea leaves show a deadly penchant for pumpkin juice..."

Ron gave a mock shiver. "Urgh... you sound just like Trelawney – the old bat. Just don't do the thing, you know, that thing with the eyes that she... I asked you not to do that! *Luna!*"

Ginny laughed. "Can I get you anything, anything at all?" she asked Luna.

Luna shook her head. "Perhaps you should find somewhere to practice?" she suggested. "You haven't played since last evening; you must be longing for it."

"I did manage to get in a few minutes this morning, before we left," Ginny admitted nervously.

"Don't encourage her!" Ron barked at Luna. "It's torture, I tell you! She never stops!"

"Perhaps you could take up the lute, Ronald," Luna said in a lilt, and then added in song, "You could serenade me, O good and gentle knight!"

Ron turned ashen. "You really *are* loony... you do know that, right?"

Luna turned back to whatever it was that she saw outside the window. "It pleases me to satisfy the expectations of others," she said absently.

"She's mental," Ron said to Ginny. "Fancy a snack?"

Ginny picked up her violin case from the floor. "I think I'll find a quiet spot instead."

“There must be a suitable dungeon,” Ron grumbled.

Harry pressed himself into the corner as Ron and Ginny passed by. He didn’t want to be seen as an eavesdropper... *like Ron* , he thought. He waited for a few moments, and then knocked on the door frame. “May I come in?” he asked.

“You just missed Ronald and Ginny,” Luna said, without looking away from the window.

“I’ll catch up with them later,” said Harry. “It was nice of you to come along.”

“It is nice of you to tolerate uninvited guests,” Luna returned.

“Er... Luna... what are you looking at?” Harry asked, not entirely sure that he was prepared for a Luna Lovegood answer.

“Something absolutely fascinating,” Luna answered. “Come to the window.”

Harry crouched beside her, and she stuck her arm out the window. Her index finger pointed directly toward the bothy. “Look there, adjacent to the cliffs.” She swirled her arm around, tracing a broad circle with her finger.

“Erm... what is it that I’m looking at?” Harry asked nervously.

“Look at that small pile of rocks, nearest to the cliffs,” Luna directed. “In which direction does the pile cast its shadow?”

Harry thought for a moment. “Let me see... northeast?”

“Yes, if the sea is directly east,” Luna said. “Look at the pile of rocks over there, away from the cliffs... no, not that one – the one farthest from us.”

“All right – I see it.”

“In which direction does the shadow point?”

Harry looked, and then looked again. “Southwest,” he whispered.

“Look at the rest of the piles of rock, Harry. All of the shadows appear to point away from the space bounded by the piles,” Luna observed.

“I’ll be switched... you’re right,” Harry said. “How did you see that... *why* did you see that?”

Luna smiled, and her big eyes shone. “My daddy prides himself on seeing the world clearly, and he taught that to me. Do you know what most of us do, when confronted with phenomena that break the rules? We see those phenomena through the lens of the rules, and thus we do not see them at all. I open my eyes, and I see. Muggles often think that the world is right side up. Wizards and witches *know* that it’s upside down. Unfortunately for them, it’s actually downside up.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “ ‘Downside up’ ?”

“Downside up,” Luna repeated. “I will borrow my daddy’s explanation, as I have been unable to improve upon it. Can you do a headstand?”

Harry froze. “I’m sorry?”

“A headstand – can you do a headstand?” Luna asked. “You can balance against the wall, provided that you are faced toward the centre of the room.” She made no move to leave her chair.

Harry felt like a fool, and he hoped fervently that no one else entered the room. Still, he did as she asked. “Now what?” he asked uncomfortably.

“Look around. How would you describe your position?” she asked.

“I’m upside down!” he blurted in exasperation.

“Where is ‘down’?” Luna asked calmly.

“Right here, for Merlin’s sake!” he shouted, and banged his elbow against the floor.

“But that’s ‘up’... isn’t it? Where is ‘down’?” she asked.

“It’s not ‘up’...” Harry stopped. He looked straight ahead. The floor was above him, and the ceiling fell away at his feet. “Okay, it’s ‘up’ at the moment. Is that your point?”

Luna slowly rose from the chair, and positioned herself in front of Harry. “Is it still ‘up’?” she asked him.

“For me? I suppose it is,” he said.

Luna smiled again – this time it was the enigmatic smile that Harry remembered from Hogwarts. “What does that make me, then?”

“Erm... upside down?” he ventured.

Luna said, “The blood rushing into your head is certain evidence that, in fact, *you* are the one who is upside down.”

“It looks to me like you’re hanging from the ceiling,” Harry said with a grin.

“You might want to consider coming out of that headstand, although your face looks rather fetching in Gryffindor red,” Luna suggested. Harry eased himself down, and Luna continued, “I was not upside down, of course. Gravity still rules – you could feel it, obviously. Still, your perception of the world differed from mine, and you held to that view in the face of my insistence to the contrary. You could not describe yourself as right side up, nor would it have been appropriate to describe yourself as upside down. You, Harry Potter, were downside up.”

“You’re telling me that you live your life in a constant headstand?” Harry laughed.

“I am downside up, thank you. Most of the rest of the world is firmly attached to the ceiling,” Luna said seriously. “Which are you?”

“I can do a headstand now and then,” Harry offered.

“You should do so sparingly,” Luna recommended seriously. “I’m loony, you know.” Harry and Luna talked about nothing in particular until Ron walked in, a tray of snacks and a pitcher of juice in hand. Luna didn’t raise the issue of the inconsistent shadows again; Harry thought that was strange but somehow predictable.

Harry Potter and the Years of Rebellion Out In The Open

Chapter Twenty-Two

OUT IN THE OPEN

August 19, 8:00 pm

Harry ran his hands through his hair, which only served to enhance its messiness. He was overwhelmed, despite Mr. Tonks' best efforts – everything was complicated, and there was so much to digest. He wished he'd never come down from the garret.

“Let me see if I understand this,” Harry reviewed. “When Sirius' will was approved, they restored his rights. When they restored his rights, he got custody of me... something of a problem, of course. They didn't bother to change guardians because Dumbledore was already my wizarding guardian, and I was living with the Dursleys anyway –”

“– and everyone with a say was too busy wrangling about the emancipation issue to pay any mind,” Lupin grumbled.

Harry pressed on. “Diggle took charge of the money because he was in charge of Sirius' estate, and... was he my conservator, like Remus, or was that missed as well?”

“He was temporarily appointed as conservator, pending execution of Sirius' will.” Mr. Tonks explained. “According to Amelia, it was the consensus that Dumbledore would not be awarded both guardianship and conservatorship. She said it was quite a tussle.”

“A tussle bought and paid for by Malfoy, no doubt,” spat Lupin. “He played this from the start. You'd almost think he knew in advance what Sirius had planned.”

“Dedalus would *never* have tipped Malfoy – of that I have no doubt at all,” Mr. Tonks insisted.

Harry returned them to the matter at hand. “So that's why Diggle was able to use my money, and... and sell my name,” he concluded.

Mr. Tonks nodded. “That's it, in a nutshell. No one at the Wizengamot was watching carefully, and Gringotts granted Dedalus full access based on the signed order. The share in the *Daily Prophet* was purchased with your funds, not from the Black Trust or Sirius' accounts. Dedalus

wanted to be sure that the share would belong to you, even if the other beneficiaries contested Sirius' will. I'd have probably done the same, in his place. You could contest the licensing arrangement, of course – Dumbledore should have been the one giving permission, in theory – but MacLeish will drag his feet with the Wizengamot. Two years will expire long before you ever obtain a ruling. Keep this in mind, Harry – it's a wizarding agreement, not a Muggle contract. Dedalus made a good choice there; I'm a bit surprised that MacLeish agreed to it. As for the rest... Vox is arguing that the *Prophet* coined the phrase 'the Boy-Who-Lived' in 1981. I wish them Godspeed with that argument; they'll need it. They should prevail with 'Bloody Harry', though I can't imagine why they'd want to protect that."

Harry buried his face in his hands. "This can't get any worse... or can it?"

Mr. Tonks patted Harry on the shoulder. "You still need to decide how to handle the relief payment issue. Perhaps we should take a detour, before pressing on? I think Dumbledore should be here for this." Harry looked up, ready to pounce, but saw the smile on Mr. Tonks' face and held back.

When Dumbledore was settled at the table, Mr. Tonks said, "Harry, I want to talk about how to gain your reinstatement at Hogwarts."

"You're kidding?" Lupin blurted.

Dumbledore leaned in, clearly interested. "What is it that you have in mind, Theodore?" he asked.

Mr. Tonks' eyes flickered for a moment at the sound of his given name, but his smile remained. "I see two approaches," he explained. First, we could take the bribery investigation public. One advantage to Vox owning the *Prophet* is that they'll sink their teeth into any scandal that presents itself. If you don't believe that, then spend a few days with some Australian wizards. The public outcry would do most of the work for us. They might even demand Fudge's ouster –"

"There is a timeworn aphorism that says 'be careful what you wish for; you might just get it'," warned Dumbledore. "We should pay heed to this where the Minister is concerned. What is your second approach?"

Mr. Tonks held his voice down. "We possess more information in this matter than does the Ministry. That's unlikely to change – this sort of thing isn't exactly their cup of tea, after all. If used properly, the information provides us with valuable leverage over the Board of Governors, yes?"

Dumbledore frowned. "I will reserve my comments on both alternatives until Harry has had his say. Harry, is there anything you wish to contribute?"

Lupin eyed Mr. Tonks suspiciously. "Ted... that sounds a lot like blackmail," he warned.

"I'm talking about using the information we possess to Harry's best advantage," Mr. Tonks returned.

“I’m inclined to the first approach,” Lupin admitted. “I’ve no love lost for Fudge, and I think the Board of Governors should be held accountable. The second approach rises and falls on the strength of the leverage. I can’t imagine Amelia would go for it, either.”

“That’s not required, is it?” Mr. Tonks observed.

Dumbledore sat impassively. “Do you have an opinion on the matter?” he prodded Harry.

Harry wondered aloud, “Could we really end up with someone worse than Fudge?”

Dumbledore answered the question with a question. “You surely have at least a passing familiarity with Muggle history, and – despite your OWL results – you have surely acquired some knowledge of the history of magic. You have also had some experience with the Ministry, for good and ill. Given what you know, what conclusion do you draw?”

Harry nodded solemnly. He said to Mr. Tonks, “I agree with Remus about the second choice; I can’t support that. Dumbledore’s right about Fudge,” continued Harry. “We shouldn’t risk it. I appreciate what you’re trying to do, but I’m all right now.”

“What do you mean by that?” Lupin asked anxiously.

Harry searched for the right words. “Everything’s changed. I... I haven’t really thought about it much... I’ve tried not to think about it, but... do you really think I could get what I need from sixth year classes?”

“I’m certain that the faculty could arrange all the supplemental training you need,” Mr. Tonks offered. “Everyone around you would cheerfully pitch in wherever useful. We were discussing that possibility on the drive up –”

Lupin cut in. “Don’t fret, Harry. Ted and Odd and I were in the front of the van, and there was an Imperturbable charm up from the start,” he promised.

“We each came at this from a different angle – no surprise in that – but we were all concerned about what you might be sacrificing by missing out on your last two years,” Mr. Tonks continued. “It’s not just about the classes; there are all the other aspects – friends, parties, Quidditch, and the like.”

Dumbledore asked Harry, “Do you harbour any fears or concerns about maintaining your friendships?”

Harry looked back at Dumbledore, and grew frustrated with himself. He wondered why should feel agreeable around Dumbledore, so much so that at times it took concerted effort to hold on to his anger. He checked the corners of his mind, but no one else was there. He didn’t want to answer Dumbledore’s question honestly – he didn’t want to be weak. A lie didn’t occur to him, so he was left with the truth.

“It’s best that I go on my own,” he said. “There are ... things I need to learn, and I need to learn

them now. I need to do things my own way... but I don't think I can do this alone. I wish I could. I mean, I'll probably fight alone in the end, but I still want my friends... if they'll have me..."

Dumbledore smiled broadly, and his eyes nearly shone. "There is no reason for you to be sorry," he said. "In an apprenticeship, you will have a measure of freedom, you will not be alone, and you will not be deprived of your friends. I wish that you could be afforded more than that. The steps necessary to reconcile even those basic requirements will pose a challenge, but we shall meet the challenge." Harry nodded in acknowledgement – he wanted to trust, but the Headmaster hadn't earned it.

"Shall we tackle the question of the relief payments, then?" Mr. Tonks asked. "Your options are straightforward – it's really a matter of degree."

Harry rubbed at his bleary eyes. He wasn't sleepy, just spent. "Let's finish this," he muttered.

Mr. Tonks glanced at one of his papers. "Right, then. Between July 21 and July 30, Dedalus took in just over eighteen million pounds of relief. I've asked that he provide fully updated... Harry? Are you all right? Do you need some water?" Harry closed his eyes and waited for the coughing fit to subside.

"What portion of the eighteen million pounds has already been expended, if I might ask?" asked Dumbledore.

Mr. Tonks consulted another paper. "Harry...?" he asked tentatively.

Harry smiled faintly when he realized that Mr. Tonks was awaiting permission to speak further in front of Dumbledore. He nodded, and Mr. Tonks continued, "About four million is still liquid. Nearly all the rest has been converted to Galleons, and disbursed in accordance with the will."

Harry cleared his throat. "Do I have enough money to fix this?" he croaked.

Mr. Tonks laughed. "That's hardly a problem. The Potter Trust could cover it from its Muggle liquid assets alone. If you set the Potter Trust aside, then you'll run through all of Sirius' remaining funds and the majority of your own vault as well," he said.

"Why wouldn't I use the Potter Trust?" Harry asked.

Mr. Tonks explained. "All of the appointed trustees are either dead or unavailable. That leaves the institutional trustee – I believe you've met Fliptrask? Everything will be according to the rules, and goblin rules are as complicated as rules can possibly be."

Lupin asked, "What do you want to accomplish here, Harry? It's obvious that you want to repay everyone. Do you have an end result in mind?" Mr. Tonks took out a bound pad of paper and a Muggle biro, and watched expectantly.

"When everything's over and done with, I'd like to live here without being hated," Harry said. "If Diggle sent me a bill, *I'd* hate me."

“Right,” said Mr. Tonks. He read aloud as he wrote. “No... villagers... with... torches... and... pitchforks... storming... the... tower.” He started to laugh and Harry weakly joined in. Lupin and Dumbledore looked on blankly.

Mr. Tonks waved his hand dismissively. “Never mind; it’s just a reference from the cinema. You’re probably talking about repayment plus some sort of interest, Harry. There’s a long legacy to overcome, after all.”

“I don’t care about the money,” Harry sighed. “I want to be able to walk down the High Street and feel good about it.”

Mr. Tonks scribbled furiously on the pad of paper. “Well... this affair has probably left a number of people in a fairly bad way. If you return the actual relief payments, plus... ten percent, I think... and cover resulting incidentals – missed rents, repossessed property, that sort of thing... you should get the end result that you want.”

“You might also consider doing something for the village as a whole,” Dumbledore suggested.

Harry nodded readily. “I like that idea,” he said. “How would I go about doing it?”

Mr. Tonks tapped his biro against the table for a few moments, and then offered, “I can meet with the community council – without referring to you, of course – and explore the local needs. Do you have anything in mind?”

Harry shrugged. “I don’t know... a school, new roadways, whatever they think they need.”

Mr. Tonks eyebrows shot up. “You *really* want to make a splash, don’t you? Do you have a figure in mind?”

“What – how much to spend? I have no idea...” Harry pulled a number from the air. “Half a million pounds,” he said firmly.

Lupin sat up in his chair. “Harry!”

Harry blurted out seriously, “What, not enough? We could make it a million, I suppose –”

“Half a million is more than enough, Harry,” Mr. Tonks laughed. “This is about your new friend, isn’t it?”

Harry frowned. “It’s about having a home, and not wanting to screw it up,” he grumbled. “Heather has nothing to do with this... well, she told me what was happening, so she has *something* to do with it...”

“Harry, I have no problem with the fact that she’s a Muggle. In fact, I’ll give you credit for aiming high,” Mr. Tonks sniggered.

“What do you mean by that?” demanded Harry hoarsely.

“Would you like some water? You’re becoming terribly red,” Lupin jested.

“I was stunned when Dora told us who you were seeing,” Mr. Tonks explained eagerly.

Harry muttered, “I’m not *seeing* anyone,” but was roundly ignored.

Mr. Tonks ploughed on, “You take off to the country – Dora wouldn’t tell us where, but it didn’t take Andromeda long to guess – and end up running into Heather Magruder, the bad girl of classical music. What are the chances of that?”

Harry’s brow furrowed. “The bad... *what* ?”

“That’s what the *Times* calls her – ‘the bad girl of classical music’,” Mr. Tonks told him. “She’s quite a lightning rod – people either love her or hate her... sorry, Harry, I should explain myself. We maintain a subscription at the Royal Opera House. The young lady drives the purists insane. She wears what she wants to wear, she sings off-program... she actually performed one aria backward – it was really quite clever, I thought. She sings pop songs, as well; she has a band with her, along with orchestra. Of course, there was the bit with mortally offending the Royal Family...” He laughed. “Andromeda and I find her refreshing; the couple with whom we attend absolutely despise her. I imagine that the two of you might share some things in common – the pressures of fame at an early age and such.”

Lupin mustered a parental tone. “How bad of a bad girl is she?”

Mr. Tonks snorted. “I can’t imagine – when would someone like that actually have the time to be bad? Of course, Vox has its hooks into her... she’s too young for Page Three, at least.” Harry choked, and Mr. Tonks and Lupin laughed hysterically.

After composing himself, Lupin turned serious. “MacLeish would have a field day if his people caught the two of you together, I suspect,” he warned. “You really should be cautious about that.”

“There’s nothing to see; we’re only friends,” Harry said. A dark thought tugged at the back of his mind – what if Heather had been put up to being his friend? – but he banished it.

“I’ll get started on a plan for settling things, then,” Mr. Tonks said as he began to collect his things. “It’ll take a few days to execute; we don’t want to exchange too many Galleons at once.”

Harry rose and shook his hand. “Thank you,” he said. “There’s one more thing. You said you didn’t take your share from Sirius’ will. I want you to have it. I’ll even cover it myself, if that would be better.”

Mr. Tonks shook his head. “That’s very kind of you, but I don’t think –”

“He wanted you to have it,” insisted Harry; “Please take it.” Mr. Tonks sighed at him.

“Would you care for a meal, Harry?” Dumbledore asked. “You have had nothing to eat since this morning.”

Harry stopped for a moment. “I have food at... erm... in my room. Remus, would you come by later tonight?”

“I’d... I’d love to,” Lupin said. “How much later?”

“Late,” Harry returned. “Ron and I have some catching up to do.”

Harry lingered by the black door that led out of the walled courtyard. “Are you up for keeping a secret?” he asked Ron.

Ron crossed his arms. “I told you I can keep secrets,” he insisted.

“There are only three other people alive that know this one, including me,” Harry told him. “You’re about to become the fourth. I just have a feeling that you should be in on this.”

Ron eyed him suspiciously. “That doesn’t sound like you... sounds more like Trelawney.”

“Call it a hunch, then,” Harry frowned.

“Okay, you’ve got me,” Ron said casually. “What’s the big secret?”

Harry dug a scrap of parchment from his wallet. “Read this, and look that way,” he said, pointing toward the southernmost stack.

“This reminds me of getting into Grimmauld... well, would you look at that? Explains a lot, actually,” said Ron.

“What do you mean?” Harry asked.

“I wondered where you were staying,” Ron returned. “I mean, the tower is big and spotless and there’s no sign of house-elves. You didn’t care what rooms anyone took, and I didn’t see any of your things inside.”

“I hadn’t even gone inside the tower until today,” Harry admitted.

“Who else knows about this – can you tell me that much?” Ron asked.

“Remus and Dumbledore,” Harry answered. “Remus has always known – Sirius told him. Dumbledore can see through the wards.”

Ron raised an eyebrow. “You’re joking, right?”

Harry shook his head. “No, I’m not. He looked right through them.”

“It *is* Dumbledore... I mean, everyone *knows* he’s powerful and all – but... bloody hell...” Ron whispered.

Harry gestured toward the bothy. “Shall we?” he offered.

“The beach is down there, too, isn’t it?” Ron asked hopefully.

Harry nodded. As they walked through the grass, which was increasingly trampled down, he asked, “So... how have the last two weeks been for you?”

“Harry,” Ron said smugly, “at last, it’s good to be me.”

Harry snorted. “A bit full of yourself, are you?”

“If I’d known what would come of saving Ginny’s life, I would have tossed her from a broom a long time ago,” Ron laughed.

“Okay, I knew you were going spare before, but...” Harry began.

Ron fished through his pockets. “I *had* to bring these – I figured you’d never believe me otherwise,” he said.

Harry fumbled with the loose clippings, and glanced at them as he walked. The largest was from *Teen Witch Weekly*. Beneath a fairly flattering close-up of Ron, the headline read: ‘ **Ron Weasley Drops Into Teen Witches’ Hearts** ’. Harry stifled a snort, and then moved to a snippet from the *Daily Prophet*:

‘Radical Ron’ mobbed on Diagon Alley

Reluctant hero Ron Weasley found himself surrounded by hundreds of well-wishers on Diagon Alley Wednesday afternoon. Weasley, whose death-defying leap to save his sister from a dangerous criminal struck a chord with witches and wizards everywhere, graciously greeted fans for over an hour before Dark Force Defence League security wizards escorted him to his destination.

Ron reached over and snatched one of the clippings. “This is the best bit,” he said proudly. It was an inset box from *Teen Witch Weekly*, rather like the ‘Harry’s Love Life’ item that had caused so much trouble.

The HOT TEN List: TWW’s rundown of the world’s hottest young wizards

Readers’ owls have been flying furiously this week, and the result is a surprising new HOT TEN list...

10. Oliver Wood. Puddlemere United’s new shining star is featured on the team poster. He’s the darling of the Quidditch world this year, and we think that Wood is good in any position.

“Poor Oliver!” Harry cringed.

“It only gets better,” Ron chuckled. “Get a load of number eight.”

*8. **Gilderoy Lockhart** . Both the wizard and his books remain popular. It gets harder every week to think of Lockhart in a list of young wizards but you keep voting for him, readers. It’s a little off when mother and daughter are keen on the same wizard, but who are we to judge? Rumour has it that Lockhart has been released from St. Mungo’s in London, where he has been recovering from injuries reputedly sustained in a nasty confrontation with a basilisk.*

“I suppose it wouldn’t look as good if they said he was recovering from injuries sustained when he crossed his own students,” Harry fumed. “Do you think they really let that git loose?”

“Merlin, I hope not,” Ron said. “Keep going, then – it gets better still, mate.”

Harry turned the clipping over and immediately cringed.

*3. **Harry Potter** . Powerful, brooding, daring, dangerous, and eyes to die for – the essence of Hot. He’s not exactly the one you bring home for the Mother test – not without good wards and a houseful of Hit Wizards – but frankly we don’t care. They say that Harry brings out the best in those around him. That must be true, because one of his mates has unexpectedly flown to #1...*

*2. **Kirley Duke**. I t’s good to be the lead guitarist. The Weird Sisters have topped the WWN worldwide charts for five years, and darling Kirley has spent more than 100 consecutive weeks in the ‘Hot Ten’. Rumour has it that he’s moving on – say it isn’t so!*

*1. **Ron Weasley** . How can you **not** swoon for him? He’s mad enough to drop half a mile without a broom, but sweet enough to do it for his sister. Ron’s clearly as daring as his mate Harry, but we think he passes the Mother test. Too good to be true? We’d like to find out for ourselves...*

“This is disturbing in... I don’t know, at least a dozen ways,” Harry said.

“Do you know how many owls I got in the last week, mate? Any idea?” Ron beamed. “Seven hundred! Girls sent me their knickers, for Merlin’s sake – their *knickers!*”

“That’s great, Ron... fantastic... erm, couldn’t be happier for you...” Harry stammered.

Ron closed his eyes and indulged in a fatuous smile. “I’ll be swimming in girls, all year long!”

Harry snorted, and then chuckled.

“What?” asked Ron.

Harry spluttered, and began to laugh.

“*What?* What’s so funny about that?” Ron whined. “I finally get some attention of my own – because I did something that was effing noble – and you laugh?”

Harry struggled to calm himself. “I’m sorry, Ron... I’m... *heh* ...I’m really sorry... *ha* ... it’s

just... *heh-heh* ... you have to hear this music that Sirius... that Sirius..." He lost the battle, and cackled.

Ron snatched back his clippings and jammed them into his pockets. "Some friend you are!"

Harry gave Ron a friendly pat on the shoulder. "I said I was sorry," he managed. "I'm happy for you. I hope you're shagged by... I don't know... by two girls a day!"

Ron nearly choked. "*SHAGGED?* By t-two a day...?" he asked nervously. "I don't know... I mean, could a person actually survive that?"

Harry completely lost it and Ron threw up his hands; "Fine... laugh it up; go ahead – mock me if you want. This is going to be a smashing year, and *you* can't spoil it," he pouted.

Between fits of laughter, Harry began, "You won't have to worry about me. Just wait until Hermione..." The laughter stopped. "You were going to tell me about her. Look, I know something happened – it's the details I don't have."

Ron looked around nervously; he wouldn't meet Harry's eyes. "Her parents came for her the same morning that you left. First, she had a terrible row with her mum, and then... there's no nice way to put it, Harry. She had a... oh, I don't know; McGonagall gave some long name for it... I'd call it a breakdown."

Harry snapped, "What do you mean, a 'breakdown'?"

Ron sighed. "I mean things exploding, curling up in the corner, screaming if anyone touched her, babbling nonsense... she might have ended up at St. Mungo's, except that Dumbledore insisted she wouldn't be safe there."

"So what happened? Was she taken to Hogwarts, then? Where is she?" Harry demanded, his voice rising with each word.

"She seemed better by the time they left – walking on her own, answering questions," Ron said. "But the look in her eyes... Harry, something's not right, not at all. I keep seeing her on her knees in front of *HIM*. And that scream... It just plays over and over in my mind. I... I really wonder, you know, what he did to her?"

"Where is she, Ron?" Harry repeated more forcefully.

"McGonagall made arrangements, and Dad took the three of them to catch a Muggle flying machine," Ron told him. "Other than that, I'm in the dark."

"When are they coming back?" Harry asked nervously. "Dumbledore said it would be at the start of term."

"McGonagall was hoping for that – I swear that's all I know, Harry," Ron said helplessly.

Harry took deep calming breaths. All the feelings that flooded him two weeks earlier seemed to be coming back – all the anger and frustration, all the desire for vengeance, and other things that he didn't choose to acknowledge. He felt the need to run but decided against it; instead he closed his eyes for a moment and then trudged onward. Ron followed, and Harry didn't mind.

Harry let Ron lift the tone arm off the record album. As soon as he set it aside, Ron began to laugh; he didn't stop until he was bright crimson. "That's un-*bloody* -believable!" he spluttered. "You mean he...? And they...? I can't believe that worked!"

Harry shook his head. "I don't get it. Well, I mean, I *get it* ... It's just hard to imagine."

Ron waved the Barry White album jacket madly, and tried to force his voice into a low rumble. "*Baby, let me take all of my life to find you ,*" he purred, "*but you can believe it's gonna take the rest of my life to keep you .*" Harry cackled, while Ron coughed from the strain.

"Puts Sirius in a different light, eh?" Harry blurted.

"Gods, yes!" Ron hooted. "I just can't believe... Whitehorn actually said there were two at a time?"

Harry held up one hand solemnly. "I swear to you that he did."

Ron traced his hand along the shelves of record albums. "No wonder Sirius went Muggle for a while," he murmured.

"There was a lot more to it than that," Harry pointed out. "You have to consider his parents. I'd say the portrait of Mrs. Black is spot on, if Sirius' journal is true. Most of the family was signing up with Voldemort, as well. He *had* to get away from them."

"So he set himself up a quarter-mile away from his parents – *brilliant* ," Ron said.

"Thumbing his nose at them, I suppose," mused Harry.

Ron's eyebrows rose. "*What* -ing his nose?"

"Sorry – Muggle expression," Harry explained. "He moved in here to spite them, I think."

"They didn't know he was here; so, how was he spiting them?" Ron wondered. "Sounds to me like he enjoyed sneaking about."

"Maybe a little of that, too," Harry allowed. "It's hard to tell from his journal. He's all over the place."

Ron flopped down on the settee. "So... what's it like, being free?" he asked abruptly.

"How would I know?" Harry fumed. "I've minders around every corner."

“Yeah, I suppose,” said Ron. He pointed at the milk crate full of record albums. “If you wanted to get another one of those music thingies –”

“Records,” Harry corrected.

“Right, whatever. If you wanted another one, what would you do?” Ron asked.

Harry shrugged. “I suppose I’d have to ride into Edinburgh,” he figured. “There isn’t a music shop in St. Ebb.”

“So you’d just hop on that... bloody thing of yours, and go? Without having to ask? Without having to tag along with an older brother... or have a younger sister tagging along with you?” Ron rolled his eyes. “Sounds like freedom to me.”

“Is that why Bill and Ginny came with you, then?” asked Harry.

Ron sighed. “Look, mate, I wasn’t planning a Weasley invasion – honestly! Mum was right cross with me over running off. Part of the reason she let me come here was that Bill was hot for it.” He chuckled, and added, “Between you and me, I think the real reason *he* came was to see Tonks.”

“What? But I... erm... I thought Bill was seeing Fleur Delacour, and Tonks was... uh...” Harry spluttered.

Ron managed a truly awful imitation of Fleur’s accent. “I zink zat Bill is finished with ze French lessons,” he smirked. “I couldn’t have been happier. Mum got off of me and onto him.” He switched to a much better imitation of his mother. “ ‘Bill Weasley, even a *veela* can’t hold your attention! You need to cut that hair of yours and settle down! At this rate, I’ll be Albus Dumbledore’s age before I see a grandchild!’ ”

Harry winced. “How did Bill take it?”

Ron smiled broadly. “He actually blamed the Order – said he couldn’t settle down now; it would interfere with his duties.”

“What about Ginny?” asked Harry.

“Here’s the whole thing, see?” Ron said. “Professor Lupin dropped by Grimmauld Place early this morning, when I got my letter from you. Mum was going on about it, and he said that he was coming up here. He’d only stopped by to tell Dad something before he met up with Mr. Tonks. So, one thing led to another, and next I knew, Bill and me were in. We were going to Floo to someplace in Edinburgh, and Dad was going to arrange a Ministry car to meet us. When we went to get Mr. Tonks at the Leaky Cauldron, Luna and her dad were there and Ginny was with them; he was in London for something to do with the printing machine. Anyway, he insisted on driving us. He said that he and Luna were heading north anyway – somebody saw a something-horned something near somewhere, I suppose. Well, Ginny was furious that Luna was out of bed, let alone riding around the countryside. She was *scary*, like... like Mum, right? She told Mr. Lovegood that

Luna wasn't going anywhere for at least a day after we got here."

"Nice of her to speak for me," Harry said.

"Look, Harry, I – " Ron began.

Harry waved his hand. "It's all right," he insisted. "If I'd known they were coming, I'd have invited them to stay. That's a long trip; I know I was knackered after riding here."

"That's not where I was going," Ron said, "but it was nice of you to speak for me." Harry stuck out his tongue, and Ron went on, "I was going to say that I'm sorry I didn't come with you in the first place. I'm sorry about a lot of things, mate."

"Ron, you don't have to –" Harry started.

"Best to get it all out now," Ron said stiffly.

"Ron..." Harry began, and then stopped. He wanted to chide Ron for giving in to whatever the brains had revealed, for acting as though his fate was divined. He also knew that he had less authority to do that than anyone else on the face of the earth.

"Sometimes I haven't liked you very much," Ron said abruptly. "It all looked good from the outside, right? You were famous, you had money, you were Dumbledore's favourite, you played Quidditch your first year – your *first year* ... it all looked good to me. You were nice enough to let me along for the ride, so I kept my mouth shut... and I just went along. That's when I started hearing it. 'Who's that?' people would ask. 'Oh, that's, er, Harry Potter's mate, isn't it?' 'Yeah, um, what's his name?' It hurt, Harry. Times like that, I didn't like you very much at all." He shook his head and wrung his hands. "I guess I didn't have a clue."

Harry leaned nervously against the kitchen counter. He had been ready to snap back at Ron until the last. Instead, he watched and waited.

Ron leant his head against one hand, then nervously ran his hand across his face. "It's there every minute," he said. "What if it's two years before... you know, before it happens? Part of me wants to nab your motorbike and just make it happen, right? Just make it happen."

Harry edged to one of the armchairs but kept silent.

"You know why I won't do it? Because I want it to *mean* something," Ron said, his voice reduced to a ghostly whisper. "Because *I* want to mean something."

Harry didn't know what to say, but his mouth opened anyway. "Come on, mate, you mean something," he said hoarsely. "You know? Weasley is our King, after all."

For a moment Ron looked stung, and then his lip quivered, and then he roared with laughter – nervous laughter, almost manic, but laughter all the same. "Well... there is that," Ron managed to splutter. Harry exhaled.

Ron drew a chessboard on a piece of paper, and they played Muggle chess with items from the kitchen and Sirius' bric-a-brac. Harry had trouble remembering if the rubber Galleon was a bishop or a knight; it didn't matter, of course. In the midst of trouncing Harry for the third time, Ron said abruptly, "So... are you going to tell me about her, or am I supposed to guess?"

Harry was about to take Ron's Tube token with his saltshaker, but he dropped it and managed to scatter half the board.

"Shall we call that a draw?" Ron smirked. "Out with it, then." He crossed his arms. "I know a bit already, but I'd really rather hear it from you."

"There's not much to tell," Harry muttered. He thought for a moment and then identified the traitor: *Tonks has a big mouth*.

Ron stood up for a stretch. "Eating with the Muggles is just for fun?"

Harry put away the impromptu chess pieces so that Ron couldn't see his clenched jaw. He thought of Tonks and of the Marquis de Maupassant's nasty rope tricks, and the corners of his mouth turned up. "I like the food," he said.

"Erm... so what does she look like?" Ron asked distantly.

Harry opened the cupboard. "She has dark hair, black I suppose, and... blue eyes... and she smiles a lot. It's a nice smile." He sighed. "I suppose I sound like a bit of a traitor, going on about –"

Ron went on as though Harry weren't there. "Er... she's not bad to watch from behind, either."

Harry spun around. "What are you going on about...?"

Ron was peering out the window. "Looks like she's headed down to your beach," he said. He turned to Harry, and added, "With Ginny, no less! They're laughing; that's a good sign, right?"

Harry froze. "Does Ginny know that Heather's a Muggle?" he asked nervously.

"Yeah, Tonks mentioned it," Ron answered hesitantly.

"That's a relief!" Harry said. "I had visions of Ginny telling her about Hogwarts, or something."

Ron fidgeted. "You know, Ginny's had two years of Muggle Studies. I'm sure she can manage a simple conversation."

"Erm... from what Hermione's told me about Muggle Studies..." Harry's nervousness returned in full force. "Right, then... what do you call the stuff that Muggles run through wires, that makes the television and the appliances work?"

"Tellyfishing...? Um... oh, I know! It's eckeltricity!" Ron said proudly.

Harry burst out the door of the bothy and quickly made for the beach, with Ron at his heels. Before they made the switchback, Harry heard the strains of Ginny's violin. Ron slapped his forehead. Harry hung back for a while, and watched Ginny play. Heather nodded a lot and said things that Harry couldn't quite make out. She looked up, spotted Harry, and waved. Ron bumped Harry from behind, and they made their way down the steep path.

Heather smiled at Harry. "Your friend's good – damn good," she said appreciatively.

"I didn't expect to see you," said Harry. "I figured Shona would have you locked up."

"Och, she's all bark," Heather smirked. "I told her that I'd sing scales full-voice in the cottage if she didn't back down, all day and all night. I can manage better than a hundred decibels, you know?"

"I met with the people I told you about," Harry told her. "They're making the arrangements to return all the payments, plus a bit extra. Apparently, it'll take a few days to pull all the money together."

Before he could react, she stepped forward and hugged him tightly. From the corner of his eye, Harry saw Ginny staring at them. He liked the hug but a sense of guilt tugged at him.

Ginny said cattily, "Don't let us stand in the way of a good snogging."

Heather released him and said to Ginny, "It's not like that. Harry is..." She stopped and turned back to Harry. "I think you might actually understand me. I've never... well, I haven't had many friends at all, but never one like that."

"I was thinking the same thing," Harry admitted.

Ginny cleared her throat and gestured toward Ron. "The fellow staring at you is my brother Ron. Say hello, Ron." Ron did as he was asked, and his voice cracked. He started to cringe in embarrassment until Harry stepped in front of him.

Harry muttered under his breath, "How do you plan on getting... *you know* ... twice a day, if you can't even say 'hello'?" Ron blushed furiously, but then regained his composure.

Harry turned around. "Sorry to interrupt you," he said. "I imagine you're here to sing?"

"I've been doing a lot of listening," Heather said. "Ginny's further proof of my pet theory, you know."

Harry bristled inside, but betrayed nothing. "How is that?" he asked innocuously.

Heather explained. "She has near-perfect pitch, picks up songs by ear, and could probably scrape along in a studio orchestra. She tells me she first played the violin a year ago – *one bloody year* ago – and she's only been at it hard for a month. Oh, and I left out the best part – she plays a Stradivarius. Do you have the slightest idea what that violin is worth?"

“It belonged to my godfather,” Harry said. “It was in the Black family for something like 200 years.”

Heather’s lips thinned. She held out her hands and asked Ginny, “May I?” She showed the violin to Harry, and pointed out a number of features that he didn’t understand. She directed his attention to a particular spot on the back of the neck. “Look here; there are initials marked in the finish – N.P. Do you recognise those?”

Harry thought for a moment, and shook his head. “There was a P.N. in the Black family,” he said hesitantly. “N.P. isn’t familiar. Of course, I don’t know a lot of the family history. I mean, I’m not a Black; I’m a Potter, actually.”

Heather seemed to process the information for a moment. Then she returned to her original point. “This is the... let me think... the fourth Stradivarius I’ve seen. It looks in better condition than the other three. One of those was valued at better than a million pounds.” Ron began coughing. Heather gently returned the violin to Ginny.

“We were going to play ‘cat-and-mouse’, then?” Ginny asked Heather.

Heather nodded. “You get the idea, right? It’s really simple. I sing a phrase, and you repeat it. If you feel something different, just go with it. We’ll see what happens.”

The exchange quickly became very rich and very complex. Before long, they were singing and playing simultaneously – Ginny had no trouble following where Heather was leading.

Ron sat down on the sand and followed attentively. When they finished, he applauded loudly.

“We’ll have to do this again,” Heather said to Ginny. “I’m afraid to imagine how well you’ll play in a few months’ time. Who’s your teacher, anyway? It must be someone big.”

Harry frowned. “Actually, he’s rather small; she studies with Professor Flitwick at our school. It’s amazing what that violin has let you do in a month. I’m sure Professor Flitwick will be very excited to see it, Ginny. I’m sure he’ll find it terribly interesting.”

Ginny glared at him; “Like hell he will,” she muttered. Turning to Heather, she said, “I’ll be down here every evening until we leave. I hope I get to see you again.” She slipped the violin into its case, and headed up the switchback without a look back.

“I’d better see to her,” Ron said. “Wouldn’t want her to do anything stupid, would we?” He took a deep breath, and strode toward Heather. “It was wonderful to meet you,” he said, extending a hand. “Erm... what can I say? You’re bloody brilliant! Oh, and thanks for putting up with Ginny.” He shook her hand, and said to Harry, “See you tomorrow, mate?”

“Are you sure?” Harry asked.

Ron nodded. “I’ll find you in the morning. ‘Bye, Harry... ‘bye, *Heather* .”

Heather waited until Ron was out of earshot, before she said, “He’s not subtle, is he?”

Harry laughed. “It’s just... it’s a long story – never mind.”

She shook her head. “Recently fallen to earth, the lot of you. I’m telling you, my theory is sound.”

Harry changed the subject. “How did you get here, anyway? I still have your bicycle.”

“I walked,” she said. She pointed to a backpack set near the bottom of the switchback. “Your helmet is in there, by the way. You left it behind last night. Um... I’m really sorry she yelled at you like that.”

“How much did you hear?” Harry asked.

“Enough,” Heather answered. “I figured she might lose it when she saw your motorbike. That’s why I thought you looked familiar. There’s this old picture of Shona’s, with her and three guys and another woman, and one of the guys is sitting on exactly the same motorbike that you ride – I mean exactly. I have to ask you... is it actually the same motorbike?”

Harry wasn’t surprised but he still fought back nervousness. He carefully considered what to say and settled on, “One of the people in the picture you saw was my godfather, Sirius Black. It was his bike, and he left it to me. It’s possible I know or know of everyone else in the picture.”

She paled a bit. “Sirius *Black*! I don’t understand... with everything that the Blacks stood for, and she... I mean, you should *hear* her... it doesn’t make sense.”

“Sirius was the black sheep in his family. Considering the rest of them, that meant he was a fine fellow,” Harry offered.

“You don’t have any more pictures, do you?” Heather asked hesitantly. “Shona lives like she didn’t exist until fifteen years ago – almost no pictures, no keepsakes, nothing.”

“I was looking through a stack last night in the bothy, after... well, after I went and cooled off,” said Harry.

“Do you mind if I see them?” she asked.

“Only if you mind coming inside,” he answered boldly.

“I don’t know... a young man on the prowl, with his own place... sounds dangerous,” she teased.

“I don’t bite,” he promised.

“What if I prefer that?” she asked.

“You *can’t* be... I... what the...?” he spluttered.

She rolled her eyes. “This is how I play. Get used to it.”

He shook his head. “Let’s just go inside.”

Heather lingered over Sirius’ record collection. When she saw her own compact disc, she jokingly offered to autograph it; she was quite surprised when he took her up on the offer. She laughed at the colour scheme, and made recommendations for changes – some serious and some definitely not.

She walked to the far end of the hall, and into the bedroom. “So, this is it,” she said. “The whole place is bigger than I would have guessed, much bigger than it looks from the outside.” She sat down on the bed and bounced up and down, as though she were testing the springs. “Nice,” she added. Then she stood bolt upright, and stopped in front of Hermione’s picture.

“Who is this?” she asked.

“That’s Hermione. She’s a school friend of mine,” Harry returned.

Heather turned to face him and raised an eyebrow. “You have a picture of an attractive girl hanging on your bedroom wall, and this is no school photo. Do you want to try again?”

“Her father took the picture. He gave it to me,” Harry explained.

“Uh-huh. You have a picture of an attractive girl hanging on your bedroom wall, given to you by that girl’s father. I’ll give you another chance, if you like,” Heather offered.

“Ron’s my closest mate, but Hermione’s been my best friend for five years,” Harry explained. “She’s very important to me. It’s... it’s complicated.”

Heather said, “I’ll say the same thing you said to me, Harry. Uncomplicate it for me.”

Harry fell silent for a long time. At length, Heather said to him, “You’re a fine piece of work, you know that? You seem like this friendly, funny person, like you’d do anything for anybody, but when I look in your eyes... there’s something different in there, something I can’t place. Explain that to me.”

“If I told you everything, you’d run screaming,” Harry told her.

“We’re both holding back. Tell me what you can,” she offered.

Harry thought through the explanation he’d concocted, and decided to risk it. “You remember that I told you my parents died? They’re dead, all right – they were murdered.”

Heather’s eyes widened. “Oh... God, Harry, I never imagined... I’m sorry.”

Harry continued, “They were in law enforcement, more or less. They had enemies. Those enemies murdered them, and they tried to kill me. I was a little over a year old. That’s how I got the scar

on my forehead.”

She just gaped at him, and it dawned on him that his story was awful even when put into Muggle terms. She sat back down on the edge of the bed, and tugged on his arm until he sat next to her. “Why would anyone set out to murder a baby?” she asked, as tears formed in the corners of her eyes. “That’s horrible!”

“It... it was a sort of family thing. My parents put away a lot of nasty sorts, and they wanted to wipe out the whole family in return. Here’s the thing – they’re still after me. I’ve had my life threatened over and over, and I’ve been face to face with the man who killed my parents. He wants me dead. He wants to hurt me first, and he’s not above hurting people close to me,” Harry told her. “It’s dangerous to be around me, very dangerous.”

He pulled away, and looked at the picture of Hermione. “You wanted to know what you see in my eyes? The man who killed my parents was responsible for Sirius Black’s death in June. At the beginning of this month, he tried to kill Hermione and a number of other people, including Ginny and Ron.”

Heather pulled at his arm again. He resisted, and she continued to tug until he sat down again. She reached out and touched his face. Her eyes were terribly blue, bluer than the sky. “What did you do?” she asked him.

He froze for a moment. “Why did you ask that?”

“Your friends aren’t dead. What did you do?” Heather asked, her voice stronger.

“I had no choice,” Harry protested. “There was no choice. Either I sat there and watched them die, one by one, or...”

“You killed someone,” she whispered.

“It’s dangerous to be around me, Heather,” Harry said. “I’m dangerous.”

Heather began to blurt out questions. “Why did *you* have to defend your friends? Where were the police? You’re obviously well off; why wasn’t there security? It doesn’t make any sense. Why would that be left to a sixteen year old?”

“I was fifteen then,” Harry said flatly, “and you said I didn’t have to tell you everything.”

She sighed and nodded.

“You can leave if you want. I’d understand,” Harry offered.

“I wasn’t planning on leaving,” she said. “It’s a lot to take in... but I think I’ll stay. Um... you were going to show me some pictures, right?”

“Are you sure you want to see them?” Harry asked. “Shona must have her reasons... maybe she

didn't want you to know about Sirius?"

"Why would she do that? I know it would be hard for her to admit having known one of the Blacks. I suppose it would come down to how well she knew him... oh, God. Do you suppose...? No, that's ridiculous. Of course not." Heather said dismissively.

"What?" Harry asked.

"No ... definitely not. I can't imagine it. He *couldn't* have been..." She sagged and closed her eyes. "Could he have been, you know... my father?" .

Harry gasped. "I was thinking that she might have seen some pretty bad things happen. I hadn't considered *that* ... When were you born – 1979?"

Heather nodded. "June 17," she said. "I know where you're going. If you follow that back for nine months, it's September of '78."

"Shona would have known Sirius then," Harry said quietly. In the quiet, he had an idea. "I'd better show you those pictures now."

They moved to the living area. He grabbed the beach picture, where Shona sat to the side with Lupin, and sat down next to Heather. "Here she is," he said.

Heather seized the picture. "Oh my God," she said. "These are all of the people in Shona's picture."

Harry pointed. "That's Sirius Black. The fellow picking sand from his hair is James Potter – my father."

Heather peered at the picture, and then at Harry. "I can't believe I never put that together from Shona's picture. You certainly have his hair. Is the other woman your mum?"

Harry nodded. "Her name is Lily. She was called Lily Evans before they married. The man sitting beside Shona is Remus Lupin. He's still alive. In fact, he's staying in the tower."

Heather brightened. "He would know, wouldn't he? He would know what this Sirius Black was to Shona. I mean, I don't know if I *want* to know, but... if he would know, then I *have* to ask him. Do you think he would talk to me?"

"I suppose he would," Harry offered. "He's supposed to come down here to see me, late tonight. If you stick around..."

"In that case, I'm *definitely* not leaving," Heather resolved. She rose and began to thumb through Sirius' records, one at a time. She managed to extract a stack of music that was familiar to her, and she played one after the other. She pored over the stacks of photographs. He noticed that she seemed drawn again and again to a few of the images, but she never asked about any of the other people there, or showed any sign that she recognized anyone other than Shona. She didn't seem in

the mood for conversation, and he was content to finish reading Sun Tzu's *Mastery of the Sword* .

Lupin knocked at the door at a few minutes past eleven o'clock. "Hello, Harry," he said as he entered. "I see you haven't touched the décor..." He saw Heather and hesitated. "I didn't know that you were having a guest."

Heather rose and took his hand. "Heather Magruder. You must be Mr. Lupin?"

"I've heard your name. Harry mentioned me?" Lupin asked.

"Yes, he did. You might be able to answer a question for me – at least I hope so." Heather clutched the photo tightly in her fingers.

Lupin's brow furrowed. He took a seat in one of the armchairs, and Harry sat next to Heather on the settee. "I'm happy to assist Harry's friends, *when I can* ," he offered. Harry picked up on the not-so-subtle emphasis. "What's your question?"

Heather told him, "I think you may have known my... well, we'll call her my mother. She gave birth to me, at any rate. I'm certain that she knew Sirius Black."

Lupin's eyes bugged. He cleared his throat several times. "Harry... water, please," he managed.

After several sips of water, he again cleared his throat. "Uh... do you know where your mother went to school?"

"She must have attended locally," Heather said. "She took her culinary training in France, but that was after I had been born."

Lupin stroked his chin. "When would this have been?" he asked.

Heather nodded to Harry, who answered, "The summer and fall of 1978, we think."

"Sirius knew quite a few people at that time," Lupin said, clearly hesitating.

Heather handed him the picture. Lupin gasped audibly. "This brings back... fond memories," he said quietly.

"That's my mother, on the right, sitting next to you," Heather said.

Lupin's head snapped up. "Who are you?" he demanded.

Heather's eyes widened, and she edged back toward Harry.

Lupin flung the photo aside. "I said, *who are you* ? Harry, get away from her."

"I... don't... I don't understand..." Heather managed.

“Remus, what in the hell is wrong with you?” Harry snapped.

Lupin flung open his blazer and whipped out his wand. “You have ten seconds to tell me who you are, or I’ll bind you and we’ll just wait for the Polyjuice to wear off,” he seethed.

Heather shrunk back until she was pressed against Harry, but she laughed nervously. “Um... Harry... what’s with the drumstick?” she asked.

“I’d like to know that myself,” Harry muttered.

“Harry, I told you to *get away from her* . Do as I say – *NOW!* ” Lupin shouted.

Heather wedged herself between Harry and the back of the settee. “He’s a raving lunatic!” she shrieked.

Harry glared at Lupin. He tried to imagine any way to back gracefully out of the situation, and could think of nothing. “Heather... that first time on the beach, what did you say Shona would do to me... you know, over the thing that Diggle did?”

Heather looked to Lupin and then to Harry; her eyes were wild, both angry and afraid. “I said she’d set after you with her cleavers,” she snapped.

Harry said loudly, “I’m satisfied.”

“Shona...” Lupin whispered. “Not possible... it’s not...”

Harry slowly rose, and moved haltingly toward Lupin. When he was close enough to reach, he wrapped his hand around Lupin’s wand and tugged it free. He set it on the table, and returned to sit close to Heather. “Sit down, Remus,” he said.

Lupin’s breaths were ragged. “Harry... are you sure...?”

“Remus, this is my friend Heather. I’d swear that her mother’s the same person as the one in that picture. Shona saw Sirius’ bike last night, and she lost it,” Harry said. “It was rather like what you’re doing right now.”

“Not quite,” Heather said, her eyes fixed on Lupin’s wand.

“You have a different last name,” Lupin observed.

“I was raised by a cousin. I have her name,” Heather returned.

Harry said, “A different last name? Sorry, I just assumed...”

Heather said. “Shona’s last name is –”

She and Lupin finished at the same moment. “Malloch.”

Heather gaped at Lupin. “It *is* her in the picture – you *did* know her!”

Lupin sat bolt upright. “This is *ridiculous* ! I don’t know what you’re playing at, young lady, but Shona Malloch could not possibly be your mother. When I knew her, she was certainly not pregnant. Unless you were born prior to... let me think... the latter part of 1977, there is no way that you could be her child.”

“I was born in June of 1979,” Heather said. “I’m missing something.”

Lupin snarled, “Shona *died* in 1978 – October 15, 1978! I’ll never forget that day, not as long as I walk this earth!” His eyes clouded over for a moment before they blazed at Harry. “I don’t know what kind of game you’re playing with me – *the both of you* – but it needs to stop *NOW*! I’m going to have to take measures –”

Harry snapped, “Remus, you’re not making any sense. I told you, I’ve met Shona! She lives in the bloody village! She runs L’Oiseau Chanteur – you know, the restaurant I’ve been eating at? I can assure you that she’s the same woman as the one in that picture. She’s Heather’s mother.”

“It’s impossible,” Lupin whispered. “She can’t be... I saw her fall... she was... she was pregnant?” He stared at Heather for several moments – his eyes more bright and alive than Harry had ever seen them – and then slumped forward in a dead faint. His head struck the table with a loud *crack*!

Harry Potter and the Years of Rebellion A Night For Magic

Chapter Twenty-three

A NIGHT FOR MAGIC

“I’m pressing down, right?” Harry snapped.

“It might work, if you’d stop fidgeting!” Heather shot back.

Harry eased out of the way. “Fine! You do it, then!”

Heather cradled Lupin’s head, and pressed the bloodstained towel firmly. “I wish he’d move, or something,” she said. “I don’t like this.”

“Neither do I,” Harry admitted. No healing charm, he thought, not inside these wards. *I can’t even get at my wand*, he thought, *she’s practically sitting on the box*.

“Then do something about it,” Heather said nervously. “You have, um, *things* you can use for this... right?”

Harry kept his voice even by force of will. “What are you talking about?”

“You’re all part of it, aren’t you? Your friends, that professor of yours... somehow the Blacks were part of it... dear Lord, you’ve been here for *hundreds of years*, haven’t you?” Heather rambled. Her hand shook, and fresh blood seeped through the towel.

Harry replaced her hand with his, but let her continue to support Lupin’s head. “Erm... you’re not making much sense,” Harry offered. “Look, we need to get help...” *But how?* he wondered.

“He’s part of it, too... and so was Sirius Black... *oh, my God* ...” She paled, and nearly lost her grip on Lupin.

“For Merl... oh, *damn it!* Would you just set his head against the floor?” Harry shrieked.

She did as she was told, and held her hands up as though they belonged to someone else. “I’m half-alien,” she whispered.

“You’re... *what?* ” Harry blurted.

She put her hands out, as if to ward him off. “Please... I’ll do whatever you say...I just... you’re right, we have to help him,” she stammered. “Just don’t... don’t zap me, or whatever you do.” She stared at him with wide eyes. “You... you wouldn’t hurt me... would you, Harry? I can see that, when I look at you. You wouldn’t hurt me.”

Heather’s babbling finally cut through Harry’s rising panic, and he fought off hysterical laughter. “You think I’m an alien,” he confirmed. “You think Remus is an alien. You...” He felt more blood through the towel. “Look... born in England, Heather, I swear – to human beings. There’s an explanation for all of this –” *And I don’t know if I want to be the one to give it* , he thought. “ – but right now, we need to help Remus. I need you to run to the tower, as fast as you can. I need you to bring Professor Dumbledore... erm... you know, Albus? If you get to Ron first, give him this and tell him to use his best judgment. Understand?” He fished the parchment scrap with the bothy’s location out of his pocket, and roughly pressed it into her hand. When Heather hesitated, he added more loudly, “*Do you understand?* ”

She nodded furiously. “I’ll get your professor if he’s there, or else Ron,” she repeated.

“*Go!* ” Harry snapped.

“Don’t let him die, Harry,” she said quickly, then flung open the front door and dashed off into the night.

Harry tried to remember anything that might help – elementary healing charms that he’d heard Madam Pomfrey use, household herbs for a poultice, anything at all. He was reduced to pressing harder against Lupin’s forehead.

He heard Heather shout something, clearly in a panic, and then he heard Tonks cry out very clearly, “*Cor blimey!* Where did you come from?”

Harry suddenly couldn’t breathe. He hadn’t thought about his minders, and he certainly hadn’t considered what they might think if someone unknown to them appeared from nowhere. He wanted to rush out after Heather, but couldn’t possibly move his hand.

“Remus, you have to help me here,” Harry urged him. “Just open your eyes, all right? I need you to open your eyes.” Lupin didn’t so much as stir, but it did seem as though the bleeding had stopped. Harry kept telling Lupin to awaken, and willing him to be all right.

Tonks burst into the bothy, Heather close on her heels. “Remus!” she cried out. Before Harry knew what was happening, she had edged him out of the way and replaced his hand on the towel with her own.

“She took the paper from me, and then... *pop* , she was just gone, and then *pop* , she was back... and your professor was with her,” Heather explained frantically. “He said he... oh God, I need to sit down...”

Tonks flicked her wand with increasing frustration. “I don’t understand,” she said. “I can’t seem to do a thing.”

“The bothy isn’t just hidden,” Harry said. “There’s, erm, another ward in place. You won’t be able to use that in here.”

“Can we carry him far enough?” Tonks asked. “In my Emergency Healer training, they were very clear about not moving someone with a head injury.

“You can help him, can't you?” Heather asked desperately.

“Would you go and wait on Professor Dumbledore, please?” Tonks snapped.

“Right... wait on the... right...” said Heather; she drifted back out the door. A few moments later, Lupin's eyes fluttered and he said something that sounded like *erk* .

“You're not supposed to scare me like that!” shouted Tonks.

“Mrmble,” Lupin said.

“And what in the world were you doing revealing us to a Muggle?” Tonks demanded. “Now the Professor will have to *Obliviate* her -”

Harry's brow shot up. “He wouldn't dare! Remus is her father!”

Tonks released the towel for a moment and fresh blood flowed. “Her father... is it... is it true?” she breathed.

Lupin cleared his throat and managed, “I’m fine, really – thank you for enquiring.” His voice was groggy and his eyes were slightly crossed. “It’s nothing that a dozen flagons of Firewhisky couldn’t dull, honestly.”

“Er, sorry, just curious,” Tonks said sheepishly. “I wouldn’t say that you’re fine, though. You have a concussion – no doubt about that.”

“Ordinarily, I’d recover spontaneously from a minor scratch of this sort. The wards must have interfered somehow,” Lupin groused. “Did one of you send her off?”

“I did,” Tonks said. “We needed to concentrate on you.”

Lupin struggled to sit straighter in the chair, but ended up slumped. “She says she’s Shona Malloch’s daughter, but that’s simply not possible.” He cleared his throat nervously.

“Shona Malloch... wait a minute...” Tonks scratched her head. “She’s the chef at that restaurant Harry fancies. I took a look at her particulars.”

“I saw her fall off a cliff. I thought she was dead. We all did,” Lupin said unevenly. “I can’t even

fathom this.”

Harry said, “I thought that werewolves couldn't have children.” When the room went unnaturally silent, he looked around and added, “What? We all know Remus is a werewolf.” Tonks glared at him.

“It’s not an impossibility,” Lupin said nervously, “but it’s incredibly unlikely. There’s a greatly reduced likelihood of conception, high risk of stillbirth... and then there are issues of heredity, which are very murky.”

“So, you could be *a* father... but could you be *her* father?” Harry asked. When Tonks grunted at him, he added testily, “Look, the question’s already been put.”

Lupin sighed. “Shona and I were together from the end of ’77 until... well, until I thought she had died,” he recalled. “Could I be that girl’s father? If Shona’s really alive, then it’s possible.” He stopped, and added, “It was a different time – things were different then... er, what I mean to say is... people were different about these sorts of... surely you know...”

“It was a very different time, indeed,” Dumbledore said from the doorway. “I came as quickly as I could. May I have a look at you, Remus?”

Lupin eyed Dumbledore warily. “How much did you hear?”

“Enough, my friend,” Dumbledore said. As he prodded Lupin’s forehead, he asked Harry, “Is Miss Magruder’s mother aware of her presence here? The current circumstances could pose a problem, given your rather pointed exchange last evening.”

Lupin sat up with a start. “She can’t come here. Albus, you have to do something. You *can*’t let her come here – OUCH!”

“Sit still, please. I will not even ask how you managed to injure yourself. So... what would you have me do, Remus? The proverbial cat is out of the bag.” Dumbledore said.

“She should be made to forget all of this,” Remus said flatly.

“She is seventeen years old, and possibly the daughter of a wizard,” Dumbledore said. “Until her paternity is proven otherwise, I will not alter her memory. In any case, I doubt that she would give consent.”

“Harry, does she honestly think I’m her father?” Remus asked hoarsely.

“She suspected Sirius before,” Harry returned, “but she’s surely changed her mind.”

Remus cleared his throat. “But I didn’t say anything that would make her... oh, dear... I *did* say something foolish – didn’t I?”

Harry smirked at him. “Does ‘she was pregnant’ count?” he asked innocently. “Of course, the

fainting might have drawn more attention to it.” Tonks sniggered, and Remus flung his face into his hands.

“Were you really that subtle, Remus?” Dumbledore asked.

Lupin looked up from his hands. “I’ll have none of your twinkling,” he fumed. “This is not a good thing.”

“By all accounts, Miss Magruder is a highly accomplished young woman,” Dumbledore said. “This is a very complicated matter, to be sure, but I choose to disagree with you as to its goodness.”

Lupin scowled. “Let’s assume that all of this is true – that Shona is alive and the mother of this girl. If she’s alive, then she chose to disappear. Now, why do you suppose she might do that... perhaps it was because she discovered that she was pregnant by *a werewolf*?”

Dumbledore said, “I admit that my recollection is not as sharp on this matter as I would like, but I recall that you had cultivated a meaningful relationship with this woman. Your despair over the matter was deep and prolonged...”

“...and long *buried*,” Lupin finished. “I don’t know if I can bear this.”

Dumbledore rose. “You have little choice but to answer Miss Magruder’s questions, in some fashion. Once asked and answered, it is a certainty that she will either speak to her mother directly, or insist that the two of you be brought together. The occasion will be as joyful or as painful as you choose it to be.”

Heather appeared at the door. Ron was behind her, positioned in a way that kept her from running away. “Don’t hurt me... please... I... I won’t tell... I swear.” She inclined her head toward Ron. “He pointed his stick at me, and I... I just couldn’t stay awake. It was that quick... you... you won’t let them...?”

Harry rushed over and took her hands. “No one’s going to hurt you. Everything’s better now – look.”

Ron started, “But Harry, she can't -”

“Remus might be her father... or Sirius,” said Harry.

“Her father... uh... right, then...” Ron trailed off and moved clear of Heather.

Heather slowly turned until she was staring at Lupin. He smiled faintly, and offered, “Perhaps we should try this again?”

Her eyes seemed hazy at first, but quickly sharpened. She shrank to one side, which caused her to bump against Harry. He moved his hands to support her. She flinched, and his spirits fell.

“But he’s... and before he was... and there was blood everywhere... but now...” she spluttered. Harry steeled himself, and put an arm around her; this time she didn’t flinch. Instead, she turned, and clutched at his arm.

“I’m back to my theory again, Harry,” she said nervously.

Harry closed his eyes tightly. “Heather, I swear that we’re not –” he began.

“You have a theory on something, my dear?” Dumbledore asked.

She cut him off. “It only took a few days to see that Harry had recently fallen to earth. I can run through all the reasons, if you like. I revised my theory to include Ron and Ginny, of course; if anything, they’re even more recent arrivals,” she explained.

Ron and Tonks stared at one another. “Erm... arrivals?” Ron asked.

Tonks muttered, “Oh, this should be cracking.”

“Heather, I said we’re not –” Harry began again.

“It’s obvious, really. I mean, I’m... I’m not afraid. If you were going to do me in, you’d have done it a long time ago... at least, I think so...” Heather said hesitantly.

Dumbledore said calmly, “I am afraid that you have lost me.”

“You’re all from another planet!” Heather blurted out. “Harry denied it, of course, but he’s surely supposed to do that. I mean, some of you have probably been here for a very long time, but Harry has these big gaps – sorry, but you should have done more revisions on music and books and cinema – and when Ginny said she’d only been playing the violin for a *month* ... I mean, I know she wasn’t lying to me, and that’s just spooky. It’s *impossible* – you all know that, right? Mr. Lupin was bleeding everywhere, and now he’s sitting there right as rain...” She looked to Lupin and her eyes widened even more. “Shona saw you in your alien form, didn’t she? That’s why she’s been on the run, isn’t it? What *do* you all look like, I wonder...?” Lupin paled and noticeably squirmed in his chair, and Harry wondered if perhaps Shona had in fact seen Lupin in a different form.

Ron tried to stifle a snort, but couldn’t stop it in time. Tonks squeaked, “I’m sorry,” and began to laugh uncontrollably. Even Dumbledore shook his head and chuckled. Harry didn’t find any of it particularly amusing, and he was tired of deception.

“What’s so funny? I... I was serious, you know,” Heather insisted.

Tonks dabbed at her eyes. “We’re sorry. It’s an interesting idea...” She broke into laughter again.

“Aliens...” Ron gibbered between snorts and howls.

“Well... glad to have amused everyone,” Heather sulked. Harry led her gently to the settee.

Lupin said, “There are trillions of solar systems out there. It stands to reason that some of them harbour life of some kind. You’re talking about a long trip, though. I doubt we’ve been paid a visit; I certainly haven’t seen any aliens myself.”

“It was silly, I suppose,” Heather muttered, “but there has to be an explanation...”

Tonks reached out and took Heather’s hand. “We didn’t mean to make fun, really,” she said, still chuckling. She took a deep breath, and calmed herself. “You’ve seen some things that must be hard to understand. I suppose we might seem like aliens to you.”

Lupin spoke up quickly. “You had other questions. Would you like those answered first? The issue of what we are will require a very lengthy explanation.”

Heather hesitated for a moment, and then drew herself up. “Are you putting me off?” she asked.

Lupin sighed. “No. It’s far too late for that.”

“Fine, then. Was Sirius Black my father?” Heather blurted out.

Harry thought Lupin seemed almost relieved by the question. “I highly doubt that. He spent most of the summer of ’77 in Shona’s company, in case you didn’t know that.” Lupin laughed. “He thought that *I* didn’t know; he thought I didn’t know a lot of things. By the time Shona befriended me, Sirius was something more like a mad younger brother to her. I can’t imagine that they would ever have taken up again.”

Heather nodded thoughtfully. “Fair enough. Are you my father?”

Lupin rubbed at his face nervously. “I think your mother would have to answer that question,” he said.

“Is it possible, then?” she asked.

“Many things are possible,” Lupin evaded.

“How specific do I have to be?” Heather asked. “Did you have sex with my mother in September of 1978?”

Tonks had been leaning against one of the shelves of record albums; she abruptly lost her balance and dropped in a heap. Lupin broke into a coughing fit, and Harry and Ron sniggered at both of them.

“That’s about as specific as you can get,” Ron laughed.

“Are you always this forward?” Lupin managed between coughs.

“Most of the time,” Heather said.

Lupin settled himself. “You’re terribly self-assured for a seventeen-year-old.”

Heather’s expression hardened. “I learned to take care of myself a long time ago. No one was there for me, no one at all. My bonnie Auntie Fiona thought I should be set adrift until she saw pounds to be made. She lived off my busking, and she took everything from my first recording deal. Shona... I love Shona, but she’s on edge all the time and she works seven days a week and she’s all guilty about leaving me with Fiona.” Her brow furrowed. “I just can’t understand her sometimes. She’s so rough and tumble, you know, but then...” She collected herself, and then went on, “Look, here’s the thing. I’ve had a rough go now and then, but I’ve come out all right. What happened that made her change *everything* ? Can you answer that? I mean, she *ran* – for *ten years* ... and she’s still so... I don’t know... jumpy? And today...” She turned to Harry, and gripped his arm again. “I’ve never seen her like this. I was half tempted to see if the chemist would give me anything, you know, to settle her.”

“There may be very good reasons why she chose to disappear.” Lupin hesitated, and then added, “I think it’s time for a private conversation, if you don’t mind... Heather.” He said her name delicately, as though he were afraid it might break.

“I’d prefer that Harry stayed,” said Heather.

Lupin’s sad eyes pleaded with Harry. “This is difficult enough. I can’t... Harry, I just can’t. Do you understand?”

“Are you sure it’s all right for me to...?” Heather asked Harry quietly.

Lupin managed a wry smile. He held out his wand to Harry. “Take it with you,” he said. He opened his hands for Heather. “I swear upon all that is holy that I will not harm you.”

Dumbledore let his hand rest on Lupin’s shoulder. “Would you like me to stay?”

“When we are finished, perhaps you could help me to explain the big picture?” Lupin offered. “Some of what I have to say is purely between she and I.”

“The hour grows late, but I will wait for you,” Dumbledore said. “I shall sit on the beach, and listen to the sea.”

“Harry...?” Heather said. She was nervous – Harry could feel it clearly – but at least the fear was gone from her eyes.

He stopped at the door. “Remus is right; this is between the two of you. I’ll wait outside.”

Tonks closely scrutinised Harry. She cocked her head and raised her eyebrows. Harry shrugged. She frowned. No words were required.

Harry’s feet dangled loosely over the edge of the cliff. He tossed another rock. “This is taking a

bloody long time,” he said.

“He’s measuring every last word, you know,” Tonks pointed out. “She doesn’t know what he is, or what we are. He has to work around all of that. It’s not as though the rest is exactly simple, either.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “The way you said that... it makes me wonder if you know more of the story than you’re letting on.”

“Not much more than you already know. He told me a bit about a lost love; never said her name, though. He was falling apart after, you know, after Sirius died... and then the Wolfsbane Potion stopped working. He was driving himself into the grave, Harry; I just stood in his way. I heard a few things, and... I saw more than enough,” Tonks explained.

Harry said, “I’m glad you were there for him, especially last month. You weren’t in a good way, yourself.”

“It’s been a hard summer for everyone,” said Tonks.

“It’s none of my business, of course, but do you... erm, do you have a thing for Remus?” Harry asked.

Tonks said, “We were there for each other, and that was the end of it. Remus is definitely *not* the kind of man whom a woman would have a ‘thing’ for. He’s an all-or-nothing type – like someone else I know.”

“Harry? Are you still out here?” Heather called.

He hopped to his feet, and rushed to her. “Well?” he called back.

She said nothing. When he drew close, he saw that her eyes were damp. “What happened?” he asked.

“He honestly believed that she was dead, all this time,” she said quietly. “I feel badly for him.” She waved to Tonks, who waved back. “Your minds are nice enough. Walk with me?” Neither spoke as they made their way to the beach. Harry saw Dumbledore, seated below, and he stopped at the top of the switchback

Harry asked, “What did he tell you? I mean, if it’s private, I understand...”

Heather said, “He and Shona were together for several months. He obviously cared for her. He told me that he has a disease, an incurable one – I assume you know about that – and then he asked a lot of questions. I think he was worried that I might have inherited it, which is funny, since he never actually admitted that he’s my father.” She hesitated for a moment, and then added, “I think he’s a good man.”

Harry nodded in agreement. “He’s been good for me this summer,” he said.

Heather said, “I wish I knew why he felt he needed to lie to me. I could tell it really hurt him.”

Harry stopped walking. “I’m sorry?”

Heather stood beside him. “I spot lies, Harry. I always know... well, almost always. I can’t explain it. It’s a professional hazard, I suppose.”

Harry swallowed hard. “Erm... when I was talking about my family... my parents...?”

Heather snorted. “Anyone would have known you weren’t telling the whole truth. I mean, you admitted that you were leaving things out.”

“So why is spotting lies a professional hazard?” Harry asked.

“The music business is all about lies. Record companies lie to managers about profits... managers lie to performers about percentages... guitarists show up drunk and tell you they ate bad fish... reviewers tell you they love you, and write about how horrid you are... the paparazzi are the only honest ones – you know exactly what they’re out for,” Heather said, her voice growing more bitter with every word. Everybody says they love you, but they *really* love what you can do for them.”

“You might not believe this, but that sounds familiar to me. Is there anyone you can trust?” he wondered.

“My boys are all right,” she said. “They’ve been along for the ride for the last three years. I got them the gig, and they watch my back. We click. When this is all finished, they’ll be the only ones who stick around.”

“Your... *boys* ?” he asked.

“The band,” she explained. “They travel with me. Three of us go all the way back to busking. Brucie and Skeet used to play on the opposite corner. I started singing with them, which steamed Meg to no end until she saw we brought in more together than apart.” She added bitterly, “Julian’s been trying to sack them. I think Burke has been pushing him; for Vox, it’s all about lowering the overhead. The last time it came up, I said I’d deliver an album of children’s nursery rhymes. Julian backed off, for now.”

Harry said, “Those are the two blokes I scared off the beach, right?”

Heather nodded. “It’s been good to get away from them, from all of the rubbish...” She looked at him strangely, and then smiled faintly. “You know... what you just did, that was quite a trick.”

Harry said, “What? I didn’t do anything.”

“The way you led me away from the point I was making... you really threw me off,” Heather said. “I shouldn’t be surprised. You do that – you throw me off.”

Harry protested, “What are you talking about? How do I throw you off?”

Heather rolled her eyes. “Let’s see... I can’t tell for certain when or even whether you’re lying to me... I let you steer conversations... I flirted with you when you were a complete stranger – I *am* a flirt, but *this* hasn’t been like me. Then there’s all this born-yesterday alien business.” Harry snorted, and she playfully patted his arm before she went on, “You didn’t even know who I was, but now you do, and I really don’t think it makes a difference to you... although I’m not completely sure about that, because you’re hard for me to read. You really throw me off, Harry.” She began to walk down the switchback, and added, “I think I like that.”

“Dumbledore’s down there,” Harry warned.

“Professor Dumbledore, isn’t it?” Heather chided.

“Not really... not anymore,” Harry said.

“I know he’s down there. I’m going to fetch him. Remus couldn’t bring himself to answer the big question alone,” Heather said.

“*Remus*, is it?” Harry teased.

Heather stopped for a moment, and then slowly nodded. “Yeah, it’s Remus. Like I told you, I think he’s a good man.” As they descended, she abruptly asked, “Why don’t you just put me out of my misery?”

Harry came to a halt. “I’m sorry?”

“They’re going to tell me anyway, and I’d really rather that it came from you,” Heather said quietly. She looked into his eyes, and asked, “What are you?”

He looked away, and scanned the beach. The tide was low again, and he saw the glint of exposed rocks in the light of the half-moon. Heather tugged at Harry’s arm, to reel him back in.

He felt nervous and oddly embarrassed. “Do you believe in magic?” he asked her.

“You mean like Gandalf and Frodo and all that? You’re a bit too tall for a hobbit,” she teased.

“That would be ‘no’?” Harry asked.

Heather laughed loudly – a bit too loudly, Harry thought. “Right, next you’ll be telling me that those sticks are magic wands...” she howled. Her laughter quickly fell to a nervous chuckle, and then stopped entirely. She began walking again, faster and faster; by the time they reached the beach, she was nearly running from him.

“Heather... wait...” Harry called out.

“Are you mad? How do you expect me to believe...? You *must* be mad!” she snapped without looking back. “You should have stopped with aliens – I could have believed *that* !”

“Explain it, then!” Harry shouted back, exasperated. “We’re not bloody aliens, that’s for certain!” He thought he saw Dumbledore heading toward them, but the beach was mostly cloaked in dark shadows. Heather broke into a run.

“Slow down!” Harry insisted. “It’s too dark – you could hurt yourself!”

“You’re barking *mad!* ” she hollered, without slowing.

“*Lumos!* ” Harry boomed, and the beach lit up. Dumbledore was indeed heading in his direction, from the rocks. Heather whirled in shock. She was at the water’s edge, and her foot caught in the wet sand. Before she could stumble into the surf, and before he gave the slightest thought, Harry reached toward her and said, “*Accio Heather!* ” She flew twenty feet into his grasp, and slammed him to the sand in the process.

“A simple levitation charm would have sufficed,” Dumbledore said calmly. He reached out his hand to help Heather up.

“I... I flew through the air...” Heather said, in a daze. “I... flew. I felt it – it was like being pulled...”

“Yes, you did indeed fly through the air,” Dumbledore said. “Harry summoned you.”

She stammered, “He... didn’t have a stick... um, I mean, a m-magic w-w-w-”

“No, he did not use his wand. Harry *is* something of a rule breaker, you may recall,” Dumbledore said with a grin. “His rather overpowering attempt to light the beach has surely attracted –”

The beach came alive in a symphony of *pops!* Bill, Odd Lovegood, Ted Tonks, Shacklebolt, and Snape whirled about, wands drawn. Heather reeled as she looked from one to the next.

“Settle yourselves, boys,” Tonks called from atop the cliff. In another instant, she stood amongst them. “If there were a genuine emergency, I would have taken care of it by now.” Bill was the first to put away his wand, followed quickly by Tonks’ father and Mr. Lovegood. Shacklebolt looked to Dumbledore before following suit.

Snape continued to brandish his wand. “Headmaster, I have substantial experience with targeted memory charms. Shall I...?”

“I wouldn’t go there, if I were you,” Tonks said, “unless you fancy ending up like the last bunch of Death Eaters who crossed Harry.” She inclined her head toward Harry, who had quickly moved between Snape and Heather.

“From out of nowhere... I don’t know if could ever get used to that,” Heather muttered.

“There will be no memory charming,” Dumbledore said firmly.

“But... Headmaster... she – is – a – *Muggle* ,” Snape managed in clipped tones.

“Miss Magruder is not a Muggle, Severus, and there will be no memory charms performed upon her,” Dumbledore returned.

“Not a Muggle... I don’t understand... sir,” Snape said carefully. Harry didn’t like the way Snape said ‘sir’ – it had the sibilance of Parseltongue. Shacklebolt immediately turned his eyes to Heather; his expression was both calculated and calculating, Harry thought.

Dumbledore arched an eyebrow. “There is no need for you to understand,” he said to Snape, with virtually no tone at all.

Ron picked his way across the beach, followed closely by Ginny. “I should have known it was just Harry,” he called out. He moved casually, but his breathing gave him away – he had obviously run from the tower.

Ginny made straight for Heather. “Are you all right?” she asked.

“Other than being half-blinded and pulled through the air, and then seeing this lot just appear from nothing? Sure, I’m all right,” Heather snapped. Her eyes bore into Dumbledore. “It’s really magic?”

Dumbledore stared back at her for several seconds, and then gave a faint smile. “Yes, Miss Magruder, you have witnessed magic at work.”

Heather gaped like a fish out of water. Ginny took her by the arm. “It might be a good idea to sit,” she suggested.

“An excellent idea, Miss Weasley,” Dumbledore chimed in. He quickly brought his wand to bear, and a dozen outdoor chairs appeared in a cosy circle. Then, he marked off an area of sand, and transfigured it into wood for a fire at the centre of the circle. “There, that should be much better.”

“Ginny... I... don’t know...” Heather stammered, and clutched at Ginny’s hands.

“Let’s just sit,” Ginny said. “Everything will be fine. We’re all people here. Other than magic, there isn’t a lick of difference.”

“That is a matter of opinion,” Shacklebolt murmured.

Ginny glared at him. “*That* isn’t helping,” she snapped.

Snape raised his chin and one eyebrow, in a classic expression of Slytherin superiority, and then slowly released a vaguely chilling smile. “Goodness, Miss Weasley... that merits ten points to Gryffindor,” he said smoothly.

“Go to hell, if you haven’t yet taken up residence,” rumbled Shacklebolt.

“The way is paved with good intentions, *Kingsley*, lest you were unaware,” Snape sneered. “Where have your good intentions gotten you, I wonder? Demoted to life as a minder? That must

be positively *humiliating* .”

“No matter how far I may fall, *Snape* , it is comforting to know that I shall always be able to look down at you,” Shacklebolt growled.

“Gentlemen, we are not here to bicker,” Dumbledore chided. *Snape* slipped into his customary dour expression.

“Tell me, *Snape*, do you practice that before a mirror?” Bill taunted.

Snape crossed his arms. “How like a Gryffindor to cast one last spell after the duel has ended.”

Ron cut in. “Um... Professor Dumbledore, why is there an extra chair?”

“Ah, for Remus, of course,” Dumbledore replied with a twinkle in his eye. “I should fetch him. He has no business descending that path in his present condition, and he certainly should not Apparate. Miss Magruder does not need to witness her first splinching this evening.”

Ron paled slightly. “Erm... neither do I,” he said. His voice cracked, which sent the men in the circle into laughter, excepting *Snape*.

Dumbledore turned to Heather. “Would you excuse me for a moment?” he asked. Heather nodded with more vigour than necessary. She shrank back in her chair when Dumbledore Disapparated. Ginny struggled to engage her in conversation, and Ron quickly turned to Harry.

“What were you trying to do, anyway?” Ron muttered. “I’ll bet people saw that light in London.”

“It’s really dark down here. I lost sight of her, and I thought she was running straight into the sea,” Harry explained.

Dumbledore abruptly reappeared, with his arms around Lupin. *Snape* immediately jumped up from his chair, as if to help Dumbledore sit. Dumbledore kept him at bay with a friendly wave. “It is good to perform an assisted Apparation from time to time, in order to remember how the magic feels,” he said. “I am fine, Severus.”

Lupin smirked, “I take it that the early sunrise was your doing?” Harry took a sudden interest in his own shoes. Lupin grinned, and took the empty chair between Harry and Tonks. He reached out and ruffled Harry’s hair; Harry cringed, Tonks rolled her eyes, *Snape* looked as though he had bitten on something sour, and Heather chuckled despite it all. Harry quickly turned, prepared to scowl, but she looked as though a weight had been lifted. The scowl deflated into a sigh over Lupin’s gesture.

Bantering continued here and there, until Dumbledore’s pensive silence drew them all in. Dumbledore sat for a while, listening to the surf, until even *Snape* appeared expectant. He smoothed his robes, and then directed his gaze to the sky. “This is the sort of night that reminds one of the grandeur of magic, and of its limitations,” Dumbledore said to the stars. Then he let his eyes wander around the circle, taking in each seated there in turn. “For despite the measured

accomplishments and the untapped potential of the magic that is practiced amongst us, there is a magic that lies beyond our reach. It is the magic that binds the universe together, that sets forth the laws governing time and space and nature, that brings us here, and that ultimately calls us home. It is so much greater than us that we can merely afford it the proper sort of awe.”

Harry heard a barely suppressed snort. He scanned the circle without moving his head, though he knew there was no need. He stopped at Snape’s imperious expression, and summoned as withering a look as he could muster. It merely moved Snape to smirk.

Dumbledore let his eyes rest on Heather. “It is ironic that those who possess the broadest ability to manipulate the forces of nature are also those least likely to recognize the grandeur that surrounds them, or to believe in anything save themselves or their own abilities,” he said. Harry was pleased to see the smirk evaporate from Snape’s face.

“You have seen magic every day of your life, Miss Magruder, as have we all,” Dumbledore told Heather. “In fact, you yourself engage in a very ancient magic, the mysteries of which continue to elude our scholars. Music can manipulate the hearts and minds of men as powerfully as the most powerful charm, and as subtly as the most carefully crafted potion. I have heard a reproduction of your voice, courtesy of Harry’s splendid silver discs. You are a most skilled practitioner, indeed.” He settled back into his chair, his fingers forming a steeple beneath his chin. “And so, you sit amongst practitioners of a different magic. I imagine that you have questions. Ask them, and we will do our level best to answer.”

Heather hesitated for a few moments, then recovered herself and began to fire off questions. Many were quite mundane questions about how wizards lived, and how their lives differed from non-magical folk. She asked whether Tonks’ cosmetics were magical, which led to a demonstration of metamorphing that startled her into silence for a solid minute. She asked about the need for secrecy, but seemed to quickly recognise the rationale behind it.

Some of her questions took Harry by surprise. At one point, she abruptly asked, “How long do you live?” After a series of curious looks spread around the circle, she added, “You can make things fly through the air, you can make chairs appear from nowhere, you can just pop from one place to the next... it’s hard to imagine that you ever get sick, or hurt too badly to fix up. You, um, you *do* die eventually... right?”

Dumbledore pursed his lips. “That is a most interesting question,” he said. “I am curious as to why you might ask it, but let us set that aside. Tell me – how old would you guess me to be?”

Heather hesitated for a moment, and then offered, “Seventy... no, seventy-five. It’s the skin on your neck, you see.”

There was some smirking around the circle, and Dumbledore smiled. “Wizards generally live longer than non-magical people, but we are certainly not immortal. That does not bar some of us from chasing immortality, but those are on a fool’s errand. There is some variation amongst us, but it is not at all uncommon for a wizard to reach the age of one hundred. I am longer lived than most. I was born in Kent in the Year of our Lord eighteen hundred and forty.” Heather gasped, and

Dumbledore's smile grew wider. He continued, "It is difficult to guess how much longer I might live. The oldest wizard in Britain is roughly thirty years older than I, and the oldest witch is twenty years older still. Both remain quite active; in fact, both work for the Ministry of Magic. The oldest wizard whom I know is nearly one hundred years my senior."

Heather faced Harry, but didn't meet his eyes. "When I'm old, you and your friends will be middle-aged," she said quietly. He didn't know how to respond, and opted for silence.

Later, she asked Dumbledore for a definition of magic, and the question captured Harry's attention. He couldn't recall hearing a simple definition offered even once during his five years of studies. After five minutes, he understood why. None of the fully qualified wizards seated in the circle offered the same definition, and there was surprisingly little agreement amongst them.

Dumbledore's explanation was a single sentence, which set off much of the fray: "Magic is the art and science of causing change by the selective application of will." He offered no qualification, and simply allowed the arguments to run their course. Harry was sure that Dumbledore had been looking at him when he spoke the sentence, and it was the only morsel from the debate that stuck with him.

After a long while, fatigue began to creep up on Harry, and the number of people in the circle diminished one by one. Eventually, their number was reduced to six: Dumbledore, Lupin, Snape and Ron, in addition to Heather and himself. It was Snape's continuous observation of Heather that kept Harry awake. The staring was so obvious and so cold that Harry began to plot a series of hexes.

The fire waned, and Heather sat forward in her chair. "So... I guess you should explain why I'm not one of you," she said heavily. All went silent except the ebb and flow of the sea. After a long pause, she added, "Ron and Ginny and Bill are all related. I'm guessing this runs in families. Does it skip generations, or something?"

Lupin sighed heavily. "I think this is something that should be discussed in the presence of your mother," he said.

"You'd be referring to Shona?" Heather snapped. "She carried me for nine months. That doesn't make her my mother, anymore than your bit makes you my father."

Snape chortled under his breath. Heather glared at him. "As for you, Mister...?"

"Snape," he said smoothly. "Professor Severus Snape. I am an associate of Professor Dumbledore."

"As for you, Mister *Snape*, I've had quite enough of your staring," she seethed. Snape faintly smiled in response.

"You rightly observe that magical ability is an inherited trait," Dumbledore said.

“Albus, I don’t think –” Lupin started.

“Remus, the young lady asked a question, and we did agree to answer questions,” Dumbledore chided him. “Some of the more delicate nuances can be tabled until later, if you wish.”

“Go on,” Heather urged Dumbledore.

“Remus is a wizard. The majority of offspring between wizards or witches and Muggles manifest magical ability. Some do not,” Dumbledore explained. “It is possible for the offspring of two non-magical people – two Muggles – to manifest magical abilities; Harry’s friend Miss Granger is such a person. Some in our world believe that Muggle-born wizards and witches must inevitably have persons in their heritage with latent ability. Blood ties and purity are complicated and inflammatory issues in the wizarding world. The pureblooded – those with no apparent Muggle ancestry – often look down on those with Muggle relations, even if they are several generations past. Harry’s mother was a Muggle-born witch; he is therefore considered a half-blood. If you were a witch, you would also be considered a half-blood –”

Heather rolled her eyes. “But I’m not, of course.”

“It is possible, but unlikely,” Dumbledore said. “If you possessed sufficient magical ability to be trained as a witch, then you should have appeared in our registry at Hogwarts at some point prior to your eleventh birthday.”

Snape said, “I believe it is more than a possibility. The young lady is hiding something.”

Heather bristled. “You weren’t just staring, were you? What were you doing? I felt something, something I didn’t like very much.”

Harry sat forward in his chair, suddenly very much awake. “Were you mucking around in her mind, *Snape* ?” he hissed.

Dumbledore looked as if he was about to correct Harry, but instead he turned to Snape. “You are falling into a pattern of considerable impoliteness, where Legilimency is concerned. You shall correct this pattern, or it shall be corrected for you,” he warned. “Is that clear, Severus?”

Snape looked down, but somehow managed to look haughty doing it. “Yes, Headmaster,” he said, with the air of a schoolboy caught pranking, “but she *is* hiding something. The very fact that she is capable of hiding it from me suggests that she is not a Muggle.”

“It is not an either-or proposition,” Dumbledore said mysteriously. He turned his attention to Heather. “If you were a witch, you would almost certainly know by the age of seventeen. I doubt that you could easily conceal accidental use of magical powers. Tell me, Miss Magruder, are you a witch?”

Heather lowered her head. “Stop that!” she said.

“What is it that you wish me to stop?” Dumbledore asked calmly.

“Whatever it was that you were doing,” she snapped. “I felt something again... something strange.”

“I did nothing,” Dumbledore insisted.

Heather looked at him intently. “You’re lying,” she said.

“I did nothing,” Dumbledore repeated.

Heather said nothing for a moment, then insisted, “I... still think you’re lying. I’m sorry, but I just know.”

Dumbledore recovered the customary twinkle in his eye. “How very curious,” he remarked. “Remus, I believe she should be properly evaluated.”

Lupin’s lips grew very thin. “This is neither the time nor the place. Her mother has a right to exercise a say in this, and I’ll see that honoured, even though it shall require a meeting – a meeting that is not likely to be pleasant,” he said. “In the meantime, young lady, you have no business being out in the dead of night, and it would be best if you would refrain from further contact with Harry while this is all sorted out.”

Heather’s eyes narrowed. “I’m sorry, what did you say?”

“I want you to stay away from Harry for the time being,” Lupin said firmly. “It’s not safe, for either of you.”

“I see,” Heather said matter-of-factly. “And I should listen to you because...?”

“Because you lack a grasp of the situation in which you presently find yourself,” Lupin said firmly. “I daresay that your mother would prefer I keep you from getting yourself hurt, or worse.”

“We’re finished here,” Heather said coldly, and stood.

Harry gauged Lupin’s expression for a moment, and then stood with her. “Would you like to go home?” he asked her.

“I’ll get there on my own,” she said flatly.

Harry followed her up the switchback to the top of cliff anyway, to be certain she didn’t fall in the dark if nothing else.

She stopped near the top, turned, and bore down on him with an icy stare. “Are you sorry you didn’t tell me before?”

Harry couldn’t meet her eyes. “I wish you didn’t have to know.”

“Don’t look away from me,” she snapped. “Are you *sorry*?”

“If I had told you, would you have believed me?” Harry asked. Heather’s downcast expression gave a clear answer.

“This isn’t easy for me,” Harry said. “I should have never come back to L’Oiseau Chanteur, after I met you. I kept coming back anyway. Now it’s all fallen apart. I’m sorry I’ve dragged you into this.”

“I believe you,” she said.

“Remus is right. You should stay away from me. You should stay away from him, as well. You should run away from here, and forget you ever met any of us,” Harry said bitterly.

“Remus can sod off,” Heather spat. “I have enough minders of my own. I don’t need another.”

Harry felt a pang of anger. “Hold on here... *I’m* the one saying you should stay away. What, I can’t think for myself – is that it?”

“I’m not having this conversation right now,” Heather fumed. “I’ve had enough for one day.”

“Fine,” Harry snapped. “Walk five miles in the dark, then. If you come to your senses, then I’ll give you a lift.”

“There’s a brilliant idea,” she sneered, “seeing as the last ride home ended so well.”

“Then we’ll find you a room for the night!” Harry barked in exasperation. He brushed past her, and stomped to the top of the cliffs.

A few moments later, he felt a hand on his shoulder. “I don’t want to fight,” she said. “It’s just... you have to admit that it’s been one hell of a day.”

“I just wanted to get away from it for a while,” Harry sighed. “Just a month, one month.”

“Um... Harry? Were you expecting anyone?” Heather asked.

Harry’s brow furrowed. “What, at this hour?”

Heather pointed into the distance. “Those lights... I think they’re on your lane, not on the roadway.”

Harry squinted into the distance. “I can’t tell – they’re moving fast, though.”

Grass crunched behind them. Harry whirled around.

“Easy, Harry,” Bill Weasley said. “I was just watching that motorcar coming up the drive. I don’t think it’s slowing down.”

Harry felt for his wand. He slipped it into his sleeve, and started briskly toward the tower.

“Do you think dashing toward a speeding motorcar is wise?” Bill asked after him. Harry paid no mind, and Heather ran to keep up.

“Is it going to ram the bloody wall?” Harry wondered aloud, and he sped up to a fast jog.

Heather ran along beside him. The motorcar veered around the side of the wall, and bore down on Odd Lovegood’s van. She stopped abruptly, and shouted, “*What in the hell is she doing ?*”

The silver car tore along the side of Mr. Lovegood’s van. The sound of grinding metal made the hair on Harry’s neck stand at attention. The motorcar fishtailed, and spun until it caught the wall; the boot crumpled deeply from the impact. The front left quarter was mangled from the first impact, and the van was creased along its entire length.

Heather ran toward the car, through stirred-up clouds of dust and dirt. “*You’re a lunatic!* ” she hollered.

The driver’s door flung open. “I *knew* yeh’d be here... what’d I tell yeh? Stay away from him, I say! What’da yeh do? Straight here! I dinnae think I gave birth to a *tart!* ” Shona bellowed.

Heather forcefully grabbed Shona’s arm. “Look at what you did to that van! What were you thinking?”

Shona pulled her arm free and pushed Heather back. She waved her hand dismissively at the van. “So? They wiggle their fingers and *poof!* Fixed!” She laughed too hard, then coughed and gagged.

Heather began, “You knew...?” but then her nose wrinkled. “God, you smell like a pub! You’re pissed!”

Shona stumbled away from Heather. “Don’t yeh be judgin’ me!” she moaned. “I’m nah here ta listen, I’m here ta *howl at the moon!* ” She laughed again, a dark and bitter laugh.

“Yeh couldn’t leave me alone, could yeh!” Shona shrieked at the tower. “Yer *dead* , an yeh couldn’t leave it! The boy’s not yours, is he, Black? I stared at that effin’ picture all effin’ day! I should-a *ripped it up – years ago!* I should-a... should-a... ripped it up...” She dropped to her knees. “He’s Jimmy’s boy, isn’t he? I should-a seen it, but I dinnae want to see it. I dinnae want *any of this!* ” She struggled to her feet. Heather tried to help her, but Shona flailed at her.

“I’m not here ta talk ta *you !*” she boomed, and knocked Heather off her feet. She rushed at the wall, and pounded against the stone with the sides of her balled fists. “*Yer all dead, aren’t yeh? All of yeh! Why?* ”

The black door in the wall opened slightly. Bill called out, “Stay inside!” He said to Harry, “We should put a stop to this. She’s going to hurt herself, or someone else.”

Bill levelled his wand, but Harry quickly shoved it aside; “Too late,” he said.

Ginny stood beside Shona. “Can we help you? Are you hurt?” she asked gently.

Shona pointed, and her hand shook. “L-Lily? Oh my God... *LILY!* ” Before Ginny could react, Shona attempted to wrap her in a desperate hug. She succeeded partly, but slid downward until she was huddled at Ginny’s feet.

“I cannae believe it – yeh’ve not changed! *M-magic!* ” Shona cried.

Harry muttered to Bill, “Get Remus, for Merlin’s sake!”

“I’m on it,” Bill said, and then disappeared.

Harry closed in very slowly, afraid of startling Shona if she were to look his way. Ginny caught his eye; she looked concerned, but no afraid. She carefully knelt. “Do... do you think I’m Lily Potter?” Ginny asked.

Shona slowly lifted her head. “Lily... Potter? Och, of course... Lily – *Potter* ... should-a known... so yer *who* ?”

Ginny said, “I’m a friend of Harry’s from school. Harry’s mum... she isn’t here. She’s, erm... she’s dead.”

“Of course she’s dead,” Shona slurred, “Lily’s *dead* , so Jimmy’s surely *dead* ...” She laughed strangely. “Sirius Black is *DEAD* . *Remus* is... dead... Remus... can’t think about... no...” She swatted at the stone wall. “*Yer all dead! Well... good riddance! Yeh ruined my effin’ life!* ” She stopped pounding, and began to cry. “Why dinnae yeh just tell me the truth, Remus? Why?” she whispered hoarsely.

“Are you talking about Remus Lupin?” Ginny asked gently. “He isn’t dead.”

Shona froze. “D-don’t yeh toy with me,” she warned. “I saw... I watched them, whatever they were... they *killed* him... they *HATED* him...” She stared at Ginny. Her eyes were bloodshot and brimmed with tears. “He couldna help it... no one would choose... it’s just how he was... wasn’t it? I wake up screaming sometimes... it’s always there... in the dark... they chained him, they beat him...an they *killed* him. I’ve played it over and over... he was tryin’ ta get at them, and they threw me in the way. He dinnae mean ta scratch me up.”

Ginny asked nervously, “Um... scratched you up? You mean that Professor Lupin... scratched you?”

Shona didn’t seem to hear her. “I forgave him, yeh know? Sat right on that beach down there, four, five years ago now. Climbed the stack, fer old times. He should-a told me. I suppose he dinnae trust me... I dunno.”

Heather carefully approached. “Ginny’s right. Remus Lupin isn’t dead. I was talking to him a few minutes ago.”

Shona laughed hoarsely. “An yeh thought *I* was pissed! Was the boy tryin’ ta drink his way inta yer breeks, then? Naw, I suppose not – Jimmy wasn’t like that. *Black* , though, there was a

hound... the pure shite that poured from his mouth..."

Ron was outside now, standing in his nightclothes next to Dumbledore, who had appeared silently. Mr. Lovegood gaped at his crumpled van; Mr. Tonks had his hand clamped firmly over Mr. Lovegood's mouth, which muffled the moaning.

Harry said, "Remus is alive, Shona. He thought *you* were dead."

Shona stared at him for a moment, and then cackled, "Oh, that's rich... that's a corker, boy!"

Lupin emerged from the darkness. "I saw you fall," his shaky voice called out.

Shona recoiled. "*Trick!* It's a trick!" she snarled at Harry. "*Stop it!* Even Black wouldna done this!"

"It's no trick," Lupin said. His voice still shook. "They didn't kill me. For quite some time, people thought that *I* might have killed *you*."

Shona stumbled to her feet. "Cheap effin' wine... should-a known better." She edged toward Lupin. "*You* aren't here," she said, jabbing her finger unsteadily toward him, "an I'll *prove it*." She ducked her head like a bull, and charged straight into Lupin, who barely had time to react. He managed to save them both from falling flat, but struck the side of his head against the ground.

"Was that really necessary?" Lupin grumbled. Harry wasn't sure who wobbled more, as Lupin and Shona dragged each other to their feet.

"*It IS you !*" Shona shrieked. "*Yeh son-of-a-bitch!*" She pounded on him just as she had pounded on the stone wall. Lupin managed to bring his arms up to afford some protection, but stood there and took the pummelling. She stopped pounding on him, and he cautiously lowered his arms. She swung at him again, and missed, then pressed into him and beat against his chest with her fists, her wails piercing the still night. Harry gaped at them, and Heather looked to be in shock.

Shona released Lupin, and snarled, "I'm so angry with yeh, I can't see straight!" She grabbed him roughly by the hair and devoured his mouth.

When she let up, Lupin gasped for air. "You can't see straight because you've been drinking petrol!" he choked. "It's time for you to sober up, and... and then we have a lot to discuss." He looked to Harry, with desperation in his eyes. "Harry... would you be put out if I borrowed... you know? I think a bit of distance would be for the best."

Harry nodded, unable to summon a single word.

Harry was beginning to read Dumbledore, in small ways. Some were obvious – a twinkling eye was generally good but sometimes a bit mischievous; an arched eyebrow said that something was amiss; and he was sometimes snappish when very tired. Some were less obvious, like the different

ways that he showed impatience.

Dumbledore stood at the massive range in the first-floor kitchen. He had put a stockpot of water on a burner, with the avowed intention of making mass amounts of hot chocolate. Heather had questioned hot chocolate on a relatively warm night but she relented. Dumbledore clearly understood how to use the gas burners, but kept fiddling with the height of the flames.

At the kitchen table, Bill and Heather were swapping impressions of various countries. Tonks looked on serenely, disinterested and exhausted. Ginny sat next to Heather and eagerly took in each new bit of information. Ron struggled to keep his eyes open.

Harry excused himself to the range. “Muggles have a saying about watching pots,” he said quietly to Dumbledore. “Aunt Petunia used to say it.”

Dumbledore laughed softly. “‘A watched pot never boils’ is what you recall. This is an instance where an aphorism proves itself true, I fear.”

“That’s quite a lot of water to heat,” Harry said, with his back turned to the kitchen table. “A Muggle flame could take half an hour to raise a boil.”

Dumbledore fiddled with the flame height again. “I do hope that Remus is faring well. I perfectly understand his insistence on handling the matter alone and in his own fashion, and he is a master of delicacy when he applies himself...”

“However...?” Harry ventured.

Dumbledore smiled faintly. “If you have learned nothing else this summer, you must surely know that affairs of the heart are complicated and not without pain.”

Mr. Lovegood clapped Harry on the shoulder. “Learning about love, are we?” he said in normal voice. “Well, that’s an honest pursuit at your age? My Luna’s certainly prepossessed with it –”

Harry quickly cut in, before Mr. Lovegood could provide any details. He reckoned that Ron might prove the cognivores wrong by dying right there in the kitchen, were Mr. Lovegood to bring up Luna’s dear ‘Ronald’. “I get it,” he said to Dumbledore. “Love hurts.”

“Love also heals,” Dumbledore returned. “Love is beautiful, passionate, glorious, jealous, spiteful... it is anticipation and release... it is tender, and sometimes savage... and yes, there are times when it hurts, Harry – when it is so painful that one can scarcely breathe.”

“Why bother, then?” Harry grouched. “Why choose to hurt, or be hurt? It always ends badly, anyway...”

Dumbledore arched an eyebrow. “Explain yourself, Harry.”

Mr. Lovegood said, “Dumbledore, I believe I’m suited to handle this. Allow me.” Dumbledore’s face froze. *That must be bad*, Harry noted to himself.

Mr. Lovegood took no notice. “You’ve been surrounded by death, obviously. I understand something of what that’s like. I could see the Thestrals, you know, when I was a student. Is that why you believe love ends badly – because people die?”

Harry felt jumbled inside. It was like Mr. Lovegood had turned up the flame beneath him, and now he was about to boil over. “I can’t talk about this,” he said. “I just can’t.”

Mr. Lovegood’s voice rose, and Harry was acutely aware that every eye in the room was upon them. “You’re wrong, Harry. Everyone dies, sooner or later. Is it better to die unloved and unloving? I don’t mean romance; I’m talking about love. There are important differences between the two.” He sighed. “I lost my wife nine years ago. I have had a drunken phase, a second-guessing phase, and a self-destructive phase... I was sacked, I abandoned our friends, and I blamed everyone around me for what happened to her... Luna suffered for it, and I regret that terribly. There’s one thing I *never* did. I never regretted for a second that I loved her, or that she loved me – not for one second. What we had... it’s enough to carry me for the rest of my life. Is that a bad end? I don’t believe so. If I hadn’t had Gaia, I wouldn’t have Luna, and I would have *nothing*.”

“I believe your question was ‘why bother?’” Mr. Lovegood said. “Have you ever met anyone who *didn’t* bother? Think about that, and you might find your own answer.” He yawned loudly. “I’m knackered. I think that there may be fezziwigs nesting in your Great Hall. It will surely take most of the day to lure them outdoors. Nasty things, fezziwigs.” He ambled toward the hallway.

“Sir? I’m sorry about your van. I’ll make good on it, I promise,” Heather offered.

Mr. Lovegood shrugged. “No one was hurt. It’s just a thing. Things aren’t all that important.” He turned to Harry. “The Beatles were right about love, you know.”

Dumbledore frowned. “I fail to see what insects have to do with the question at hand.”

Mr. Lovegood shook his head. “Dumbledore, only *you* could miss an entire decade. Good night, all.” His voice echoed in loud off-key song from the hallway. “All you need is love, *all you need is love*; all you need is love, *all you need is love*; all you need is love, love; love is all you need!”

Bill piped up, “Sir... um, the Beatles were...”

Dumbledore’s eyes twinkled. “I know very well who the Beatles were. Mister Lovegood is simply too much. Fezziwigs... good heavens.”

“Um... what’s a fezziwig?” Heather asked.

“Precisely,” laughed Dumbledore.

Ron laughed. “We sure know where Luna gets it!” Ginny smacked Ron’s arm.

Harry cleared his throat. “I’m off to see how Remus is getting along.”

“You should not interfere. It is, after all, a private matter,” Dumbledore said.

“I just want to be sure they haven’t destroyed... erm... anything important,” Harry said, barely catching himself. “Heather?”

“I’m too tired,” she said. “I can stand the suspense until morning... er, I mean later this morning. Is there, you know, anywhere that I can catch some sleep? Perhaps there’s a spare bed in the spaceship?” She grinned, and even Harry laughed this time.

“Harry’s bedchamber is vacant, I believe,” Dumbledore said.

Harry said, “Take it. I’ve never even seen it.”

“I’ll show you upstairs,” Ginny offered.

As she passed, Heather muttered to Harry, “So... a *bedchamber* . Sounds inviting. How big is the bed, I wonder?”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Tease,” he muttered.

At the foot of the stairs, she turned to Harry. “Thank you,” she said.

“For what?” he asked. “For mucking up your life? I mean, it hasn’t been a banner day.”

“For Remus,” she said, “even if he isn’t what I imagined.”

He said, “I thought you said he didn’t tell you...?”

Heather smiled a tired smile before heading up the stairs. “I just know,” she said.

As Harry drew close to the bothy, the hairs on the back of his neck stood up. He quietly disillusioned himself, and silenced the crunching grass beneath his feet. Someone was there, he was certain. He could almost feel them. He reacted just as he felt a breath on the back of his hair, but too late. An invisible arm wrapped around his neck. Harry flailed around, trying to grab anything that he could. Just as the pressure on his neck made him light-headed, he was flung forward. As he fell, he angled his wand arm backward, and muttered, “*Everbero* .” He heard a satisfying thud, just before he made his own thud against the hard ground.

As Harry tried to stand, his wand wouldn’t budge. In the same instant, he realised that his invisible attacker was probably standing on it. He whipped around and toppled his attacker. When he reached for his wand, it flew away from him. He saw a body-sized swath of rippling grass, and dove. His attacker let out a guttural *oomph!* but countered with a slapping spell. By the time he recovered, Harry had been pounced upon.

“Give up yet, Potter?” an invisible voice barked.

Harry wrestled with his attacker. He felt a smooth head, and all became clear. He barked out the warming charm, and Shackbolt howled. Once free, Harry dove for his wand. He waved away the

illusion that concealed his attacker, and called out, “*Stupefy!*” Shacklebolt countered with a shield.

“Shame on me for forgetting that you don’t always need a wand,” Shacklebolt said. “Not bad, Potter, but I think the holiday has softened you.”

Harry stood slowly, maintaining his wand at the ready. “Any other surprises?” he snapped.

“If I told you, then they wouldn’t be surprises,” Shacklebolt smirked, and lowered his wand.

Harry remained wary. “I just came to see if Remus was still alive.”

Shacklebolt arched an eyebrow. “I haven’t seen him since I left the beach. I understand that there was quite a ruckus earlier. Did he go for a walk?” Harry stopped for a moment before he realised that Shacklebolt was staring directly at the bothy but didn’t see it.

“I thought he had. I guess not,” Harry said. “You have the watch tonight, then?”

Shacklebolt nodded. “Dumbledore asked me to take it in his stead.”

Harry nodded. He hesitated, not sure what to say next. “Well... guess I’ll be going back.”

“Your training resumes today,” Shacklebolt said. “Since you have decided that nights are not for sleeping, we’ll use the afternoons. Have you been reading?”

“No,” said Harry.

“I noticed that some of the library from Grimmauld Place is duplicated here,” Shacklebolt said. “Take a pass through the titles, and find something worthwhile. We’ll begin with the assignment I gave you.”

Harry said, “Assignment...?”

“Conveniently forgotten, I see,” Shacklebolt said. “I asked you to review your experiences with wandless magic, and document both the circumstances and the state of your emotions. Since you obviously have written nothing, an oral presentation will suffice. We’ll also review the incident at the Grangers’.”

“Is that necessary?” Harry grumbled.

Shacklebolt nodded slowly. “I expected you’d resist that. It’s important to consider what happened, and why it happened. We will both benefit. I will be better able to evaluate your needs, and you will gain some perspective.”

“Fine, then,” Harry snarled. He turned toward the tower.

“Harry...” Shacklebolt said.

Harry turned, surprised at hearing his first name.

Shacklebolt looked uneasy. He cleared his throat. “I know why it’s so important to train you. Dumbledore didn’t say anything to me; it wasn’t necessary. After what has happened, after what I’ve seen, it’s painfully obvious who and what you are. At the tower, when I expressed my concerns about consorting with Muggles... Harry, my job is to give you the best chance of surviving what lies ahead. I didn’t mean to suggest that you wall yourself off from everyone. I just think you need to be selective. You need to think carefully about how the people in your life can help you do what must be done.”

Harry was too tired to retort. “Tomorrow, then,” he said.

“Tomorrow,” Shacklebolt confirmed. “One o’clock. The Great Hall in the tower should be an excellent space for our purposes.”

Harry walked toward the tower without looking back. All was quiet. He flopped onto the plush couch in one corner of the Great Hall, and settled in. His sleep was unsettled, a jumble of shouting and singing and spaceships and a dark sky with brilliant stars and a sun-dappled whitewashed building on a high hill that overlooked an azure sea.

Harry Potter and the Years of Rebellion If There Be Monsters, They Be Us

Chapter Twenty-four

IF THERE BE MONSTERS, THEY BE US

August 20

Even closed, Harry's eyes felt dry. *How strange*, he thought, with the sea so close... the glittering azure sea, and a fresh breeze that smelled of salt and olives and flowers and something else sweet and familiar but unnamed... what? *Something baking* ?

He opened his eyes. They felt encrusted with sand. He half-expected to see a patio bounded by trees overlooking the ocean. Instead, the dining table in the Great Hall of the tower sat before him. He moved and he winced; the couch was soft but too short for sleeping. By the height of the sun, he judged that it was still early. *Definitely something baking*, he decided.

He stumbled down the stairs and into the kitchen. All six burners on the range top were going, something was indeed baking on the open hearth, both prep tables were covered with bowls and plates and food from the larder, and Shona was chopping like a madwoman. Her hair was in disarray, and it dawned on Harry that she was wearing one of his running suits – she had apparently spent the whole night in the bothy. She looked up furtively and returned her attention to the chopping. “Good mornin’, Harry,” she muttered.

“Uh... good morning,” he returned warily. “This is, erm, quite a feast you have going.”

“Least I could do after stirring up all yer guests last night,” she said briskly. “Least I could do.”

“Can I help?” he asked.

She stopped the chopping. “I admit I’m spoilt with a sous chef an’ a runner. Remus wasn’t sure about the numbers – would I be feedin’ twelve or fourteen?”

Harry shrugged. “That depends a bit on who’s around. It’s somewhere in there, I think.”

Shona said, “Och, close enough. We’ll see whether all that watchin’ in my kitchen did yeh any good.” She slipped into a commanding tone and he played along. She wasn’t terribly critical of him, so he presumed that he was managing more or less as she expected.

When the meal was nearly ready to be served and Harry had moved several dishes into the dumbwaiter, he asked Shona if she needed anything else, or if he should gather everyone to the dining table in the hall. She didn't respond; her attention never shifted from the work.

"Shona?" he said quietly.

Her eyes welled up – something Harry absolutely didn't expect. "This was the only normal thing ta be done," she said hoarsely. "I needed ta do somethin' *normal* ."

"I'm sure everyone will appreciate it," he offered. "It'll be the best meal anyone here's had for a while."

She chuckled for a moment, even as tears trickled down her cheeks. "It's all I know to do," she said. "Remus... he told me a lot last night. Not everythin', I suppose, but enough. Madness, all of it." She carved sausages loudly, banging the cleaver hard. "God, they've been tryin' ta kill yeh for fifteen years! How do yeh stand it?"

"It's all I know to do," he said quietly.

"That's not right," she said.

It took Harry a while to decide what to say. "I'm sure whatever happened to you wasn't right, either."

The cleaver slipped out of Shona's hand and clattered against the tabletop. She said, "I didn't know if they were hunting me, so I ran. I didn't know whether Heather was like me or like Remus, so I gave her up. I gave up my own child because I was afraid. Anything that came of that was my doin', and mine alone." She picked up the cleaver, and waved it in Harry's general direction. "This *thing* tried ta kill yeh when yeh were a *baby* . There's no choice in that. *It's – not – right* ."

Harry immediately thought of several questions. He wasn't about to ask them and he certainly wasn't about to argue with her, especially with a chef's cleaver in her hand. He changed the subject. "Where's Remus?"

"Talkin' to the old man," she said dejectedly. "Tryin' ta figure out how best ta explain the rest to her..." She set down the cleaver, and added, "...like it or not."

Harry said, "You don't like it, right?"

"Yeh don't think I *want* ta drag her into this mess, do yeh?" Shona asked.

"Erm... it might be a bit late for worries," Harry suggested.

"Black told me that yeh have ways ta make people forget. She'd forget all of yeh, if it were up ta me," Shona growled.

Harry said defensively, "In our world, you're an adult at seventeen. If she's Remus' daughter, then

it's up to her."

Shona glared at him. "I don't give a damn about *your* world. Truth is, I gave up the right to make her choices, a long time ago. I'll tell her to know Remus and *stay away* from the rest of yeh. She'll know the cost, if I have anythin' to say about it. After that, it's her cross to bear." She plated the sausages and snapped, "Breakfast is served."

At the table, Shona was composed. The conversation drifted entirely around and past the late night events. Heather seemed too chipper and laughed a bit too loudly. She pointedly avoided Harry. Harry couldn't bring himself to sit there and pretend that everything was somehow all right. Luna had remained in her room. Harry fixed a plate for her, excused himself, and climbed the spiralling stairs to the garret.

Luna was once again staring out the window. "Good morning, Harry," she said without looking.

Harry held out the plate. "I brought you some food. How are you?"

"I am tired. I am tired of being tired," said Luna. "How are you?"

"Hiding," he said quickly.

Luna chuckled softly. "Ginny told me about last night's events in vivid detail. I would have preferred that she simply quiet herself and go to sleep, but she was unstoppable. Your friend is the daughter of Professor Lupin, then?"

"It appears that way," Harry said.

"A most interesting summer, indeed." Luna remarked. "To discover friendship in the midst of horror is ironic. I certainly would not have expected Hermione Granger to become friendly with me. Hermione will have a difficult time upon returning, I fear. She shall need her friends."

Harry felt a sudden sense of dread. "Why... why 'upon returning'? Why will she have a difficult time then?"

"I am sure that Hermione will explain when she returns," Luna said distantly, and she turned back to the window.

"Don't turn away! What was that supposed to mean?" Harry demanded.

Ginny entered the room. "That was a smashing breakfast. Heather's mum certainly can cook... what's going on? Am I interrupting something?"

Luna said, "I was simply telling Harry that I fear Hermione will have a difficult time upon returning."

Ginny quickly closed the door behind her. "Cast a silencing charm," she said to Harry.

Harry crossed his arms. “Why should I? More secrets? You’re hiding something from me... she’s not going to come back, is she?” Ginny’s face was a blank mask.

“What causes you to think that, Harry?” Luna asked.

“Hermione’s reasonable, and so are her parents. Walking away would be the reasonable thing to do,” he said.

“I wouldn’t say she was reasonable when she left,” Ginny said sadly. “I wish I could just talk to her. I can’t even send an owl.”

Harry jumped inside at the word ‘owl’. “Why not? Where is she?” he asked.

“I can’t tell you,” Ginny answered. “Mum would have known, but she had a row with Hermione’s mum.”

“She *would* have known? And what do you mean, ‘a row’?” Harry asked.

“They had a row,” Ginny said evenly.

Harry saw that Ginny was measuring her words; she said that she couldn’t tell him where Hermione and her parents were, instead of saying that she didn’t know where they were. He wondered whether she could be trusted at all. He said curtly, “Excuse me; I start training again today,” and flung open the door.

Ginny said, “Harry... I *am* sorry.”

He sneered, “Goodness, I can’t imagine what you’d have to be sorry about!”

“I... hey! What’s that supposed to mean?” Ginny shot back.

“Forget it,” Harry grumbled as he stormed down the stairs. He brushed past Tonks, who called after him about something, but he didn’t care. He burst out of the tower, and nearly ran into Dumbledore and Remus, who were walking in the courtyard.

“Harry? What is wrong?” Dumbledore asked.

“Not now,” Harry snapped, and continued toward the black oaken door.

“Come here – that was uncalled for,” Remus demanded.

He threw open the black door, and ran toward the bothy. He didn’t stop until he reached his bedroom; the need to see her picture drove him there. “I wish you were here,” he sighed as if she could hear him. The next thing he heard was insistent pounding on the outer door. He stumbled to the living room, gathered up his wand, and flung open the door.

“*What?* ” he barked.

Heather looked at him in horror, and took an immediate step backward. “I’m... sorry,” she said quietly. “I’ll just...” She pointed toward the tower, and backed further away.

Harry said, “Heather! I didn’t mean to shout... I thought you were someone else.” He hesitated. “Heather? What’s wrong? What’s happened?”

Heather looked around. “I expected Shona would chase after me. After what she said... she’d have kittens if I came in.”

“You’ll be coming in, then?” Harry asked with a smirk.

Heather allowed herself a wry smile. “I don’t know whether I should trust you, but at least you do understand me,” she said as she passed through the door.

Her eyes searched the living area. She headed directly for the kitchen counter, and sifted through the pile of photographs. “Shona said she ran because she was afraid. She was afraid of more than just the... you know, of what you can do...”

“You can use the word ‘magic’, Heather. That’s what it’s called,” Harry said.

“Whatever. She was afraid of more than just... magic. *Something* happened,” Heather said. “They were both dancing around it, whatever it was, other than Remus admitting that he thought she was dead... the point being, she ran away. He said he would have been part of my life if he’d known about me. He said he wants to be part of my life now, if I’ll have him, and then he started in on having me evaluated or whatever. Anyway, I had to tell him to sod off *again* .”

“What, for wanting you evaluated?” Harry asked.

Heather groaned. “Isn’t it obvious? Remus is dangerous as well, or at least he was, but that didn’t prevent him from offering to hang about. After that, he has the nerve to steer me off of you?” She shook her head. “One-hundred-percent pure shite, all of it; I’m not about to listen to him.”

“Will you listen to *me* , then?” Harry said. “He’s right, and I meant what I said last night. You should stay as far from me as you can.” He added weakly, “You should probably go now.”

“No ,” said Heather, “and I’m not going to budge from this couch until you tell me *why* I should stay away – all of it.”

Harry didn’t want to say anything, but the words churned inside him. Once he let them loose, he couldn’t stop. “Everything I told you about me, about my parents and what happened to them, about me being a target, was all true... it just wasn’t the whole truth. You want to know why you should stay away? *Fine* – here’s the whole truth. The person trying to kill me is called Voldemort.”

“You said that name last night, like it was a joke,” Heather recalled.

“Well, he’s no joke. He’s a wizard, a very powerful and very evil one. He has followers called

Death Eaters, and they're as evil as he is. When Voldemort killed my parents, he killed them with a curse. It's the only curse that can't be blocked; if it strikes you, you're dead. He used it on me, but I didn't die, which is impossible. Somehow it bounced back at him. I ended up with this scar..." He flipped back his bangs and scowled.

"Voldemort disappeared, and everyone thought he was dead. He wasn't." His bangs fell back across his forehead. "In our world, people call me the Boy-Who-Lived; charming, isn't it? I didn't know any of this until I turned eleven and went to Hogwarts – that's my school. Dumbledore packed me off to live with my mother's sister and her horrid git of a husband. I slept in a cupboard under the stairs for ten years – let's leave it at that. I spent my Christmases at Hogwarts, and as much of my summers with the Weasleys as I could. During my first year at Hogwarts, Voldemort came back. A year ago, I duelled with him. He... he killed a schoolmate of mine, and I barely escaped. He keeps getting stronger, and he's set on killing me."

He sighed. "In our world, I'm famous – all because a curse bounced off my head! I'm in the papers constantly. One day I'm the saviour of the universe; the next day I'm a demon. Almost no one believed that Voldemort was back, until this summer. People thought I was crazy, you know, that it was some kind of delayed madness or something. Deep down, no one wanted to believe it. I can't really blame them for that."

Part of Harry wanted to stop, but something possessed him to continue. "I have this connection with him. Maybe it has something to do with the scar – I don't know. I can see what he sees sometimes, or hear what he hears. It was especially bad last year. It would happen at night, in my dreams. I could have blocked it out, but I didn't... I wasn't taught properly, but I think I knew how. Part of me didn't care. I let him in and he tricked me, to try and bring him something he wanted, something only I could get. I managed to get Sirius Black killed because of it, because I didn't learn... Tonks nearly died... Ron and Hermione were badly hurt... Ginny and Luna and Neville could have been... all because I was *stupid!*"

Harry closed his eyes to compose himself, but that left him in the darkness of the Department of Mysteries... the Veil was there, and his eyes snapped open. He pressed on. "Sirius had a will, and he was... gods, I wouldn't know where to start. In the end, I ended up emancipated on my birthday. I turned up in the papers even more. In *Teen Witch Weekly* –"

Heather laughed nervously, which startled Harry. "I'm sorry," she said. "It's just... *Teen Witch Weekly*? What's that about – all the hot magical boys?"

"More or less. I'm sure Ron would love to show you his clippings," Harry grunted.

Heather's eyes widened. "I was joking... sorry, it's a lot to take in." She fidgeted. "So... I take it you turned up in this *Teen Witch Weekly*."

Harry took a deep breath. "They printed something about my supposed love life. It connected a few girls with me – Luna and Ginny, and Hermione, and some other schoolmates." Heather closely scrutinized him, and he looked away. "Voldemort got inside my head again – I didn't even know he was there this time," he admitted. "He wanted to find out who was really important to

me, and..." His fists balled. "...and he went after them... just to hurt me. Luna – I don't know if you met Luna, but she's here..."

Heather nodded. "Ginny introduced me to her. She seems like a very nice girl. Strange eyes, though."

"She's nice, all right. She's one of the bravest people I know. One of Voldemort's Death Eaters..." Harry squeezed his fists tightly, and hoped that he could hold himself together. "...the same one who killed Sirius..." He shook. "...cut Luna's throat." Heather recoiled.

Harry waited until his shaking stopped, and then continued, "Right after that, a group of Death Eaters attacked us at Hermione's house –"

"And now it all comes together," Heather whispered.

Harry nodded. "Voldemort came. He..." The anger rushed through him in waves; with each wave, he squeezed his hands again. "...he had her tortured, and he attacked her himself. He told me..." Harry's throat tightened, and his voice became anguished. "...he told me that he was going to kill her, and that he'd spare everyone else in the room if I didn't move."

Heather covered her mouth with one hand and gripped the back of the couch with her other hand. Her eyes demanded that he finish.

Harry couldn't meet her eyes any more. He looked at his hands in his lap, and decided that he couldn't look at himself either. He steeled himself, and told it without emotion. "I couldn't let him do it. Ron's dad said they'd have just killed all of us anyway. He was probably right. I got loose, and I killed six of them."

"How?" Heather asked quietly.

"Why do you have to know that?" Harry demanded.

Her voice could barely be heard. "You got loose, so they had you locked up or something. You didn't have your stick, then."

Harry couldn't hold it in any longer. "I did it with my bare hands! Wizards who fight for a living were frightened of me! *I tore apart six people with my bare hands!*" He felt his eyes begin to moisten, and he was not about to cry in front of her. He turned away. "I don't even know how I did it. I was completely out of control." She didn't say anything. They just sat there, for what seemed to Harry like hours.

He felt two hands rest on his back. "I'm not afraid of you," she said.

His laugh was bitter. "Then you're a nutter," he said.

She rubbed his back gently. "You're probably right," she said. "Are you ready to listen to me now?"

“Probably not,” he said, but he turned back toward her.

Heather kept running one hand up and down his back. “When I came back here for holiday, I was looking for something that didn’t exist. I wanted a nice-looking fellow who had never heard of me and wanted nothing... well, some kissing would have been nice. This is St. Ebb, you know; all the boys worth having are taken or moved on. Then... here comes Harry. Definitely nice-looking – the black clothes, the motorbike... a bit flirty... obviously well-to-do... and decent to anyone and everyone.” She mussed his hair, and he smiled a pained smile. “Too good to be real – recently fallen to earth, for certain. Of course...I didn’t plan on you being heir to the Blacks, I didn’t plan on stumbling across Remus, and I sure as hell didn’t plan on falling through the looking-glass!”

Harry muttered, “Sorry to disappoint you.”

Heather pressed harder into his back. Harry was distracted by it, but didn’t mind. She said, “I’m not disappointed. I like you, Harry, and I’m not afraid of you.”

“You should be,” Harry said.

“You kept some people from being killed, people you obviously care about – you saved their lives. You killed the bad guys along the way, and you’re tearing yourself apart over that. Tell me, would the bad guys have lost any sleep over killing you or your friends?” she asked. Harry reluctantly shook his head.

Heather pulled him into a hug. “I won’t pretend that I’m comfortable with all of this going on about magic. I... I have a lot of questions. That doesn’t mean I think you’re some kind of monster. You’re not. You’re a good person; I know that.”

“I just don’t want to see you hurt because you’re close to me,” Harry said.

“Good. Neither do I,” said Heather. She pulled back from him, and smiled.

“Erm... I have to ask... what’s this about kissing, then?” Harry asked with a smirk.

Heather shook her head and gave a wry smile. “Two days ago, I would have left your lips numb if you’d just asked. Something’s come between us.”

Harry sat up straight. “What? It isn’t Remus, is it?”

“No, it’s not... although I do feel like we’re family in a strange way, with Remus being what he is to you. No... I’m talking about your friend on the wall... Hermione,” said Heather.

Harry didn’t care for the way Heather said Hermione’s name. “What about her?” he asked defensively.

“I saw the look in your eyes when I asked about that picture. I may as well have left the room. Listening to you just now... don’t be daft, Harry,” Heather said.

“It’s not like that,” he said.

“What’s it like, then?” she asked.

“I told you before – she’s been my best friend for five years,” he returned. “To see her like that... it ripped me in two; I won’t deny it. She deserves better.”

“I know you’re holding out on me. Do you want me to trust you, or not?” Heather asked.

Harry swallowed and licked his lips. He felt suddenly dry. “I’ve watched people get together, you know, at school. It doesn’t work out, and there are hard feelings, and... and I couldn’t chance that. She’s too important to me; I didn’t want to make a bigger mess of things.” He sighed deeply. “In the end, it wouldn’t have mattered. After I... you know... did what I did... she couldn’t even look at me. She was afraid of me – *afraid*. Now I find out that after I left to come here, she... well... she snapped.”

Heather’s eyebrows shot up. “Snapped? What do you mean, snapped?”

“You know... snapped, went spare. Ron’s told me the most. He said she was curled up in the corner, babbling or something like that. She and her parents left the country,” Harry said. “I just hope she’ll be my friend again, if she comes back at all.”

“Why are you sitting here?” Heather demanded.

Harry was puzzled. “What?”

Heather shook her head. “Do you even hear yourself when you talk? If she’s so important to you and she’s been hurt, then why are you sitting here?”

“I can’t,” Harry explained. “I don’t know where she is, and I wouldn’t know where to begin looking.” *Although Ginny might be in on it*, he thought.

There was an insistent rapping, and both Harry and Heather turned to the open door.

“May we come in?” Lupin asked.

Harry looked to Heather, who shrugged. “If you like,” he said without meaning it.

Shona followed Lupin inside. A few moments later, Dumbledore entered and closed the door. Shona and Lupin sat next to one another in the armchairs. Dumbledore conjured his own chair and Shona jumped in her seat at the sight. Heather tried not to appear intrigued but Harry knew better.

Shona tugged at the sleeve of the running suit she wore. “Er... borrowed this from yeh,” she said to Harry. “Return it tomorrow?”

“That’s fine,” Harry said.

Heather looked at Dumbledore suspiciously. “What are you doing here?”

“I asked Remus and Miss Malloch if I could join them. There is more that you must be told, and I thought that I might be of assistance,” he returned.

“Harry stays,” Heather said firmly.

“I had no intention of asking him to leave,” Dumbledore said. “In fact, I suspect that you may derive value from his support. Remus?”

Lupin stiffened. “Albus... I’ve seen your idea of supporting Harry, and I object.” He turned to Heather, and added firmly, “I thought that my feelings on this were quite clear.”

“And so were mine! Do I have to tell you again? *Sod off!*” Heather snapped.

“Heather, yeh’ll not talk to yer father like that,” Shona said.

Heather’s eyes narrowed. “He’s not my father, and you’re not – my – mother,” she snarled. “You gave birth to me, he’s responsible, and that’s the end of it. Anything else, you *earn* .”

Dumbledore arched an eyebrow. “A more respectful tone would be in order,” he said.

Heather didn’t shout but her voice commanded the room. “Everyone except Harry has been lying through their effin’ teeth at one time or another, and even he wasn’t telling the whole truth before. Show me something to respect.”

Lupin said, “Shona hasn’t lied to you and I haven’t lied to you. There’s more to tell, and we would have told it if you hadn’t run out on us. As for Harry, I’m sorry – I genuinely love Harry – but I’m right about this. You don’t understand what you’re doing.”

“Don’t I?” Heather said. She proceeded to recount Harry’s story. Lupin’s jaw dropped further with each detail, and even Dumbledore appeared surprised. “I know exactly what I’m doing,” she finished.

“You were rather forthcoming, Harry. I do hope that you were not too forthcoming,” Dumbledore said. “Miss Magruder seems to have made a strong impression upon you.”

Harry said to Lupin, “I agreed with you, you know.”

Shona lightly touched Lupin’s arm. “Let him stay,” she said. “I want ta be done with this.”

Lupin nodded reluctantly. “Albus... could you...?” he said nervously.

Dumbledore smiled. He reached into a small bag that he was carrying, and withdrew a nondescript wand. “Would you hold this, please?”

Heather eyed it suspiciously, and wrung her hands. “I’m not sure if I should. I don’t know what

I'm doing."

"There is nothing for you to do," Dumbledore assured her. "Simply hold the wand, and it will do the rest."

Heather apprehensively took the wand. For several seconds, it did nothing. Then it emitted a few tiny white sparks.

"Thank you," Dumbledore said, extending his hand. Heather gave him back the wand. "You do not appear to be a witch as we ordinarily define such," he declared. "That does not mean that you are without magic."

Lupin said, "That makes no sense. One has magical ability, or one does not."

"How is it that Arabella Figg performs household magic?" Dumbledore asked.

"I wasn't aware that she did," Lupin said. "I have no idea how she would perform *any* magic."

Dumbledore inclined his head and looked at Lupin over the top of his small silver spectacles. "Have you heard of the Kwikspell course?"

"It's little better than fraud," Lupin said. "It's a terrible thing to seed people with false hope."

"Algernon Croaker has studied squibs and wild talents, and he took a great interest in Kwikspell training. It seems to provide at least some enhancement for one-quarter to one-half of those who complete the programme," Dumbledore said. Lupin's eyebrows rose at that.

Croaker – where have I heard that name? Harry wondered to himself. Dumbledore continued, "So many of us believe that magical ability is controlled as if by a simple switch – turned one way, ability is granted; turned the other way, ability is withheld. I spent time in a Muggle house whilst away from Hogwarts last year. It was there that I encountered an apt metaphor for magical ability – the garden hosepipe. With the valve fully released, the flow of water is a torrent. With the valve scarcely opened, the flow is a mere trickle. It is still a flow of water, just the same."

"So Squibs can actually be trained?" Lupin asked.

"Not in all cases, and not to a standard that we would accept as true wizardry or witchcraft. Arabella is perfectly capable of a wandless cleaning charm, but cannot manage a broom or a wand. Argus Filch can see the same magical manifestations as any wizard – how else could he negotiate the stairs at Hogwarts? Despite that, he can only cast one charm."

"I'm sorry... did you say 'Squibs'?" Heather asked.

"Just as non-magical persons are referred to as 'Muggles', non-magical offspring of wizards and witches are referred to as 'Squibs'," Dumbledore explained.

"A dud firework, am I?" Heather grumbled. "Obviously, they've never met me." Shona laughed,

and Heather laughed with her.

“You represent a very complicated case, Miss Magruder. It would be wise to completely ascertain the boundaries of your abilities,” Dumbledore said. “Your fath...” He nearly scowled. “I am sorry. *Remus* is not an ordinary wizard. This brings us to a more difficult subject. Remus, would you care for me to continue?”

Lupin took a deep breath, and slowly let it out. “This should come from me,” he said. “Heather, we need to talk more about the disease that I have.”

Heather nodded. “You’re worried that I have it, aren’t you?”

“No! No!” Lupin insisted. “Goodness, there wouldn’t be any doubt about that! I can assure you that you don’t have this disease. It’s a miracle that Shona doesn’t have it, and I dearly hope that it hasn’t affected you in any way.”

“Remus’ disease may explain why you do not possess complete magical abilities,” Dumbledore interjected.

“Is that why you’re afraid of him?” Heather asked Shona.

Shona squirmed in her seat. “It’s not a simple thing,” she said. “What I felt for Remus, what I *feel* ... I don’t know if it’s enough ta... och, it’s just not that simple.”

“I have lycanthropy,” Lupin blurted out. “I’ve had it since the age of six.”

Heather said, “Lycanthropy... I’ve heard that word before... you know, I *have* been rather well schooled; Madame Hartmann insisted on it. Lycanthropy... lycos... that’s Greek for... for what...? Wolf...?” Heather paled, but then began to laugh. “Oh, that’s brilliant; next you’ll be telling me you’re a vampire, right?”

Lupin laughed nervously. He rattled off, “Oh, no! That’s the only thing I can think of that would be worse. Can you imagine? At least I have twenty-four or twenty-five good days between episodes. Vampirism is a daily nightmare! It can only be controlled if potions are commenced before a vampire drinks human blood, and the potions are nearly as damning as the curse.” He looked at Harry, who thought Lupin looked almost manic. “If you think I look terrible around the full moon... even potion-managed vampires are waxy pale things. They constantly smell of the potions – you’d think they lived in a cauldron. No, I’ll take *my* existence over that, thank you very much!”

Heather clutched at Harry’s arm as if she were drowning. “*You’re serious!* ” she shouted.

Harry drew her to him. “It’s all right,” he said.

She pulled angrily away from him. “Like hell it’s all right!” She jabbed her index finger at Shona. “You knew! My God, *you knew!* That’s... that’s why you handed me off to Fiona, *isn’t it?* ”

“I handed yeh off because I couldn’t take care of yeh. I damn near drank myself ta death – and *not* because of what yer thinkin’,” Shona said. Her voice quavered. “I found out what Remus is, all right. It was the last time I saw him 'til now; he wasn’t supposed ta be there. It was just me an’ Black, takin’ in one last climb afore the winter. God, I used ta love the mountains...” She paused and a small smile flickered across her face, the last gasp of a fleeting memory. “The bastards dragged Remus up there. They chained him up like an animal, an’ they beat him and kicked him, an’... an’ they called me a whore an’ a lot worse. He was goin’ mad with pain – I don’t know if it was the beating, or what was happenin’ ta him.” She reached out and squeezed Lupin’s hand. “They threw me at him. I figured they wanted him ta kill me. He caught me with... with his *claws*...” She stopped, and burst into tears.

Heather awkwardly reached out to comfort her, but Shona swatted away her hand and barked, “Yeh ever wonder where the scars on my leg came from?” She turned to Remus, with a gentler tone. “I screamed, and... yeh recognised me, I’m sure of it. Yeh stopped, and that just made ‘em angrier.”

Shona took a deep breath before she continued. “Eventually Remus got loose, and he went straight after ‘em. They had their wands, six or seven of ‘em, and they all hit him at once. He just let out this howl and went limp. I... well, I figured I was alone. I ran a ridge line an’ I came ta the end. One of ‘em shot his wand at me. I slipped an’ I fell.”

“Who were ‘they’?” Harry asked.

“Death Eaters,” Lupin said quietly. “They stunned me. I managed to follow and I saw her fall. That’s all I remembered the next day.”

“I don’t know how far I fell,” Shona said. “I don’t know how I made it ta the trail head. I figured Remus and Black were both dead, and they’d be lookin’ fer me. As soon as I could run, I ran.”

“All we found the next day were bits of her clothing, torn by me, and a pool of blood fifty or sixty feet below the ridge,” Lupin explained. “I guessed that the Death Eaters had taken her body. Sirius... Sirius assumed that she’d crawled off into the brush or fallen further. He was certain that I’d killed her. You see... Sirius took it upon himself to tell Shona that we were all wizards. Why he picked a full moon to do it... I was supposed to be in my safe place where I couldn’t harm anyone, not on some accursed mountainside. The Death Eaters ambushed me and brought me up.” Lupin took Shona’s hand with both of his. “He could have picked any weekend, the git. I’d have stayed behind; that was far too steep a slope for me.”

Shona said, “We should never a’ been on Ben Nevis that late in the season ta begin with. It was cold, yeh couldn’t see more than twenty feet the first night... shouldna been there. With what Black told me... well, it took a lot a’ single-malt ta swallow *that* story, let me tell yeh. He always was first ta the floor when drinkin’ was involved. If...” She struggled for composure. “...if we hadna been drinkin’, maybe Black might a’ been able ta do somethin’.”

Lupin gently stroked Shona’s hand. “It’s much more likely that Sirius would have gotten himself killed. Remember what I said last night, about regret?” He looked to Harry. “It was never the same

with Sirius after we thought she had died. I think that started it all, in some ways – all the distrust and the anger. Wormtail simply took advantage. I had to escape, to bury myself in something, so I took an assignment in Eastern Europe for a few months. When I returned, even James was distant.”

Heather sat silent, and Lupin studied her face. At length, he asked her, “What are you thinking? Please say something... anything.”

“You can’t be a... a *werewolf*. This isn’t happening – it *can’t* be happening,” Heather said. “You seem so normal, but... what am I saying? *Normal*? There’s nothing normal about *any of this*! I *can’t* ... I don’t know if I can handle this.” She stood up.

“Where are yeh goin’?” Shona asked. “We’re not done here.”

“I can’t take any more, not now,” Heather blurted. “I need to be alone.” She brushed past Harry’s outstretched hand and rushed toward the doorway.

“If I’d known he was alive, I would a’ come back,” Shona said. “I was afraid of what I saw, but I would ‘a come back. I... I loved him somethin’ awful.”

“I can’t handle this. I just can’t!” Heather cried.

“Heather! He’s not a monster,” Shona called after her, but Heather was already running toward the switchback that led to the beach.

Lupin sagged in his chair. “I’ve turned her life completely upside down. She must hate me,” he sighed.

“She requires time to process what she has heard, and she will need support and guidance after that,” Dumbledore said.

“She can handle it,” Shona snapped.

Lupin muttered, “Can she? I doubt I could, under the same conditions.”

Shona nodded. “She’s tough. Give her time. I’m more worried about this talent the two of yeh were talkin’ about this morning. So... is she one of yeh, or not?”

Dumbledore thoughtfully stroked his beard. “As I said, she is not a witch, not in the sense which we generally understand. Miss Malloch, your daughter was reading my thoughts last night, or more precisely, my intentions.” Harry’s mouth dropped open. “This is a form of a magic we call Legilimency,” Dumbledore went on. “She showed an ability to recognize and perhaps even prevent my own use of Legilimency, which is a defence that we term Occlumency. These are both rather advanced magics, and she wields them with no understanding or instruction. At the same time, the training wand barely responded to her. She may be a wild talent.”

Lupin appeared surprised. “Isn’t that really a myth?” he asked.

Harry was reeling – everything Heather had said about spotting lies suddenly took on different meaning. “You mentioned that before – what do you mean?” he managed to ask Dumbledore.

“Wild talents are Muggles or Squibs who possess one magical ability or skill in full measure,” Dumbledore explained. “Sometimes, they possess it in greater measure than most wizards or witches. There have been cases of Muggle healers who unwittingly cast wandless healing charms. Mr. Filch casts only one charm but he does so with his hands as effectively as I cast it with a wand. Algernon studied a case of a Muggle gambler who could divine the outcomes of future sporting contests with fair accuracy; the poor man barely avoided losing his life over it. There are more wild talents than anyone realises, Remus. For the most part, these people live their lives in a Muggle context. Many fail to fully recognise their ability; others intentionally hide or obscure it. Given the current climate, that may be for the best.”

“Heather has commitments, right? She has to deliver a record soon,” Shona said firmly. “She can’t be dragged off to some school for months at a stretch.”

“That should not be necessary,” Dumbledore said. “Together, we shall find a means to help your daughter address her ability in the context of her life.”

“About this record business... there’s something else you should know,” Lupin said to Shona. “The man who owns the recording company is a wizard.”

Shona gasped and began to cough. “I knew he was a rotten bastard, but... cor, he’s not one of *them* ... is he?” she managed.

“We don’t think so,” Lupin told her, “but he’s not exactly a favourite of ours. Harry’s a sort of accidental business partner of his.”

Shona’s eyebrows rose. “You’re in business with Keith MacLeish? Don’t suppose yeh’ll tell me how ta get Heather *out* of business with him?” she asked Harry.

“Erm... I haven’t even met the man yet,” Harry admitted. “It’s been a problem?”

Shona scowled. “Heather was satisfied with what she had,” she said. “The deal with MacLeish was dear Fiona’s last hurrah; I set a solicitor on her after that. Thank God she’s cut out now; after expenses and an allowance, the money goes inta trust. I dinnae get her out of the contract, though, and she owes three records. I still cannae fathom why they took her on at all. They’re tryin’ ta make her inta somethin’ she’s not.”

Lupin began, “What do you mean by that...?”

Harry fidgeted in his seat. “Shouldn’t someone go after her?” he blurted.

Lupin started to stand, but Shona waved him off. “She’s not ready for yeh. She doesn’t want me ta be her mum but she’ll cry on my shoulder if yeh give her some time. That’s the thing now.”

“It is nearly one o’clock,” Dumbledore said to Harry. “You should make your way to the tower

and await Kingsley's arrival. You must not neglect your training."

.. ..

"You're particularly intense today, Potter," Shacklebolt said. "I think we'll stop for now, before one or both of us are injured."

Harry leaned forward, his hands pressing against his knees, and struggled to catch his breath. "I'm sorry," he panted. "It won't happen again."

Shacklebolt gave a derisive snort. "Of course it will; you're intense by nature. Let's turn to your assignment. Sit." Harry summoned one of the chairs pushed against the side of the Great Hall and sat heavily.

"Yet another example, I see," Shacklebolt said. "You really have no idea, do you?"

Harry was distracted, and still a bit short of breath. He looked at Shacklebolt strangely. "What are you going on about?"

Shacklebolt pointed at the chair. "You may have given your wand a bit of a wave, though I didn't see it, but you didn't speak the charm – did you?"

Harry shrugged. "I really don't know. I wasn't thinking about it."

"I suspect that you've just identified a common thread," Shacklebolt said; "No matter - it's time to go over your assignment." Harry frowned, and Shacklebolt paid him no mind. "I'm assuming you experienced the usual sorts of childhood incidents?" he went on. "Primary school seems to bring out the best and worst in the young."

Harry nodded. "I ended up on a rooftop once, and I made a pane of glass disappear at the zoo."

"What's the first peculiar incidence of magic that you remember after your Hogwarts letter?" Shacklebolt asked.

Harry chuckled. "It's *all* peculiar, when I stop to think on it. But especially peculiar... let me think..." He struggled to think of something. "Well... there was the bit with the Sorting Hat, at the end of my second year."

Shacklebolt's eyebrow rose slightly. "What were you doing with the Sorting Hat?"

"Fawkes brought it to me, in the Chamber of Secrets... I assume you know about that?" Harry said.

"That's the chamber Salazar Slytherin supposedly built within Hogwarts. I know you were believed to be the Heir of Slytherin for a time – ridiculous, of course – but how are you connected to the Chamber?" Shacklebolt asked.

Harry gave him an abbreviated version of the events, and Shackbolt's eyes lit as he listened. He was particularly amused to discover that Ron was responsible for Gilderoy Lockhart's memory loss.

At length, Shackbolt said, "Arthur and Molly continue to surprise me. As far as I know, they've never told a soul – excepting Dumbledore, to be sure." He stroked his chin thoughtfully, and added in a slow rumble, "Just as well: Ginny Weasley would be a pariah if people knew she'd been under the thrall of either Voldemort or Tom Riddle." When Harry's eyebrows rose, Shackbolt smiled. "The Order has been briefed as to Voldemort's identity. For the life of me, I don't know why that's held close. I think we should shout it from the rooftops."

"So, does that qualify as 'peculiar magic'?" Harry asked.

Shackbolt laughed. "That incident was peculiar from beginning to end. I will, of course, keep it in strictest confidence. Perhaps we should limit the discussion to events since you left Hogwarts in June?"

"Well, I suppose it all started when I blew up Dudley's punching bags..." Harry began. Event by event, they worked their way through the summer. It was a longer list than Harry had contemplated. He hadn't thought about the telephone call to Hermione since Bill Weasley had told him on the steps to Gringotts that she was safe; as they mulled over what had happened, Harry realised that he was probably responsible. He might have knocked Aunt Petunia's prize vase off the mantle, as he had been angry with Dudley. He still wondered about his response to Snape's Legilimens attack; Harry noticed that Shackbolt smiled faintly at the mention of Snape writhing in pain. There had been the screaming in the stairwell when Draco Malfoy had held his ears in pain.

He was surprised when Shackbolt told him that he had summoned a chair for Tonks, in the shed at the Burrow; he thought he remembered reaching for a chair, but Lupin had told Shackbolt otherwise. Of course, he had taken down Dumbledore's barrier and silent space; later he was able to create his own silent space without clearly knowing how it was done. He disarmed Dumbledore without a wand as well, when he had thought Hermione might be *Obliviated*. Shackbolt growled at the mention of his earring being summoned with a table leg. He had twice apparated without Apparating, once through a shield charm. He had summoned Ginny in mid-air, he had summoned Shackbolt off the rocks and into the sea, and he had summoned Heather on the beach as well. Shackbolt had the good grace not to mention what Harry had done to the Death Eaters; it was understood, and nothing needed to be said.

"There was a shared dream, as well, but that may have been Voldemort's doing," Harry said cautiously.

"Explain," commanded Shackbolt. Harry walked through a very flat, detached version of the dream, ending when Ginny, Luna and Daphne Greengrass were sent away.

Shackbolt asked, "Have you discussed this with anyone?"

“Ginny and Luna were there,” Harry recounted. “Ron knows about it, in general. Tonks knows it happened. That’s it. Of course, I don’t know if Hermione spoke to anyone.”

“Many of us are rather superstitious when it comes to dreams. It’s best you keep that under wraps, although you should explore it further with Dumbledore, or... Lupin asked me... he wanted to know about other kinds of resources.” Shacklebolt’s hesitance surprised Harry. “Certain resources are available to Aurors when they experience, er, certain sorts of difficulties. Do you require... certain resources?”

“Madam Bones asked about that,” Harry said. “I think Hermione was the one in need of those.”

“I’m certain that she has them,” Shacklebolt said. “I’m also mildly surprised that you know of her needs. Have you received a message?”

“No... should I be expecting one?” Harry asked excitedly.

Shacklebolt shook his head. “I assumed that was why you knew,” he said. Harry glared at him, but he was too spent to argue.

“Back to the assignment, then,” Shacklebolt said. “I certainly heard some common threads amongst your descriptions. I wonder if you did, as well? Let’s begin with physical states during the various episodes.”

“Erm... heat? I remember being hot,” Harry said.

Shacklebolt waved his wand and muttered. He wrote the word ‘heat’ in mid-air. “Continue,” he said.

“Sweat? I wasn’t just hot – I was practically soaked a time or two,” Harry added. Shacklebolt wrote ‘sweat’ beneath ‘heat’. He motioned for Harry to go on.

Harry said, “A draft – I remember a draft. It was like a wind, when I blew up the punching bags, and when... well, you know.” Shacklebolt scribbled ‘draft / wind’.

“All of those states are associated with substantial discharges of magic. Very well - let’s follow on the five most significant episodes,” Shacklebolt directed. “In my mind, those would be the destruction of the punching bags; the long-distance conjuring of the flower and the book; the apparating that wasn’t Apparation; the bodily summonings; and the incident at the Grangers’ home. We’ll set aside the dream for now. What were your emotional states?”

“Anger, for some of them,” Harry said immediately. “A lot of anger.” ‘Anger’ joined the other words floating in the air.

“What else?”

“I don’t know,” Harry grumbled. “Rage? Well, I suppose that’s just anger.” Shacklebolt wrote nothing.

“Why were you angry when you destroyed the punching bags?” Shacklebolt probed.

“I’d just gotten the letter from Gringotts about Sirius’ will,” Harry said. “I went down to the cellar, and everything just came out... how I’d gotten Sirius killed, you know, and how everyone around me gets hurt. I was thinking about Voldemort killing people... the Dursleys, Dumbledore, Lupin, all of you in the Order, the Weasleys, and my schoolmates... Ron... Hermione...” He clenched his fists and squeezed; somehow that seemed to help. Shacklebolt wrote ‘worried about Granger, Ron Weasley’ beneath ‘anger’.

“Right, then. What were you feeling when you did the long-distance conjuring?” Shacklebolt asked.

“Hermione and I were having a row. She was angry with me for cutting myself off at the outset of the summer, and I made her cry. I felt like such an arse. I remember

wanting to apologise, you know – to make her feel better,” Harry recalled. Shacklebolt wrote ‘comforting Granger’.

“You scared us half to death, truth be told,” Shacklebolt said. “Of everything you’ve done, that is the most difficult for me to comprehend. What about the non-Apparations?”

“When we were training, I was panicked,” Harry said. “You were putting on your Voldemort act, and I was trying to figure a way to get behind you. You started in on what Voldemort does to Aurors...”

“...and to women, and what he would do to people close to you – I recall that,” Shacklebolt said. He scribbled ‘times two’ next to ‘worried about Granger, Ron Weasley’.

“I think you know enough about the second time,” Harry said quietly.

Shacklebolt looked sadly at Harry. “I do. I’m left with one question about that event. I hope you’ll have an answer, but I’ll understand if you don’t. When you crossed that room, who were you trying to save?”

“Wormtail was killing her,” Harry said softly. “I had to do something.”

“I assumed that you were trying to save everyone in the room. You played it as well as it could be played. I’ve never seen anything like that – never in my life,” Shacklebolt admitted.

“I’m glad it turned out that way,” Harry said.

Shacklebolt wrote ‘saving Granger’, and then went silent for a long time, long enough for Harry to become unnerved by the unbroken column of ‘Granger’ floating before him.

“The summoning is interesting,” Shacklebolt mused. “Summoning the Weasley girl isn’t so hard to understand.” He scratched out ‘Ron Weasley’ next to ‘Granger’ and instead wrote ‘friends’.

“I was trying to keep Heather from falling into the sea,” Harry offered. Shacklebolt nodded, and changed the ‘times two’ next to ‘worried about Granger, friends’ into ‘times four’.

“What about me?” Shacklebolt asked.

“Well... I just wanted to pull you into the water,” Harry smirked.

“Charming,” Shacklebolt said. “We’ll set that one aside, other than to note that the wandless work seems to be getting easier for you, perhaps more conscious and less instinctive... or at least it requires less provocation. Despite that, one thread seems more common than the rest – especially for the major events.” He waved his wand at the words drifting in the air. “You need to determine *why* she’s the common thread. If you don’t take this up with Dumbledore, I will.”

“I thought you said you would keep my confidences,” Harry fumed.

“I said I would keep the events relating to the Chamber of Secrets in confidence, and I shall. This, however, is too critical to leave to chance,” Shacklebolt said. “You need to clearly understand how she will help you or hinder you. Frankly, you need to engage in the same exercise with regard to all of us, including Lupin’s daughter. You start with Miss Granger, however. It’s not clear to me whether she is an asset or a liability. You need assets, because you have more than enough liabilities.”

“Leave Hermione out of this,” Harry snarled. “She’s off limits.”

“Voldemort didn’t think so,” Shacklebolt said. Harry drew his wand in a flash.

Shacklebolt crossed his arms. “If I seem cold to you, so be it. I look forward to your bitterness and resentment ten years from now – if you’re still around to berate me, then I will have successfully discharged my responsibility.”

“We’d better be finished,” Harry snapped.

“*We* are,” Shacklebolt said. “Resume your reading. Be prepared to fight tomorrow – with your wits about you. One o’clock, this location.” He looked around the room with irritation. “Where is Tonks? She should have been here five minutes ago.”

“What for?” Harry asked.

“For your training – did you forget? Dumbledore wanted her to make quick progress with you, so I’m giving her two hours per day at the outset,” Shacklebolt said.

Harry was curious despite himself. “What can *Tonks* teach me that’s so important?”

“Underestimate her at your peril, Potter,” Shacklebolt chided him. “We want to take advantage of your physical assets. You’re young and you’re fast. Most of your opponents will be much older than you and much slower on their feet. You’re doing a fair job of working on strength and endurance, so we’ll leave you to your routines. We want to develop your agility, though, so we’ll

be falling back on Auror training methods.” He smiled broadly, and explained, “Tonks is going to teach you to dance.”

“*Dance?* ” Harry spluttered. “With *Tonks?* ” He buried his head in his hands; he could think of a thousand things he’d rather do than dance, and a hundred partners less likely to injure him than Tonks. *How easily can you mend a broken foot?* he wondered.

Harry Potter and the Years of Rebellion Dancing With The Partner At Hand

Chapter Twenty-five

DANCING WITH THE PARTNER AT HAND

“That’s enough,” Tonks said.

“I didn’t say anything,” Harry muttered.

Tonks chided him, “You’re annoyed – which is fine with me, by the way. I’d just rather you spew forth than hold it in.”

“All we’ve done for half an hour is walk in circles. I’m not the expert here – I’ve admitted that, right? – but walking isn’t dancing,” Harry said. “And I still don’t understand why in Merlin’s name I’m supposed to do this.”

Tonks shook her head. “You’d think I was that old ghost Binns, the way you’ve been drifting off,” she pouted. “We’ve done more than walk in circles, you know. You crawl before you walk, and you walk before you dance – *especially* the tango. You’re moving naturally with the beat, which is good. You seemed to grasp the idea of the line of dance, and you managed the obstacles nicely. Stand up – we’re not finished here.”

Harry reluctantly stood. *At least the music’s tolerable*, he thought.

This time, though, Tonks left the portable stereo idle. “No music this time,” she said. “The tango is about the movement between partners, and it’s about the *kind* of walking. A lot of dances are glorified walking, but the tango is different. By the time you know what you’re doing, you’ll understand why those differences matter.” She sighed, and put her hands on her hips. “I know you think this is pure shite, Harry. You’ll have to trust me for the moment. Start walking again, slowly.”

Harry was exasperated by the whole experience, but he complied. “I’m not in a trusting mood,” he sulked.

Tonks ignored him. “When you step forward, what part of your foot strikes first?” she asked.

“I don’t know... erm... my heel?” Harry ventured.

“Right in one,” Tonks said, “and dead wrong for the tango – wrong for duelling, as well.” Harry perked up slightly. She moved beside him, and they walked step for step, circling the emptied Great Hall counter-clockwise. “Step forward onto the balls of your feet,” she commanded. “Light steps... no, no, too stiff... that’s a bit better... *stop* .”

She stepped back and surveyed him. “Feeling a bit fey, are we?” She shook her head. “*Men* . You don’t need to tiptoe like you’re wearing a dress and heels. Just keep your weight over the balls of your feet. You need a picture in your mind...something that’ll stick...” She crossed one arm and rested her chin against her free hand, and then abruptly nodded. “You’re a jungle cat – a lion on the prowl.”

Harry took a startled step backward. “A... what?”

“A lion on the prowl,” Tonks repeated. “That should work for you, Gryffindor. Up over the balls of your feet, legs a little straighter than ordinary, a bit further back with each step than you might like... think ‘king of the jungle’.”

Harry couldn’t evade the dream he and Hermione had shared. He vividly remembered the feeling of stalking Malfoy and the other Slytherins, even though it hadn’t been real. He rolled forward slightly on his feet and stalked around the room. He could feel it – the power of the movement, the slow saunter from side to side, the readiness to pounce at any moment.

“Now *that*’s what I’m talking about,” Tonks said. “Stop, and do it backward. Tilt your head to the right, so you can see where you’re going. Stay light on your feet – think ‘king of the jungle backing up’... keep it to a walk, though... *good!* ” She nodded her head and clapped her hands. “You’re taking to this better than I expected. Right, then – let’s work on the embrace.”

Harry stared at Tonks dumbly, and she motioned for him. “Come over here,” she said. “Time marches on, right?”

Harry tugged at his collar. “Erm... embrace?”

“Tango partners embrace one another. Be glad Shackbolt isn’t teaching you, although he’d probably recommend swing instead,” Tonks said with a smirk.

“*He* taught you?” Harry asked.

“No, thank Merlin! He’s not exactly a forgiving partner,” Tonks laughed. “My point was that Auror pairs aren’t always male and female, but they still learn to dance together. It’s an efficient means to an end.”

“Oh... *oh!* ” Harry said. He had a brief and troubling image of dancing with Ron, and wasn’t sure whether to laugh or retch at the thought. *Embracing Tonks is a damn sight better than that* , he thought.

“Right, then – I’ll come to you,” Tonks said. “For the time being, I’ll be leading. That’s not how

it's supposed to be done in Latin dances, but I'm not a big one for tradition. Besides, I know what I'm doing and you don't. So... I guess you're the girl."

"Charming," Harry deadpanned.

"Again – shift your weight up onto the balls of your feet, but keep straight," Tonks ordered. She moved in close – very close – and pulled him toward her with her right hand against his back. "Put your left hand on my upper arm, and push just a bit. Keep it light – gentle but firm, like my hand on your back," she said. "The man pulls, the woman pushes away... sort of like life, I figure."

She extended her left arm to the side, and said, "Give me your free arm – come on, then." Harry put his right arm out. She pressed her palm lightly against his. "If we both knew what we were doing, we might hold hands," she said. "This way, if either of us lets up, our hands will come apart. Think of it as an early warning. How do you feel?"

Their faces were practically touching at the cheek. Harry felt silly and a little embarrassed. The feel of Tonks pressing against him stirred a flutter of something inside that he liked but didn't want. *Tonks isn't a girl*, Harry thought, *she's... she's just Tonks*. He fought an impulse to laugh nervously, and went for a joke instead. "I feel pretty," he squeaked in falsetto.

Tonks snorted in his ear, and their hands came apart. "Prat," she grunted, but he felt her smile. She took up his hand again. "Let's try walking. I'll move forward and you'll move backward. Remember to keep your head up." The first attempts were furtive on Harry's part. He felt awkward and flushed, and his hand kept slipping loose. Tonks turned so that Harry walked forward and she walked backward, and he was more comfortable. They kept alternating, forward and backward, backward and forward, until they moved smoothly together. Satisfied with his progress, Tonks put on the music and they repeated the exercise. When they stopped, he realised that his feet had remained untouched; he had stepped on her feet at least twice, however.

She grinned at him. "That was *la caminata* – the walk. It's the basic pattern, the one everything else flows from. You're doing well, Harry... really. I thought this might take the whole two hours today. Let's look at some basic steps, then." They breezed through the stroll, the cadence-counting step, the chase, and the cradle step in quick succession; Tonks told him that they were all two-step walks and could be strung together in any number and order.

"How's it coming?" Bill Weasley called from the loft overlooking the hall.

"I still have my feet, more or less," Tonks replied. "Come down here, so we can show him how it's done."

"I'm not much for a straight tango. We mostly danced milonga when I was in Chile," Bill said. "Up for that?"

"Milonga... I *like* speed," Tonks purred.

Bill descended the stairs to the hall. "Any of your music fast enough?" he asked.

“Fast as a Firebolt,” she laughed as she dug through a short stack of compact discs. She managed to scatter the plastic cases across the floor.

Bill tried not to snigger at her. He caught the curiosity on Harry’s face, and explained, “Milonga’s a kind of really fast tango. It’s sort of, I don’t know... bouncy? Some people think that the tango’s actually a slowed-down milonga, but I don’t think anyone knows. You really have to watch your line, though; it’s very quick, and you could easily collide in a crowd.”

“Any certain pattern, or should we just chance it?” Tonks asked Bill.

“How about *salida*, *cadencia*, tango close, *salida*, chase, stroll, *cadencia*, tango close?” Bill offered.

“Any adornos, or caresses?” she asked.

Bill shrugged. “Wing it, I suppose.” Harry gaped at them both, bewildered by the exchange.

Tonks nodded, and took up the position that Harry had held. Bill swept her up with a wolfish grin. The moment that the music started, they began to race around the hall. Harry quickly moved out of the way for fear of being run down. He was dazzled by the speed. Tonks’ coordination on the dance floor was so improbable to him; he waited for Tonks and Bill to go sprawling each time that their feet intertwined, but it never happened. The dance was terribly intimate; by the expressions on their faces, Harry almost felt as though he was intruding. After two songs, they stopped with obvious reluctance.

Tonks playfully slapped Bill on the arm. “You should know better than to place bets with me. That’s five galleons, mister!”

Bill smiled broadly. “Gladly surrendered,” he said. “Merlin, but you can dance!”

Tonks turned to Harry with a smirk. “So, my young pupil... any questions?”

“Do you expect me to be able to do *that* ?” Harry spluttered.

“No,” Tonks said, “but you’ll get what you need.”

“What did you think of milonga?” Bill asked.

Harry fidgeted. “Erm... it’s awfully... uh... close?”

Tonks sniggered, and Bill nodded appreciatively. “One of my friends describes it as ‘sex, standing up’,” he said.

“Bill! You’re going to give Harry fits!” Tonks scolded.

Bill waved his hands derisively. “Bah! He can handle it... can’t you, Harry?”

Harry suspected that his face was somewhere between red and purple. “Erm... standing up?” he blurted.

Tonks frowned at Bill. “All right, you’ve had your fun,” she said. “No worries, Harry. We will certainly *not* be dancing like *that* .”

“Are we done, then?” Harry asked anxiously.

Tonks nodded. “Practice your positioning without a partner. Remember – ‘king of the jungle’.”

Bill raised an eyebrow, and crossed his arms. “‘King of the jungle’, is it?” He cast a withering look at Harry, and didn’t break into a big smile until well after Harry became excruciatingly uncomfortable. He laughed, and cast a brotherly arm around Harry’s shoulders. “You’re almost as much fun to tweak as Ron,” he said.

“Have you seen him?” Harry asked.

“He was outside, last I saw. He must have been on the beach with Heather for a good two hours,” Bill said.

Harry froze. “I’m sorry?”

“He was on the beach with...” Bill stopped, and regarded Harry with growing alarm. “Are you all right? Did I say something wrong?”

“He was on the beach with *who* ?” Harry asked roughly.

Bill looked to Tonks. “Er... help me out here, would you?”

Tonks frowned. “She was in a right state, Harry. It’s no wonder, after the day she had yesterday,” she said. “I gave it a go earlier on – didn’t get anywhere, but I did learn a few new words. Ginny was down there for a time. I didn’t know that Ron decided to try.”

Harry set his jaw. “He’d better not have *tried* anything.”

Bill asked hesitantly, “What’s this? I know you and Heather are fast friends, but... uh... I presumed that you were spoken for.”

Harry simmered, just short of a full boil. “‘Spoken for’? What’s *that* about?” he demanded.

Tonks shifted her feet nervously. “Well... ‘spoken for’ is a bit strong, but... oh, for Merlin’s sake, Harry! Everyone who spent any time around you and Hermione this summer *has* to figure that there’s something between the two of you.” Before Harry could say anything, she waved him off and continued, “I know what you’ve said, and I know what she’s said. I also know what I saw at Grimmauld Place. If there was nothing there, then you were both putting on a splendid act.”

“*Enough!* ” Harry shouted. “Not everything is about Hermione! If we’re done here...?”

“I think I should speak with Ron,” Bill said gently.

“Whatever,” Harry snapped, and he stormed off. *Ron had better hope that I don't find him first*, he thought.

Lupin was outside the tower with Mr. Lovegood. Together they were removing the dents and long scratches left on the van by Shona's late-night collision. Lupin looked up, and asked, “How did you make out with Shackbolt? He said something about getting at the basis for your wandless magic.”

“He has an idea about it, all right. Rubbish... it's *rubbish*,” Harry snarled.

“A package arrived for you, from Gringotts,” Lupin said calmly. “Shackbolt looked it over and determined it to be safe. Were you expecting anything?”

“No,” Harry said with a shrug. He took the obviously shrunken box and then headed briskly toward the beach.

“Come back here before you do something that you'll surely regret,” Lupin said. “Heather's down there with Ron, but you obviously know that.”

“Ron's no good for her,” Harry said without looking back at Lupin.

Lupin continued to follow him through the tall grasses. “I'm thankful she was willing to talk with anyone, after what she's been put through. What's worse, I can't let up; her abilities still need to be identified and evaluated. She's certainly frightened of me; I suppose she'd be mad if she weren't. As for Ron... for the sake of discussion, tell me why he's no good for her?”

Harry turned on Lupin and said, “He's different now. He's my friend and I'd still want him at my back in a scrape, but I don't trust him alone with Heather. If she fancies him... I don't know what I'll do.”

Lupin remained calm, almost still. “Is this about Ron, or is this about you?” he asked.

“What's that supposed to mean?” Harry demanded.

“If it's warranted, then I'll be worried about Ron. At the moment, I'm more worried about you,” Lupin said. “What are your intentions here?”

“You didn't ask about my intentions yesterday afternoon,” Harry fumed. “All you did was warn me off.”

“Yesterday afternoon, I didn't know that Shona was alive, and I certainly didn't know that Heather was my daughter. Yesterday afternoon was a lifetime ago, Harry,” Lupin said.

“I don't have any intentions – Heather's a friend,” Harry said. His jaw tightened and he added angrily, “Everyone seems to be an expert on my bloody intentions – as if it were anyone's

business!”

Lupin locked his world-weary eyes on Harry. “You’ve had a very close friendship with Hermione for the last five years, and you may need to draw on that in the times ahead,” he observed. “I admit that I’ve wondered whether the two of you were becoming something more than simply friends. That’s quite different than suggesting that you’re somehow intended, or fated, or anything along those lines. I certainly haven’t decided that, and you’re correct – it’s no one else’s business, one way or the other.”

Harry cooled a bit, and Lupin plunged on. “Heather’s a different matter entirely. First, you’re a lightning rod for forces against which she has no defence. Death Eaters have been attacking Squibs this summer as well as Muggle-borns – she’s at enough risk already. Second, there’s something wrong about all of this.”

Harry eyed him warily. “What do you mean, wrong?”

Lupin sighed. “The magical world is one of coincidences, to some degree, but all of this feels wrong to me. You went from the Dursleys to Grimmauld Place to here in a matter of days. Your emancipation has had a number of consequences, and that the emancipation itself was – at least in part – contrived. Now, you proceed from being spotted riding down a lane to dining out to flirting to what I’ve no doubt is genuine affection, again in days. The object of your affection appears to be my offspring, born of a woman I believed dead – a woman who quite possibly should be a werewolf but is not. The only common factor in all of this would appear to be Sirius... but the review of your finances has caused me to give up on chance for the time being. Something’s amiss.”

Harry crossed his arms. “Are you suggesting Heather is involved in some kind of plot or something?”

“No, not intentionally at any rate,” Lupin insisted. “I just think you need to exercise caution. We both need to exercise caution. Neither she nor Shona possess protections or defences, and it’s possible that the both of them are unwitting pawns in some sort of plan. Those are my reasons for ‘warning you off’, as you put it.”

Harry wanted to argue with Lupin, but he could not. Instead, he lowered his head and said, “You’re right, of course.”

Lupin reached out to Harry, but Harry flinched. “I’m sorry,” Lupin said. “Merlin knows, I’m forever saying that to you.”

“It’s not your fault,” Harry said sullenly. “You’re right... and she’s your daughter, and you should protect her - even from me. It’s right for her to come first. I’ll manage. I’ve always managed.”

Lupin’s sad eyes grew sadder. “Harry... are you afraid that I’m going to abandon you?” he asked softly.

“No... no! Of course not!” Harry insisted, because he knew it was the right thing to say.

Lupin’s words were strong and clear. “I will not do that. I have accepted responsibilities where you are concerned, and I take them seriously; you’ll be seeing quite a lot of me. I want... I simply want you to be sensible. We both know what Voldemort will do to those close to you.”

Harry said, “What am I supposed to do if she doesn’t agree? I mean, she’s already told you to sod off.”

Lupin grimaced. “She’s headstrong. I can’t imagine where that comes from. Just be sensible - *please* .”

Harry nodded. “I understand,” he said, and turned away from the cliff’s edge. “So, what are you doing tonight?”

“Shona was flummoxed about missing half a day’s work; she certainly wasn’t going to miss this evening, as well. I’m taking Ted and Odd to dine at her restaurant and I believe that Albus will join us there,” Lupin said. “Ted’s been quite busy today, as you can imagine. I’m anxious to be updated. In fact, I’d be happy if you came along. Luna will come to dinner with us, I’d imagine; Odd surely wouldn’t leave her here alone.”

“I’ll come to dinner, then,” Harry said. As he turned back toward the tower, he hastily added, “Thank you.”

“Why? For preventing you from dashing to the beach?” Lupin asked.

“You know why,” Harry said quickly. He didn’t wait for a response.

Harry tucked away the box from Gringotts and then slipped back into the tower. As he climbed the stairs to the garret, Harry thought of the study that only he could enter. He wasn’t wearing the Black signet ring so he passed by the door – but he resolved to open it soon. The door to Luna and Ginny’s room was closed. Harry knocked.

“Ginny, I have reached my limit,” Luna called out. “Would you please leave me be?”

“Er... sorry,” Harry called back. “I’ll just be going, then.”

He heard a quick scramble behind the door, and then a click. The door opened slightly. “Please come in,” Luna offered.

“If you need time alone, I really can find something else to do,” Harry assured her.

“You are always welcome,” Luna told him. “Ginny is not welcome, at present.”

“I suppose she’s just worried,” Harry said. “We all were, you know.”

“That is obvious,” Luna said. “I have never seen so much fussing. It was helpful at first; now it is

irritating. I am not an invalid, Harry.”

“Then why have you hidden yourself away?” Harry asked. “I assumed that it was because you couldn’t manage the stairs.”

“This room has a lock that prevents Ginny from waiting on me hand and foot,” Luna said. “Thank you for letting my daddy and me stay here. I needed to sulk and curse and so forth.”

“Luna, if you ever need to talk...” Harry began.

“Thank you,” Luna said. “The offer is reciprocal. I do have one need at the moment.”

“Name it,” Harry said.

“I need to get out of this room and out of this tower, and I need to do it without Ginny or Ronald or my daddy following two paces behind,” Luna sighed.

Harry smiled. “I could take you... somewhere nearby. You could listen to music, or read, or whatever you like. We can use the Bonnie, of course, if you had something else in mind.”

“The Bonnie... do you mean your motorbike?” When Harry nodded, she smiled and added, “Perhaps later – that might be fun. A walk would do me good, for now,” Luna said. “You have a plan, then?”

Harry took out his wand and lightly tapped Luna on the top of her head. “A Disillusionment should do the trick,” he explained.

“What an unusual sensation,” she said as she disappeared from view.

“I’ll need you to have a look at something, at the doorway,” Harry explained. “Be sure to keep quiet – your voice will give you away.”

Mr. Lovegood never came out from beneath his van. Lupin eyed Harry curiously and asked if he was heading for the beach. Harry tersely said that he was not and moved on.

Halfway to the cliffs, Luna said quietly, “Thank you for sharing this with me. Thank you for moving slowly, as well.”

“Will you make it?” Harry whispered back.

“Oh, yes. I am very happy to be free, even if just for a little while,” Luna answered. After a few more paces, she said, “Why did Professor Lupin ask whether you were going to the beach? He sounded unhappy.”

Harry hesitated. “Uh... it’s nothing. You should see it at some point, though. It’s a steep hill to get down; I think it would be too much.”

“I’ll just take in the view from that rise,” Luna said. Harry heard the grass crunch more quickly.

“Luna, slow down,” Harry said, more loudly. “You shouldn’t overtire yourself.”

The trail of crumpled grass came to an abrupt stop a few feet from the cliff’s edge. Harry listened carefully, but heard nothing until Luna cleared her throat.

“Well... perhaps we should move on,” she said. “I need to sit for a time.”

“What did you see?” Harry asked cautiously.

“Ronald continues to seek solace. It is awkward and rather painful to watch,” Luna said distantly.

“Seek solace? What does that mean?” Harry asked; his voice rose with each word. “Luna? What does that mean?” He couldn’t see her, and she said nothing. *I have my answer*, he thought. Harry opened the door to the bothy, and waited.

A few moments later, an unseen hand lightly brushed across his arm. “Thank you, Harry,” Luna said. “I truly appreciate this.”

Harry quickly said, “*Finite incantatum*,” and Luna came into view once again.

Luna slowly spun in a circle, her big eyes taking in every detail. “I *love* the colours – they’re very *bold*,” she sing-songed. She ran her fingers along the spines of Sirius’ music collection. “Muggle record albums... and so *many* of them.”

Harry nodded. “They belonged to Sirius. The compact discs are mine.”

“I’ve heard of compact discs, but I’ve never seen one,” Luna said. She peered closely at the stereo receiver and amplifier and the compact disc player, and paused to read each label of each button and dial. She pushed the eject button on the compact disc player, and laughed when the drawer came out. Harry explained what he knew about how compact discs worked, and removed one from its case for her to examine.

“Fascinating,” she said. “My daddy prefers Muggle music to the WWN, mostly.” She continued to walk around the room, and took playful punches at the hanging bags.

“Would you like something to drink?” Harry asked. “Everything is from the market in the village. All I have are Muggle fizzy drinks and water.”

“Daddy fancies a Muggle drink called ‘Irn Bru’,” Luna said.

Harry’s nose wrinkled. “I tried that one,” he said. “Didn’t work for me.”

“I don’t care for it,” Luna agreed. “It smells good enough, but it tastes more like water than water does. I became fond of Coca-Cola this summer, actually. Did you know that it can be found everywhere in the world?”

“Including my icebox,” Harry added with a chuckle. He set a red aluminium can atop the counter.

Luna smiled. “I wonder how it will taste here. It was not as sweet in Sweden as it was in France.”

Harry found a glass and carefully poured from the can. Luna sat on one of the stools. She bumped her foot, and looked down. “Your trunk is much larger than this one,” she observed. “Is someone else from Gryffindor House staying with you?”

Harry frowned. “No. It belonged to my mother.”

“Oooh! What do you keep in it?” Luna asked excitedly. “Mother kept her school trunk. We store photographs in it.”

“My aunt held onto it, all these years,” Harry said in a low voice. “I haven’t opened it. I’ve come close, but I haven’t done it.” He passed Luna the glass.

She took a swallow. “Thank you,” she said. “I might have to spare space in my trunk for a few cans of this. Could it be mildly addictive?”

Harry was distracted by thoughts of the trunk at Luna’s feet. “I doubt it,” Harry said flatly. “It’s intended for children.”

Luna tapped the trunk with her toes. “Your mother had a pretty trunk. My mother’s trunk is knotty pine, practically lashed together.”

“I think I’ll have a drink myself,” Harry said. He opened the icebox, took out a can of Fanta, and decided that he didn’t need a glass.

“I imagine the trunk will clean up quite nicely. You might try using some Mister Sheen – the spray works best,” Luna suggested.

Harry’s nose wrinkled. “Bleagh! That stuff smells like Mrs. Figg’s house!” He eyed Luna warily. “Why are you so keen on the trunk, anyway?”

Luna took another swallow from her glass. “I should finish this before it stops fizzing,” she said. She quickly drained the rest of the glass, and then added, “I thought that you were keen on the trunk... and it *would* look smart in this room.”

“I should open it, I suppose, but... it’s hard to explain. I’m not sure that I really want to open it. Am I making any sense?” he asked.

Luna looked at him intently – a look that was rather different from her absent, dreamy expressions of the year prior. She was more interesting now, in Harry’s opinion. His darker thoughts took over; *having your throat cut must change you*, it occurred to him.

Her eyes lit and Harry thought she was about to say something. Instead she let forth the loudest belch he had ever heard, even from Ron. Luna’s eyes grew slightly wider than usual and she

quickly covered her mouth.

Harry dropped his can in shock. The sticky drink sprayed all over his trousers and across the carpeting. “*Merlin’s balls!*” he shouted. He scrambled for the rolling can, and then called out a cleaning charm with the ferocity of a curse.

Luna lowered her hand slowly. “I really *do* fancy Coca-Cola,” she cooed. Harry looked at her dumbly for a moment and then burst out laughing. She smiled broadly; her eyes narrowed, and Harry thought it made her look happier and less surprised.

When Harry finally stopped laughing, she said, “You should laugh more often; it becomes you. So... would you prefer company when you open the trunk? I could leave, if you’d rather be alone.”

Harry shook his head. “You’re not going to let this go, are you?” He picked up his mother’s trunk and moved it to the table in front of the couch.

“You really should put it away if you don’t care to open it,” Luna said. “I’ll stop now.”

Harry looked at her crossly. “Why don’t you teach Hermione how to do that?” he grumbled.

“How to do what, exactly?” Luna asked.

“How to needle me into doing something, and then back off,” Harry grumbled. “She’d just keep pushing; at least you’re polite about it.”

Luna returned to Sirius’ records. She pulled *Yellow Submarine* from the stacks, and expertly placed it on the phonograph. “Daddy is fond of the Beatles. Had I mentioned that?”

Harry grinned. “I figured that out for myself,” he said, recalling Odd Lovegood’s off-key rendition of ‘All You Need Is Love’. Luna looked at him curiously but asked nothing.

The music was distracting, as was the company – enough so that Harry found himself lifting the lid of the trunk without thinking. Luna leaned in attentively, as Harry set aside the lid and surveyed the contents. His mother’s trunk was the most orderly trunk he’d ever seen. He decided that she must have packed it away as a keepsake of her school years; not even Hermione’s everyday trunk could be this tidy, he decided. All of the contents were carefully partitioned into impeccable stacks.

There were at least two years’ worth of schoolbooks inside; Harry was surprised to see many of the same titles that he had studied. A set of school robes were neatly folded and placed to one side. Blank parchment was stacked along with quills and bottles of long-dried ink. Loose photographs were bundled, next to a photo album and a stack of seven small leather-bound books with unmarked covers and spines.

Luna waved her hand in the direction of the photo album. “May I?” she asked.

This was my mother’s, he thought. *She studied and went to class just like me or Hermione or Ron*

or Luna or anyone else. His mouth simply wouldn't form words, so he nodded at Luna by way of reply.

Luna turned the pages of the album as though it were something from a museum, to be carefully preserved. "You look rather like your father, but you have your mother's smile... actually, you have her entire jaw line."

"Uh... usually people mention that I have her eyes," Harry said.

Luna looked back into the album. "Oh," she said distantly. "I suppose that they do."

The photographs were mostly taken at Hogwarts. He thought of the images of him and Ron and Hermione, taken by Colin the year prior, and his mum and dad suddenly seemed so close to him – just beyond his fingertips. There were a few photographs in the trunk that were duplicates of the ones inherited from Sirius, but not many. Others depicted the same events, but in wildly different ways. Sirius' photos almost always captured people at play, Harry realised. His mother, on the other hand, photographed individuals, groups, whole rooms, landscapes – she tried to capture an experience.

Nothing inside the trunk dated after the spring of Lily Evans' seventh year. Harry wondered, not for the first time, how it had ended up with the Dursleys. Luna set aside the photo album and began to lift the cover of one of the nameless leather books. With a bang, the book flew open.

Harry's hair blew back in the face of a stiff breeze that arose from the pages. "None may open this book save Lily Evans or those of her blood!" the book howled, and slammed shut.

Luna blinked hard and rubbed at her eyes. The breeze had lifted her close-cropped hair into tufts. "Well... that was remarkable. I doubt the book came that way from Flourish and Blotts. Your mother must have been quite skilled at Charms." Harry nodded as he ran his fingers through his windblown hair; he couldn't argue with what he'd just seen. *She could manage this before sixth year*, he thought, and he was impressed.

He turned the book in his hands and examined it, though he didn't know what he was looking for. Then he carefully opened the front cover, to reveal a blank page. He began to turn the page, and felt an odd tingling in his fingertips. He saw a blur, and then meticulous handwriting appeared.

A personal journal,

Covering the period from September 1, 1976 to August 31, 1977

Lily Evans

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry,

Perth & Kinross, Scotland, UK

Harry held the open book in front of Luna. “Did you see that?”

Luna stared intently. “I see a blank page. What do you see?”

“It’s my mother’s journal, from... her sixth year, I think,” Harry said.

Luna said, “You’re of her blood, so you can open the book. It makes sense that I am not able to read it. If she opened the book and left it laid open on her bed or her nightstand, someone could have accidentally read it. This way, no one else could ever read what she wrote unless related by blood.”

“That seems extreme,” Harry said. He idly turned the pages, and revealed line after line of his mother’s small and precise script.

“Only someone who never kept a journal of their own would feel that way,” Luna commented absently.

Harry set down the book with a jolt. “Do you suppose...? I wonder if Aunt Petunia ever read any of these? *That* would have been a corker,” he said aloud. He winced. “Dudley couldn’t have... no, he wouldn’t have kept it to himself.”

“Aunt Petunia... you lived with your aunt and uncle in the summer,” Luna stated.

“I’m afraid I did,” Harry said flatly. He picked up the book again. “It’ll take a long time to read these. I think I’ll finish off Sirius’ journal first.”

Luna reached for the photo album. She opened to a picture of Harry’s father clowning with Sirius, and Lupin looking on. Her fingers traced across James Potter’s face, who flinched and seemed to look for the offending hand. “I recognize Professor Lupin. Is he older than your father? The other... the other is Sirius Black, isn’t it?”

Harry lost his words again. It hurt to see the pictures, more than he thought it should.

Luna lightly touched his hand. “Tell me about him,” she said. “Tell me about all of them. That is how you keep them alive, you know.”

Once Harry found the words, he couldn’t hold them in any longer. He talked and she listened until the stereo had long gone silent and the shadows had lengthened. Her lips were pursed as if she were ready to say something. She hadn’t spoken since she had prompted him, and he wanted to hear what she had to say. He shifted his weight and the Gringotts box dug painfully into his leg.

He rolled to one side and fished the box out of his trousers pocket. “Imagine that – another box,” he said ruefully.

“It’s small,” Luna said. Harry broke the seal on the lid and the box instantly increased tenfold in size and weight; he nearly dropped it.

“Gringotts sent this,” observed Luna. “Do you suppose it's Minister Fudge's head?”

Harry choked before he managed to say, “I don't think so.”

“I suppose not,” Luna admitted; “The box isn't really head-shaped, is it?”

“Er... should I open it, do you think?” Harry asked.

Luna shrugged. “I have no advice to offer,” she said. He pulled back the lid to reveal a parchment envelope addressed to him and a tightly folded cloth of some sort.

Mr. Potter -

Director Ragnok has been told that knowledge of your kin was either withheld or lost. Enclosed is a copy of a tapestry that the Director thought would be of interest. With our compliments.

Fliptrask

“Oooh , it's a family tapestry!” Luna said brightly. “The Potters are a very old family; I imagine the tapestry is quite large.”

“Why do you know that my family is old? Everybody else seems to know these things,” Harry grumbled.

“Perhaps the goblins have made amends for all of us, then?” said Luna. “I do not have to be here for this, Harry. You might prefer to share it with Hermione – she is the sort to take an interest in genealogy, wouldn't you think?”

“Stay,” Harry said.

Luna took up parchment and quill and began to sketch out a massive and complex tree as Harry had his first look at the Noble and Courageous House of Potter. The tapestry was so large that he could only unfold it one panel at a time. It was the antithesis of the Black tapestry: brightly coloured, with a breathtakingly real image for each person included. There was nary an obliterated entry to be found.

As Harry moved into the oldest panel, Luna said, “It's no wonder that you are a Seeker, Harry. Your family's predecessor was the House of Wright.”

“The House of...?” Harry stopped and let his fingers trace upward to the progenitors of his line. The tapestry began with Bowman Wright, the creator of the Golden Snitch.

“This must in some part explain your wealth,” observed Luna. “Bowman Wright had no sons and his eldest daughter married Mathias Potter. Mathias was much older than his wife... oh, see? He was Bowman Wright's apprentice.”

Harry moved down the line of Potter men, from Mathias to Samuel to Brendan to Nicholas to

Bartemius and finally to William. “Why doesn't it become the House of Potter until William?” he asked aloud.

“Perhaps it requires a certain number of generations to become a House?” Luna suggested.

“It says that William 'consolidated' these other houses: Molyngton, Piggott and Waldegrave. What does that mean?” Harry wondered.

“This Beatrice Molyngton must have been the last of her line,” Luna said. “If you look over here, the other two families come to an end here and here. The Molyngtons consolidated Piggott and Waldegrave, and then it all moved to William Potter. That's all a guess, of course.”

“Sounds like a brilliant guess to me,” said Harry. “There must be so many stories behind all of this.” As he moved onward, he wondered how Isabel Potter had been 'Lord' of the house for seven years in the 17th century; or why Martin Potter and his son Roger had both died in 1886, one year before the House went from being merely Noble to being Noble and Courageous; or whether it was normal for one House to 'consolidate' so many others. He discovered that Gladys Boothby was his great-grandmother; Luna had to prompt him before he remembered that she had created the Moontrimmer broomstick, which might have explained his modest share of the Comet Trading Company. He came to the last panel and had to set down the bulk of the tapestry – his hands shook too much to hold it. Luna let her hand come lightly to rest on his shoulder.

“My... my grandfather was called Alexander,” he whispered. “My grandmother was called Elisabeth.”

“They were in their sixties when your father was born,” Luna said.

“I had a cousin?” he gasped.

Luna peered more closely at the picture of a young boy named David Potter. “He was nine when he died,” she said.

“That's why they had my father,” Harry realised. “He was born four years later. The House of Potter needed an heir, right?”

“They loved your father,” Luna said with certainty.

The side panels followed several of the more recent marriages outward to a number of familiar families: Bones, Longbottom, and Greengrass, among others. Madam Marchbanks from the Ministry was something like a great-great-great aunt. The biggest shock was along the Bones line: Susan's great-great aunt Martha Bones had been married to Dumbledore. She had been in her 30s at her death, in 1917.

At the end was an embroidered and very current image of Harry. “I'm Lord Potter, I guess. It all comes down to me,” Harry said.

Luna said, “You've always known that much.”

Harry reverently folded the tapestry and set it atop the counter. “I always felt like I was outside all of this somehow, you know?” he said. “This brings it home: I had a family.”

“You still have a family,” said Luna. She pulled him into a feather-light hug, just close enough to know that she was there if he needed her. After a long while, she told him, “I should go back to the tower.”

“Do you really want to?” he asked.

“I imagine Daddy might be looking for me... or perhaps Ginny,” she said. Harry swore that Luna cringed slightly at the last.

“She can bugger off,” Harry said flatly.

Luna's brow furrowed. “I don't see how she could manage that on her own,” she said. “Buggery requires that –”

“Right, we'll be off then,” Harry blurted out, and he leapt to his feet.

They were most of the way back to the tower when they were met by a red blur. It was Ginny, and Harry wasn't pleased to see her or anyone else at that moment.

Ginny drew herself up into a fair imitation of Molly Weasley. “*Luna Lovegood!* What were you thinking, frightening everyone like that? We thought you'd had a fit and wandered off, or... or maybe *they* were here... and... and *you could have left a note, for Merlin's sake!* ” She pointed at Harry, and jabbed her index finger into his chest. “And *you* ! Of all people, *you* should *know* what happens when people sneak off without telling anyone...” Ginny stopped abruptly, clearly embarrassed.

Harry realised that he had liked St. Ebb much better when the wizarding world was far to the south. It didn't feel like it was his anymore. Ron was down on the beach stealing part of it from him, and Ginny was being horrid to Luna, and Harry decided that it was perfectly fine to be angry over all of it.

“Harry, I –” Ginny began cautiously.

“*Don't* ,” Harry said crossly.

“I asked Harry to take me out of the tower,” Luna said evenly. “Professor Lupin surely knew where Harry was, and Harry is very closely watched. I doubt there is a safer place than this property right now in all of Great Britain. Of course, I was not aware that I suffered fits or was prone to wandering off – thank you for informing me.”

“I didn't mean it like that,” Ginny insisted. “I just... why did you ask *Harry* to take you? I mean, I would have gone for a walk with you any time you liked. We weren't forcing you to stay upstairs.”

Luna gently rubbed at her throat through her high turtleneck, and looked everywhere except at

Ginny. “Have you ever been unable to breathe, Harry?” she asked offhandedly. “It is a new experience for me. It is very unpleasant.”

“I can’t breathe *right now*, and I hate it,” Harry said bitterly.

Ginny scowled. “Don’t tease me, Luna,” she said. “No one has been trying to smother you.”

Luna smiled. “I had no idea,” she said.

“Luna...” Ginny chided.

Luna came to a stop shoulder-to-shoulder with Ginny, but facing in the opposite direction. “Ginny, you have known me since we were very young. You have been a close friend to me for three years. You know me better than anyone alive, excepting my daddy. Reflect on the last two weeks. How *should* I feel?”

Ginny gave a deep sigh. “Why didn’t you say anything? All you had to do was say something.”

“You needed something to do with yourself,” Luna said. “I thought that you would stop after a few days.”

“What do you want from me?” Ginny asked; she sounded defeated.

Luna turned toward her. “I have no need for a nursemaid or a mother. I would like to have my friend back.” Ginny nodded slowly, and gingerly embraced her. Luna flashed a wry smile at Harry.

Ginny faced Harry and lowered her head. “What I said... it was out of line.”

Harry was not in a forgiving mood. “Whatever,” he snapped.

Ginny said, “Look... Ron wants to talk to you.”

Harry’s jaw tightened. He said, “Funny, I don’t see him here.”

Ginny offered, “He’s worried that you might have misunderstood –”

Harry burrowed into her with his eyes. “Does Ron need you to speak for him?”

“He just thought –” Ginny started.

Harry cut her off again. “He *didn’t* think. That’s the problem,” he said. “Tell him... tell him he’s a coward. If he wants to talk, he knows where to find me.”

Ginny glared at him. “You’re ruining everything. Tonight could have been fun.”

“Is something happening tonight other than dinner with Remus? No one told *me* anything,” Harry snapped.

“There wasn’t anything happening, but Heather had an idea and it all just fell together in the last hour or two,” Ginny explained.

“It figures I’d be the last to know,” Harry sneered.

“It’s not as though we knew where to find you,” Ginny protested.

“Ever hear of asking someone?” Harry shot back. “Whatever these plans were, they didn’t include me.”

“Why are you being such a prat?” Ginny shot back. “If you’d take ten seconds to talk to anyone before jumping to conclusions –”

“That’s funny coming from you, Miss Secret Keeper,” Harry snapped.

“There’s the pot calling the cauldron black,” Ginny returned with an edge.

“If Ron wants to talk to me, then he can do it himself,” Harry said. “Obviously, he has *something* to feel guilty about.”

Ginny balled her fists. “You and my stupid brother... *both* of you are *hopeless* ! Luna, *say something!* ” she demanded.

Luna said, “Harry has had quite enough to be going on about, without being swarmed upon. I am mildly disappointed in Ronald.”

Ginny said coldly to Harry, “I’ll give him your message, but you can guess how he’ll react to that word.”

“The word was *coward* ,” Harry snapped. “While you’re at it, tell him that having his sister do his dirty work is pathetic.”

“It’s one thing to light kindling, and quite another to start a forest fire,” Luna sang out, and then added, “Unless you want to burn down the forest, of course.”

Harry’s eyes squeezed shut. “You’re doing it again,” he pouted.

“It’s your choice, of course,” Luna laughed.

Harry opened his eyes and shook his head. “As if I had a choice,” he said, and then he smiled. He told Ginny, “Tell him he needs to speak for himself. That’s enough.”

Ginny gaped at Harry as if he’d just grown a second head. “*I don’t believe this!* You’re angry with Ron because he spent time with Heather? Who is the one that stole off with Luna without telling a soul? Who’s standing here now, flirting like mad?” She pursed her lips and glared at Luna. “*You’re* much more interested in my brother than in Harry, unless something has changed.” She threw up her hands. “And everyone gives *me* grief! Maybe Heather and I should leave the lot of

you here..." She snapped at Luna, "Don't do this," and stormed off.

Harry was quiet for a few moments before he asked, "Were we really flirting like mad?"

"Possibly," returned Luna.

Harry tugged at his shirt collar. "Erm... does that bother you?"

Luna stroked her chin thoughtfully. "No, I see no reason to think of it as a bother," she said. "Where are you supposed to be going tonight?" Luna asked.

Harry was flummoxed but managed to say, "Wha...?"

"Where are you going?" she repeated.

Harry shrugged. "I haven't the slightest idea what she was talking about."

"Ah," Luna said.

"Remus and your dad and the others are going into St. Ebb for dinner this evening. Why don't we both go with them?" Harry blurted out.

Luna nodded. "That sounds like a nice respite. I think I should like that... but what of Ginny's mysterious plans?"

Harry shook his head. "No, thank you. You're better company." Luna smiled faintly in response.

Harry slowly walked Luna back to the tower and up to the garret. He watched her carefully for signs of faltering but she made the stairs on her own. She opened the door to her bedroom without knocking, and provoked a shriek and cursing from an apparently half-dressed Ginny. Harry quickly turned away from the door, which slammed shut. The door to the washroom opened and Ron strolled out in a threadbare bathrobe. He nearly reached the other bedroom before Harry loudly cleared his throat. Ron whirled around; his expression flowed smoothly from surprise to embarrassment to anger.

"A coward, am I?" he snapped. Harry was surprised to see that Ron had his wand in hand.

"That's what Ginny was supposed to tell you," Harry said.

Ron waved his wand menacingly. "What did you tell her?"

"If you'd bothered to show up yourself, I wouldn't have to tell you," Harry responded. The anger flowed in him.

"Let's see... Bill said you were about as pleasant as a splinching, and Professor Lupin said straight out that I should avoid you. I can't imagine why I wouldn't come looking for you," Ron fumed.

“You were on the beach,” Harry accused.

Ron rolled his eyes. “Oh, so that's the big secret?” He didn't take notice of the growing quaver in Harry's voice.

Ron's tone only made Harry angrier. “Stay away from her,” he demanded.

Ron frowned. “Who do you think you are – her own personal Auror?” Harry advanced on him, and Ron levelled his wand at Harry's chest. “Back off!” Ron demanded.

Harry's voice went from quavering to threatening, and he didn't care. “If you so much as lay a hand on her, I'll hurt you. You know I can make good on that.”

Ron gaped at him. “You've gone 'round the bend, mate! She told me you were friends, and you stand here acting like the two of you are... are... are handfasted!” He stopped, and scowled. “You're jealous of me, aren't you? I don't *believe* this! Of all the... gods, Harry! *You can't stand it!* You can't stand that she might think that way of me!”

Harry balled his fists. A part of him longed to strike. “You're going to hurt her. You damn well know that you hurt Hermione. I'll bet that you hurt Lavender Brown, and didn't even see it. It's all about *you* now, isn't it – what *you* want, what *you* need. Let me tell you something – Heather's too good for you, and she's *not* going to be one of your two shags a day!”

“*That's what this is all about?* ” Ron shouted. “Harry, I went down there because Ginny was looking for *anyone* else that Heather might talk to! You were off training or whatever, and I happened to be there. Do you know what I did? I told her the truth. That's what she was looking for. Do you know what else happened? She kissed me, once, on the lips.”

Harry's pulse pounded in his ears. Ron kept on, but Harry scarcely heard him. “Will she kiss me again? I have no idea! Do I want her to? Why wouldn't I? Is this some kind of big thing? No! That's not what I'm looking for, and it's not what she's looking for either. She goes off to her thing, I go back to Hogwarts, and that's the end of it! If you have a problem with *any* of that, then you can just *SOD – OFF!* ”

Harry erupted. “She's too good for you, I said!” he shouted.

Ron snarled, “Well, that would be her decision to make, right?”

Harry reached out his hand, summoned Ron's wand, and tossed it aside. “I won't let you hurt her,” he hissed, and then – to his own surprise as well as Ron's – he charged.

Ron said under his breath, “Oh, for the love of...” He dove to one side, and barely escaped Harry's advance.

“Harry, listen to me,” Ron said, as he ducked a wild swing. “*She* kissed *me* ! What part of this isn't sinking in?”

“*Git!*” Harry yelled. He lunged again, and knocked Ron off his feet. He rolled over him, and slammed his fist into Ron’s jaw.

A door flew open. “Stop it! Stop it!” Ginny hollered. “Bill, are you just going to stand there?” Harry crouched, but didn’t move to strike again.

Ron cradled his jaw, and muttered, “What makes you think I’m going to hurt her? Her dad’s a werewolf – you don’t think that’s enough to keep me on edge?”

“She’s the only person who’s ever met *me* ... and liked *me* ... *ME* , not some bloody *freak* !” Harry shouted. Ron sat up, his arms lowered to his sides. Harry heard the echo of his own shout, and realised that the corridor was unnaturally silent. The anger slowly trickled out of him, and humiliation burned in its place.

“That’s not true,” Luna said quietly.

“She’s right – it’s not true,” Ginny agreed.

Harry glared at Ginny. “You couldn’t even speak to me, when we first met, because I was the Boy-Who-Lived,” he said. Ginny didn’t lash back; she just looked wounded. *I’m getting good at that* , Harry thought bitterly.

“I didn’t start anything – *she* kissed *me* ,” Ron said. “I’m not going to feel bad about that, Harry. I’m sorry that hurts you. I’m sorry... I’m sorry you’re lonely. I’m sorry –”

“I didn’t say I’m lonely,” Harry snapped.

“Yes, you did,” Luna said.

Ron stood up. “I’m going to get dressed. Bill took Heather home to get ready for tonight. They should be back any minute now.”

“What the bloody hell is with tonight, anyway?” Harry demanded. “Whatever it is, I assume I’m not invited?”

“I assume Heather planned to ask you. Not now, perhaps,” Bill said from the edge of the stairs. The sound of rushing footsteps receded down the stairwell. “Good show, Ron – you handled yourself well. Harry...” He frowned. “I’m worried about you. I think... never mind what I think. You don’t need to explain yourself to me, but I think you owe something to Heather.” Bill pointed over his shoulder at the steps.

Harry stood and descended the steps as though he were sleepwalking. Heather stood against the open door to the library, with her back to him. Harry cautiously reached out and touched her shoulder. Heather flinched, and remained facing away.

Her voice was cold and hard. “You didn’t even look for me, to see how I was,” she said. “You didn’t even look. No... you had to talk to everyone else instead, and make assumptions. Then you

ran off with Ginny's friend. I guess that didn't work out?"

"Luna is *my* friend, we didn't run off, and there was nothing to work out," Harry said. "She wanted out of the tower, that's all."

"Interesting timing – almost like you were playing tit-for-tat," Heather said. "I suppose I could have looked for you, but I just *assumed* ."

"You've made your point," Harry said.

"No, I don't think I have. Ask me how my day has been," Heather said dangerously. "Go ahead, Harry. *Ask me* ."

"All right," Harry said. "How has your day been?"

Heather turned on him, her jaw set. Her voice grew angrier as she spoke. "Oh... same old, same old. You know how it is... the boy I've been flirting with is some kind of bloody sorcerer with a price on his head, and the people around him are just as strange. Shona knew about all of this, as it turns out. In fact, I was born because she had a big fling with one of them, and because of that I'm like you lot – or sort of, but not actually. Oh, and the best bit? Her fling was with a *werewolf*! How the *fuck* do you *think* my day has been?"

Harry stepped back and looked at Heather, and wished that he hadn't. She wore a leather jacket over a closely fitted shirt, a short skirt, and leather high-heeled boots. Her hair was styled into waves, her cheeks were lightly blushed, and her lips were glossy. It was a far cry from sweatshirts and aprons, and Harry fumbled for words. He awkwardly began, "Heather, look..."

She acted as though she hadn't heard him. "You're all a mess, all of you. Ron had the decency to admit that. He's nice. I like him. I thought maybe he could be my holidaymaker, you know – no strings attached?" Before Harry could speak, she added, "He showed me his clippings from your silly teen thing; he was funny about it, really. What he did for Ginny... I think it was crazy and amazing. He's kind of cute, kind of funny, and more than a little frisky. If he gets something, he wants more. That's the most normal thing I've seen today. But *you* ..." She shook her head. "Just when I think I understand you, I don't. Ron practically worships you, and you jump him in the corridor! What is wrong with you? What do you want from me? Was I wrong the other day, you know, about your friend on the wall?"

"I don't know," Harry said. He wanted to look at the books, the light above, or the floor – anywhere but at Heather.

Heather threw up her hands, and stood up. "Fine. I can play games, too. I'm going in to Edinburgh tonight. There's a major festival going on right now, two of them really. The Fringe is all over the city and I need to do something I can understand. I rang some of the boys, and they're playing one of the clubs. Burke and Julian will have kittens over the whole thing, which seals it for me. Come if you want. Stay here if you want. I'll enjoy myself either way." She brushed past him, and moved briskly up the steps.

He heard Ginny shriek, “Oh! I am so not ready!”, and then a door slammed.

Luna called softly from the steps above, “Harry? Are you still there?”

“I’m here,” he said without turning.

“Were you told what is planned for the evening?” she asked. “William explained it to me. Apparently, Ginny had no intention of disclosing anything to me.”

Harry clenched his jaw. “I’m not going to just sit here while they go off for the evening. I won’t let him think...” He looked at Luna, and everything came together. “We’re going to Edinburgh tonight, the two of us.”

“You’re asking me to come along? We would be going with Ronald and Professor Lupin’s daughter?” Luna asked.

“Not a chance,” Harry said. “We’re going – you and me. If we happen to end up in the same place, I guess I can live with that.”

Luna drifted off into a dreamy look. “Edinburgh sits on seven hills, you know – just like Rome,” she said. “It is the only old city in Europe completely untouched by the Muggle World Wars. I have never been to Edinburgh.”

“So... does that mean you want to go?” Harry asked.

“I imagine Edinburgh is particularly appealing from the back of a motorbike,” Luna said.

“Oh... oh, yes, that’s good,” Harry said. A sly grin spread across his face. “Ron’s not going to like this, not a bit.”

Luna glanced aimlessly around the room. “Really? Do you think so?”

Harry appraised Luna in a new light. “You’re... erm... not exactly what I thought you were. I don’t mean that in a bad way! It’s just... there’s a lot more to you than meets the eye.”

“Perhaps you’re just seeing things downside-up,” Luna said. “You should ready yourself. Ronald has doubtless changed his wardrobe, having seen Professor Lupin’s daughter.” Harry nodded, certain that Luna was right. He rushed back to the bothy, stared critically at his shaggy hair in the washroom mirror, and began to clean himself up.

Harry Potter and the Years of Rebellion

An Evening On The Town

Chapter Twenty-six

AN EVENING ON THE TOWN

The evening meal was excruciating. Lupin's offer for Harry and Luna to join his party of four turned at the last minute into an awkward party of eleven, shoehorned into the smaller of the two private dining rooms at L'Oiseau Chanteur. Odd Lovegood fretted openly about his daughter's health, but didn't chastise Harry for taking her from the tower – 'Luna makes up her own mind', Mr. Lovegood declared.

Once again, Ron was turned out like a younger, taller imitation of Bill, sans earring and ponytail. He followed Heather around like an owl delivering posts. Ginny had settled on a black dress. Luna wore a powder blue turtleneck, trousers and white trainers. Harry went for a grey silk sweater and black trousers. He had packed his jacket for the ride, and had been quite surprised when Luna brought out an ancient aviator jacket with all manner of patches stitched onto it. At the dining table, Harry sat next to Luna and near Lupin.

Dumbledore was disconcerted. Harry guessed that neither Lupin's invitation nor Dumbledore's attendance had been purely personal in nature. Lupin was terse and frowning, and Harry eventually realised that it was because of Heather's outfit. Shona made no effort to mask her opinion; within earshot of the table, she asked Heather, "Anything I can do ta help yeh tart up a bit?"

Ted Tonks found the opportunity to fill in Harry on his progress. The funds for repaying the assessments were largely assembled, and Mr. Tonks had already met with more than two-dozen affected parties as well as two of the village councillors. Shona pulled Harry aside at one point and gruffly thanked him for returning the payments.

Harry thought that the food was fabulous. He was surprised how much he had missed his regular meals at the restaurant. Ron did a poor job of concealing his dislike of much of the meal; Heather was quietly but obviously displeased. For his part, Harry thought that Heather had no business spending time with someone who couldn't appreciate Shona's skill.

Heather was subdued throughout the meal; she spoke a bit to Ron and chatted with Ginny. She sat at the opposite end of the table from Lupin and Harry, and Harry had no doubt that was

intentional. They made eye contact at one point, but she quickly glanced away and resumed her conversation with Ginny. Harry only heard one word amidst the din: ‘violin’.

Just when Harry decided that the situation had reached the height of discomfort, Odd Lovegood spirited him away to discuss the proper context for sexual intercourse in adolescent relationships. The more Harry insisted that nothing remotely like sexual intercourse had happened or was going to happen between he and Luna, the more calmly explicit Mr. Lovegood became. Harry wasn’t clear whether Mr. Lovegood was trying to threaten him or to make recommendations. When Harry returned to the table, it was several minutes before he could comfortably look up from his plate.

Unable to arrange a large enough vehicle, Bill had borrowed Mr. Lovegood’s van for the evening; clearly, Bill was not thrilled. Lupin interrogated Heather, Bill and Tonks about destinations and times, and took copious notes. Heather barely acknowledged him.

Harry piped up, “Luna and I are travelling separately, on the Bonnie.”

Mr. Lovegood cleared his throat. “Luna, are you certain about that?”

“I am quite certain,” Luna said. “I am looking forward to it.”

“Harry, we’ll need to discuss security matters first,” Tonks said firmly. Harry nodded in acknowledgement, though he really didn’t care to have the discussion at all. Ginny stared daggers, but Harry wasn’t sure if they were directed at him, at Luna, or the both of them.

Ron said to Luna, “You’ve hardly moved in two weeks. How you could possibly be up to this?”

“I walked nearly a mile today,” Luna said. “I walked down and up and down the stairs in the tower, and all the way to the cliffs and beyond. I did stop for a few moments on a rise that overlooks Harry’s beach. It must be wonderful to have a beach all to one’s self.” Ginny’s fork slipped from her hand. Bill and Tonks abruptly stopped their side conversation.

Ron’s ears reddened. “If you can’t be talked into staying behind, then you should ride in the van.”

“I immensely enjoyed riding on Harry’s motorbike, and I am looking forward to the rest of the ride,” Luna said. “In any case, we have our own plans in Edinburgh.”

Heather looked up from her plate. “What plans?”

“What if you get tired and slip off?” Ron asked.

“That seems unlikely,” Luna said. “I trust Harry. His actions have earned my trust, Ronald.” Heather watched Luna with narrowed eyes, Harry noticed.

“What have I done to *you* ?” Ron asked anxiously. “All I’ve done is look after you for two weeks, and I’m treated like this?”

“Ginny has done most of the looking after. How *am* I treating you, exactly?” Luna asked. “I

simply said that I enjoyed Harry's motorbike, and that he has earned my trust. You're rather defensive."

All the adults at the table watched the exchange with great interest, Lupin in particular. Harry was surprised that neither Luna nor Ron seemed to take notice; he wished that they would.

"Ron's right," Heather said suddenly. "You should ride in the van, Luna. I can ride with Harry. I've ridden with him before, so I know what to expect." *What are you doing, Heather?* Harry wondered.

Ron smiled, and it was obviously forced. "Mr. Lovegood said it himself – Luna makes up her own mind. If she's set on riding with Harry, I suppose I shouldn't stand in her way."

"No... really, Ron. You were right in the first place. I'll ride with Harry. The back of a motorbike is no place for someone weak," Heather said.

Luna's eyes could make her expressions difficult to read, but Harry was not in doubt. "Weakness is relative," she said airily. "For example, I would be unable to run for even a quarter-mile at present. However, I could transfigure a person into a worm with only modest effort."

"Luna, you're being silly now," Mr. Lovegood chastised her. "Perhaps you might be capable of transfiguring a person into another mammal, but certainly *not* into a worm. You'll have to be past your N.E.W.T.s before you even *think* of trying something like that." Harry watched Heather; she didn't visibly react to either the thinly veiled threat or to the clarification.

Harry decided to intervene. "I have the directions," he said. "We might meet you later. Luna, are you ready?"

Luna smiled serenely at Ron. "I'm ready for anything," she said to Harry. "I'm so looking forward to seeing some of Edinburgh." She stopped to kiss her father on the cheek, and then lightly took Harry's hand as they walked out of the dining room. Ron's stare was murderous; for her part, Heather regarded Harry with a faint smirk and shake of her head.

They slipped through the kitchen to the alley, where Harry could discreetly enlarge the Bonnie. Tonks followed closely behind. Shona intently watched Harry walk past her station, and Harry stared back. Her eyebrow rose ever so slightly.

Harry gently but firmly grasped Luna's arm as they walked down the steeply sloping West Port. Luna kept staring up at the Castle Rock that loomed above them, a ghostly apparition that cut through the drizzle. Harry was sure she would catch her toe on a cobblestone and fall flat.

When she wasn't looking up, Luna watched the walkers and diners along the sidewalks. She commented on the clothes and the hats and the hair. She picked out the couples that held hands and the men who were cads and the women who were looking for a change. She was a bit too loud and tended to point, but she made for an eccentric Muggle and not a conspicuous witch. She was

funny, witty, occasionally catty, and not terribly loony as far as he could see. For a time, she made him forget the last three days. Nothing on Earth could make him forget the balance of the summer. He enjoyed himself nonetheless and was in no hurry to reconnect with the others.

The West Port opened wide into the Grassmarket, which teemed with people despite the turn in the weather. Harry had offered to transfigure an umbrella but Luna declined; she seemed to enjoy the rain. Motorcars were banned from the area by orange cones and harried traffic wardens, and people occupied every conceivable space. Long winding queues before several shop fronts surely led into restaurants, clubs and the like. Pressed by the crowd, Luna stopped abruptly and tried to blend into the stonework between two shops.

“Are you all right?” Harry asked.

“Yes,” Luna said hesitantly. “I do enjoy watching people, but *this* is rather overwhelming.”

Harry grinned. “Yeah, I’ve never seen anything like this. It’s great, isn’t it?”

Luna managed a shaky nod.

“You’ve travelled a fair bit, right?” Harry asked. “Crowds can’t be new to you.”

“They’re not, but we avoid larger cities,” Luna explained. “Daddy doesn’t care for the commotion. I... I think that I appreciate his logic.”

Harry held out his hand. “Maybe this will grow on you,” he ventured.

“You like it,” she observed. “All the people, the movement, the noise... you really like all of this. I am confused, Harry. You seemed to prefer solitude.”

“What, because I like being in St. Ebb?” he asked. Thinking for a moment, he added, “I like both, really. It would be fantastic to have a choice.” Most of the buildings that ringed the Grassmarket were old stone tenements, several stories high. Balconies jutted from the highest floor of a stone building opposite them; there were patio chairs on one, and revellers peering down from another. Harry asked excitedly, “Can you imagine having a flat here? You’d be a few steps from all of this.”

“I doubt it’s like this all the time,” Luna pointed out. “Besides, half the world would be a few steps from *you*. ”

“That wouldn’t matter,” Harry said. “I’m nobody here.”

“Can you teach me to appreciate this?” Luna asked. She took his outstretched hand.

Now Harry did the pointing. Luna seemed steadily less apprehensive, but clung tightly when the crowds grew close. There were dozens of buskers about. They walked past some jugglers. Harry looked closely, and did a double take; they were the same jugglers as in the Muggle market in London.

Harry easily jostled through the crowd, and Luna squeezed his hand until it was nearly numb.

“Oi, who wants to have a go?” one of the gaily clothed men called out.

Harry stepped up. “I took a turn in London a few weeks ago, but I’m game again,” he said.

The juggler pulled his blue top hat low. He looked Harry up and down, and his eyes fixed on Harry’s forehead. “Whitechapel Market, right? Yeah, I remember you. You’ve got the knack. Don’t worry, mate... we won’t make you look *too* bad. Can’t have that in front of your lady friend, can we?” The juggler winked. Harry was pleased that it was growing dark; surely no one saw him flush.

Harry turned to Luna. “You don’t mind, do you?”

“Do you require my permission?” she asked.

“I just... you know, the crowd...” Harry stammered.

“I am fine,” Luna said. She waved to the jugglers and called out sweetly, “Make this as difficult as possible, please.”

The other juggler, who wore a black beret, bowed grandly. “As you wish, good lady,” he said. A good share of the nearby crowd sniggered. Luna looked on distantly as though she had said nothing.

Harry frowned, and moved tentatively into the ring formed by the onlookers. Without warning, the jugglers flung four rubber balls into the air. Somehow, Harry managed to keep three in the air long enough to get his bearings and guide them into a smoothly flowing pattern.

“Not bad, not bad,” the top-hatted juggler said. “We’ll have to try harder.”

“Much harder,” his partner agreed. He tipped his beret jauntily, and reached into an open trunk. Harry nearly dropped the rubber balls when the juggler revealed what looked to be a cannon ball with holes in it.

The top-hatted juggler laughed heartily. “A little ten-pins, eh? Nah... we wouldn’t want to break any ickle fingers now, would we?” He whipped out two more rubber balls, and tossed them over Harry’s head. Harry managed to snare one of the two, whilst keeping the other three in motion.

“Four is good, four is cracking,” the juggler encouraged him. “Oi, Martin, put back the ball and fetch the pins.” Out came four bowling pins, deftly flipped one at a time to the juggler in the top hat. As Harry struggled to maintain the four balls in the air, the two jugglers began exchanging the bowling pins. Soon they had worked in two rubber balls, taken out two pins, and then added a whirling chef’s cleaver. Harry caught his four rubber balls one at a time, and watched in amazement; the pins were surely slick from the rain and mist, he figured. The two jugglers stopped, and the juggler in the beret gamely held out the cleaver for Harry. Harry took two quick steps back, and the crowd laughed.

“No? Well, you’re a good sport, and a fair juggler, kind sir,” the juggler said loudly. “In the spirit of friendship and good will, we will *not* make you eat fire.”

“Why not?” Harry asked.

Both jugglers gaped at him for a moment, and then laughed uproariously. Luna tugged hard at Harry’s arm.

“Keep the balls, my friend, as a token of our esteem,” the top-hatted juggler said. They encouraged applause for Harry, and Luna dragged him back into the crowd.

Harry stuffed the balls into the pockets of his jacket. “Luna, what are you...?”

Luna pulled Harry into a hug, which startled him. She thrust her mouth against his ear and whispered insistently, “You were planning to eat fire? Are you mad? You can’t cast a flame-freezing charm in the midst of a crowd of...” The beret-wearing juggler thrust a flaming torch into his mouth. Harry turned so that Luna was facing the action, and he felt her jaw drop.

“Neither can he,” Harry whispered back.

Luna pulled back, her eyes even wider than usual. “An *excellent* point,” she sing-songed. “I *have* to know how that is *done* .” They lingered there a while, but moved on when the jugglers showed no sign of stopping. As they weaved through the throngs of revellers, Luna again gripped him tightly. They passed beyond the Grassmarket and the crowds lightened but Luna never relinquished his hand.

They walked in silence past museums and through part of what proved to be a university campus. The area was still well trafficked, but even more appealing to Harry than the Grassmarket. He turned down a route marked as South Bridge, and spied a harried-looking woman attempting to tug a pram over a threshold and through an open door. He quickened his pace, and Luna followed without prompting.

“Mind if we pitch in?” he asked the woman.

She said, “I’ve done this a hundred times. You’d think...”

“It’s not a bother, ma’am,” Luna said. She held the door wide, and Harry reached down to free the wheels of the pram. The child inside was asleep, and he took care to set the pram gently down on the other side of the threshold. The woman muttered her appreciation and moved inside.

Harry turned back to the door. “It’s a café of some kind. Fancy a hot chocolate?” Luna smiled serenely and nodded. They were seated two tables away from the woman with the pram, who spread books and papers across the table and absently flipped her hair away from her face. Harry was reminded of Hermione setting up camp in the library at Hogwarts.

They waited in silence for the hot chocolate to come. After a sip, Harry said, “Luna, I’ve had a great time.”

Luna said, “As have I. You make for pleasant company.”

Harry took two more sips to calm himself, and then asked the question that had gnawed at the back of his mind all evening. “So... why don’t you tell me what you’re up to?”

Luna slowly swirled her hot chocolate. Each turn of the spoon launched another puff of steam. She was silent for a long while. “This has become so confusing. People are confusing,” she said at last, without taking her eyes off the spoon and the cup. “Perhaps I should stick to Snorkacks. One knows where one stands with a Snorkack, you know?”

Harry had no idea what Luna was going on about, but he wanted to understand. “No, I don’t know. Tell me?” he asked, in hopes of drawing her out.

“Snorkacks in the wild live to be about twenty, about the same as a Kneazle,” Luna said slowly. She steadfastly refused to look up from the swirling hot chocolate, which had surely cooled to lukewarm at best. “They reach maturity before the age of two. They have no mating rituals, no courtships. They simply mate for life. Snorkacks become intertwined at their very souls, and they are never wrong about their mate – *never* .”

Harry thought he was onto something. “It would be easier if people were like Snorkacks,” he offered.

Luna looked up from her cup brightly. “You understand,” she said.

Harry said, “Ron’s not the same person that he was, Luna. I’m sorry, but it’s the truth. I doubt he’ll ever be the way...” He trailed off as Luna’s face dimmed.

She said softly, “You don’t understand.”

“I’m trying,” Harry insisted. “This *is* about Ron, right? I mean, you’ve had a crush on him for ages – long before Hogwarts, I heard.”

“We were like Snorkacks, you know,” Luna said. Her voice became strained and her eyes actually seemed to grow bigger. “Ronald... Ronald couldn’t see it, of course, but I always knew he would. When I fell into his circle – your circle – it simply offered confirmation. Then everything grew dark. First, there was Umbridge, and then the Department of Mysteries, and he changed. You changed. Everything changed.”

“I’m having a hard go of it with Ron,” Harry admitted. “I’ve tried, but I just keep blowing up. I was hoping that we’d patch things up, you know, before the end of the summer. I thought... well, I hadn’t counted on a crowd.”

“I will not cost you your friendship with Ronald,” Luna said. “I can talk to Daddy. We can leave tomorrow. Perhaps you’ll still have the time to mend things? I never intended...”

“How are you responsible for this? This is between Ron and me,” Harry told her.

“Snorkacks don’t know for certain until they mate,” she said absently. “Perhaps that is the problem.”

“Luna, I’m really trying here,” Harry said. He tried hard to keep the exasperation out of his voice. “The Snorkack thing is throwing me off, right?”

“It’s so easy for Snorkacks,” Luna said, her gaze returned to the cup before her. “They’re never wrong... they never compete, they never interfere with another match.” She moved her spoon in idle circles, but steam no longer rose.

“Luna...” Harry began, with an edgy tone.

“I can leave tomorrow,” she said. “I should not intrude upon the fates of others.”

Harry reached for her shaking hands. “Luna, please... just tell me what you’re thinking, straight out. Set aside the Snorkacks, just for a bit?” He smiled and tried to catch her eye.

“I think I may have been wrong about Ronald. This afternoon, I was so...?”

“What... catty?” Harry teased.

“I was not the person I wish to be,” Luna frowned.

“I manage that quite a lot,” Harry said. “It’s not the end of the world.”

Luna continued as though Harry wasn’t there. “I drew you along with me, and you came willingly, and then everything was better, and this evening has been delightful, and... I don’t know what to believe anymore.” She abruptly snapped to attention, and stared at him with an intensity that made Harry instantly uncomfortable. “Our souls intersect; yours and mine – I’ve recognised that for some time. They can *not* be intertwined –” She stopped abruptly, with the air of someone who had said too much.

Harry felt heat rise from his neck up into his cheeks. He fought the impulse to quickly let go of her hands, and instead cleared his throat. “Erm... Luna, I... er... are you saying... oh, bugger! Are you saying that you fancy me?”

Luna gripped his hands tightly. “I am saying that I feel connected to you, and I can’t make sense of it. It scares me, but I am drawn to it. I know what is coming, and I’m not afraid.” She summoned the most serious expression Harry could ever imagine crossing her face, and repeated in a whisper, “I’m not afraid. Tell me what you need me to be.”

Harry had no idea what to say or do; she’d just placed herself in his hands, like a sacrifice. The room seemed suddenly warm. He wanted to wipe sweat from his brow but didn’t dare let go of her hands. *Why is my chest pounding?* he demanded of himself. *It’s just Luna*. She looked into his eyes expectantly, but he could see fear there. She apparently wasn’t afraid of everything swirling around him, even though she should have been. *What is she afraid of, then?* he wondered. It dawned on him that he hadn’t responded to Luna’s... *to her what? What does she want from me?*

“What if I don’t know what I need?” he asked. “I’m a bit thick about this sort of thing. Everyone knows that.” His voice cracked, and he cringed inside.

“Do they really?” she wondered aloud.

“I think it’s common knowledge,” Harry said. “You can ask around back at Hogwarts, I suppose.”

“I prefer to make up my own mind,” she said.

It occurred to Harry that it was much easier to battle a basilisk than to muck around with feelings – just swing the sword and, whatever you do, don’t look it in the eye. There was a rushing sound; Harry glanced around for the source.

“Do you hear that?” he asked nervously.

“I hear the rain, and a small child fussing. What do you hear?” she asked in return.

He heard whispers. They seemed to be all around him, just a bit too soft to make out. One of the whispers seemed to emerge from the rest, in a static haze that reminded him of a wizarding wireless warming up. The whisper became a voice – an achingly familiar voice.

You have to stop pushing people away.

Harry closed his eyes. He was instantly determined to shut it out. He focused on emptying his mind. For a moment, he wondered why his hands were his focal point; then he shut that thought out as well. For a few moments he was able to push the voice away, back into the whispers. It still sputtered at him in fits and starts.

...you don’t want to be alone... cares for you... understands...

He couldn’t hold it off any longer. It was miserable – it was like standing before Snape in the dungeons, half-drowned in memories. The voice was around him, behind him, before him, inside him. There was no escape.

Give into it.

It wasn’t real, it couldn’t be real – he knew that. He knew it was Voldemort invading his mind, stronger than ever. Sirius was dead, and that was the end of it.

You-Know-Who isn’t taking your life away, lad. You’re throwing it away. I thought you had more sense.

“Use his name,” Harry snarled aloud.

Luna stroked the back of his right hand. “Harry...?”

As hard as it is to see people hurt, it’s ten times harder to go it alone. Damn it, Harry... think

about the power you need... think...

"I won't listen, *I won't!* It's not you... it was *never* you – it was just Voldemort in a cheap suit!" Harry insisted. He focused his mind as strongly as he could.

He felt Luna's hand on his cheek; she brushed away something warm and wet. "Harry, open your eyes and look at me. You are sitting in a café, drinking hot chocolate. It is raining outside. We are most likely going to meet Ronald and Ginny and William and Miss Tonks at a club of some sort. Can you hear me? Do you hear what I am saying?" Her voice was even and steady, and he heard it clearly. He managed an unsteady nod and then opened his eyes.

A man in an apron stood next to the table with a look of concern. "Er... hate to barge in, but is there a problem here?"

Harry moved to speak, but Luna moved her fingers from his cheek and brushed back his wet bangs.

"Everything will be fine," she said. "My friend has seen some terrible things, sir. It all rushes back to him at the most peculiar times."

The man hesitated, and then looked at Harry sadly. "When my brother came back from war, he was in a bad way for the longest time. You saw someone killed, lad?"

Harry bristled when the man said 'lad', but managed to nod.

"Awful times we live in, awful times," the man said. "You're lucky, though. My brother had to go it alone, more or less. You've got your young lady friend to help you along." Luna smiled and Harry attempted to smile back.

"Thank you for your concern," Luna said. "I hope we weren't a bother."

"Not at all, miss," the man said. "It's my job to watch for strays." He turned to Harry. "Sorry, but I have to ask... do you have a headache?"

A chill climbed up Harry's back. "No, I don't," he said cautiously.

The man smiled. "Never forget that you have friends. There are always people looking out for you." He winked, and briskly walked to the kitchen.

"What the...?" Harry blurted. Luna slid in her chair as Harry brushed past her hand, and dashed after the man. He blazed into the kitchen, to the startled shrieks of three cooks and a runner. There was no sign of the man in the apron.

Luna waited for him just outside the kitchen entrance. "He is gone, I presume?"

"Did you hear... what...?" Harry spluttered.

Luna shrugged. “Did you really think they would let you wander about a large city with me as your only line of defence?”

Harry scowled. “I figured there would be watchers. Please tell me you’re not in on it?”

Luna shook her head. “Certainly not. The Headmaster appears capable of smothering you without my help. I made a game of looking for them at first, but decided that I preferred talking to you.”

“We should go,” Harry said flatly. “I’m sure that fellow will have ratted me out to Tonks by now.”

“Is that how you see it?” Luna asked.

“I suppose I do,” Harry answered. He went to leave the café, and pulled hard at the door for several moments before Luna pushed it open. He stormed down the sidewalk. Luna grasped his hand and somehow managed to keep up.

After a few blocks, Luna tugged on Harry’s hand. “I can’t... I’m sorry, but... I just... too fast...” she panted.

Harry stopped. “I wasn’t thinking,” he said. “I’m good at that.” He spied a stone planter under an awning and led Luna there to sit and rest. She insisted that he sit as well, though there was barely room for the two of them. She shivered. Harry looked around carefully, before he took his saddlebags from his pocket and enlarged them. He dug inside, found Luna’s aviator jacket, and draped it around her shoulders.

“Why are there runes on your hand?” Luna asked him.

“Um... I’m sorry?” Harry managed.

“Three runes have been placed on the back of your right hand,” Luna observed. “I noticed them when you were distressed. Do they afford some kind of protection?”

“I wish I knew,” Harry said ruefully.

“What an *interesting* answer,” Luna sing-songed. “You haven’t enrolled in *Ancient* Runes, I’m sure. Few Gryffindors *do* .”

“And I suppose all Ravenclaws do?” Harry teased as he held out his hand.

“My father has tutored me in Runes,” Luna said absently. “*Gebo* ... how unusual.”

Harry cleared his throat nervously. “I suppose I’m fated to be trampled by rampaging hippogriffs, or something?” he joked.

Luna stared at him blankly for a moment, and then resumed her examination of his hand. “This is not Divination... not that Divination is, of itself, flimsy or ridiculous. Professor Trelawney, however, is quite ridiculous; I completely agree with Hermione on that point.” She looked up

again, animated this time. “Runic symbols are imbued with magic. They are tangible and quite serious. The acceptance of *gebo* by a wizard requires selflessness, which is rare. In combination with the other runes...” She tapped the back of his hand, and her face took on a look of concentration that appeared painful; then her eyes widened. “These are not for your protection. You are *protecting* –” She stopped in mid-sentence, and watched him expectantly.

Harry snatched his hand free. “Let’s change the subject.”

“Was Sirius Black talking to you?” she asked abruptly.

Harry wasn’t sure he could ever get used to Luna’s bolts from the blue; they were so hard to evade. “How did you guess...?”

“‘Voldemort in a cheap suit’, you said. I would have called it gaudy, instead of cheap,” she said.

“It wasn’t Sirius. It’s Voldemort – it has to be,” Harry growled. “I don’t know how he’s doing it, but has to be him. I’m so tired of this. I just want it to be over.”

Luna draped her arm around him. “Why does it have to be Voldemort – on account of the dream?” she asked.

He wanted to push her away, but he didn’t. “I’m so sorry for everything that happened,” he said.

“You have no reason to offer me an apology. I’ve stood with you twice, and I will stand with you again,” Luna said. “You said to the minder that you had no headache. I was told that you suffered terrible headaches last year, when Voldemort intruded in your mind.”

Harry frowned. She was right, of course, but he didn’t have to like it. “Who else could it have been?” he grumbled.

“Why couldn’t it have been Sirius Black?” Luna asked.

Harry stared at her dumbly. Part of him wanted to be angry with her for toying with him. Part of him wanted to laugh off the idea – *even the Quibbler wouldn’t print this one*, he thought. A small part of him wanted desperately to cling to the idea, to believe that Sirius had somehow spoken to him from beyond the veil.

“It can’t be him,” Harry whispered hoarsely. “He fell through the veil, Luna. I watched him... he fell through... it can’t be him.” He raised his voice, and it cracked with rising anger. “I can’t even have my memories of him. Voldemort won’t even leave me *those* .”

They sat there, side by side, staring straight ahead. Luna tightened her hold on him and he didn’t resist. “Harry... you heard the voices, the whispers,” she reminded him. “They’re all right there, just behind the veil. He risked everything for you. He must have loved you. Why couldn’t it have been him?”

Harry felt so unsettled that he nearly shook. He licked his dry lips, and asked nervously, “Have

you ever heard... has your mother ever... you know, spoken to you?"

"If she had, would that make a difference to you?" Luna returned.

"I might not think I'm a complete lunatic!" Harry blurted.

"Then you're not a complete lunatic," Luna said. "You have considerable potential in that area, of course, but I expect it will go unrealised..." She stopped, and looked at him with a mix of curiosity and surprise.

"What? What did I say?" Harry asked.

"I nearly missed it. You used me as a reference standard for your sanity. I am flattered," Luna said.

"Half the wizarding world thought I was a nutter last year," Harry chuckled. "We make a good pair, I think."

She turned and smiled at him. "Downside-up thinking seems to suit you," she said.

"I suppose it does," Harry admitted. "Just don't point out any, erm... fezziwigs, right?"

Luna's expression grew grave. "Oh... that's quite unlikely. I dearly hope you never see one."

Harry stifled a laugh. "Do you know what I need right now?" Harry asked.

Luna sat up straighter. "Tell me."

"I need to get out of the rain," Harry said. "We may as well find them, before they find us."

"Do you think that Ronald will look for us, if we linger too long?" Luna asked.

Harry suppressed a smile. "Erm... I wasn't thinking of Ron. No, I expect the minders are in full force now." He stood, and extended his hand to her. "I'll go more slowly this time – I promise."

Within a block, Harry was certain that they were being closely followed. *Probably just the bloody minders*, he figured, *but there's no reason to take a chance*. He guided Luna into an adjacent alleyway and cast quick silencing and befuddlement charms where the alley opened to the lane.

"What is it? Did you see something amiss?" Luna asked. She brandished her wand apprehensively.

"Do you trust my Charms?" he muttered.

She hesitated for a moment, but said, "I trust you."

"With Glamour Charms, we might go unrecognised," Harry suggested.

Luna asked, "Have you cast one before?"

“We had to cover a half-dozen basic glamours for the O.W.L.s,” Harry said. “I did reasonably well.”

“Are you certain that this is necessary?” Luna questioned.

“We’re being followed,” Harry returned sharply. “I didn’t manage to count them, but there are several.”

Luna looked at him strangely. “When I asked my housemates about the O.W.L.s, I was told that glamours were reserved for the N.E.W.T. examinations,” she said slowly.

“They said that, did they?” Harry fumed. “Your housemates were having you on, apparently.” He looked to his wand, reviewed the charm in his mind, felt a flutter of nervousness, and asked, “Shall we?”

“Try not to think of food while casting the charm,” Luna said earnestly. “I wouldn’t care to look like a parsnip.”

He focused his thoughts. He saw Luna with smaller eyes, longer and darker hair, and fuller features, and managed to cast the charm before his mind was filled with the image of Ron eating. Then he conjured a pocket mirror; it didn’t have a frame, but at least the edges weren’t sharp.

Luna’s disguised cheeks flushed. “I look like my mother,” she whispered.

“I... I didn’t know! I can change it, it’ll only take a moment,” Harry quickly offered.

She gazed into the mirror and smiled. “No, thank you,” she decided. “It’s your turn.”

Older, he thought, I want to look older – five years or so. Keep the hair the way it is, a little taller, brown eyes instead of green. He cast the charm.

“What do you think?” he asked hesitantly.

Luna looked at him very carefully, taking in every part of his face. “I think that no one will expect to see my mother walking with your father,” she concluded. “Shall we?”

The club they were seeking – the Cabaret Molière – was a few blocks farther beyond the Uni. It was on one side of a close. Harry nearly failed to spot it at first – there was only a sign hung above a wrought-iron gate to mark its location; the long, snaking queue gave it away. The heavy gate barred a dark passage into the ground floor of one of the slender stone tenements that lined the close. Two hulking men hovered before the gate; they looked surly and bored. Harry’s eyes darted along the rooftops, and then swept the queue. The close was narrow, the rooftops were high, and his breathing was shallow and fast.

They held back from entering the close. Harry preferred to remain cloaked in shadow. Luna stood beside him. “Perhaps we should simply return to St. Ebb?” she offered.

“Like it or not, we’re surely expected,” Harry grumbled.

Luna leaned forward slightly, and looked at the crowd without blinking. “Irony, isn’t it, that so many of them are dressed like wizards? It appears that we are fashionable.”

Harry scanned the queue again, and recognised that she was right. A number of people were wearing dark cloaks or long coats. There were even a few dresses and tunics that would have been inconspicuous in Hogsmeade. He continued to look for signs – people out of place, flickers of movement, any hints of magic.

“Your unease is palpable,” Luna observed.

“You’d think someone would have waited outside for us,” he said. “Something doesn’t feel right.”

Luna said nothing, but shifted into place behind him. He felt her shoulder graze against his back. There was a faint *pop!* and Harry whirled around, just as Luna jabbed her wand into the chest of a dark-robed figure.

Snape let out an audible gasp but quickly recovered. “My colleagues would approve of your vigilance, Miss Lovegood,” he sneered. “*You*, on the other hand, should not have turned to face me. She has your back, and I presume that you were to have hers. Disappointing, Potter. Predictable, but disappointing.”

“You Apparated alone into our immediate vicinity, which suggested that you were not a Death Eater,” Luna said. “If I had thought otherwise, you would no longer be standing, Professor.”

Snape’s lip curled into a crooked smile. “I award five points for your logic and your pluck,” he spat, “but I take five points for your unfortunate taste in friends.”

“It is good that you evened the score, Professor,” Luna said earnestly. “It would be unfair to reward or punish a student’s entire house while on holiday.”

Snape glared at her. “Potter’s cheek is already contaminating you – a great pity. I, unlike most of your peers, am able to gauge capacity without consideration for aesthetics. I do hope that your insistence on fraternizing with... *Gryffindors* – ” Snape grimaced, as though speaking the name of Harry’s house burned his tongue. “ – does not compromise your performance in my classroom. You would do well to limit yourself to Granger, Bell or the youngest Weasley. The rest are layabouts and buffoons.”

“What do you want, Snape?” Harry angrily demanded.

“What do I want?” Snape mocked. “At present... larger chambers, competent students and an umbrella. I stand before you with all my wants unfulfilled. My task this evening is simple, and an utter waste of my time and abilities. I am to escort you into a Muggle club, so that you may partake of loud music, consume questionable beverages, and writhe lasciviously. I intend to take my leave as quickly as possible. Do you have any more ridiculous questions, or are you tapped out

for the evening, Potter?”

“They could have sent someone else. Why *you* ?” Harry snapped.

“Your grasp of the obvious is a testament to your house,” Snape mocked. “It appears that I blend in with the riffraff this evening, despite wearing perfectly normal attire.” He shook his head. “You’re expected inside. *Move*. ” Snape swept to the front of the line with a sneer and a swish of his cloak, oblivious to the grumbling behind him.

One of the revellers in the queue suddenly perked up and pointed. He was older and clad in biker leathers, and looked a bit out of place. “Bloody hell! It’s Alice *bloody* Cooper!” he shouted. Everyone within earshot turned his or her eyes on Snape, whose sneer twisted slowly into a snarl. Harry remembered the name and the face that went with it, from Sirius’ stacks of record albums; he scarcely stifled a snort.

“I don’t care if it’s effin’ Queen Maggie,” growled a large man behind the gawkers. “No jumpin’ the queue!” Harry could sense a cloud of frustration looming over the entire crowd. He gripped his wand tightly.

Luna took a step backward and pulled Harry with her, as Snape clenched and unclenched his fists. Suddenly, the Potions professor snapped at the queue, “Alice? *Alice*? I am not feminine *in – the – slightest!* ” He turned quickly to the hulking bouncers, whipped his cloak extravagantly to one side, and shouted, “*Well?* ” This time, Harry couldn't hold back the laughter.

One of the bouncers grunted something that sounded vaguely like ‘They’re with Heather’, and the other swung open the gate. Most of the front of the queue openly groused, but the man holding open the gate silenced them with one withering glance. Harry nearly bumped into Snape as they pressed forward into the entryway.

They made their way down a short flight of dimly lit stone steps, amidst the muffled echoes of drums and a wailing guitar. A third enormous man stood before a huge oaken doorway. He nodded at them, and opened the door wide. Harry winced for a moment at the assault of blaring music, but regained himself. He tugged at Luna’s hand. She hesitated until Snape glared at her, and then followed Harry inside.

Snape hissed something at Harry but it was lost in the din. For his part, Harry wasn’t sure he wanted to hear anything else that Snape had to say. Against his better judgment, he leant in and cupped his hand to his ear.

Snape scowled, and then moved still closer until his breath burned against Harry’s cheek. “I see your little pet is showing off. You should look into a sturdy kennel, Potter - she must be a wolf in sheep’s clothing, after all.”

Before Harry could react, Snape menacingly swished back his cloak and disappeared into the teeming crowd. Luna gave Harry a questioning look, and abruptly shrunk back. Harry figured that he must be wearing his double-Potions face, and tried to settle himself. He didn’t want to look at

the stage; he didn't want to take Snape's bait. He looked, despite himself, and everything else receded.

Heather was standing back, while a man sang. He was tall, with thick longish hair, strong arms, and artfully torn denims. For an instant, the vision of a young Sirius rushed into Harry's mind. He shook it off, but there was something vaguely familiar about the man. He stopped singing and Heather moved forward. She wielded a bright blue electric guitar like it was a weapon; her left hand squeezed it by the neck and her right arm worked like a windmill. The result was a punctuated explosion of sound. She jumped up and down, flung around, and did half a dozen other things incompatible with a short skirt – and it was plain that she didn't care. She was powerful and she was angry. Harry immediately wondered what Ron had done.

Harry forced himself to look at the rest of the stage – anywhere else. There was a drummer, as well as another person with a host of drums and bells and blocks of wood and other things that Harry didn't recognise. A large man with a topknot stood off to one side amidst a stack of keyboards. A small slender fellow wearing what Harry figured to be a bass stood stock-still next to the drummer. A woman with big blonde hair and little more than half a shirt stood before a microphone opposite the keyboard player. The male singer had a guitar, as well; he strummed it calmly by comparison to Heather.

Heather seemed to settle down and the song returned to a consistent pattern. The singer slung his guitar to one side, seized the microphone – stand and all – and began to wail something. 'Teenage wasteland' was all that Harry could catch amidst the blare and the echoes. There was someone else behind the blonde singer, hunched over, with headphones half-buried in long red hair. Harry stared intently until Luna began to tap insistently on the back of his shoulder.

"What?" Harry shouted over the song.

"Go – up – there," Luna mouthed, and pointed to one side of the stage.

"Why?" Harry shouted.

Luna cupped her hand around the back of his head, and drew him in close. "We should find out why Ginny is sitting on the stage," she shouted in his ear. "I believe that I see Bill, but I see no sign of Ronald. That may be an ill omen."

Harry harrumphed. "Heather dumped him... or he dumped her – the twit! Tonks is probably trying to calm him down," he concluded.

"We must locate him," Luna insisted. "It is very crowded in here. None of us should be alone."

Harry ducked and weaved through the crowd massed before the stage. Luna nearly tore his arm off in her attempt to remain close. They moved around to one side of the stage behind the speakers. It was still loud, but much easier to hear voices. The crowd parted for a moment and Harry nearly ploughed Bill to the floor.

“What the... *Harry!* We were beginning to wonder,” Bill said. “Er... where’s Snape?”

Harry frowned. “Don’t worry – he was exactly where our mutual friends wanted him to be.”

Bill rolled his eyes. “For goodness’ sake, Harry; you know you’re going to be watched. There’s no getting around it. Remus was in a panic wondering what had happened to you. He’s around here somewhere, and Kingsley as well. They’re trying to establish a perimeter or something.” He looked around the crowded space. “Not exactly the sort of place to manage that.”

“So... you heard about my little episode in the café, then?” Harry fumed. “I’m surprised Dumbledore isn’t here.”

“Haven’t seen him. Tonks asked Snape to wait outside for you – that’s all I know for certain,” Bill said. “Come to think of it, Tonks made certain Ron was out of the way before she... oi, what’s this about the café?”

“It’s not important,” Harry said quickly. “Where *is* Ron, then?”

Bill sighed. “He’s milling about. I’ve given up keeping an eye on him. Frankly, I should probably let up for a while.”

“What did he do now?” Harry asked.

“Very nice, especially coming from you,” Bill said with a scowl. He seemed to struggle for the words, and finally said, “I think he’s trying to be like me. Actually, he’s trying to be like his image of me, and that’s a bigger problem.”

Luna nudged Harry. It was indeed Ginny on the side of the stage. She doffed the headphones, leant over, and came up again with her violin and bow. Something was clipped to the body of the violin, connected to a wire that ran to a black box at Ginny’s waist. Her expression was so intense that Harry took in a sharp breath.

“It’s not enough to pick up the pieces Ron leaves behind – on top of that, I’ve got Ginny to look after,” Bill grouched. “She won’t let me touch that damned violin, you know. It *has* to be cursed somehow. Look at her! She can’t set it aside for an hour without pining for it. Besides, Heather was right; it’s impossible to master a musical instrument so quickly.”

“Erm... Sirius did say it wasn’t cursed,” Harry said. His godfather’s name felt wrong in his mouth, and his hate for Voldemort grew.

Bill’s eyes flashed. “Sirius said a lot of things, and they weren’t all true,” he snapped. “Dash it all, I’m going to put a stop to this.” He took two steps toward the side of the stage, before Luna wandered idly into his path.

“It would be best not to trifle with Ginny just now,” she offered.

Bill glanced at his sister, who now stood beside the blonde singer and was rocking from side to

side. He flinched. “Crikey! She *does* look like the kneazle just died, doesn’t she?”

“She’s terrified,” Luna said, “and she’ll take it out on the first person who gets close.”

Bill looked at Luna with what seemed to Harry like mild horror. After a moment, he sank.

“Ginny’s changed,” he said. “Not just this summer, either; I hardly know her now.”

“How old was Ginny when you left home?” Luna asked.

Bill flushed. “Er... six? No... no, she was seven.”

“Quite a lot happens in a girl’s life between seven and fifteen,” Luna said dreamily. Bill stared at her, while Harry shrugged and turned his attention to the stage.

The singer stopped again, and he and Heather duelled one another with their guitars. He overpowered her, and Harry figured that she had let him win. Ginny stepped rigidly out onto the stage next to Heather. She raised the violin to her chin, held the bow expectantly, and watched Heather’s eyes. Heather’s gaze darted to the singer, and then to Ginny, and she nodded. The guitar quieted, and Ginny’s violin sang through the speakers. For a few notes, it seemed like everything else in the room came to a stop; as her pace quickened, the drummers and the bassist and then the guitars joined back in. Ginny kept playing a little faster, and a little faster, and a little faster still. The singer-guitarist began to grin, and then broke into a full-blown smile.

Ginny visibly relaxed and leant forward into her violin. Her head bobbed, and grim determination was replaced by something that Harry couldn’t quite name – not happiness, not joy, but something equally compelling. Within a few notes, Ginny bobbed and weaved along with Heather. Heather looked to the drummer, held up four fingers, and received a crisp nod in return. She nudged Ginny, showed the same four fingers, and Ginny nearly laughed. For their part, the crowd began to hoot its approval – this only seemed to spur Ginny and Heather on.

Heather nodded again, and the song moved into what Harry realised was a finale – after two weeks of immersion in Sirius’ records, Harry more or less understood the elemental rules of pop music. Ginny joined in with the rising frenzy of guitars and keyboards and drums. When it all ended on a single powerful note, the throng in front of the stage went berserk.

During the song, Ginny had looked as though she’d been doing this for her entire life. When the cheers erupted, Harry thought that for a few moments she faded back into the Ginny he remembered from his third and fourth year – wide-eyed, nervous, and somewhat uncomfortable in her own skin. Heather let her guitar slide onto a stand with an amplified clang, and gave Ginny an excited one-arm hug.

The singer bowed to Ginny and clapped. Heather sauntered to the microphone, and yelled enthusiastically to the crowd, “You can do better than that!” She grabbed Ginny’s hand, and pulled it up into the air like she was the victor of a duel. “Jean Prewett, everybody!” The applause erupted again, and Bill’s face quickly shot from normal to red to violent purple. “And our new mate Kirley McCormack on vocals and guitar!” The applause took on a decidedly female tone,

Harry noticed.

Abruptly, Tonks was beside Bill. “*I knew it! I told you it was Kirley –*” She stopped in mid-sentence and gave Bill a concerned look. “Breathe,” she told him.

“She used Mum’s family name,” Bill snarled. “She had no right, damn it!”

Tonks wrapped an arm around Bill. “She was smart to use a different name,” she said quietly. “It might have been the only one that came to mind. What would you have preferred – Ginny Potter?” Harry briefly flashed crimson and Bill spluttered wordlessly, as Ginny came off the stage. Luna rushed to greet her.

Ginny hesitated, and then squinted. “Luna? You look so... different.”

Luna shrugged. “It’s just a *glamour*. Ginny, *that was astounding – a tour-de-force!*” she sing-songed.

Ginny tightly clutched her violin, and broke into a toothy grin. She gushed, “I - don’t - know - I - felt - a - bit - off - you - see - I - wasn’t - sure - about - the - tuning - and - I - mean - I - know - I - can - pick - up - almost - anything - by - ear - in - one - go - but - to - turn - around - and - play - it - in - front - of - people - isn’t - exactly - something - I - planned - to - do - and - then - Heather - gave - the - sign - to - stretch - it - and - I - almost - fainted - dead - away - can - you - imagine - living - that - one - down - and - thank - Merlin - everyone - was - patient - with - me - and - isn’t - the - drummer - just - *gorgeous*?” She gasped for air, blushed furiously, and then burst out laughing. Luna twittered about something that Harry couldn’t quite make out, and joined in the laughter far too loudly.

Heather strode toward them with a big smile. “Now there’s a debut to remember!” she boomed, and pulled Ginny into another one-armed hug.

The singer sidled up to them. “I’m learning the hard way that Heather is always right,” he said. He bowed extravagantly to Ginny and added, “It was an honour and pleasure, milady.”

Ginny giggled, but then turned serious. “The honour is mine,” she said. “I’m glad I had the chance to play with you.”

Tonks had an irrepressible smile on her face, as she squeezed between Ginny and the singer. “Wotcher, Kirley! I’m a *big fan* of your, um, *other work*,” she gushed.

McCormack’s eyes bulged. “I see... Miss...?”

“Tonks,” she returned brightly, “just Tonks.”

He nervously shook her hand. “Um... Kirley,” he said. “Of course, it seems you knew that already ...”

Harry goggled, and understood why the man had looked vaguely familiar – it was Kirley Duke, the

guitarist for the Weird Sisters. It appeared that he was using his mother's family name, as well.

Bill stepped in to the fray. "Bill Weasley," he said, and thrust forward his hand.

"Weasley..." McCormack said distantly. "Weasley! You've a brother by the name of Charlie?" Bill nodded, and smiled faintly.

McCormack turned to Ginny. "Then *you* must be... *well ... this* is a bit of a shock..." He moved close to Bill. Harry heard him mutter, "Does she know?" as he inclined his head toward Heather.

Harry was about to intervene, but Bill said quickly, "Er... she's a friend of my sister, right? As it turns out, she has some of our kind in her extended family. She doesn't ask, we don't tell... but she knows."

McCormack's eyes widened. "I'll be switched!" he said in a forced whisper. He turned to Harry. "And you are?"

Before Harry could speak, Tonks stammered, "This is... erm... a schoolmate of mine... uh... *Podmore* ... James Podmore. Say, Jimmy, this is Kirley... er... *McCormack* ." Harry recognised what Tonks was trying to do, and didn't reveal who he was. Instead he smirked knowingly and shook McCormack's hand. "I'm a fan," he lied, and then added, "So... erm... how did you fall in with *her* ?" with a nod toward Heather.

"She works for Keith MacLeish – eh, *surely* you know about MacLeish," McCormack said quietly. "My former band works for him as well through, shall we say, a different subsidiary. After I went on the outs with them, MacLeish offered me a solo contract on condition that I also work with Heather." He smiled broadly. "MacLeish and his people think I'll be able to cross over, you know, into Muggle music – I had no idea how many have done it." He looked toward Heather, and added conspiratorially, "She's sharp, and bloody creative, and her voice is *ridiculous* . She can sing almost anything and pull it off, which is the problem. MacLeish's people don't know what to do with her. She's not been a lot of help in that department; it's been a rocky start for me, I can tell you. Not one of them ever said anything about her *knowing* – you know what I mean?"

Heather sauntered over. "Getting saucy with Kirley, are you?" she teased Tonks. "Don't feed his ego – guitarists take care of that on their own." She gestured to Harry. "So, who's your friend?" The moment that she took a good look at him, her jaw slackened.

"Erm... Jimmy Podmore," Harry said quickly. "Tonks and me are old school chums."

"But you're... you can't... Harry said..." Heather babbled.

Ginny followed Heather's stare to Harry's face. Her eyes widened for an instant, and then she cut in. "Would you excuse us?" she said to Harry sweetly, and led Heather by the arm toward the secluded sidestage.

McCormack shook his head, as Heather walked away. "She's been in a right state tonight," he

sighed. “Skeet said she had a really bad day, or something.”

“It looks that way,” Tonks said idly. She motioned to Harry. “Say, Jimmy, some of my mates are dying to see you.” Harry took the hint, and Tonks led him circuitously to the sidestage.

As soon as he arrived, Heather shoved at him rudely. “You scared the life out of me!” she snapped. “It’s not like I expected to see your father!” Ginny was openly staring at him. Luna was wearing her own face now.

“It’s a glamour – a disguise,” Harry said. “We were in a hurry. I didn’t plan it, all right?”

“Why a disguise?” Heather asked.

Ginny started to speak up, but Luna answered, “Harry had an unusual experience while we were making our way here. We decided it would be best to alter our appearance.”

Heather looked to Luna suspiciously, and pursed her lips, but finally nodded in acceptance.

“Look, I’m sorry we took so long to get here...” Harry began. Heather immediately bristled, and he had no idea why.

Ginny cut in. “Where’s Ron?” she asked.

Heather rolled her eyes and said flippantly, “He’s off sampling the buffet.” She squinted, and then pointed to the back of the room. Harry followed her direction, and spotted Ron. He was leaning against the bar, in animated conversation with three young, flashy and incompletely dressed women.

Harry gaped at Ron and then at Heather. He wanted to shout at her – at both of them, really – but she had already moved on. She set about gathering the band to plan out the next set, her eyes wide and hands in constant motion.

“There you are, at last!” Lupin called out from behind Harry. Harry turned, and Lupin stopped in his tracks.

“It’s just a glamour,” Harry said quickly.

Lupin frowned. “Change it,” he demanded. “Now.”

Harry retreated to the corner, and angrily cancelled and recast the charm without concentrating. When he turned around, Tonks laughed nervously.

“That’s not funny, Harry,” Lupin said, his arms crossed, and then chuckled in spite of himself. “All right, it might be a *bit* funny.” Harry stared dumbly at them, and Lupin conjured a small mirror. The face of Severus Snape stared back at Harry, and he breathed in sharply.

“Don’t just stand there,” Tonks laughed. “Say something.”

Harry gazed into the mirror, and sneered, then curled his lip several times. “This is so wrong,” he said, and his voice cracked.

“That wasn’t very convincing,” teased Tonks.

Harry practiced an icy glare, and then cleared his throat. “Fifty points from Gryffindor, Mr. Lupin, simply for being you,” he snapped. When Tonks laughed, he whipped his head toward her, raised his nose, and sneered, “Miss Tonks, do you honestly believe that your pathetic conversation is more important than the subtle art of potions? Fifty points for disrupting my classroom, and a week of detentions.” Now Lupin laughed, and Tonks responded by sticking out her tongue.

Harry ploughed on. “Three thousand points from Gryffindor, Mr. Potter, for continually interfering in my opportunities to kiss the Headmaster’s – ” A hand came to rest on Harry’s shoulder. Lupin looked past Harry and clapped his hand over his mouth, while Tonks winced.

“Why, Severus, I believe you have lost your sense of proportionality,” Dumbledore said jovially. “You have never sought more than a thousand points from Mr. Potter at any one time.”

Harry turned on him. “*A thousand points!* ” Dumbledore wagged his wand. The space around the four of them became hazy, and the noise of the club receded.

“I prefer to see you as yourself, Harry,” Dumbledore observed, and Snape’s face was gone with another waggle of the Headmaster’s wand.

“I’m responsible,” Lupin said. “I told Harry to change his glamour.”

“I am aware of that,” Dumbledore told him. “I imagine that you were shocked just now, Remus, but it was simply the result of an elementary concealment. Keep in mind that within a few years, Harry will look remarkably like the James Potter that you remember.”

“You didn’t intend it?” Lupin asked Harry.

“No! I just wanted to look older, and to hide my eyes,” Harry insisted.

Lupin regained himself. “You have the most amazing timing, Albus,” he observed.

“It is merely a coincidence,” Dumbledore said, “although it may appear that I defy coincidence from time to time. An improbable coincidence should always be closely evaluated. The appointment of a prominent wizarding musician to Miss Magruder’s troupe by a very prominent wizard is an example of such an improbability.”

Harry did a double take. “You know about that already?”

“I recognised young Mister Duke almost immediately,” explained Dumbledore. “Without facial hair, his appearance remains similar to that of his school days. The rest was easily surmised. We shall have to discuss Mister MacLeish prior to your meeting, Harry.”

Great – that way you can make more decisions for me, Harry thought. “That doesn’t explain why you’re here,” he said, and quickly added, “Nothing’s the matter.”

“One of our colleagues had a different impression,” Dumbledore responded impassively.

“He was wrong,” Harry said flatly.

“I wonder what Miss Lovegood would have to say?” Dumbledore mused aloud.

“She would say that I had Sirius on my mind,” Harry shot back, “not that it’s anyone else’s concern.”

“Your safety is paramount,” Dumbledore returned. “That is always my concern, and the concern of our mutual friends.”

Harry balled his fists. “Friends – you mean the ‘old crowd’? They’re *your* friends. They were my *mum and dad’s* friends. They’re not *my* friends; if they were, things would be different.”

“Your safety is paramount,” repeated Dumbledore calmly, “and you know very well why that is the case, as does our present company. You are at increasing risk in St. Ebb, and this venue is only acceptable because the crowding and confusion also works against our adversaries. Now – you say that thoughts of Sirius caused you enough distress to draw out our colleague?”

“I didn’t see Voldemort, I didn’t hear him... I didn’t even smell him. Are you satisfied?” Harry fumed.

Dumbledore asked, “Do you need to talk to someone with regard to Sirius’ passing, perhaps someone unbiased who might be able to help – ”

Harry felt the anger well up inside, and it exploded. “Where was that offer *six weeks ago* , when I was *rotting at the Dursleys*? ” he thundered.

Lupin frowned. “Harry, that’s enough,” he said.

Harry glared at Lupin, but continued to rail at Dumbledore. “Someone who can help... right... someone *unbiased* . *That’s* bloody likely! *How stupid do you think I am?* Anyone you’d send my way would be about the bloody Order, and duty, and stiff upper lips, and all that rot! *No thank you!* ”

Lupin grabbed Harry’s wrist with unexpected strength. “Harry, I said that’s enough!”

“*Let go of me!* ” Harry shouted. “Who do you think you are – my *father*? *You’re not even my godfather!* ” Before the words were out of his mouth, he felt a catch in his throat and a heaviness pressing down upon him.

Lupin was clearly stung but shot back, “You’re right, I’m not. I’m just one of the large number of people working more or less full-time to keep you alive, and Merlin knows, you don’t make it

easy. When you're ready to keep a civil tongue – and I *might* settle for having you act like a human being – *then* I'll let go of you."

"I told you to let go of me," Harry said in a quiet and dangerous way. Lupin released Harry, with anger or frustration or something like that in his eyes.

Harry returned his full attention to Dumbledore. "I knew I was going to be watched tonight; Tonks was clear about that. If you want to watch from the shadows, that's fine. If I so much as see anyone other than Tonks or Bill, I'll hex them with everything I have."

Dumbledore stood silently and watched Harry seethe for the better part of a minute, before he spoke. "May I ask you, Harry... would you treat Sirius this way, were he here?"

Harry's voice shook. "If he were... if he were here, *everything* would be different."

Dumbledore pressed him, "If Sirius were standing before you, would you shout at him for trying to protect you?"

Harry looked down and said sullenly, "No."

"Did Remus merit the pain that you just caused him?" asked Dumbledore

"No," Harry said, though the admission irritated him.

Dumbledore paused, until Harry met his eyes. "Do you need help?" he asked.

"I need you to teach me how to kill Voldemort," Harry answered.

Dumbledore's face fell. "In my office, after you returned from the Department of Mysteries, it was clear that you were distressed by the idea of killing –"

Harry cut in coldly, "– and then I tore apart half a dozen Death Eaters. Seems a bit late for worries."

"There is a darkness falling about you, Harry," Dumbledore said. "Right now, I do not know how to lead you back into the light."

"I don't trust you, so now I'm dark – is that it?" Harry sneered.

"No, the problem is that you seem to have lost hope," Dumbledore corrected him. "You see the world through a darkened lens, which is the first step into darkness itself."

"The world *is* dark, so that's what I see," Harry returned. "I'll bet you wish you could get back the old me – the one who worshipped you, because he didn't know any better."

Dumbledore frowned. "I am fallible – I have admitted this to you."

“Fallible, eh? You don’t act like it,” Harry said. “Are we done?”

“For the moment,” Dumbledore sighed, and with a wave of his hand the surroundings returned to sharp relief and the din returned to Harry’s ears.

Lupin crossed his arms, and said, “I have an unexpected opportunity to hear Heather perform, and I plan to seize it. Do you have a problem with that?”

“Whatever,” Harry said dismissively as he walked away.

Tonks followed him closely. “Harry,” she said, “you don’t have to be like this.”

“Like what?” he snapped without looking her way.

“Like everyone’s out to get you,” she answered, “because they’re not.”

Harry stopped, looked her square in the eye, and shook his head. “You must be joking,” he sneered.

Harry Potter and the Years of Rebellion If Music Be The Food Of Love

Chapter Twenty-seven

IF MUSIC BE THE FOOD OF LOVE

With one turn and three steps, he found himself in the midst of a row between Bill and a brightly flushed Ginny. *The fun just doesn't end, does it?* he thought.

“A family meeting, about poor little Ginny? Oh, that sounds just *cracking* !” Ginny set her jaw, levelled her expression, and added, “Mum should be up for it – I’m sure she’s been too busy to tread on anyone’s dreams lately.”

“Ginny! That’s uncalled for!” Bill snapped.

“How would you know? As soon as you finished Hogwarts, *you left* ,” Ginny hissed.

Bill looked ready to explode; it was very different than the controlled fury Harry remembered from the row at the Grangers’ house. “You’d be surprised what I know,” he seethed. “Unlike you, I remember Uncle Fabian and Uncle Gideon. I’ll tell you what I *know*, Ginny – I know that the name Prewett isn’t something to be used for your silly games!”

Ginny’s voice was painfully shrill. “You’re not Dad – stop acting like it!” She briskly brushed past Bill and joined the musicians, huddling next to Heather.

Tonks clamped her hand on Harry’s shoulder. “Aw,” she said, “Ginny’s taking after ickle Harrykins. Isn’t that grand?” Harry let out a low growl.

She moved to Bill. “Don’t be cross with Ginny. Heather set this up specifically.”

“You make Ginny sound like the shrinking violet here,” Bill said. “She’s hardly that! She’s... I don’t know what she is anymore. I don’t like my baby sister shading the truth, and I don’t like that damn violin – not a bit! And the *name* ... if Mum had been here tonight, she would’ve either exploded or fainted dead away!” The loud ruffle of a cloak interrupted him.

Snape’s voice dripped with false sincerity. “My goodness, Mister Weasley. Your sister possesses a formidable talent – very formidable, indeed.” He summoned a crooked and vaguely frightening smile. “I take it that she is playing the Black Stradivarius?”

Harry noticed that Tonks shrunk back slightly. “I thought you were leaving,” he growled at Snape.

Before Snape could respond, Bill stepped in the way. “Stay out of our family affairs, Snape,” he said coldly.

“You may wish to offer me an invitation, though I reserve the right to decline,” Snape sneered. “Tell me... are the initials ‘N.P.’ carved into the finish? As I remember it, they were found somewhere on the back side.” Harry froze.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Bill snarled.

“Ah, another whiff of your family’s infamous temper. I certainly don’t see enough of *that*,” Snape said. “Tell your parents, Weasley. Tell them, or I may be forced to suffer through a conversation with your father. Despite what you or others may think, I do harbour concern for my students’ personal safety.” He turned to Tonks. “I shall remain for a time. This little outing of yours may yet become a spectacle.”

“Whatever you like, Severus,” Tonks said with a wave of her hand.

Snape pulled two wads from the folds of his cloak that looked like crumpled Extendable Ears. “I will give your brothers their due, Weasley,” he said. “At least they prove useful, from time to time.” He pushed the wads tightly into his ears and stalked off.

“What was that git going on about?” Bill grumbled. “How would I know if there were any initials carved in the damn thing? She won’t let me within ten feet of it!”

“He’s right,” Harry said. “I saw them.”

Bill paled, and spluttered, “He... he *can’t* know anything about this! I will not be beholden to *Snape* !”

“‘N.P.’ is written on it? How intriguing... it is old enough, after all...” Luna said in a ghostly voice.

Tonks raised an eyebrow. “What are you going on about? Well? Spit it out, then – no quibbling!” She chuckled. “Get it? No *quibbling* ?” She reached out and playfully slapped Luna on the shoulder. For her part, Luna just continued to stare vacantly.

Tonks harrumphed, “Come on! I’ve been *waiting* to use that! Not a laugh, not a snort – not even a grin?”

Bill groaned at Tonks. He asked Luna, “What are you thinking? If you can tell me anything useful...?”

“I have a trivia question for you,” Luna declared.

Bill squinted at her. “A *what* ?”

“A trivia question,” Luna repeated. “My dad prints trivia questions in the *Quibbler*, you know. We love trivia, the both of us. A few weeks ago, he asked me to name five of our kind who are or were renowned for playing the violin.”

“Renowned... you mean, um, known in broader circles?” Bill asked.

Luna nodded. “Aptly put,” she said.

Bill hesitated, and then shook his head. “I didn’t know there were five. I suppose that fiddler for The Weird Sisters wouldn’t count... uh... what’s his name...?”

Tonks frowned. “Merton Graves plays the cello, for goodness’ sake – the *cello*.”

Bill laughed. “Should have known you’d have that on the tip of your tongue, Tonks. Fine then; let me think on it... er... Miroslav Kryzkowski?”

Luna brightened. “You have one of five. Only a few readers thought of Kryzkowski.”

“Perlmutter... can’t remember his first name off the top,” Bill added.

“Last names are acceptable. You have two of five,” Luna said.

Bill scratched his head. “Well... there’s Paganini, of course, but you can’t really count him. I mean, most think he was some kind of demon –” He stopped, and his eyebrows shot up.

Luna nodded enthusiastically. “Niccolo Paganini... ‘N.P.’ I’m impressed that you’ve named three of five; our readers averaged two –”

“I knew it!” Bill shrieked. “*I knew it was cursed!* That tears it... *mmpffh!*”

Tonks smiled a false smile, and clapped her hand firmly over Bill’s mouth. “I think we’re going to have to cut you off, luv... how many pints have you had, anyway?” she said loudly and gaily, then added in an insistent mutter, “Ixnay on the urse-kay!” Bill cowed his head.

Luna chattered on as though nothing had been said. “Did you know that Paganini collected Stradivari’s instruments? He had several violins, a viola and a cello at various times. Some think that the Guarneri was actually his favourite – they call it ‘il Cannone’ – but according to ...”

Harry said, “I think Bill’s heard enough, don’t you?”

“But Paganini’s history is fascinating,” Luna insisted. “The idea that he was a dark creature is rubbish. Can you imagine falling for such a...?” She seemed at last to take notice of Bill’s colour, blinked suddenly – Harry wouldn’t have noticed, except that Luna rarely blinked – and stopped.

Bill clenched his jaw. “I intend to take that violin, permanently seal it in its case, and take it as far away as possible.” Tonks looked Bill in the eyes. He tried to shirk her gaze, but couldn’t. Harry tried not to smile – it was obvious even to him that Bill was done for.

“Has it hurt her?” Tonks asked.

“She’s bloody well obsessed with it – does that count?” Bill retorted.

Tonks groaned. “Has she hurt anyone else with it?” she asked.

“No, of course not,” he snapped.

Her voice turned soft. “Have you felt anything in its presence?” she asked him.

“Other than irritation?” he quipped.

“You know what I mean,” she said firmly.

Bill scowled. He huffed. He squirmed. At length, he said, “No,” as though he were uttering an Unforgivable curse.

Tonks flashed a smile of victory. “Then there’s nothing to concern yourself with tonight. I want to dance with you, and that requires music for dancing.” She looked askance at some of the revellers, and let her eyes take in the low expanse of the vault. “I’d say that the only thing we’re likely to hear in *this* club is music to break kneecaps by.”

Bill feigned horror. “Why, Miss Tonks, are you saying that you’re too *old* for this sort of thing?”

Tonks crossed her arms. “Certainly not. What about you?”

“Er... right, then,” Bill said. “I’ll try to find out what else they’re planning to play. I will *not* start a row with Ginny... don’t you waggle your finger at me... but I’m not letting this alone. First thing tomorrow, do you hear?”

Tonks rolled her eyes. “Yes, dad!” she teased. Bill threw up his hands, and stiffly strode toward Heather.

She turned on Harry, who managed to say, “Erm... that was interesting.”

“I am impressed by your management skills,” Luna said. “Perhaps you can offer lessons?”

Tonks worried her lower lip. “I went too far, didn’t I? I’m forever doing that.”

“Did you know that Professor Flitwick could easily have been an answer to the trivia question, if he had wished it?” Luna said.

Tonks cocked her head and stared at Luna. “I’m sorry... what?”

Harry chuckled. “This one doesn’t travel in straight lines, Tonks,” he advised.

Luna smiled. “Thank you, Harry. You’re filled with compliments this evening,” she said. She

turned her attention back to Tonks. “I was just saying that Professor Flitwick could have been an answer to the trivia question, if he had wished it. He is a gifted musician. He has a cabinet in his office where he keeps a very rare violin – a Villiers, I believe he told me – and a guitar and several different types of woodwinds. I imagine that he knows quite a lot about Paganini, quite a lot indeed.”

Tonks beamed. “That’s brilliant!” she exclaimed. “I mean, it’s natural to think of Defence professors first when curses are a possibility, but Flitwick would be the perfect person to ask for help!”

Harry had thought of Flitwick as well, back on the beach when Heather heard Ginny play for the first time. He understood what Luna was driving at, though – Flitwick would be ideal because he was a musician as well as a charms expert. Something else tickled at the back of his mind.

“Luna... I’ve been in Professor Flitwick’s office several times, and he hasn’t opened any cabinets for me,” Harry observed.

“I assist the Professor from time to time. On occasion, I review first-years’ papers and projects. For the most part, I handle correspondence and such,” she said.

Thoughts of missing property and misleading study hints pushed into Harry’s mind. “Then why doesn’t he do anything about your housemates?” he demanded.

“I’ve never asked him to do anything,” Luna said calmly.

“Why should he wait to be asked? He’s your Head of House, for goodness’ sake!” Harry snapped.

“Your reaction marks you as a Gryffindor,” Luna said. “Professor Flitwick would do absolutely anything to help anyone if asked.” Though her voice never faltered or rose, Harry felt her emphasis on ‘if asked’.

“And if not asked...?” Harry began.

“Then he would assume a person’s competence to deal with the situation at hand as she or he saw fit,” Luna finished.

Tonks’ brow furrowed. “What’s the problem with your housemates, exactly?” she asked Luna.

Luna sighed. “It would take some time to answer your question in the proper context.”

“I’m a patient woman when I need to be,” Tonks said. “Harry, make yourself useful. Go talk to Ron, and make Bill happy. If Bill’s happy, then it’s more likely that I’ll be happy. If I’m happy, then you’re more likely to survive your dance lessons.” She smiled wickedly and ushered Luna off. Harry realised that he was beaten, just as surely as Bill before him, and he unwillingly trundled toward the bar.

Ron caught Harry’s eye and cautiously watched him approach. He said nothing until Harry was

within arm's reach. "So... you had a nice ride, then?" he asked.

"Sure, a nice ride," Harry said. He stopped, but just couldn't let it go at that. "Luna is good company," he added. "We walked all over the city. It was brilliant."

Ron frowned. "She's still recovering! What were you thinking, walking her all over the place?"

"What do you care?" Harry snapped. "I thought you were on a *date*."

"*Hah*," Ron snorted, "*that* was put to rest in about five minutes. She spent the whole bloody ride talking about music, thinking about music, and scheming to play music. She and Ginny were on and on and on and on... cripes, it's all that either of them could talk about! I mean, going on the whole time about one thing – and not an especially interesting thing at that – can you imagine?"

Harry said, "I can imagine," and began to hum the Chudley Cannons' fight song.

Ron's ears reddened. "I do not... that's unfair; it's not like I... it's not the same – not at all!" he spluttered. Harry laughed at his distress, which did nothing whatever to relieve it.

One of the tall, lightly clad women at the bar returned her attention to Ron, and then looked Harry up and down. He didn't care for it at all. "So, *Ronnie* ... are you going to stand there, or are you going to make introductions?" she asked.

Harry mouthed 'Ronnie?' and Ron rolled his eyes. "Mary, Harry. Harry, Mary," he rolled off absently.

She didn't look like a Mary to Harry; he expected something more exotic, or at least more forward. '*Mary*' wears a buttoned jumper, he thought, *not... well, whatever that is*. He managed a smile, and said, "Charmed."

She extended her hand. He wasn't about to kiss it, and she left it in an awkward position for a handshake; somehow he managed to grasp and wiggle it about in a not-entirely-uncomfortable fashion. She prattled on about a hundred things that were meaningless or unimportant to him. '*Charmed*', *indeed*, he thought; *why couldn't it be a silencing charm?* He tried looking at her in hopes that it would change his mood; there was, after all, quite a lot of her to look at. It didn't work. Instead, he became acutely aware that there were a number of girls he'd rather see in a balaclava and heavy woollens than the one before him in gauzy bits of whatever.

Harry had to get away. "Ron, look... I'm really sorry... but..." he managed.

Ron sighed. "I'm sorry as well, mate. We keep letting the birds get in the way this summer, eh?"

"In the way?" Mary huffed.

Ron smiled at her indulgently. "Oh, no - not you, luv," he said in a silky voice that was almost entirely unlike his own. "Harry's my best mate and we have a few things to settle, that's all."

She pressed close to Ron and nuzzled his cheek. Harry thought that the top of Ron's head was going to shoot violently into the air. "You'd better hurry, then," she said to Ron in a voice calculated to make his toes curl. "Make your peace, hand him off to Julia, and come back to me. After all, I'm sure you'd much rather –" She leant in even closer, whispered something into his ear, and then backed away with a carnivorous grin.

Ron's eyes flickered. "Well... well," he said, "I... that sounds very interesting, but hardly a first-night-out sort of... er, tell me... is that actually possible?" He didn't blush as much as Harry would have expected.

"You're cute," she said. "I like that... quite a lot." She blew Ron a kiss, winked at Harry, then turned and began to walk away; even Harry found himself momentarily taken in by the sight. "You'll never know if it's possible, unless you hurry along," she purred without looking back.

Ron moved to one side, putting Mary behind him and Harry before him. He whispered too forcefully, "She's *eighteen* – can you believe it? I was asking around. The one with the darker hair – Julia – she's watching you, isn't she? Don't *stare*, for Merlin's sake!"

"Ron..." Harry began.

"She wants to put the make on you – can't you tell?" Ron said eagerly. "This could still end up one hell of a night!"

Harry struggled to make sense of Ron. "Have you been drinking?" he asked.

"Only one... or three... I don't know. Seems like pretty weak stuff, though," Ron said. "Look... I mean, *don't look*, but look... *live a little*, mate... you know, while you can. If you don't get yourself snogged *soon*, you're going to burst into little bitty itty bits that just... *explode* all over the room – *BOOM, splat!* ." He nervously brushed back his bangs. "It's just bloody *snogging*, you know..." The leggy, lightly dressed girls waiting at the end of the bar sniggered at that. "...no rings or ministers involved. 'Course, it could be more than a snog, but that's up to you, I expect."

"Ron..." Harry warned. He wished that Ron would lower his voice.

"I'm serious!" Ron said.

Harry couldn't help but snigger himself. *Yeah... you're Sirius, all right*, he thought.

"What?" Ron demanded.

"Never mind," Harry said. *How do I put this?* he agonised. "I... um... *appreciate* ... what you're trying to do. It's passing strange, considering how the day has gone... but I do appreciate it. It's just not... it's not..."

"What? They don't do it for you? You must be joking!" Ron said, exasperated.

Harry harrumphed. "Ron, this is Harry here – you know, *Harry*? Best mate for five years, and all

that? Can you see me losing myself with someone I don't know? Gods, I couldn't take that kind of risk even if I wanted to!"

Ron gaped at him for a while. He seemed strangely deflated, but after a long while he slowly nodded. "I don't know what I was... I'm sorry *again*, I suppose. I just..." He steeled himself, and said quietly and firmly, "I'm not going out without having a damn good time first. You shouldn't either. Life's too short. Merlin knows, it's too... it's too short... it's just so short, you know..." He bit his lip, and looked at the floor.

Harry fidgeted. He said quietly, "Madam Bones said... and Lupin, he said... there are people, you know, who can help you deal with this sort of –"

Ron glared at him. "Off the top, I can think of two people who have to live knowing how they're going to die. Funny, both of them are standing right here," he growled. He took a deep breath, and his voice softened. "Besides... if I talk to any of *that* lot, then it's a one-way ticket to Lockhart's old bed at St. Mungo's."

Harry couldn't deny that. He struggled for something else, some way to make Ron understand without snapping or criticising or blaming. "Maybe... maybe you need to find someone who wants to be with you and doesn't care what might come next," Harry offered.

"*That's what I'm trying to do*," Ron huffed.

"I mean, someone who understands the, uh, circumstances. Don't you want more than *this*?" Harry asked, with a dismissive wave toward the bar.

"Well, that's a bloody long list, isn't it?" Ron sneered. "Let's think... someone who dropped me cold; a known nutter; and Lavender Brown. Two real choices, and I'd have to be barmy for one of them!"

Harry winced. "Don't call Luna a nutter... and keep it down, would you? You're making a scene."

"*I am not*," Ron said petulantly.

"A bit more of this, and people will think *I'm* the one to do... well, whatever Myrtle over there wants to do to you," Harry quipped.

Ron covered his mouth. "You... did you say *Myrtle* ...?" Ron chuckled. "I suppose... I suppose that there *might* be moaning involved..." He clapped his hand over his mouth again and just shook, until he managed to spit out, "...and trust me, *you'll* never be doing *that* to anyone. Gods, what an image!" He laughed loudly. "Get me an Obliviator, quickly! *Oh*, that *hurts*!"

"Shut it – *now* – or we'll really need one," Harry forced out while maintaining an even smile.

Ron fixed Harry with a glassy-eyed stare for a moment, and then nodded; Harry hoped that he was snapping out of whatever state he was in.

Harry glanced around casually, to see if anyone was paying attention. No one was staring at them, but someone was staring pointedly at Heather. He looked to Ron, flicked his head ever so slightly to one side, and used his eyes to guide Ron's attention. Ron raised an eyebrow slightly, and stood up straighter. Harry knew that they shared the same observation and concern. There was nothing magical about the exchange, but it was something reserved to the closest of friends.

The woman was not old, but might not have been all that young – it was very hard to tell. She had short dark hair that clung to her head, intense eyes, and a sleek figure held in a ready posture. *She knows how to fight*, Harry thought. She wore a dark leather duster over closely fitted dark clothing. Her look wasn't all that different from some in the crowd, but she stuck out to Harry like a wizard roaming the High Street.

“What's she holding?” Ron whispered?

“I think it's a mobile telephone,” Harry said. “My uncle carries one from time to time, but it's quite a bit larger.”

“Where does the wire go, then?” Ron asked. “Fellytones hook to the wall with a wire – even *I* know that.”

“I said it's *mobile*,” Harry groaned. “It travels with you – no wires. It's... it's sort of a two-way wireless, I suppose.”

“Ah,” said Ron. “You may be right. She's jabbing on the number thingies and putting it to her face.”

“Ears?” Harry asked.

Ron fished in his pockets. Luna came up beside Harry and stood closer than was customary; it didn't bother him. She looked him in the eyes, and turned to follow his gaze.

“She's one of us, of course,” Luna said matter-of-factly. “I thought I might be of some help – you know, just in case.”

Ron smiled slightly. “Er, how can you tell?”

“When she moves, her clothing doesn't move,” she said.

Ron's brow furrowed. “I don't get it.”

“Observe,” Luna said. She lifted her own arm to her face. The sleeve of her shirt pulled taut, and the way it draped across her body subtly changed. She lowered her arm, and nodded at the mysterious woman. As the woman talked on the mobile phone, she moved her arm. Neither the duster nor her clothing changed position – not a shift, not a wrinkle. Luna grinned, and added, “Not the sort of thing you might find in an ordinary shopping district.”

“I'll be switched,” Ron whispered.

“Either her clothing is charmed, *or* made of a certain very special hide, or *both*,” Luna sing-songed. “A large coat made of *that* hide would be terribly *expensive*, I should think. I’d much prefer a *Demiguise* coat, although I suppose that it would be quite easy to lose. Of course, I’d want the *Demiguise* to be *done* with its pelt *first*. I *abhor* hunting... do you *abhor* *hunting*, Ronald...?”

Ron gaped at her, and Harry smiled. “Good eye, Luna,” he said. “You might want to fetch Tonks. Ron and I are going to have a listen.”

“Yeah... fetch Tonks, would you?” Ron said quietly. “Here, Harry... take one.” He shoved an Extendable Ear into Harry’s hand.

Harry smoothly made his way to one side of the woman, and Ron sidled up opposite him. Soon, they could clearly hear her.

“...no, she hasn’t *sung* anything... Julian, I will not... look, I owe you, but I certainly *don’t* owe you... Julian... this is ridiculous. Burke is going to pop a seam when he finds...” The woman scowled, and held the mobile phone away from her ear a few inches. Despite that, Harry noticed that her eyes followed a very disciplined pattern back and forth across the stage area. “Here’s the situation,” she snapped. “I will watch her. I will let you know if she sings – on the stage, in the loo, whatever. I can detain her for a short time, if necessary... I most certainly will *not* do that to *her*. There are very explicit guidelines where she is concerned... frankly, it’s none of your affair... no... no, it’s not. I suggest you keep your pointy beak in the clear; you might not like what you find. Wha... if you weren’t so intent on screwing Burke, not to mention... *oh*, that’s too much information; I *really* don’t want to... uh-huh... *right* ... well... then that’s your cross to bear, isn’t it...? *No*. No, I will *not*. I have explicit... once more, stay clear of it. Mr. MacLeish’s instructions aren’t yours to question, unless you care very little for your employment... Julian, if you poke beneath that rock, then you must care very little for your health. Wha... no... well, I wouldn’t exactly wait around to cash your bonus cheque, then... well... that would be *your* problem; no worries for me. Why...? He trusts me... he trusts me, and I’m not about to cock *that* up. I’m on the rotation to supervise Nicola, for Chrissake... *WHAT*... what did you say? You insufferable... why? *Why*? Of all the... because I owe you, you wanker, and when this is done, I *won’t* owe you. If you *ever* assert that I owe you *anything* – *ever* – *again*, there won’t be enough left of you to feed a herring. Get your scrawny arse in here *now*, so I can be done with you. Five minutes, and I walk. Set me off, and you know that I’ll be dialling Burke straight away.” She angrily stabbed at one of the buttons on the phone, and thrust it deep into one of the duster’s pockets.

Harry reeled in the Ear and nonchalantly moved on. Ron waited a moment and then followed. It would have been discreet, except that the gaggle of girls was trying to remain within earshot. The woman glanced at the brazen girls for an instant and a flicker of disgust played across her face. *Ten points to your house, whomever you are*, Harry thought.

“What did you make of that?” Ron muttered.

“Julian is Heather’s minder, more or less. Burke has something to do with her as well – he

manages the money, I think. It sounds to me like those two may be having a falling-out. Did you get the impression that this Julian is trying to catch Heather singing? I can't figure why," Harry said.

"She said she could 'detain' Heather. I've heard enough," Ron said menacingly, his head inclining slightly toward the woman. "What do you think – give her a chance to explain herself, or just come out swinging?"

"*You* won't be doing anything; it's not worth risking a letter from the Ministry. She doesn't want to be here, and she's just watching for now. I know what this Julian character looks like, and I can certainly handle him," Harry said. "Let's just point her out to Tonks, and watch for... Ron, what are you...? *Ron* !"

Ron walked slowly past the woman; he never stopped. Harry clearly heard him, though. "Don't even think about doing anything to Heather," he said. "There are Aurors watching you."

"I've only seen the one that the girl with the large eyes is bringing toward us. You're not one, and I think that the same is true for your dark-haired friend," the woman said quietly and evenly. "Keep her from singing on stage, and nothing will happen." She never made a move toward Ron or toward a wand.

Harry had the sense that Ron had just set something in motion that would have been better kept still. He took a deep breath, and decided to intervene. He slowly sidled up beside her, and faced the stage. "You're not from England... Australia, maybe?" Harry said.

"I'm a bit old for you," she said. "Is there a reason you're taking up my time?"

"You don't have any idea who I am, do you?" he said.

"No, and I can't imagine that it matters," she said. "Come back when you're grown up; perhaps we'll have something to talk about then."

"Heather's very important to me," he said. "It might be best if you just walked away."

She turned to look at him, clearly annoyed. "Stay clear of this, boy," she warned.

Harry waved his wand inside his sleeve, and cancelled the glamour. He deliberately tossed back his fringe, which left his scar in stark relief. The woman's expression never wavered but she said slowly, "Well... *that* adds an interesting wrinkle to the situation."

"You don't want to make me angry," he said in a low voice.

"No, not if I value my job," she said. "Mr. MacLeish would have my head on a platter if I laid a finger on you. So... what's next?"

"Why does Julian want to catch Heather singing?" he asked.

She smiled slightly, apparently impressed. “You’re fully informed, aren’t you? Very well... he’s trying to trigger penalties in her contract.”

She seemed to assume that he knew more than he did, probably because he had used Julian’s first name. He decided to exploit that. “Burke wouldn’t agree with this?” he asked.

“Certainly not, and he would be right to disagree. Julian’s an arse *and* a poor strategist. Burke would like to have a position next summer. Julian seems to think that his best chance for that lies in blackmail,” she said.

Harry reacted instinctively. “I don’t care for the sound of that,” he said. “Call Burke, straight away.”

“No,” she said.

“What do you mean, ‘no’?” he snarled.

The woman crossed her arms, and leaned more heavily back against the edge of the bar. “Call him yourself. I’ll just stand here until Julian shows up, and then he’s on his own.”

“I have no way of calling him,” Harry said. “It’s not as though I have a mobile telephone. How do you make it work, anyway? Shouldn’t – you know – shouldn’t there be interference, or something?”

The slight smile returned. “You simply need the right sort of phone. Mr. MacLeish may be able to help you with that. You *do* have a meeting with him next month, correct?”

“How did you...?” Harry began.

“Nicola has been prattling on non-stop for the last two weeks,” she said. “Here.” She held out the mobile phone. “Press ‘8’ and then ‘Dial’. I have nothing to do with this, of course.”

Harry dialled the phone, and awkwardly held it to his ear. Ron stood back, watching with a raised eyebrow.

A voice grumbled, “Burke Preston here.”

Harry cleared his throat. “Mr. Preston, we haven’t been formally introduced. My name is Harry Potter, and –”

There was a brief fit of coughing on the other end. “What can I do for you, Mr. Potter... and how did you get this number?”

So, you’re one of us as well, Harry thought. *This just gets stranger*. “I’m borrowing a mobile at the moment,” he said; the woman frowned. “I wanted to let you know that your friend Julian seems intent on stirring up trouble tonight. I’m at a club in Edinburgh, called Cabaret Molière –”

“I know the place,” Preston said quickly.

“Heather is here,” Harry said. “So are her band mates, and Julian will be here presently.”

There was silence for a few moments. “I see,” Preston finally said. “How is it that you know Heather, may I ask?”

“I’m Mr. MacLeish’s neighbour,” Harry admitted. “We’ve met before, on the beach. Erm... I wasn’t exactly hospitable.”

Preston spluttered, “Well... that’s... well, I missed *that* completely... *oh* – that’s rich! Heather was with you at the time, wasn’t she?”

Harry didn’t answer him. “I think Julian’s out to hurt her. I just thought you should know. I can handle him, of course, but... er... I might be a little...”

“Rough?” Preston asked. “He’d most likely deserve it. Still, Julian is, shall we say, not completely acquainted with our ways – do you understand? It might be best if I handle him instead. I’ll be there in... oh... two minutes?”

“Right, then. Er, thank you?” Harry said tentatively.

“It was good of you to call,” Preston said. “I’m most grateful.” Harry heard a click, then a buzzing sound, and then nothing. He handed the mobile phone back to the woman without a word.

Moments later, as the musicians prepared to take the stage, a familiar looking man with long blond hair sliced through the room. It hadn’t fully struck Harry on the beach, but Julian reminded him a bit of Lucius Malfoy. He didn’t need to hear a word; he could see the man tear into Heather from the moment he reached her. Harry was halfway to the stage before he realised that he was in motion. He was nearly within reach of Heather and Julian before he recognised that both Ron and the mysterious woman were just steps behind, with Luna and Tonks close at their heels. The woman was a wild card, and Harry let his wand drop inside his sleeve until he cradled the end in his fingertips.

“You have no respect for your talent, no respect for your management, no respect for the label, and no respect for the opportunities you’ve been handed!” Julian shrieked.

“Handed? Everything I’ve gotten, I’ve *earned* !” Heather shouted back.

Julian jabbed his finger toward her. “See? There you are – a complete lack of respect for your talent. What are you thinking, screaming like that? You shouldn’t be screaming, you shouldn’t be subjecting your ears to this caterwauling, you shouldn’t be putting in late nights... no respect, none whatever!”

“Isn’t there a new boy waiting for you somewhere, Julian? Someone fresh? Or have you decided to settle down, maybe stick it out for a week at a time?” Heather sneered.

“No respect for your management, and no respect whatever for your contract,” Julian snapped. “Your contract – ”

“Enjoy the ride, Julian – it’s over in ten months,” Heather growled.

Julian allowed a Cheshire grin to spread across his face. “Your contract has so many interesting elements,” he said, “like the behaviour clauses, or the self-renewal triggers. It’s a beautiful document, perfectly designed for you. You’ll be fortunate to be free of it when you’re fifty.”

“I could tie you up in the courts forever,” she said, “and don’t you forget it. Nearly everyone admits the thing is unenforceable.”

“Yes,” he said, “and you’d be prohibited from performing or recording during the whole process. So... go ahead. Sing your brains out. Play in public with your little friends. Prance around in leather and minis, hang about in clubs, consort with questionable men... live it up.” He smiled an entirely false smile, and added sweetly, “We’ll own you.”

“Hullo, Julian,” called a cross-sounding voice from behind Harry. “We really need to reach a firm understanding in regard to *roles* .”

Julian stiffened, and then grumbled, “Fancy seeing you here, Burke.” He stared down the mysterious woman, who simply shrugged in return. “I believe it’s *my* responsibility to make sure that Heather understands what she can and cannot do.”

He proceeded to light into Heather again, this time with a tangent having to do with the sacking of her former guitarist, but she ignored him. Harry saw her try to make eye contact with Burke, who conspicuously avoided it. *Does he know what she can do?* Harry wondered.

Heather’s eyes flashed malice. “I don’t know what to say to you anymore, Julian. I think I’ve said it all before, but you don’t get it. We have a set to play.”

Julian crossed his arms. “Go ahead – it’s *your* never-ending contract, not mine.”

Burke cleared his throat. “Julian, the next time you allow the word ‘contract’ to pass between your lips, there may be *another* sacking involved. Are we clear?”

Julian glared at him. “Clauses were included in the *document* because she won’t listen to reason. I used to catch her busking, even after the second record – out on a freezing street corner, straining her vocal cords!”

Burke ignored him, and looked instead to Heather. “You have reason to be upset, and you may direct it at me. You know full well that I approved your guitarist’s dismissal, and not Julian, but it was at Mr. MacLeish’s personal request. He had Mr. McCormack in mind for you, and I have found that there is no value in arguing with him when he sets his mind. It’s true that we’re under pressure regarding recording and touring costs, but I’ve convinced the label to forego any force reductions until after the tour when we can evaluate actual revenues and expenditures. If you were

working regularly, we would have discussed this. As it stands, you've made yourself rather difficult to reach this month."

Heather exhaled slowly. "Thank you for being straight with me," she said before she returned her attention to Julian. "As for you, I hope you enjoy the set. Maybe I'll howl a little AC/DC, just for you."

"*You – wouldn't – dare*," Julian hissed. "Burke, put a stop to this!"

"I'll wager she wouldn't be doing this if you hadn't provoked her," Preston said calmly. "Now you get to reap what you've sown."

"Like hell..." Julian began.

Preston smiled, revealing unusually sharp-looking teeth. "Before I forget, I have an introduction to make. Julian Sumner, this is Harry Potter. You might remember Harry, from our walk on the beach."

Julian's brow furrowed, "I don't... oh! You're the *neighbour*. Er, what are you doing here, may I ask?"

Harry was quite prepared to threaten Julian, but Preston stepped in. "As it turns out, Harry is a friend of Heather's. He's also a business partner of Mr. MacLeish."

Something seemed to slowly register for Julian. He paled slightly, and said, "Business... partner...?"

Harry summoned a wicked grin. "Yes – business partner," he confirmed.

Preston's smile grew even wider. "Unless you have a strong desire to manage church choirs in the Philippines, I suggest that you calm yourself and refrain from baiting Heather for the remainder of the evening." Julian spluttered, but said nothing. Harry mouthed 'Thank you', and Preston nodded.

Heather whispered in Harry's ear before she moved to the stage, "I don't know how you did it, but thank you. Listen – I have something for you." She fished in her pocket, but McCormack tugged at her arm. She mouthed 'later' and let herself be drawn to the stage. Once there, she slipped on a headset with a microphone attached. There was a loud wail of feedback, that was mercifully replaced by her voice.

"Er... hello out there. In case you don't know, I'm Heather Magruder," she said, provoking a healthy round of applause. "My mates had a few sets planned for you tonight, and I'm joining in. No opera or anything like that, I promise you – although we might toss in a ballad or two." The crowd hooted its approval. Harry tried to manoeuvre toward the centre of the stage, but it was becoming difficult; he wondered if they'd let in the entire queue.

She smiled. "My mates tend to like the old noisy stuff, and this is their gig. If you don't like it, then plug your ears or move on!" She nodded to the drummer, who rhythmically clapped his sticks

together four times before the band erupted.

Harry recognised some of the music – a Jimi Hendrix song here, Rolling Stones there. McCormack and the keyboardist did most of the singing, and Heather seemed content to take her frustrations out on her guitar. Harry settled in at the centre of the stage; the rush of the crowd pressed him against the edge of the riser from time to time, but he was where he wanted to be.

She sang one strange song that Harry thought was about Alice and the looking glass. The lyrics mentioned Alice at any rate; and the Mad Hatter and the Red Queen and dormice; and a hookah-smoking caterpillar for that matter. Harry had no idea what a hookah was, but something about the song made him conclude that it was probably a bad thing. Julian stood frozen at the side of the stage. When he looked as if he might rush up onto the stage, the woman with the mobile phone was there to stop him. When he looked as if he might prefer to leave, Burke Preston cut him off. Harry found a certain satisfaction in the man's distress.

At the end of the strange song, Heather handed her guitar to the backup singer and slowly walked to the middle of the stage, directly in front of Harry. She nodded at someone unseen, and the lights dimmed until only Heather and the keyboard player were lit in a foggy glow.

She slipped into Shona's cadence for a moment. "Some of yeh asked fer this one. Some of yeh know it. If yeh don't, then it's not fer yeh." Harry heard Julian whimper, "Don't do it!"

There was barely any music at all, just a few quiet chords that echoed behind her voice. This was at last the voice that Harry associated with Heather. He didn't understand the words, and quickly realized that they weren't English words at all. They were heavy and guttural, and Harry thought that they would sound rather like an auto accident coming from anyone else's mouth. As soon as she began, a few people whooped in apparent recognition – otherwise, the room went silent.

When she was finished, about half the crowd erupted into wild applause, and many of the rest clapped tepidly. He looked about and spotted a few people who looked rather like Wimbourne fans singled out amidst the Puddlemere United side at a league match – uncomfortable and angry, but too cowed by the opposition to say anything.

The rather large man to Harry's left had hooted and clapped madly. He turned a grin on Harry, nudged him with his elbow, and bellowed, "Ain't she somethin'?"

Harry nodded enthusiastically. "She is," he said. "I wish I understood the words."

"Shame that yeh don' know yer heritage," the man said. He closed his eyes and recited, "Cuil-lodair, is Briseadh na h-Eaglaise, is briseadh nan tacannan - lamhachas-laidir da thrian de ar coms; 's e seoltachd tha dhith oirnn. Nuair a theirgeas a'chruaidh air faobhar na speala caith bhuat a' chlach-liomhaidh; chan eil agad ach iarann bog mur eil de chruas nad innleachd na ni sgathadh.

"Is caith bhuat briathran mine oir chan bhuat briathran agad; tha Tuatha De Danann fon talamh, 's nuair a ruigeas tu Tir a' Gheallaidh, mura bi thu air t'aire coinnichidh Sasannach riut is plion air, a dh'innse dhut tug Dia, brathair athar, coir dha anns an fhearann."

“Oh...” Harry said, because he could think of nothing else to say.

The man still sported a mad grin. “It’s na’ the words, it’s the meanin’. She’s tellin’ Queen Maggie where ta go.” Harry recalled Dumbledore’s mention of Heather singing in Gaelic to the Queen; it had sounded controversial, and now he had an inkling why that might be the case.

Julian looked ready to be tossed in a kerbside bin. For that matter, Preston appeared positively ruffled. Both he and the mysterious woman nervously watched the crowd.

Heather retrieved her guitar. “I thought we’d throw in something brand spanking new,” she said. “We wrote this one on the road, and it’s never been heard outside a bus or a hotel room. Kirley’s only played it once, so we’ll forgive him. What’d’ya think – that sound all right to you wankers?” There was a loud roar. “I’ll take that as ‘yes’. It doesn’t have a name, really. The working title is ‘My Manager is a Flaming Pile of Shite’. Hope you like it.” Harry was fairly sure that Julian was going to have a stroke on the spot and that his remains would then spontaneously burst into flames, which suited Harry fine.

Heather let her guitar rest loose, and bobbed from side to side while her band mates played a few bars. Then she joined in.

“All I see, it’s not for me. What I want, you have not got...”

Her voice was much lower than before, and sounded breathy and forced. Julian gripped the edge of the stage, and moaned, “What – are – you – doing? *Stop doing that to your voice!*”

“Tried to use the things you sold me, no matter what the cost... tried to go the way you told me, but each time I got lost... the stairs didn’t lead me anywhere –”

Her face contorted into a snarl, and her guitar exploded to life. She glared at Julian more intensely with each powerful chord, as she continued to sing.

“I’m takin’ the fire escape, up to the roof... don’t care if it’s not the way you find the truth... time to make this climb, to rise above...”

Abruptly, she let the guitar fall though she continued singing.

“...this room, and all of you... who say I should do like you would... tried to live the life you sold me, no matter what the cost... tried to walk the way you told me, but each time I got lost... the stairs didn’t lead me anywhere...”

The room exploded in power chords and thumping bass and pounding drums.

“I’m takin’ the fire escape, up to the roof... don’t care if it’s not the way you find the truth...and when I get up that high, I don’t know what I’ll find... but I’d rather look at the sky, than wonder why I let you take my time... time to make this climb, to rise above...”

McCormack broke into a solo over Heather’s power chords. Julian looked as if he wanted to bang

his head against the stage. Harry was inclined to help with the banging, if the opportunity arose, but he was quite happy watching Heather.

Her intensity took him aback. The song struck a chord deep within him, too. *We have more in common than I really knew*, he thought. His place in front of the stage left him at an awkward angle, looking up at her. She was no more conscious of her skirt than before, and he was acutely aware of how long and bare her legs were. She caught his eye, and unexpectedly flashed a trace of a smile. He looked deeply into her eyes. *I wish I knew what you were thinking right now*, he thought, but he wasn't sure that he would want to share what was on *his* mind. Her eyes flickered, his head swam, and he felt a sickening tug like falling into a Floo.

He felt a wave of joy – it felt familiar, like he felt when he flew alone high above the Quidditch pitch... there was some anger – a strong desire to take his guitar off and dash it over Julian's head... there was a kind of sadness and regret, a sense that nothing would ever be the same... there was a powerful feeling of loneliness and a knowledge that no one understood, not really... and there was a strong sense that he could be undone by green eyes if he were to let it happen... and he *had* to look at those eyes, but he couldn't screw up the song, not when he was sticking it to that effin' wanker, not when he could see that Julian wanted to crawl under the stage... anger, dark anger... stay away... stay at bay... not right now...

Harry shook his head, and tried in vain to clear his mind. He could see her before him, and he could see himself as well. Somehow he had performed Legilimency on her, and he was horrified. He needed to get out of her mind but couldn't seem to withdraw. He tried to end it, and something stood in his way. He felt *something* – it was like an animal growling and pouncing – and he realised that he couldn't withdraw because she wasn't letting him.

Her eyes tore at him and he felt the tug again. His mind flooded with memories... flirting at L'Oiseau Chanteur... running on the beach... hiding Heather from Julian and Burke... telling her about his past, at least as much as he could tell a Muggle... the feel of her hands on his back, comforting him... the sense that they shared things in common, things that he had never shared with anyone else before... Heather sitting on the edge of his bed... the smell of her hair... watching her walk from behind and feeling guilty about it... how she looked in that bloody skirt, standing there in the library – she turned his head, even when she was furious with him... how he had wanted to strangle Ron... he could still see Heather in front of him, on the stage, still playing her guitar... he pushed back as hard as he could, and she grew clearer and his memories grew fainter.

She shook her head clear, returned to the power chords, and began to sing again.

“I’m takin’ the fire escape, up to the roof...”

Pushing back didn't work like it should have. Instead of being freed, he was flooded with memories and thoughts that weren't his – being hustled out to stand on a blustery street corner and sing for meagre coins... having her few toys taken from her because she wasn't good enough, because she didn't bring in enough... moving to Madame Hartmann's cottage... travelling constantly... loneliness, in the midst of a crowded room... excruciating highs and lows... Julian

being a bastard, but telling the truth – no one really did care about her, just the voice...

“Don’t care if it’s not the way you find the truth...”

...always a step ahead the darkness, holding it at bay, holding the Wolf at bay, but sometimes letting it out, enjoying it when she snapped at Julian or Madame Hartmann or anyone else foolish enough to tamper with the Wolf... seeing a motorbike race by, outside of St. Ebb... bantering with a nice, attractive – boy? man? He was right on that cusp, but who was he?... sneaking onto the Black’s property and sitting on the beach... those green eyes, the ones that were hard to avoid... friends were harder to come by than lovers, though...

“And when I get up that high, I don’t know what I’ll find...”

... wondering how the Wolf can be real – it *can’t* be real... betrayal – just when she was beginning to feel something special with Shona, the world turned upside down again – lies – who was this man, this Lupin? – fear – how can I be one of them? – sorrow – nothing ever works out in the end... loneliness, crushing loneliness... Ron reaches out to her, decent and kind and helpful in the moment; at least he doesn’t like her for the voice – that’s refreshing...

“But I’d rather look at the sky, than wonder why I let you take my time...”

...he felt like he was shoved backward. She had a snarl on her face as she sang, and the torrent subsided for a moment before his own memories began to flow out of him... a scream and a green flash... a flying motorbike in the night... a cupboard with locks... hand-me-down clothes... his first ride on the Hogwarts Express, and the first boat ride to the castle... Fluffy, and McGonagall’s giant chess game... Voldemort, in the back of Quirrell’s head... Ginny and Riddle’s diary and the basilisk and Hermione in the Hospital Wing... Sirius and Lupin and Ron and Hermione in the Shrieking Shack... his patronus, and Sirius racing off on Buckbeak... dodging the Hungarian Horntail... Cedric – poor Cedric... the ghostly shades of his parents emerging from the wand... Umbridge and the blood quill... Voldemort, always in his mind – scar burning, and burning, and burning... becoming the snake... is this madness?... have to save Sirius... it’s a trap... Bellatrix... the veil... running, always running... Fliptrask’s office... riding the Bonnie to the Burrow... the safeguarding charm... Sirius in a cheap suit... Hermione in a bathrobe... dinner at the Grangers’... the Death Eater attack... he’s going to kill her – have to stop Wormtail... noise, light, heat, swinging, flailing, blood... nightmares... dismissal... poor Luna...

Stop! Stop! he screamed, but there was no one to hear it. Somewhere deep inside his mind, it dawned on him that she wouldn’t have any idea how to withdraw, that perhaps she was accidentally pulling him back in...

...she knew that the Wolf was real, not just a shade in her mind – the Wolf was in her mind and in her soul – the Wolf was real, and there was nowhere to run anymore – she couldn’t bear it, but she knew that she would... she wouldn’t be broken, not by Auntie Fiona, not by Julian or Keith MacLeish, and certainly not by the Wolf, and anyone in the way could just sod off... wanting to take that damn picture off his wall and smash it to bits... wanting to kiss and be kissed... wanting... needing... help...

He screamed inside his head again, but it wasn't a scream for release. It was pain, his pain and her pain. He needed to hold her, to help her bear it. She had a vacant half-mad look in her eyes, as if she was pushing through a wall of exhaustion in order to finish the song. He couldn't move. He wondered just how much she'd actually taken in, and how much of it made any sense to her. He wondered what would happen if he kissed her. He wondered if she knew what he was thinking in that instant. Her voice sounded strained and tired.

“Time to make this climb, to rise above... time to make this climb, to rise above.”

The song ended on a single powerful note, at the exact moment that the last word died. She breathed hard, her chest rising and falling heavily, and he wanted to feel guilty because he was watching her chest, but he couldn't summon any guilt. Wanting... wanting... he could understand that. He could understand all of it, really – the monster inside, barely contained, barely held at bay – the betrayal, the lies, and the fear; the loneliness, and the wanting.

Her guitar clattered to the stage and she stood there, eyes locked with Harry. The drums began to pound, and some kind of music began to play – Harry didn't know what it was, and he didn't much care. She absently slipped off the headset, her eyes never moving away from his, and stepped toward the edge of the stage. Harry had the presence of mind to step forward and stop her from simply walking off the edge. He reached up, placed his hands at her waist, and lowered her to the floor.

“What... I... was that...?” she babbled.

“Uh-huh,” he said.

Her hands shook. “I... I'm so ashamed, I... you saw everything that...?”

He said faintly, “Uh-huh. Did you?”

She nodded, and asked in a throaty whisper, “How do you... how do you go on?”

“No choice, really,” he said. “Anyone gets in the way, I tell them to sod off.”

She smiled but it quickly faded. Her eyes were haunted, he thought. She placed her hand to his cheek. “I want... I want...”

“Uh-huh,” he said. He realised that he was breathing as hard as she was. He was nearly dizzy from the warmth of the room. He knew that they were still connected somehow. He didn't understand why or how, and he didn't care.

She brought her hand around the side of his head, buried her fingers in his hair, and pulled him to her. The kiss was electric; he was sure that his hair was standing on end, and that his feet had been reduced to cinders. Ron had it right – *BOOM, splat!* He thought he had known magic before, and now knew that he hadn't – *this* was magic. She loosened her grip on his hair, and pulled back just enough to look into his eyes. He felt himself pulling and being pulled all at the same time. It was

all feelings without thoughts this time, bounding and rebounding from her to him to her to him... wanting... longing... hunger... white-hot... sweating... burning...

He drew her to him with one arm behind her back, his other hand roaming freely, and they began to devour one another. He was dimly aware that her clothing fit like a second skin, and that he desperately needed to feel the skin beneath – and he frantically pushed back with everything he had. Dementors... Snape in a dress... dancing with Ron... he summoned everything and anything to help with the push, but it was so hard. He was a human Patronus, impervious to all things unhappy and disturbing. *Why did I ever want to be alone ?* he wondered. *I was a stupid arse!* They stood there and embraced and kissed for ten minutes, or a day, or a hundred years – there was no measuring and no knowing, only feeling.

A voice intruded. “Potter!”

Snape in a dress , he thought, *reciting naked in McGonagall’s class – wait, that one’s not mine... that’s Hermione’s...*

Hermione! In a trice, the hunger and the longing subsided just enough for him to push back. Now, it was just a kiss – a terribly pleasant kiss to be sure, but only that.

“Snap out of it, boy!”

Harry broke off the kiss and shrieked, “*Gah! Snape in a dress!* ”

“*WHAT?* ” Snape thundered.

Harry stammered, “I mean... Snape... uh, you see, I was just trying to, um, find a way to push back, and... uh...”

“Push back? Push back against *what ? Potter, what have you done ?*” Snape demanded.

“Do *what ?*” Harry snapped. “What are you talking about?”

Heather looked past Harry, and said “Oh – my – *God ...*” There was no music anymore. Harry spun around and surveyed the room. Most of the people in the room were in various stages of snogging.

“What the... how...?” Harry managed.

Heather swallowed hard. “We did this?”

“You *must* be responsible for this, Potter,” Snape said with disdain. “You should establish a dedicated fund at the Ministry, to cover the Obliviation costs associated with your pathetic lack of control.”

Heather whispered. “I couldn’t stop it...”

Harry felt a protective pang pull at him. He reached out to her, and she let herself be held. “We both wanted it,” he said.

“Did we?” she asked.

Snape arched an eyebrow. “Explain, Potter – *now* .”

“She’s a Legilimens,” Harry snapped. “Don’t tell me you hadn’t figured that out?”

Snape arched an eyebrow. “She is a Squib who may possess some latent abilities in that area – nothing more. You managed this disaster entirely on your own; it has ‘Potter’ written all over it.” He withdrew his wand. “I’m happy to demonstrate.” Harry let go of Heather and lifted his hands defensively.

Snape whispered, “*Legilimens* ,” but Harry felt nothing.

Heather squeezed her eyes shut, and her hands twitched. “No... no... please...”

“Stop it! You’re hurting her!” Harry shouted.

Snape showed signs of strain. “I am not hurting her, Potter,” he gasped. “She is... *not* defending... she is... resisting her own defence against me... I can not imagine... why...” Heather’s eyes snapped open, dark and fierce. Snape screamed and dropped his wand.

“I’m sorry... I’m sorry... I’m so sorry,” Heather said quickly, with the voice of a scared child.

Snape nursed his wand hand. There were four jagged tears across the palm, and blood dripped down Snape’s wrist and onto the sleeve of his robe. “You have nothing to be sorry about,” Snape told her. “Potter, *that* was Occlumency.”

Heather’s voice shook. “Did you... did you see it?”

“I did,” Snape said. “Have you seen that manifestation previously?” When she paled, he added, “I take that as affirmative.”

“You didn’t have to do that,” Harry snapped. “She’s a wild talent – Dumbledore said so himself.”

“Perhaps if you had shared *that* , I might have been spared injury,” Snape sneered.

“Hello... sir...” Heather mumbled.

“Good evening, Miss Magruder,” said Dumbledore. “This is quite a sight, is it not?” He turned to Snape. “May I tend to your hand, Severus? Quickly, please – we must make haste.”

Snape scowled but presented his hand. Dumbledore didn’t bother to take out his wand; he grasped Snape’s hand as though he were about to shake it, and muttered something. The rough tears were reduced to faint white lines. “Thank you, Headmaster,” Snape whispered.

“Are you frightened, Miss Magruder?” Dumbledore asked.

Heather’s eyes were sad and tired, and Harry thought he could see Lupin in her. “Twenty-four hours ago, I thought I was a regular person and I honestly wondered if Harry was an alien... but this... I don’t know... it’s...” She trailed off. Harry put his arm around her; she bridled, but then seemed to relax slightly.

“Given the circumstances, you are handling yourself admirably,” Dumbledore assured her.

It was clear that Heather had very little reserve left. She looked around the room, in a rising panic. “How did all of this happen?” she asked.

“I’d like to know that myself,” Harry added.

Dumbledore explained, “Very little is known about the effects that two legilimens may have upon one another. Not many wizards possess the ability, and male legilimens outnumber females by at least three-to-one.” He smiled faintly. “There are few opportunities for study.”

“Did we do this to the room, to the entire city – what?” Heather asked nervously.

Snape said, “I briefly looked outside the door. It appears to be a line-of-sight phenomenon.”

Heather asked Snape, “So you don’t know anything about this? You’ve never been with someone else who can do this whatever-you-call-it?” Snape frowned but said nothing.

“How do we get them all to stop?” Harry wondered.

“A diffuse Enervate charm should be sufficient,” said Dumbledore.

“An... Enervate charm?” Heather said, confused.

Dumbledore put on his Kindly Headmaster face, as Harry was beginning to sarcastically think of it. “The charm lends energy and wakefulness to the recipient. I carefully probed a few individuals. They are not caught up in any meaningful way. The Enervate charm will get their attention, and they shall manage the rest on their own.”

Snape glared at Harry and added, “Rather like an opportunistic healing potion – which is something that you *should* have known for your O.W.L.s, of course.”

Harry smirked at Snape. “Why are *you* not, you know... snogging with the rest of them?” he asked.

“I was able to break free of the effect after a short time – as would any wizard worth his salt,” Snape sneered. Harry caught Snape’s furtive glance at the mysterious woman with the mobile phone, who sat on the steps at the far end of the stage and was apparently asleep. He smirked and Snape summoned a haughty glare.

Dumbledore took Heather's hand – it was far too compassionate a gesture, Harry thought, and it left him a bit nauseous. “Miss Magruder, you require intensive instruction with regard to your ability, as soon as possible,” he intoned. “You have manifested a very powerful and immensely dangerous talent. I shall take responsibility for your training, with Professor Snape's assistance.”

“*Not a chance in hell!*” Harry snapped.

Heather reached for his hand and squeezed it. “Not now,” she said quietly.

Snape cut in. “You should not speak about your ability or what has happened here,” he said. “Who is presently aware of it, outside of present company?”

“Remus and Shona,” Heather mumbled.

Snape bristled. “It is unwise for a Muggle to know of this, but I suppose that cannot be helped.”

“Ron doesn't know?” Harry asked.

“We didn't talk about it,” Heather said flatly.

“If she leaves immediately, we can avoid further questions,” Snape pointed out to Dumbledore, “particularly from the Ministry personnel that are undoubtedly on their way.”

Dumbledore nodded. “I am surprised that they have not already arrived.” He returned to the Kindly Headmaster expression, as his attention shifted back to Heather. “It is best that the magical authorities remain unaware of your talent. I will escort you to Hogwarts. We will sort out the situation there, as soon as possible.”

“Potter, you can take care of the rest of the Weasley brood,” Snape ordered. “Mind that you avoid bringing around any of the Muggles. The Ministry will doubtless bring a horde of Obliviators. I must depart before they arrive.”

“Mr. Snape?” Heather said.

“What?” Snape asked impatiently.

“You said this was a line-of-sight thing, right? It shouldn't happen through walls, then? So if I were ever in a similar situation...” Heather asked nervously.

“There's no risk of that,” Lupin snarled. “Step away from him.” Heather clutched Harry's arm.

“Remus, this is not the time –” Dumbledore began.

Lupin forcefully cut him off. “I'm not a *schoolboy* – don't presume to lecture me,” he snapped.

Dumbledore tried again. “Remus, you're making a grave –”

“*Don’t*,” Remus barked, and then he turned on Harry. “I asked you, and you said you’d stay away. *I asked you*. When you decided to come with Luna, I assumed that you would respect that request to a reasonable extent.” He waved his hand toward the bar. “Now that she’s cuddled up with Ron Weasley, the *real* scenario is obvious enough. You planned this, didn’t you?”

Harry’s eyebrows shot up. “This? How on Earth could I have planned *this*?”

Lupin slowly began to shift from red to purple. “Don’t play with me. You planned to come here and ingratiate yourself with my daughter, when I expressly asked you – *and you agreed* – to do no such thing.”

Heather’s jaw tightened at the word ‘daughter’. “When I told you to sod off,” she said stridently, “I meant it.”

“The best thing for you would be to wake up tomorrow with a crushing headache and no memory of the last two weeks,” Lupin snapped at her.

Snape stood back with his arms crossed and a smug look on his face, while Dumbledore tried again to intercede. “Remus, the young lady is seventeen,” he pointed out. “She does have rights in this situation.”

“She has the rights of a Squib, which is to say almost none. If she is here when the Obliviators come, they will remove any memories relating to magic,” Lupin said. He was almost manic, and Harry found himself a little frightened. “All I have to do is keep her here, and the problem will be solved.”

“That is hardly the best –” Dumbledore started.

“*It’s precisely what’s best for her*,” Lupin shouted. “It’s not best for me, and it’s not best for Harry, but we’re well accustomed to loss – we’ll get over it!”

“She will eventually injure someone with that talent of hers, Lupin,” Snape said. “You should have seen what she did to my hand. It was shockingly reminiscent of a werewolf attack.”

Lupin whirled around in a fighting posture. “Shut your foul mouth,” he snarled.

The corners of Snape’s mouth twisted upward. “Does the beast wish a duel?”

Lupin pushed up his sleeves. “No,” he said, “I’d rather remind you what a werewolf attack is *really* like.”

“Stop it! Just stop it!” Heather cried.

“*Accio wands!*” Harry barked, and Snape and Lupin’s wands flew to him.

Dumbledore smiled approvingly, and held out his hand for the wands just as a frowning Amelia Bones appeared with a *pop!* She quickly surveyed the room, and smiled faintly.

“I really don’t want to know,” Madam Bones said. “Albus, you have no more than two minutes to resolve whatever requires resolution. After that, you’re going to have as few Aurors as possible, Cornelius Fudge, and a good-sized gaggle of reporters all bearing down on you.” She stared through her monocle at Harry, and added, “I suppose it should be expected that *you’re* here.”

“It’s nice to see you, too, ma’am,” Harry said, with the barest trace of a smile.

“I need to move as many as eight people from here to another location in Scotland with some haste. Only two of those are licensed to Apparate, and I am not certain it would be advisable in any case,” Dumbledore said.

“I have no knowledge of any capacity that you may or may not possess to create untraceable portkeys,” Madam Bones said flatly, and then abruptly Disapparated. Dumbledore barely managed to hand Snape his wand before the Potions Master was gone.

Dumbledore turned to Harry. “You will take this portkey, and use it to remove yourself, Miss Lovegood and Mister Weasley. Miss Magruder will be accompanying Professor Snape and myself.” He quickly made a portkey from a beverage napkin, thrust it into Harry’s hand, and pointed toward the bar.

“Like he she will,” Lupin growled. “She comes with you and me, Albus – not Snape.”

Heather abruptly flung herself at Harry. “Harry, what if they... look, I’m really scared...” she said awkwardly. Something about it seemed wrong, he thought – forced somehow. She mouthed ‘something for you’, and shoved a bit of paper into his hand.

“You can come with us,” Harry insisted.

“The portkey is specific, Harry. She can not,” Dumbledore said. He held out his hand to Heather.

Harry glared at Lupin, and spat, “If you do anything to her, *anything at all*, you’ll regret it.” Then he began to step over and around people, to make his way across the room.

Ron was sitting on the floor, his back against a barstool. Luna sat on his lap. Their lips were locked together, her hand was tracing across his chest, and they were completely unaware of the rest of the world. “If he hurts you, Luna, I’ll hurt him worse,” Harry said aloud. He spoke the incantation and flicked his wand.

Ron broke off the kiss. “What... I don’t... I was hungry, and then I... *Luna!* ”

“That was... unexpected,” Luna said. “Tell me, where did you learn to kiss? Your instructors were clearly of very high quality.”

“Instructors? What are you on about?” Ron said, and he shook his head.

“That was a joke, Ronald,” she said, “an attempt a humour. Did you like it? Was I funny?”

“I suppose... ” Ron said. He blinked rapidly several times, and then looked up. “Harry! What the...?” He looked around and his jaw dropped. “Crikey - what *happened* ?”

“Erm... it’s a long story...” Harry trailed off, uncertain what he should say. He settled for helping Ron and Luna to their feet.

Luna turned to Ron. “I am sorry that you felt compelled to kiss me.”

Ron straightened his hair by running his fingers through it. “Er, it’s all right,” he said absently. Luna stood up straight, her eyes wider than usual.

“There’s no time to explain,” Harry said, and held out the napkin. “Just take it, both of you.” As soon as Ron and Luna touched it, Harry felt the familiar tug and the three of them were gone.

A moment later, he fell to the floor in the Black tower’s Great Hall. Bill, Tonks and Ginny were already there; Bill and Ginny were arguing, and Tonks looked dazed.

“Looks like we have the time for a long story,” Ron said to Harry.

“I’m not in the mood,” snapped Harry.

Ron looked around the room. “Say... where’s Heather?”

“Being taken as far from me as Remus can arrange,” Harry returned.

Tonks’ eyes widened. “Harry... I saw what the two of you...” She stopped, cleared her throat, and continued awkwardly, “What I mean is, it was obvious that you were... um... are you all right?”

“No, I’m not,” Harry said flatly. He brushed himself off, and walked to the stairs without a word.

It was a clear, cool night. He thought about sitting on the beach. Then he thought about running off. He decided on returning to the bothy, for the moment. As he neared the cliff, he shouted, “*Shacklebolt, don’t even think of jumping me!* ” There was no answer, and no rustling grass or other cues. He reached the bothy unmolested.

He couldn’t put Heather out of his mind, couldn’t silence all the memories. After an hour or two, it became apparent that Dumbledore would not be making an appearance. He listened to music, thought quite a lot about Heather’s lips and the feel of her in his arms, stared at Hermione's picture, and cursed loudly at the sodding prophecy and all those responsible for it. He rolled the crumpled scrap of paper from Heather around the top of his bureau, and decided that he couldn’t look at it, not yet. Eventually he flopped onto the bed and drifted into an unsettled sleep.

Songs and poems referenced (by order of appearance):

Townshend, P. (1971). Baba O’Riley. On *The Who: Who’s Next* . London: MCA Records.

Chaquico, C., & Slick, G. (1967). White rabbit. On *Jefferson Airplane: Surrealistic Pillow* . Los

Angeles, CA: RCA Records.

MacThomais, R. (1979?). Cruaidh. In *Gairm: the Gaelic literary magazine* , volume/issue unknown.

Goldman, M., Stanton, P., Wink. C., et al. [vocalist: Tracy Bonham]. (2003). Up to the roof. On *Blue Man Group: Complex* . New York: Lava Records.

Harry Potter and the Years of Rebellion The Restaurant At The End of the Holidays

Chapter Twenty-eight

THE RESTAURANT AT THE END OF THE HOLIDAYS

August 28

Harry flung another stone from his perch atop the cliff, and watched it leave a tiny crater in the sands below. The next stone sent bits of crushed shells and jetsam skittering. With two more stones, Harry found himself thinking of Ron - falling through the sky of his own will, like he'd been diving off a cliff into a teacup. *The higher the fall, the greater the splat*, he thought. *Maybe I should just jump off my broom and land on bloody Voldemort - boom, SPLAT.* He winced, and the remaining stones in his hand slipped loose and clattered down the cliffside. There was a *clang!* in the distance, which was entirely unlike a *pop!*, *whizz!*, *bang!* or other sudden sound associated with magic, and he knew that he hadn't made it. He squinted toward the tower, just in time to see Mr. Lovegood slam shut another of the various panels on his van. Before the next *clang*, he scrambled up the path of trampled grass. The Lovegoods had returned to the tower six days after first leaving. In the face of Dumbledore's decision to withdraw, take everyone with him and leave Harry to his own devices, their return had been at once unexpected yet predictable. Mr. Lovegood had shrugged it off, by insisting that they had simply finished their Quibbler business to the north and preferred not to make the return to Devon in a single day. Harry knew that St. Ebb had been out of their way, but had said nothing.

As Harry approached, Odd Lovegood looked up from the engine of his van, and waved brightly. "Good morning, Harry!"

Every door of the van was flung open, and Harry saw luggage inside. "Are you leaving, then?" he asked.

"Leaving..." Mr. Lovegood mumbled absently. "Oh! Oh, yes - leaving." He looked blankly at Harry for a moment, and then his eyebrows shot up. "Goodness, me! Where were my manners? It's fortunate that I've found them." He stuck his hand out so rapidly that he nearly stumbled. "You've been a gracious host. Thank you."

Harry awkwardly shook Mr. Lovegood's hand. "Er... you really don't have to go..."

Mr. Lovegood rolled his eyes. "Say no more, Harry. Dumbledore's made a royal botch of things, you know. I imagine he learnt that from Croaker..." His face darkened for an instant, and then became the picture of joviality. "We've rarely seen eye to eye, the old man and me; in fact, I avoid being eye to eye with him."

There's Croaker again, Harry thought, and he made a mental note to follow up with Bill Weasley. "I don't trust Dumbledore, not anymore," Harry muttered bitterly.

Mr. Lovegood heard him. "Oh, you can trust him, Harry - don't fret about that. You should disagree with him on a regular basis, of course. If a few people would have done that along the way, we'd be living in a far more interesting world."

Harry goggled, and took several seconds to say slowly and hesitantly, "Right..."

Luna stepped through the black door, and deposited a small knapsack into the van. She caught Harry's eye and smiled. "Good morning!"

"You don't have to leave," Harry said quickly.

"We do have to leave," Luna returned. "We're two days behind Daddy's schedule. As it stands, he'll be pressed to get an issue out in time for the beginning of term. It really was good of you to let us stay here."

"So, um, I haven't scared you off?" Harry ventured.

Luna looked at him uncomprehendingly. "Scared us off? How would you go about doing that?"

Harry thrust his hands into his pockets. "I thought that after we went to Edinburgh, maybe you... I don't know..."

Luna walked slowly around the van, until she stood too close to Harry. "Everything has turned out precisely as was intended," she said plainly. "What could be frightening about that?"

"I swear I'm not asking you to go," Harry insisted.

Luna smiled. "You never asked us to come at the outset. I have appreciated the rest and the company, twice." She stood on her toes and kissed him on the cheek, then added casually, "I love you."

Harry gasped and turned bright crimson; he fervently hoped that he wouldn't faint.

Luna's large eyes widened. "Are you all right, Harry? Are you choking?"

Mr. Lovegood peered around the side of the van. "Remember what I told you about young men, Moonshine?"

“I believe Harry is choking,” Luna reported.

“He’s in shock. It’ll pass,” Mr. Lovegood laughed. He looked to Harry. “She loves you, Harry. So do many of the people close to you, I’ll wager, and so do I. You should breathe now, I think.” Harry looked back at Mr. Lovegood in sheer panic.

“Help me with the tools, would you?” Mr. Lovegood asked. Harry blankly followed him. Mr. Lovegood began putting various things into three large metal cases. Having no idea what he was supposed to do, Harry just stood there and watched.

“Love has many facets, Harry,” Mr. Lovegood said without prompting. “Remember that.” He closed the first metal case, and held it out to Harry. Harry tried to take it with one hand and nearly dropped it before bringing both hands to bear. He lugged it around the side of the van and nearly lost his grip before wrangling it inside.

Mr. Lovegood easily managed the other two cases. “Yours was the heaviest of the three,” he laughed. “I’m three times your age – you have the back to spare.”

Harry leaned heavily against the van. “Why tools? Why not just magic?” he groaned.

Mr. Lovegood set the other two cases into their places. “There’s nothing magical about this van, nothing at all. As it was, it took a good three hours to negate the magical signature after Remus and I repaired the side panels.”

Harry flinched at Lupin’s name, but managed to let the anger flow away. Instead, he wondered aloud, “Why does it matter that the van’s completely Muggle?”

“It’s about stealth, Harry,” Mr. Lovegood said seriously. “Without magic, the heliopaths never know that you’re coming.”

Mr. Lovegood closed up the van, and Harry went around to the passenger side. Luna rolled down the window, and Harry leaned against the door. “You’re welcome back anytime,” he assured her.

“Thank you, Harry. We’re rarely invited back, you know,” Luna said. She seemed to drift away, but then snapped back and added, “Do you need a lift into the village, for your appointments?”

Harry shook his head. “It’s a nice day; who knows how many we’ll have before fall sets in? I fancy a walk, actually.”

Mr. Lovegood clambered behind the wheel. “We’ll be back again,” he said. “This would be a wonderful place to live – outstanding visibility.”

Harry barely had a chance to step back before the van pulled away and tore down the lane.

As soon as he entered the tower, Dobby was upon him. “Harry Potter missed breakfast,” he frowned. Harry decided that a house-elf’s frown was a very amusing sight, but stifled a grin.

"I'm heading into St. Ebb now," Harry said. "I shan't be back until late."

"Dobby worries about Harry Potter's comings and goings," Dobby returned in a near-whisper. "He wonders what sorts of wizards might be watching."

Harry rolled his eyes at Dobby's fretting, but he was grateful that the house-elf had shown up, two days after everyone else had departed. If it hadn't been for Dobby, Harry feared that he might have still been awash in flocks of ruddy owls and the heads of unsolicited saleswizards popping up in the fireplace. Dobby had even accompanied him when he'd slipped on the Black signet ring and made his way into the master's study.

A familiar voice sneered through the door, "Mister Potter... you have come to claim what is yours?"

Harry thrust his hands into his pockets nervously. "I suppose I have, yes," he said.

Phineas Nigellus' dark laughter rang out. "You are a Gryffindor through and through – aren't you, Mister Potter?" the voice mocked. "Did you think to ask what it is that you are claiming?"

Harry's jaw tightened. I won't be pushed by a bloody portrait, he thought. "I signed the will. I'm the heir to Sirius. Let's finish this – open the door ... or I'll blast it open."

After several seconds of silence, Phineas Nigellus said, "Spoken like the heir to the House of Black, Mister Potter." There was an audible click! and the door's handle turned of its own accord.

Harry leaned forward and attempted to peer into the room beyond, but saw nothing save a greyish blur. "Come, boy – the room will not bite you," Phineas Nigellus mocked. Harry stepped forward into the grey void, as Dobby clung to his arm. A strong draft blew back his hair, and the void resolved into a room that was painfully familiar.

Harry walked to the centre of the large circular room, and ran his hand slowly along the edge of the claw-footed desk. He almost expected to see the Sorting Hat perched on the shelf behind the desk. The walls were covered with portraits, but Harry didn't recognise most of the wizards and witches depicted; most were unmoving, which mildly surprised him. "It's Dumbledore's office... er... a fair copy, at any rate," he observed.

Phineas Nigellus' cool voice filled the room. "That earns a grade of Acceptable, Mister Potter. This is my office. I summered in this house during my tenure as Headmaster, and identical offices proved to be an eminently practical choice."

As Harry turned to face the portrait, his eyes locked onto a familiar writhing visage – an aged woman in a black cap with taut yellowing skin. "Oh, no..." he groaned.

The woman's mad eyes steadied and she whirled to face him. "Begone, you half-blooded freak! You have no right to enter this sanctum! You are a stain on this house!"

Phineas Nigellus rolled his shrewd eyes. “Cease your odious caterwauling,” he said. “This is your son’s ward and heir, Harry Potter. Mister Potter, I doubt you have ever been properly introduced. This is Walburga Black, mother to Sirius Black and the most recent mistress of the House of Black.”

“I have no sons! *Regulus is dead, and... the other...is dead to me! He was a pathetic blood-traitor, an embarrassment that surrounded himself with scum and half-breeds! There are no heirs in my line of the House of Black – it is left to the Malfoys or the Lestranges to carry on!*” Mrs. Black howled.

“Though Sirius was dead to you – though you burned his name from the House tapestry – you failed to disown him as a matter of law. Now that he is truly gone, the House of Black passes through him to his ward,” Phineas Nigellus intoned.

Mrs. Black stopped moving, and Harry realised that the most disturbing thing about her portrait at Grimmauld Place had not been the screaming but instead the constant roiling motion. “To that? My House passes to THAT?” she spat. “Then the House of Black is dead. Listen well, you... abomination! Just as I retained a faithful servant after my death, so shall the Dark Lord’s servants forever serve Him. You will never win. Even if He is somehow destroyed, you will never win! We shall triumph! The scum and filth will be rounded up, and purity will be restored!”

Harry walked toward the painting, fists clenched. “Sirius is dead – your son is dead!”

Mrs. Black’s lips froze into a thin line. “The person to whom you refer died in the year nineteen hundred and seventy-seven,” she snarled.

“Then there’s no need for you to hang around, is there?” Harry seethed. He reached up, and firmly grabbed the frame around Mrs. Black’s portrait. Despite pulling as hard as he could, he was unable to budge the frame. “Accio Mrs. Black’s portrait!” he thundered. The frame shook against the wall and bits of plaster fell, but it remained in place and Mrs. Black indulged in cruel laughter.

Dobby glared at the cackling portrait, wagged his fingers and muttered something guttural and unaccountably dark. The portrait and a jagged portion of the wall to which it had been attached tumbled to the floor.

“Destroy me, but it changes nothing! You will never win! You are an abomination, and the Dark Lord shall rid us of you!” Mrs. Black shrieked.

Harry brandished his wand, and shouted “Iugulo!” over and over again until he rent the portrait and frame into pieces. “Incendio!” he cried, and the pile of oily canvas strips and slivers of wood burst into white-hot flames. When the flames died, only cinders remained. He snapped, “Scourgify!” until every trace of Mrs. Black’s portrait was scrubbed clean.

“You continue to climb in my estimation, Mister Potter,” Phineas Nigellus said. “I have not heard the throat-slashing curse uttered for many a year; it was a rather dramatic choice.”

Harry's blood ran cold, and he fell into thoughts of Luna and Bellatrix Lestrange, that led inevitably to Sirius. Dobby squeezed Harry's hand, and then turned his glare on Phineas Nigellus. "Harry Potter is a great wizard and he is here to claim what is his," he said tremulously.

Phineas Nigellus haughtily regarded Harry with shrewd heavy-lidded eyes. "An underfed half-blood and a freed house-elf... thus is the future of the House of Black," the portrait sighed; its air of superiority reminded Harry of the Malfoys. "Very well. The House of Black lies at your feet... such as it is," Phineas Nigellus went on. "I never held the belief that all those lacking purity of blood merited exclusion, let alone extermination. Headmaster Dumbledore correctly observes that such practices are self-destructive; if the current Dark Lord were successful, the wizarding world would eventually cease to exist. However, I do believe that careful husbandry of the remaining pure houses is in the best interests of all. Let me be clear, Mister Potter – to my mind, with the Black and Lestrange lines extinguished, the young Malfoy is the rightful heir to this House. Even the eldest Weasley son holds a more honest claim than do you. What Sirius has wrought is an artful dodge, to safeguard the assets of the House from the current Dark Lord and his minions. I respect his artistry; it was a shining example of his heritage. Moreover, I shall respect the legality of this dodge. Under the law, you are the master of the House of Black and I shall not prevent you from claiming what is yours –"

"Which is...?" Harry snapped.

Phineas Nigellus coolly arched an eyebrow. "You will show me respect," he demanded, and his voice owned the room. Harry nodded, but fixed a level stare on the portrait.

The portrait smiled, and Harry wished that it would stop. "You have an unexpected grasp of position," Phineas Nigellus smirked. "This tower is yours. The lands upon which it is situated are yours. The ancestral castle and grounds are also yours –"

"Er... Sirius ordered those sold, to replenish the Black Trust," Harry said.

Phineas Nigellus scowled. "One cannot sell that which one does not own. The castle belongs to the master of the House of Black. Another may occupy it. It may even be paid for. It cannot be sold. The castle remains under your control, and it shall always remain under control of the master of this House. Now, if I might continue – without interruption... control of the House Trust is yours, as are any monies specifically assigned to you. Headmaster Dumbledore has explained your legal status to me, and I must therefore accept the custodial arrangements that have been put into place." The portrait went silent, and Harry said nothing.

"Speak!" Phineas Nigellus exhorted.

Harry smirked at the portrait. "I didn't want to interrupt you. Is there anything else?"

The blood-curdling smile returned to Phineas Nigellus' face. "Knowledge, boy – you lay claim to knowledge. In the bowels of this tower, you will find a collection of magical artefacts and artifices that once was the greatest in private hands. You will also find the balance of my library. A sampling was kept at the London manor, and the leavings can be found in the reading room above

us. There are texts and scrolls in the main collection that have not been examined for ten centuries. In addition, you inherit the collective experience of those depicted in this room. Every known charm, curse or potion has been brewed, cast or defended against by at least one wizard present here. Perhaps ‘the power that He knows not’ may be found amongst the books, or perhaps from my brethren on these walls?”

Harry’s mind raced. He’d thought about the knowledge that ghosts held; he’d asked Nearly-Headless Nick about the Veil, after all. He hadn’t really considered the knowledge that might be held by portraits, despite being constantly surrounded by them at Hogwarts. His eyes traced across the rows of faces – some were regal, some were haughty, and a few were thoroughly frightening. Have they really seen everything? he wondered. Is the answer here?

Dobby tugged hard on Harry’s arm, until he bent down, and then whispered forcefully, “Dobby must speak to Harry Potter, but there are many ears within this room.”

Harry resisted the impulse to turn and look again at the portraits. Instead he recalled Dumbledore’s spell work at the birthday party, and casually flicked his wand until he could hear the faint echoes of their breathing inside the silent space. “All right, we’re alone,” he said quietly.

“Dobby wonders if there are many copies of Headmaster Nigellus’ portrait?” the house-elf squeaked nervously.

Harry returned, “Three that I know of – Dumbledore’s office, Grimmauld Place, and now here. Why?”

“Portraits always keep the secrets. Headmaster Dumbledore told me so, and he is a great wizard,” Dobby said. “Headmaster Nigellus spoke a secret, Harry Potter. He said... I cannot say, but it is a secret – Harry Potter’s secret.” Dobby pointed a long finger toward the wall. “That one is a Malfoy. Dobby knows that there is one copy...”

Harry paled. “He wouldn’t possibly... Dumbledore would obliterate him!” How did I miss that? he cursed himself. The silent space vanished abruptly, and he went round on Phineas Nigellus. “How is it that you could talk about ‘the power that He knows not’?” he demanded. “How is it that you know everything of Sirius’ will?”

Phineas Nigellus laughed. “Not certain about me, are you? Were you aware that Headmaster Dumbledore considered having me removed, early in his tenure? I believe that he is satisfied with the decision to leave me be. When a portrait receives information that originated from a person, even second-hand or third-hand, it may only reveal that information to a second person if the first person permits it. Even if the portraits in this room overhear us, none may share what we exchange unless you actively offer your permission to do so. As to the second question, there was much to be heard at Grimmauld Place over this summer – and still is.”

Harry struggled to make sense of Phineas Nigellus’ explanation. “But how... how do they know... I mean, if it’s really third-hand, then somehow portraits have to remain aware of who said what, and when... how?”

Phineas stared at Harry as though he had just grown a second head. “ Magic, of course! Surely you can’t be so daft?”

Harry turned to Dobby. “Is this what you meant, when you were talking about portraits and secrets?” Dobby nodded mutely.

The portrait’s face returned to a stony glare. “A measure of distrust is a wise thing to maintain, Mister Potter. I am not offended in the slightest that you distrust me. You’d do well to hold a measure in reserve for the house-elf, as well. How long has the toe-rag been free?”

“Harry Potter made M-m-master Malfoy free me, three years ago,” Dobby said nervously.

Phineas Nigellus crooked an eyebrow. “Three years? Goodness, Mister Potter, I wonder if you recognise what you have on your hands.”

Phineas Nigellus hadn’t elaborated, and they had moved on quickly to other business, but Harry did wonder what he had meant. Nonetheless, Dobby had proven at every turn that he could be trusted. True, the house-elf didn’t always deliver what was intended, but Harry didn’t doubt for an instant that he meant well.

Harry informed Dobby that he planned to walk to St. Ebb. He figured that Death Eaters or other undesirables would probably be looking for the Bonnie or a broom. Dobby frowned again, and Harry very nearly laughed. "Dobby would prefer to pop Harry Potter to where he is going," he offered.

"Harry Potter could try popping there himself," Harry returned with a sly grin.

Dobby's big eyes grew bigger. "Harry Potter needs *much* more practice before popping beyond what he can see!"

"There's the little matter of secrecy, Dobby - I was *joking* ," insisted Harry. He frowned slightly, and added, "And I *didn't* take half the tower with me."

Dobby crossed his bony arms, and agitatedly tapped his foot. Harry winced at the thought of his memorable ‘popping’ lesson.

“You really think that I... erm... ‘popped’?” Harry asked.

Dobby nodded enthusiastically. “Harry Potter popped from the chair to Miss Granger – Dobby is certain of that.”

Harry wasn’t sure what to think. On the one hand, the possibility of understanding what had happened to him was enticing. On the other hand, the idea that he was performing house-elf magic

was a bit disturbing. Looking for a simpler explanation, he asked, “Is popping the same thing as Apparation, then?”

“Popping is better than Apparation, Harry Potter,” Dobby whispered, as though he were afraid of being overheard.

“How’s that?” wondered Harry.

“Dobby can pop the sundries and the bags from the greengrocer, and Dobby can pop anywhere,” the house-elf said proudly.

“Can you tell me how it works?” Harry asked quickly.

Dobby shrugged. “Dobby just pops, like Harry Potter just pops.”

“If I am, uh, ‘popping’, then I don’t know how or why I’m doing it,” Harry sighed.

Dobby wiped at his brow, and then squinted at the ceiling and tapped his foot. “Dobby thinks popping is like walking, only faster. Dobby walks across the room, but only takes one step, and pop!”

“Just like walking...” Harry shook his head. “Do you say anything in particular, or maybe do that finger-wagging thing?”

Dobby fidgeted from foot to foot, and lowered his head. “Words are for wizards, Harry Potter. House-elves just do things.”

So Harry tried to ‘step’ across the great hall in the way of a house-elf. He tried, and he tried, and then he tried some more. His brow wrinkled in concentration, and then confusion. He broke into a sweat with the strain of thinking about the other side of the room, and absolutely nothing happened. Dobby continued to fidget, as though he were ready to say something but instead held back.

When Harry kicked at the floor in frustration, Dobby stepped forward and took Harry’s hand. He pointed at the opposite corner of the room, and said, “We pop there, Harry Potter.” The walls swam, and Harry felt like he was being sucked across the room at the same time as he was being shoved from behind. It wasn’t at all like the Floo, where there was really nothing to see. Dobby was right, Harry realised – it was rather like walking very fast. As suddenly as they had started forward, they stopped, and Harry somersaulted into the wall.

Harry groaned, and gingerly moved one limb at a time. Dobby immediately started to bang his head against the floor, and Harry had to topple him in order to stop the punishment. The house-elf cried, “Dobby is a menace! Harry Potter could have popped into the wall!”

“It’s all right, it’s all right!” Harry insisted. “I’m glad you did it. I... I felt what you did, and it makes sense now, I think.” He stood up, and gave the opposite wall of the hall a determined look. He closed his eyes, and thought hard about how the magic had felt, the way it had swirled around

him and through him. A breeze rushed through the hall, as though the windows had been opened.

Dobby squealed, "No, Harry Potter! It is different to pop –" just as the hall began to contract. There was a powerful rush of air and a squelching sound, like a door being magically sealed. Harry reached the opposite wall in a flash; he barely had a chance to brace himself before he passed right through it. He screamed and abruptly came to a stop, ten feet outside the wall and fifteen feet above the courtyard. His shoulder issued a crack! as he landed, followed by a reprise of the squelching sound. Half the contents of the serving table, two tapestries, an Oriental rug and shards of glass from three windows fell on top of him.

There was a quiet pop! as Dobby appeared beside him. "Harry Potter does not listen! It is different to pop alone than with another," he said crossly.

"Ouch," Harry managed.

Dobby looked at the pile of debris, and shook his head. "Harry Potter must like the cleaning and the repairing," he muttered.

"It wasn't half the tower," Harry muttered.

Dobby continued to tap his foot. "There will be no popping by Harry Potter today," he squeaked.

Harry winced. "I'm sorry, Dobby," he said earnestly. "Look, I appreciate everything you've done - I was going spare when you showed up. I'm not trying to make trouble for you, and I'm grateful that you're teaching me –"

Dobby's eyes watered. "Dobby is teaching the great Harry Potter... Dobby is beside himself, even though he can't be beside himself! Dobby was being wretched..." The house-elf eyed a doorframe suspiciously, and Harry put himself between Dobby and the door.

"No punishment," Harry said firmly. "I thought we had an understanding."

Dobby bowed his head. "Of course, Harry Potter."

Harry patted Dobby on the back, and sped out the door. Immediately, he took a page from Shacklebolt and silenced his footfalls. It wasn't something that would stand out to a Muggle, he figured, but it might make the difference in an encounter with a wizard. He disillusioned himself until he was well on the way to St. Ebb. Between a light *Confundus* charm, a glamour that lent his hair a brown cast, a wire-rimmed pair of spectacles different from his usual style, and unnaturally quiet feet, he managed to avoid a single wayward glance along the five miles of empty rural carriageways and teeming village lanes.

He ducked into an empty alley and ended the glamour. Back on the high street, he hesitated at a familiar door, but The Greek spotted him and gave a not-entirely-unfriendly wave. There was no choice now, not that there had really been a choice at all. Harry walked into L'Oiseau Chanteur

cloaked in tattered confidence, and allowed himself to be led to the small table - a two-top, Harry recalled - set discreetly near the kitchen.

The Greek abruptly sat down across from Harry, who nearly dropped his serviette in shock. "You are not so good today," he said in a thick, heavily accented voice that sounded like hammers crushing rock.

"I'm fine, thank you," Harry responded evenly, though his left leg was jittering beneath the tablecloth.

"Shona, she is plenty mad, you know," The Greek offered casually. "Ready to chop everyone like, eh, aubergine - but she starts with you."

"Erm, glad to know that in advance, I guess," Harry managed.

The Greek waved his hand dismissively. "All talk, Shona. Still... you see her with the big knife, you run outside, okay?" He laughed like a man to whom laughter did not come easily, and then clapped Harry on the shoulder as he rose.

Harry froze, and spluttered, "I'll... I'll keep that in mind..."

"You want drink?" The Greek asked. "Not wine - you need clear head, you know, in case." He made a show of removing the sharpest knife from the place setting opposite Harry, and then broke into grinding laughter.

Harry squirmed, and squeaked, "Just water for me, thanks."

"She comes after the noon tasting is done, yes? Your Mister Tonka, he come at one, and then your Professor Dimple come at three, and then the last one come... after that," The Greek rattled off. "Busy day for you."

Harry nodded. "Busy day," he repeated.

"I talk to you later, eh," The Greek grunted, then snapped his fingers and pointed harshly at a busboy, who in turn scuttled to the table with a full pitcher of water and a glass.

Harry watched Shona through the entry to the kitchen, as she barked at the servers about the day's menu. He wondered what had possessed her to contact him, and what had possessed him to respond. The servers fanned out to their stations, the kitchen staff turned back to their six-burners and broilers and stockpots, and Shona strode purposefully toward Harry's table. He couldn't crawl beneath the table - not only was it too late, but the table was too small. She left behind her apron, the one with the belt and the loops that held a variety of very sharp things, and he took that as a hopeful sign.

Before Harry could finish thinking about what to say, Shona grabbed the chair opposite him, twirled it around, flopped onto the seat, leant forward against the chair's back, and growled, "Yer a pain in the arse, the both of yeh... och, all three of yeh."

If Moody had said that, or Tonks, Harry would have snapped back or at least have attempted a smart remark. With Shona, it was different; something about her brooked no disagreement. Instead, he simply said, “Hello, Shona.”

She took the pitcher of water from the table, filled the glass, and drank it down. When the glass was empty, she set it down firmly, and slowly let out an exasperated sigh. “Figured I’d corner yeh while he was still down and out. He’s curled up in the cottage.”

Harry’s eyebrows rose slowly, until he was fairly sure they would eventually reach the back of his head. “But he’s... I mean, he doesn’t have the, er, medicine that he used to take...”

“He won’t hurt me,” she said flatly.

Harry began to worry for Shona, and wondered if he still had it in him to worry about Lupin. “He wouldn’t mean to hurt you,” he returned.

“We’ve both been hurt enough. He won’t hurt me,” she repeated.

“What about Heather, then?” he demanded.

“She isn’t here,” Shona returned.

Harry let it drop. “Why did you want to see me?” he asked.

Shona fiddled with the tablecloth, and didn’t meet his eyes. It didn’t seem like something she would do, and Harry didn’t know what to make of it “Yeh need ta patch things up,” she said quickly. “This is killin’ him.”

“I need to patch things up?” Harry barked, and Shona’s head snapped up. “I need to patch things up?” he repeated in a much quieter voice. “He knows where to find me. If he thinks I’ll come crawling to him and Dumbledore, then he doesn’t know me at all.”

“Remus doesn’t know yer here, and he’s in no shape ta know anythin’ today,” Shona shot back. *“I’m sayin’ yeh need ta patch things up.”*

Harry nearly shouted back at her, but her nervousness had startled him, and there was something even more disconcerting about the look on her face. He fidgeted a bit, then said, “I’m listening.”

She crossed her arms defensively and chewed on her lower lip, and waited until well after he became uncomfortable with the silence. “No point in getting’ all girly on yeh, but... here’s the thing. I know people,” she said. “Yer thinkin’ Shona’s a nasty bint, so how could she know people, but it’s the truth. Yeh cannae make a livin’ in this business if yeh cannae size people up –cooks, suppliers, patrons...” she stopped, and added with a smirk, “...effin’ critics... all of them, yeh know?”

The corners of Harry’s mouth flickered just a little. “Yeah, I know about critics,” he allowed, “and I don’t think you’re a, you know... a bint.”

Shona snorted, and went on, “Remus, he hasn’t changed much. He’d be the last ta say so, but he’s...” she stopped, and Harry waited for her to go on. “...he’s more of everything than he was, when I knew him. He was intense, now he’s more intense. He was loyal, now he’s more loyal. He was...” She suddenly grinned, and Harry was completely thrown off. “Well, that’s not yer business. He’s... he’s just *more*, but he’s the same person, right?”

She paused again, and Harry wondered whether to say something; he just couldn’t grasp where she was heading. “I’m not getting this,” he blurted out.

“When yeh want ta size up a person, yeh have ta get in his head,” she instructed. “With Remus... all his friends are dead and buried, he thought I was dead – and that he’d made it happen – and he dinnae know a thing about Heather. Then he shows up here and it all turns upside down fer him. How did yeh expect he’d feel?”

“I’d expect him to be happy, I guess,” Harry returned. “I’d expect he’d want you to be part of his life. I thought I was part of that, too.”

“I said yeh have ta get in *his* head,” chided Shona. “He lost damn near everythin’, and now some of it comes back. He’s scared – thinks that if he blinks, it’ll disappear.” She laughed, but it was hollow. “I ran away from livin’ fer ten years – gave up my own daughter over it – and he doesn’t think he *deserves* me. Heather’s shat on him fer a week, and he just took it; said she has every right ta do it. All that, and he’d stand up fer us just because of who we are, you know?”

“That I’d believe,” Harry muttered, because he’d seen it. He couldn’t escape thoughts of the morning after the club, when he’d walked into the row that had set everything else in motion.

Ron and Ginny sat on the stairs that led to the great hall. No one inside the hall had bothered to cast a silencing charm. Harry could hear Mrs. Weasley’s voice, raised to a pitch that could cut glass, interspersed with Lupin’s very unwelcome growl. Ginny was on the cusp of either screaming or spewing up, and Ron was clearly stricken. Harry pulled out his wand, quietly muttered ‘Everbero’, and flicked toward the sealed door three times.

The shouting inside the hall stopped. Someone inside – Harry couldn’t make out the voice for certain – shouted, “What in Merlin’s name was that?”

Mrs. Weasley – there was no mistaking her voice, Harry thought – said, “Neither Ron nor Ginny would bang loud enough to wake the dead unless... oh, good heavens!” There was a loud popping-squelching sound, and the door flew open.

Harry burst through, very nearly running down Mrs. Weasley, and demanded, “What’s going on here?”

Mrs. Weasley gasped. “Harry, dear – there you are! Is everyone all right? Tell me everyone’s all right! Ron and Ginny –”

“Are just fine,” Harry snarled. “I didn’t expect to hear shouting in my home, or to be locked out

of my hall, so I knocked. ”

Mrs. Weasley resorted to nervous shuffling, and Harry saw that Tonks was taking close notice of her own feet. Mr. Weasley offered earnestly, “Harry, we should have owed first – our apologies.”

Harry relented a bit. “That’s not necessary,” he said, but then added with some bitterness, “It seems this is becoming the new Headquarters.”

“Let me look at you. Have you been eating properly?” Mrs. Weasley asked, and moved as if to embrace him. He sidestepped her, and her eyebrows beetled.

“I’ve eaten very well,” he said, “better than Hogwarts, I think.” His eyes passed from the elder Weasleys to Bill, then Tonks, and finally to Remus Lupin. He rode out a wave of loathing, and then added flatly, “Shona’s a brilliant chef.”

Mrs. Weasley looked from Harry to Lupin and back to Harry again. “Arthur’s right, of course. We didn’t mean to intrude,” she said.

“I’m becoming accustomed to uninvited guests,” Harry said coldly. “Besides, I’ve always been welcome at the Burrow, and your family is always welcome here. Are the apologies for the shouting, then, or are you just sorry that I walked in on it?”

Mrs. Weasley flushed. “I see that we are intruding,” she said sharply. “We’ll take this elsewhere.”

Harry barked at Lupin, “So, why are you here?”

Lupin’s face was redder than Harry could remember ever having seen it. “I came with the intention of talking to you about what happened last evening. I expected the possibility of a screaming row with you. I hadn’t considered the possibility of one with her.”

Harry watched Lupin shift from red to something more violet, and Mrs. Weasley glower unflinchingly, before he asked, “Will someone tell me what’s happened here?”

“This is something that Molly and Remus need to work out, Harry. It might be best to let them alone – perhaps the rest of us should take our leave?” Mr. Weasley offered.

“No,” Harry said firmly. “I won’t have this in my house. Settle it here and now, or everyone leaves.”

“Agreed,” Lupin seethed.

Mrs. Weasley smiled indulgently at Harry, and it only served to irritate him. “Arthur is right, Harry. I’m sure that Ron and Ginny would love to talk to you –” she began.

Harry crossed his arms. “Sending me out with the children, are you?” Mrs. Weasley moved as if to scold him, then caught his eyes and stood stock still.

“This is none of your affair, Harry,” Lupin warned.

When Lupin refused to say anything more, and it was clear that the elder Weasleys were not going to offer an explanation, Harry looked to Tonks. “Well? Spit it out!”

Tonks laughed nervously. “Not treading into the middle of this – sorry.”

Harry turned to Bill. “And you?”

Bill held his hands up. “This was supposed to be about the violin,” he insisted.

“So what is it about now?” Harry shouted in exasperation. “Look, no one’s leaving this room until I know what all this is about!”

Mr. Weasley said, “Mostly it seems to be about obstinance,” and Mrs. Weasley shot him a wicked glare.

Lupin advanced on Harry. “Very well, since you insist upon forcing the issue... it appears that my daughter isn’t good enough to associate with Mrs. Weasley’s children – which is just as well,” he said bitterly.

“I didn’t say that,” Mrs. Weasley protested.

Lupin edged forward on the balls of his feet, and Harry’s hand tightened around his wand. Harry mustered the calmest voice he could manage. “What did you say, then?” he asked.

“She referred to Heather as a round-heeled trollop,” Lupin said through clenched teeth.

Mrs. Weasley looked away. “I apologise for that,” she said. “It was said in the heat of the moment, and it was uncalled for.”

Harry’s wand shook in his fist. “Uncalled for? I’d say so, for a start!” he snarled.

“Some things cannot be wished away,” Lupin said dangerously, teeth still clenched.

Harry felt the anger flood into him, and he didn’t care. “You come into my home, and you say that about my friend?” His voice dropped, his eyes narrowed, and he spat, “Who in the hell do you think you are?”

Mrs. Weasley turned her ire on him. “Mind your language, Harry! Tell me, what kind of ‘friend’ would take up with both you and my poor Ron in a single day? What kind of ‘friend’ would corrupt my Ginny into life as a... a... minstrel! And she may not be a trollop, Remus, but I understand that she dresses as one!”

Mr. Weasley moved forward, and put her hand on her arm. “Molly, stop this,” he said. “There’s nothing to be gained, and a great deal to be lost.”

“I suppose it’s perfectly acceptable amongst her sort to behave in that way,” Mrs. Weasley said emphatically, “but it’s not acceptable with respect to my family.”

Lupin stormed toward Mrs. Weasley, so quickly that Mr. Weasley jumped between them. “Heather is my daughter, and I will not tolerate your denigration of her,” he growled.

Harry felt the heat of anger rush into him. “Her sort is my sort,” he said quietly.

Lupin and Mrs. Weasley continued to bark at each other, as Harry boiled. “I said, her sort is my sort,” he interjected more forcefully, but the squabble continued apace.

“Harry... um... are you all right? You... er... you look a bit off...” Tonks stammered. She slid her chair backward noticeably.

“You’re a sight, Harry,” Mr. Weasley said with concern. “Perhaps you should sit for a moment.” He looked to his wife and added, “Perhaps we all should sit.”

“Didn’t anyone hear me? I said, Heather’s sort is my sort!” Harry roared, and the windows rattled.

Mrs. Weasley’s eyes widened. “Oh, Harry! I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it like that at all!”

Mr. Weasley insisted, “Let’s take a seat – everyone – and talk this through. We’ll handle this with dignity.”

As Mrs. Weasley edged toward a chair, Lupin glared at Mr. Weasley. “Your wife is holding my daughter responsible for your children’s behaviour. The only thing to be handled is an apology.”

Mrs. Weasley stood bolt upright. “Fancy yourself an expert on raising a child, do you?” she screeched. “Look me in the eye and tell me that your daughter behaved appropriately last night, and we’ll discuss apologies.”

Harry’s reserve ran out. He shouted, “HAS EVERYONE HERE GONE MAD?”

Mrs. Weasley’s jaw dropped, but Harry paid no mind. He bore down on her, his voice increasingly more powerful. “First, Heather didn’t take up with Ron. Second, she hasn’t taken up with me, either.” He jabbed his finger angrily at Lupin. “He’s going to see to that, I can assure you! Third, she invited Ginny to play with her bloody band last night – ONCE – so I’m lost as to how Ginny has been ruined somehow. Fourth, you’re all barking about the bloody violin! Have Professor Flitwick look over the damned thing! Sweet Merlin! Maybe being tossed out of the room like a stupid child isn’t so bad, if this is how you go on!”

“Harry... let’s just sit, please?” Mr. Weasley asked plaintively.

“Arthur’s right, Harry,” Lupin added quietly. “I’ve gone too far.”

Harry ignored both of them. He was burning, and he felt like the burning would stop if he just

spoke his peace. He kept his eyes on Mrs. Weasley. "I expect this kind of rubbish from the Daily Sodding Prophet . To hear it from you... it's like fourth year again. I don't know what to think. I know you lost your home... you could have died, and... and most of your family along with you... all because you know me... because you've stood up for me, taken me in. So you can be angry with me . You should be angry with me, but don't you... don't you dare take this out on Heather! You don't know her; you don't know anything about her! For Merlin's sake, she's been drawn into all of this whether she likes it or not, and I know how that feels! I won't let you do that to her. I won't have it... do you hear me? I won't have it! Hate me – hate ME , damn it!" He paced nervously, unaware that all the people in the room save Lupin were edging back.

"Look at us! " Harry shouted. "We're standing here, fighting over nothing , and Voldemort's an arm's length away – just waiting to kill everyone here! I'm no better – I've spent my summer running ! I ran here, and there's no running from him ... from this . I'm tired of it! I'm tired of people being hurt. I'm tired of running! I've had enough! This needs to END! " All the windows in the great hall exploded as one. He fell to his knees, grabbed the edge of the table tightly to steady himself, and watched in horror as the wood smoked and crumbled in his grasp.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Ron rush toward him from the open doorway. "Don't!" he croaked. "Stay where you are!"

Just as at the Grangers', Harry felt a hand on his back. "Nonsense," Mr. Weasley said calmly. "You'd never hurt any of us. I know that, even if you don't." Mr. Weasley extended his other hand to help Harry up. Harry refused it, and remained kneeling.

Mrs. Weasley teetered between shock and concern. "What... can we do for you, Harry?" she asked, her hands trembling.

"Just leave – all of you," he said quietly.

Tonks was the only one who dared speak. "That's the one thing we can't do," she returned.

Harry stood slowly. "I'm going for a walk. When I come back, I expect you'll all be gone."

"Harry, it's not safe –" Tonks began.

"You're right – it's not safe," Harry snapped, as he gestured at the burned table and scattered shards of glass. "Get out, all of you!"

He stormed down the stairs, brushed past Ginny and shot out the black door.

"...tryin' to protect Heather, right?" Shona looked at Harry expectantly, and he blinked hard.

He blushed faintly. "Erm... sorry?"

"I said, he's not tryin' ta hurt yeh, he's tryin' to protect Heather, that's all," Shona repeated. "He

doesn't know what ta do, and he's drownin' in it."

"Didn't even say goodbye to her," Harry muttered.

Shona didn't seem to hear. "He's been tryin' ta convince her that she should forget the whole thing. I mean, *really* forget it, you know? He tried the same with me."

Harry gripped the edge of the table, and willed himself to feel cold. "W-what did she say? What did *you* say?"

"Calm yerself, Harry. I won't have a scene here," Shona said quietly but forcefully. She refilled the glass from the pitcher of water, and shoved it into his hands. Harry sipped at it between breaths. After several sips, he said, "Well?"

Shona smirked. "I told him it was hard ta know where his arse stopped and his head started. Good enough for yeh?" He pressed his serviette to his lips, to keep from spraying water. She added, "And Heather? She can look after herself. She says the old man's worried about this thing she can do. I pressed Remus and he said the same. The other one – Snip, or Skip, or whatever he is – well, yeh'd be daft ta trust that one." Harry buried his whole face in the serviette and shook with laughter.

"Not yer favourite?" she asked.

"No," he blurted between chortles, "but you have him right in one."

She studied him carefully and said nothing, for long after he settled himself. He found it unnerving. She was proving to be as up-and-down as Heather, and Harry hadn't expected that.

Her voice was soft and quiet when she spoke again. "Things coulda been so different, you know. Even if everything had went to hell anyway, yeh could have been with..." She sighed, took the glass from him, and drained it. "Yeh'd have grown up with someone that cared for yeh. Heather woulda grown up right, not with that hag of a cousin – and that's all on me, I know that. Yeh'd have had a sister of sorts, maybe." Her eyes took on a far-off quality, and she finished with a whisper, "So different..."

"I'm sorry that it..." Harry started, but he trailed off. "I'm just sorry."

"Tell *him* that, don't tell me," Shona said. "He needs yeh – and I think yeh need him, even if yeh don't see it now."

Harry hesitated, then said, "I can't do that. I'm not sorry for what I said."

Shona's eyes widened. "Yeh have ta be sorry! Yeh can't have meant –"

Harry stiffened. "*He* meant everything, all of it," he insisted, "and I meant what I said as well."

"I told you yeh have ta get inside his head, ta understand –" Shona started.

“How do you think I know he meant it all?” Harry asked coldly. “I didn’t even have to try, you know? He was wearing it like a bloody robe. I’m responsible for my parents’ deaths, and he loathes me for it... for... for getting Sirius... killed... he...” He stopped and squeezed the edge of the table, but tried to keep the icy-cold pitcher in his mind.

“Harry... yeh can’t carry this. It’ll eat yeh up – I know,” Shona offered.

“I can’t forgive him for that, not even if he’s right,” Harry said firmly.

“It was fear talkin’, and no more,” insisted Shona. “If yeh hadna... yeh know... had yer little moment with Heather, he wouldna –”

Harry released his grip on the table as he felt a wash of anger. “It wasn’t a little moment,” he shot back. “It was a lot more than that.”

Shona’s eyes narrowed. “Yeh knew her fer what – two weeks? Don’t make more of it than it was.”

Harry glared at her. “*Knew* her? Funny, I don’t think of Heather as being in my past.”

Shona pursed her lips. “Yeh’d better start.”

“You sound exactly like him,” sneered Harry. “If that’s how you feel, we’ve nothing to talk about.”

“Don’t yeh think it’s best ta stay away? Can’t yeh see that?” Shona retorted.

Harry took advantage of the days he’d had to replay his falling out with Lupin. “What if Remus had explained everything straight away, say two weeks after you met? Would you have run away? Would you have let him run away?”

“It was different,” Shona snarled.

“After just two weeks? How was it any different?” Harry demanded.

She shouted back, “Because we knew it was us – me and him – not some mad bit of...” and then suddenly stopped herself. She finished in a whisper, “...some mad bit of magic, makin’ us all bothered fer each other.”

“It wasn’t like that!” Harry shot back. Servers and patrons were looking at them, he realised, and he tried to force all the frustration back inside. “What about you?” he muttered with his eyes closed. “It’s not like you knew him for years. Why wasn’t that magic?”

Shona shook her head. “It was me and him, no question,” she said.

“Then why is it any different with me and Heather – because you’re her mum?” Harry blurted out.

Shona looked down at her hands. “Seven years, off and on, and I’ve seen Heather keep a head fer

two things, and two things only – her music and herself,” she answered. “She’s mine and I’m proud of what she’s done, but she’s got no room fer yeh and that’s the truth of it.”

Harry shook his head. “I know her,” he insisted. “I saw everything. You’re wrong.”

“I won’t sit by and let her get herself killed fer want of a warm bed,” Shona snapped.

Harry burst into a coughing fit. “You... think that’s... what I... see in her?” he managed. “She’s my friend.”

“I think she gets lonely, and she gets wrapped up for a month or so, and then there’s something else ta do – that’s what I think,” Shona said. “I like yeh – hope yeh know that – but she’s not right fer yeh and yer no good fer her, not now.”

Harry’s face burned crimson, and he fumbled for words. “Why does it matter that... that I forgive him, then – answer me that? He... he has you... you have both of them – looks like... it looks like everyone’s fine, doesn’t it?” He crossed his arms, and added forcefully, “He doesn’t need anything from me, and I won’t need anything from him in a year or two.”

“Yeh don’t have ta make it this way –” Shona started.

“How else am I supposed to make it?” Harry wondered aloud. He looked away, and sighed, “Tell him... tell him I’m sorry it has to be like this.”

Shona sat there quietly for a few moments, then glanced over her shoulder at the kitchen. A frown flashed across her face, and then she sighed before turning to Harry. “Do yer business, then,” she said. “Eat here when yeh want – I won’t stop yeh. Come see Remus when yeh want – I’ll point yeh to him. But listen to me, boy: stay away from Heather. I’m asking yeh now; go behind my back, and I won’t be askin’ the next time.” Harry resolutely kept his mouth closed. She stood, and added, “Yeh don’t have ta fear Remus on this. Get her crossed up with your business, and all the stick-wavin’ in the world won’t save yeh from me... and yer food’ll be out in a spiff.”

Harry felt like all the air had bled out of his lungs, but he succeeded in squeaking, “I didn’t order.”

“Yeh’ll get what I give yeh,” Shona snorted, and strode into her domain. What she gave him was a meal adventuresome by any standard, but Harry refused to be defeated. The servers gaped at him periodically, as if he were mad to keep eating.

The Greek, for his part, seemed to weigh Harry’s odds of survival with each glance. “How you doing? You quit yet?” he asked each time that he passed. “Slower than the knife, eh,” he grunted another time, and then indulged a throaty laugh. At length, Harry ate every bite; his stomach gurgled, but he was victorious. By the time Ted Tonks entered the restaurant, plates were cleared, place settings replaced, and water glasses filled.

Mr. Tonks looked grim. He gave Harry a curt nod, and set his valise atop the table. Rummaging inside, he withdrew a small glittering box; he touched its sides in a pattern, eliciting a faint glow,

and placed it next to the valise. Then, he tucked in and said flatly, “Good afternoon.” With a glance at the box, he added, “It seems best to assure our privacy.”

“Thank you for coming,” Harry said. “Erm... how are you?”

“Fine. How’s your jaw?” Mr. Tonks muttered as he reached down and rummaged through the valise.

Harry’s cheeks flushed. “It’s not sore anymore,” he mumbled.

“Dora visited last evening, and provided me with her version of recent events,” Mr. Tonks snapped. “I’m not sorry she walloped you, Harry,” Mr. Tonks frowned. “I presume that you were trying to make her shove off, but what you said to her was... it was... bringing Sirius into it was reprehensible.” Harry studied the carpeting, but nodded.

Mr. Tonks shoved a file folder toward Harry. “I’m glad you have the good sense not to offer excuses. When Dumbledore calls an end to this nonsense of his, I expect you’ll apologise to her – not because I say so, but because you wronged her and a sensible adult offers amends when he wrongs someone.” Harry began to speak up, but Mr. Tonks added, “Being wronged by someone, even for an extended period, doesn’t require or even justify that you respond in kind. I’ve told Dora this. I’ve also said the same to Remus. This applies to you as well, Harry, and I’d add Dumbledore to that list if he’d deign to listen.”

Harry sat back in his chair, and felt more than a bit off-balance. “How did you...?”

“Anticipate where you were headed? It’s part and parcel with my profession... and I’m good at it, as it happens,” Mr. Tonks answered with a smirk. “Good thing, given that I’m both disorganised and perfectly lacking in practical skills.”

Harry’s eyes widened. “Disorganised? But how...?”

“It’s all Andromeda,” Mr. Tonks admitted. “Without her, I couldn’t find my robes in the morning.” He took on a slightly wistful look and fell silent.

“Er... do you want to order?” Harry asked.

“Thank you, no,” Mr. Tonks returned. “The food’s lovely here, but I have to mind what I eat – the joys of mid-life, and all that. Shall we just press on with things?”

When Harry nodded, Mr. Tonks launched into an update on his progress with returning relief payments to the residents of St. Ebb. Well over half had gladly accepted the repayment with interest. A few had experienced serious hardships as a result of Diggle’s efforts, and Mr. Tonks was proceeding with settlements that befit the circumstances. A few chose to hold out, in hopes of more generous terms. Mr. Tonks pointed out that these had limited recourse, and advised distribution of cheques; he figured that some would simply cash the cheques on receipt, and that would be the end of it.

“What about the rest – the ones who don’t take the cheques?” Harry asked.

Mr. Tonks nodded, as he returned, “Two more, perhaps three, will continue to hedge; they’ll eventually take the cheques, I suspect. I see one or two choosing to set a solicitor after you. As you’re overpaying for my representation, I’ll set about having their claims quashed.”

“After Diggle, I don’t think I’m overpaying you,” Harry said.

Mr. Tonks laughed. “The fees from this work alone will exceed my net earnings from last year, Harry. You might be better served by simply taking a solicitor into your employ.”

Harry lit up. “You’d be interested in that?”

Mr. Tonks harrumphed for a moment, then recovered. “I prefer working on behalf of others to working for others, and it’s not healthy for a practice to rely on a single client. If you continue to require the lion’s share of my time, I’ll bring on additional associates.”

“Erm... how large is your business? Do I take up a lot of people?” Harry wondered.

Mr. Tonks turned very serious. “Our associates have no connection to your affairs. No one save Andromeda and me can access any documents, correspondence or other materials relating to you in any way. As far as others in my chambers are concerned, you don’t exist. You’re too important and you live at too much risk for any chances to be taken.” His expression lightened a bit, and he hastily added, “Besides, if anything happened to you and I was responsible for it, I’d be turned out of my own home.”

Harry opened the folder before him, and began to idly page through. “English... er, these *are* written in English, aren’t they?” he mumbled.

“Remus was rather insistent,” Mr. Tonks said delicately, as he settled back into his chair. “I held these until today, hoping that he’d come to his senses, but... he’s more or less foisted you upon me, Harry.”

Harry’s eyebrows beetled in confusion. “Foisted... what?”

Mr. Tonks pointed to the file folder. “You can read it all at your leisure, but I’ll sum up. Remus can’t surrender his responsibilities to the Black Trust, for a variety of reasons – for one, the arrangement was magically binding – but he’s not irrevocably obligated with regard to conservatorship. Frankly, there’s little to be done. The only area where you require approval is in the matter of entering into binding contracts, and that’s at issue in England only – not in Scotland. At any rate, he’s decided on an ordinary power of attorney, which –” He reached out and shook the edge of the folder lightly. Harry looked up, startled. “I’ll cut to the quick. Remus has authorised me to approve your dealings in his stead, for the next six months,” Mr. Tonks finished.

Harry dropped the sheaf of papers in his hand. “Six months... I... I see...”

“This is for the best, isn’t it?” Mr. Tonks offered.

Harry quickly looked up from his search for stray documents. “What is that supposed to mean?” he snapped.

“This does appear to be what you wanted,” Mr. Tonks explained casually. “You’ve systematically pushed away everyone directly connected to Dumbledore, after all.”

“Dumbledore did this. I didn’t do this,” insisted Harry. “He’s the one who appeared at my door, and said that it was time for me to take my place as an adult. He’s the one who took away the Or... the old crowd. He’s the one who ordered everyone to stay away.”

“I’m not holding Dumbledore blameless here,” Mr. Tonks said. “However, you’ve assumed that everyone simply jumps to his tune, haven’t you? Either that’s the case, or you’re pushing everyone away.”

“They all left,” Harry responded flatly.

“I didn’t leave because of Dumbledore; I left because you asked us to leave. The Lovegoods did the same,” returned Mr. Tonks. “Remus... well, Remus is managing to be piggish on his own. What about Bill Weasley? I understand he left behind a note of some kind?”

Harry wondered how on Earth Mr. Tonks knew about Bill’s note. “How did...? He told *Tonks* ? But she might have talked to...”

Mr. Tonks frowned. “She didn’t. For one, she seems to fancy him – this week, at any rate. In fact, despite your behaviour toward her, Dora has a considerable appreciation for you.” He took off his reading spectacles, rubbed at them with the end of his tie, and added, “I suspect you don’t actually know her, or Bill for that matter.”

‘How would I have known anyone at all before this summer, other than the Weasleys or...?’ Harry hesitated and cleared his throat. ‘You haven’t found Hermione, have you? I nearly forgot to ask how that was coming.’

Mr. Tonks grimaced. ‘I was getting there. No, I haven’t been able to find out exactly where the Grangers have gone. I don’t believe Dora knows, by the way. However, I was told that Hermione Granger sent you a post –’

Harry sat up excitedly. ‘When? Where is it? I mean, I haven’t seen any...’ He stopped when Mr. Tonks winced.

‘Well... the thing is... taking everything into account... the post most likely arrived on the 24th...’ Mr. Tonks began tentatively.

Harry lowered his forehead until it rested on the tabletop. ‘I banished her post, didn’t I?’ he groaned.

‘Most likely, yes,’ Mr. Tonks nodded. ‘Now, Andromeda’s passed that along and I’m confident the young lady understands that –’

‘Hermione was told that I banished her post?’ Harry wailed. ‘Do you know what that sounds like?’

‘I daresay that Andromeda placed this bit of news in the proper context,’ Mr. Tonks chuckled. When Harry’s frown remained, he went on, ‘I only know what Dora has told me, Harry, but I presume you feel responsible for everything that happened at the Grangers’ home. You know... I’m Muggle-born, and I lived through the war with You-Know-Who –’

‘He has a name,’ Harry snapped.

‘Yes, he does,’ Mr. Tonks admitted, ‘and most of my clientele would soil themselves if I said that name in their presence. Fair enough – I lived through the war with Voldemort, and a second war looks ever more likely. Your friend is at grave risk by her own merits. She is Muggle-born, possibly the most notable Muggle-born of your generation thus far. True, that’s been enhanced by her association with you, but Dora tells me she’s no shrinking violet. The last time around, Voldemort went hard and fast after Muggle-borns. When he couldn’t get at students, he attacked their families. I know that your mother –’

Harry stiffened. ‘What about her?’

‘She was a very highly regarded student, very outspoken. I knew who she was, and I had little connection to Hogwarts by that time. You’ve not been told...?’ Mr. Tonks stopped. ‘I see,’ he continued quietly. ‘As I think about it, I doubt that it made the Daily Prophet. Bagnold was behaving very much as Fudge is behaving now, and there were cover-ups at every turn.’

‘They killed my mum’s... they killed my grandparents?’ Harry asked.

Mr. Tonks slowly nodded. ‘I don’t remember precisely when it happened, but I do recall that your mother was still a student. I only knew because Andromeda heard it from Sirius – she was still in touch with him during his school days, you see.’

The room swam before Harry’s eyes, and a terrible pain seared through his head. At some level he’d always suspected that Voldemort or his Death Eaters had killed his grandparents; there was no mention of them during his years with the Dursleys. It was very different to hear the words.

‘I’m sorry, Harry,’ Mr. Tonks whispered. ‘I was only trying to make the point that the Grangers may actually be safer by being close to you. I certainly didn’t intend to... I didn’t mean to be the bearer of bad tidings, truly.’

Harry couldn’t toss the table aside, couldn’t lay waste to the restaurant; he didn’t want to hurt Mr. Tonks, and he was determined to control the hate rather than let it control him. ‘It’s done,’ he said. ‘There’s nothing left, except for me to end this. I have to stop him.’

Mr. Tonks took in a sharp breath. ‘Is that why you’re seeking tutors? Are you seriously considering taking on... you mean to take on...?’ He stopped and decidedly lowered his voice. ‘You mean to take on Voldemort yourself? But that’s... that’s...’

‘Necessary,’ Harry returned flatly. ‘How are you coming with my list, then?’

‘Not well at all,’ Mr. Tonks said nervously. ‘Good gracious, Harry, if I’d understood what you were contemplating... I... I don’t know that I regret the lack of progress.’

Harry fidgeted, perched on the edge of his chair. ‘What do you mean, ‘not well’?’

Mr. Tonks took a sheet of paper from his valise, and it shook in his hand. He held it at arm’s length. ‘It’s like this... the Marquis deMaupassant is actually still alive – I had no idea – but quite ill at present... Vladimir Karensky’s whereabouts are unknown, and it seems he prefers that... Julia Cather’s husband declined on her behalf... Marcus Detheridge is otherwise engaged, and sends his regrets... Bret McCrary hexed four post owls, so I gave up on her – that gets expensive, you know... my contacts think Mad-Eye Moody might know where Klaus Adenauer is, but I can’t seem to locate Moody... Kanzan Yasutsuna is involved in some sort of major project, but offered his availability next year... David Narrandarrie thought that he shouldn’t teach you before springtime – for the life of me I don’t understand why; something about tests or quests or some such... and so it goes, on and on and on. I see three categories here: unable, unwilling and busy. I’m sorry, Harry, but I’ve struck out completely for this fall.’

‘Dumbledore will be thrilled,’ Harry deadpanned.

‘If he’s aware of what you have on your mind, then I can’t say as I’d fault him,’ Mr. Tonks chided him.

‘‘He’s probably behind it; he’s probably telling people to turn me away. He just wants control,’’ returned Harry, ‘‘that’s what he always wants.’’

‘Why would he withdraw, then...? Ah, of course... control on his own terms.’ Mr. Tonks seemed to weigh the idea, then added, ‘It’s a concept based on observation, I’ll grant you that much.’

‘You, erm, don’t seem to like Dumbledore all that much...’ Harry ventured.

Mr. Tonks rummaged in his valise yet again. ‘Dumbledore’s a complicated man. He tends to bring out complicated emotions.’ He let a leather binder drop to the tabletop. ‘Things are rarely as they seem with him. I’ve known the man for nearly forty years, accounting for my school days, and all I know for certain is that I don’t know him.’ Two folders joined the binder. ‘I respect him more than anyone I’ve ever met. I firmly believe he seeks to do that which is good and right.’ He set a smattering of biros and pencils atop the folders. ‘I also believe he’s stubborn to a fault and more than a little self-righteous, considering that he was losing the war rather badly until... well, until you ended it. He’ll sacrifice people to the greater good, and I’ve made certain Dora sees that. I’ve come to believe that Dumbledore loves everyone, and no one in particular.’ He pulled a slim pair of spectacles from a case nestled within his suitcoat, and dangled them by one extended arm. ‘He’s been very near to the centre of the wizarding world since before I was born. I can’t begin to imagine what goes through the man’s mind, except...’ He slipped on the spectacles, which promptly slid to the end of his nose. ‘...I’d venture that he sees something of himself in you. I don’t know that, of course, but it’s the impression he left with me.’

‘I guess I should be glad he’s coming, then,’ Harry sighed. ‘It looks like he’s my only alternative for a teacher, for one.’

Mr. Tonks pushed up his glasses. ‘He’s coming, is he? When did you speak with him?’

‘I didn’t speak to him – we exchanged posts,’ Harry answered. ‘He’ll be here in an hour or so.’

‘I see,’ said Mr. Tonks. He spoke slowly – carefully, Harry thought. ‘I’m pleased to hear that, not because I want a particular outcome, but because I think *you* need some resolution. I also suspect that learning from Dumbledore will benefit you far beyond any current objectives that you may have.’

‘What, after the war?’ Harry asked. ‘How do you mean?’

Mr. Tonks sighed. ‘Yes, following the war. Well, think on this – he *is* Albus Dumbledore, after all... a pupil and colleague of Nicholas Flamel, leading expert in several areas of magic, vanquisher of the last dark wizard, and as well connected as any wizard in the world.’ The corners of his mouth turned up slightly. ‘It’s fair to assume that you’d be his last student, Harry – the last person to receive his knowledge. Now combine that knowledge with his contacts, and your own reputation and merits... surely you can see the value.’

‘It’s hard for me to think that far ahead,’ Harry admitted.

They both fell silent for a time, while Mr. Tonks leafed through the folders atop his binder. He set a sheet of paper before Harry, covered by columns of numbers. ‘This is a balance sheet, that reflects the results of the repayments,’ he explained. ‘Do you recall when I told you about the trustee situation with the Potter Trust? I’ve initiated a discussion with Fliptrask, the goblin at Gringotts in charge of these matters. He has determined that either new trustees must be appointed, or the trust must be dissolved. He was also willing to approve a one-time transfer from the trust into your personal account. I didn’t expect he’d do that.’

‘You were able to get the money I asked for, then? And the other things that I need?’ Harry wondered.

Mr. Tonks nodded slowly. ‘Fliptrask was apprehensive about the size of the exchange you requested. After Diggle’s misadventures... well, they’re a bit on edge. At any rate, it’s not in your best interests to annoy the goblins, so we struck an agreement. His staff arranged for a secondary Gringotts account, to hold the transferred Galleons from the Potter Trust. Rather than exchange it all at once, they’ve linked the account to a Muggle account with Lloyds. You can use up to 10,000 pounds per day, and Gringotts will automatically cover it. It’s easy for you to use, and Gringotts continues to generate fees – everyone’s satisfied this way.’

‘And... Fliptrask helps us get the Trust in order, because I’m doing something good for him,’ Harry thought out-loud.

‘You’re catching on to all this. Good show, Harry,’ Mr. Tonks grinned. He proceeded to give

Harry a small supply of cheques and a Lloyds credit plate, and carefully explained how they were used and how transactions should be logged and so forth. Then he proffered a large sealed envelope. 'I understand the need for the Muggle papers; in any case, Sirius set all of that in motion. He was determined that you be able to live free, as an adult, where you chose. Everything of importance is in the envelope; official copies, of course, with the originals safely put aside. We can go over it all at another time, if you like.' He hesitated. "It's... very tempting to enquire why you wanted such a large amount of Muggle money... *but ...* I prefer to give you the benefit of the doubt. Remember, no contracts in England unless I give the authorisation.'

Harry nodded solemnly, in acknowledgement of Mr. Tonks' trust. 'Er... should we do this regularly – meet, I mean?' he asked.

'We'll have to do that, particularly as the trust arrangements are evaluated,' Mr. Tonks agreed. As binders and folders and biros and finally the glittering box rained into the valise, he cleared his throat. 'I have to ask this... er... how hard did Dora hit you, really?'

'She knocked loose a tooth,' Harry said ruefully. 'Dobby had to fix it properly.'

'That's my girl,' Mr. Tonks beamed. He stood, patted Harry on the shoulder, and added, 'Contact me if you need anything. I'll be in touch shortly.'

Harry was left alone with his water glass and his thoughts. He mulled over everything that Mr. Tonks had told him, but kept returning to the parts about Dumbledore. For once, someone hadn't simply assumed that Dumbledore had a right to teach him, to control him. Mr. Tonks was swayed by Dumbledore's abilities, and it was difficult to mount an opposing argument. *Will he teach me what I need to know?* Harry asked himself. He suspected Dumbledore didn't really know how to kill Voldemort, but doubted that anyone did. *I'll let him teach me, then, but I won't be a prisoner*, he decided, *I won't let him lock me away – not anymore.*

'I won't live in a cage... not like Sirius,' he murmured. *Not like Sirius*. Everything that everyone had said about Sirius, everything that Hermione had said about guilt, everything that Sirius had said via the will – it all flowed back into Harry, and for the first time he knew that it was all true. Sirius did something foolhardy because he so badly wanted out of his cage; despite all the other mistakes – Dumbledore's, Snape's, his own – it really came down to that. 'I understand, Padfoot – I understand,' he added. A heaviness lifted from him, even as the loss struck him anew. He rubbed at his eyes, and blinked hard twice; the air around him had a faint shimmer to it, that was already fading.

Dumbledore was sitting quietly across from him. 'It seemed inappropriate to disturb you,' he said gently.

'I'm fine. I was just... er, hello,' Harry stammered. He reached for his serviette, but Dumbledore extended a silken handkerchief instead. 'I don't need that,' he insisted.

'There is no shame in grief, unless you choose to feel ashamed,' said Dumbledore. He let the handkerchief rest beside Harry's elbow. 'I should not have returned you to the Dursleys in June,

Harry. Perhaps if I had simply done the right thing – sent you with the Weasleys, or perhaps allowed you to remain at Hogwarts –then you would have been able to properly grieve for Sirius.’

Harry’s teeth clenched. ‘If you hadn’t locked Sirius in that... that... that *house* , perhaps I wouldn’t *have* to grieve!’

Dumbledore sighed audibly. ‘What would you have had me do? There were very few –’

‘Send him away! One of his posts came by some sort of jungle bird – he surely wasn’t in Surrey. You should have just kept him there!’ Harry shot back.

‘That is precisely what I did – I sent him away,’ Dumbledore replied calmly. ‘He returned. I sent him away again, and he once again returned. It is hard to recognise that many things take place outside of our respective vantage points.’

Harry stared in disbelief. ‘You... you sent him away twice? But he never said...’

‘You undid him, Harry. He was never certain how much of himself to share, unsure whether to treat you as son or friend, torn between hovering over you and letting you fly free.’ Dumbledore smiled faintly, and added, ‘I have come to understand his dilemma, after a fashion.’

The Greek sidled up to the table, a menu lazily dangling from one hand. ‘You will order, then?’

Dumbledore smiled. ‘I am deeply stirred by the scents coming from the kitchen, but I have already taken the midday meal and it is too early for the evening repast.’

The Greek looked to Harry. ‘What did he say? Does he order or not?’

Harry grinned. ‘He’d like to see the dessert cart.’

‘Could have just said that,’ The Greek grunted.

Dumbledore laughed. ‘Are you attempting to create a diversion, Harry?’ he asked. ‘If so, I commend you on your choice.’

‘No diversion – not at all!’ Harry assured him. ‘I just remembered the lemon tart, and thought you might like it.’

‘Indeed – I recall it fondly from prior meals here. In fact, I obtained the recipe,’ Dumbledore recounted. ‘Sadly, the house-elves’ best attempts fall short.’ He shook his head. ‘It is a sign of true artistry when the sum exceeds the whole of its parts. Miss Malloch is an artist.’

Dumbledore fell silent, as if content to await dessert. Harry fidgeted, looked about, fidgeted some more, and then decided to attempt conversation. ‘Er... I imagine everything is in place for the beginning of term?’

‘Hm... what was that? Oh, yes,’ Dumbledore said absently. ‘Nearly everything is in place.

Returning staff are all quite busy, owing to the changes in curriculum. I've had to leave some elements in play. There is one staff position yet to fill, and another that remains uncertain –'

One of the servers rolled a silver service cart to the table, festooned with an array of desserts. Dumbledore stopped in mid-sentence and turned his attention to the cart. 'Ah, there is that lovely tart... oh, goodness, the mousse does look compelling... yes, a splendid diversion, indeed...' He made one selection, and then added a second at Harry's urging. Between forkfuls, he caught Harry's eye. 'Marcus Detheridge informed me that you attempted to secure his services. I was rather surprised, to say the least. In fact, I couldn't fathom how you knew of him.'

'I was trying to arrange tutors for the fall,' Harry snapped. 'Surely you knew that – I imagine that's why he turned down the offer.'

'I knew nothing of the kind,' Dumbledore returned. 'In one respect, I'm pleased to hear it. By withdrawing, I had hoped that you would either return of your own accord or be spurred on to action.'

Harry's eyes narrowed. 'No one was available, not one wizard. Quite a coincidence, isn't it?'

'You pursued several wizards, did you? That would be a wise course. Provide me with a list, and we shall see if it is in fact a coincidence,' Dumbledore challenged.

As Harry quickly rattled off the names, Dumbledore's eyebrows rose ever higher. 'Well? How many did you hire away?' he demanded.

'That is an astonishing list,' Dumbledore managed. Harry was quietly pleased to see him so obviously startled. 'Alexandre deMaupassant is... he is a remarkable man. I imagine you were unaware that Professor Flitwick studied with him at one time. I daresay Filius could tutor you in most of his techniques, but without the bluster and bravado...' The corners of his mouth twitched upward. '...though that is certainly part of Alex's appeal. As to Mister Karensky... he is dangerous, to say the least. I do understand why one might consider him – there is no one more able in his particular area of expertise – but I would require some convincing as to why he and his skills would be of use to you. Madam Cather is a brilliant spellcrafter, but rather averse to fieldwork; in fact, I believe that she may be agoraphobic. We have corresponded but have never met. In any case, I question whether spellcrafting would best employ your abilities. Miss McCrary is someone I have considered in the past for the Defence post; however, I am fairly certain that she is not welcome in Britain at this time. I imagine that she might kill Severus on sight, as well, and this would prove rather inconvenient...'

Harry sat up straight at that. After several seconds, he still had no idea whether or not Dumbledore was joking. The Headmaster continued, 'Professor Adenauer would be a very able Potions tutor for you. You are aware, of course, that he is blind; he has managed to turn this to his advantage in very interesting ways. However, he is under contract to the United States magical government at the moment. Kanzan... you simply must meet Kanzan at some point, but he is quite often booked two to three years in advance. David Narrandarrie... yes, I would not have thought of him. His methods are considered unorthodox, as is often the case when people lack understanding. I suspect

that some would call for my removal were I to offer him a regular post. Still... there might be value in learning of dreamtime...’

Dumbledore went on and on and on, and it became abundantly clear to Harry that he was acquainted with all wizards of any stature, and equally clear that he hadn’t conspired to steal them away. ‘That brings us to Marcus Detheridge. I have in fact offered him the Defence position for the coming year. He has not yet accepted, but I did not expect to see him again until tomorrow evening. Apparently he plans to accept, although it is not wise to make assumptions about Marcus – his time is not always his own.’

Harry lowered his eyes. ‘I shouldn’t have snapped at you,’ he said.

Dumbledore patted his hand. ‘You were seeking the services of some very powerful wizards and witches, Harry. It is not surprising that they were, by and large, otherwise engaged. On the whole, your inclinations were superlative. I must ask, who assisted you with the creation of this list?’

Harry frowned. ‘Well... you can *ask*.’

‘I see. I fear I shall have to add to the ranks of those who disregarded my request that you be left alone,’ Dumbledore said, and his eyes gave off the familiar twinkle that Harry found just a bit grating.

‘Did you just break into my mind?’ Harry asked indignantly.

‘Not at all. You hesitated to respond, which told me that a member of our, ahem, circle of friends was involved. I know that Bill Weasley has at least attempted to make contact with you. Miss Tonks is clearly unhappy with me. I wouldn’t be at all surprised if the young Messrs. Weasley had sought you out –’

‘What, Fred and George? No, they haven’t,’ Harry said honestly.

Dumbledore raised a hand. ‘It is of no matter. None of those could have spawned your list, not in its entirety. Alastor could have done so, but he is away at present. Severus could have been responsible, but I cannot imagine that this is so. That would leave... Kingsley Shacklebolt, perhaps?’ His maddening twinkle grew brighter. ‘Your eyes betray you, Harry. Most would not have seen them flicker – perhaps not even Voldemort – but I have observed you rather closely for some time.’

Harry crossed his arms and pounced. ‘He was doing what he thought was right.’

‘Of that, I have no doubt,’ Dumbledore smiled. ‘Did he explain himself, offer justification for why he returned?’

‘He just showed up for the lesson, as we’d planned,’ Harry shrugged. ‘At first I figured that you’d sent him.’

‘Certainly not,’ Dumbledore assured him. ‘I truly intended that you be left alone, in keeping with

your stated desire.’ His smile returned. ‘Does this mean that you have reached a rapprochement with Kingsley?’

Harry stared at Dumbledore blankly. ‘Sorry... a what?’

‘An understanding, Harry – I assume that you’ve reached an understanding,’ explained Dumbledore. ‘I realise that Kingsley began his engagement under duress.’

‘Well, he didn’t want to teach me, that’s for sure,’ agreed Harry. ‘We’re getting on now, more or less. Last summer, I didn’t know he was so... er...’

‘Unyielding? Difficult? Demanding?’ Dumbledore offered.

Harry grinned sheepishly. ‘Sure, all of those.’

Dumbledore frowned, but it failed to reach his eyes. ‘He thinks highly of you. If he did not, then he would never have overcome the anger from losing his post, and he certainly would not have disregarded my request.’

‘Request... it wasn’t an order that everyone stay away, then?’ Harry asked.

‘I rarely give orders,’ answered Dumbledore. ‘Orders often excuse their recipients of both responsibility and creativity. It was a request, and nothing more.’

‘People take your requests seriously,’ Harry observed.

Dumbledore grew quiet. ‘That is something hard-earned,’ he said after a time.

‘I suppose they’ll all come back, if you change your mind?’ Harry ventured.

‘Some already have, as you well know. Others have acceded, but begrudgingly – they disagreed, but did not wish to publicly challenge my position.’ Dumbledore took another forkful of the tart. ‘Molly Weasley puts more of herself into a Howler than any witch I have ever known,’ he added casually.

Harry winced. ‘I’ve heard one of her Howlers before. What was she on about, exactly?’

‘My addled brain, amongst other subjects,’ laughed Dumbledore. ‘She was extraordinarily perturbed over the idea of leaving you alone in St. Ebb, atop what has been a very difficult summer for her. My ears were positively ringing.’

‘I, erm, suppose that I should be sorry,’ Harry offered.

‘Yet you are not, nor should you be,’ Dumbledore quickly returned. ‘I have explained to you my errors from last year, and have accepted responsibility with regard to Sirius’ death. However, I expected you to accept both my explanation and my regrets in a single sitting, as though you would simply move on without worries or grief. That was an unreasonable expectation on my

part.'

'I've done all right,' Harry said firmly.

Dumbledore looked deeply into his eyes. 'Have you really?' Harry quickly turned away, and Dumbledore's expression dimmed. 'Would it have been easier or preferable to cope with your loss in the company of friends? I returned you to the Dursleys' home; you surely would have chosen elsewhere.'

'If it would have kept Hermione safe, or helped Ron get better, or protected the Burrow, I would have stayed there until the first of September,' insisted Harry.

'It would have made no difference,' Dumbledore told him. 'Miss Granger and her family were targets, on account of the events at the Ministry as well as her heritage. The Weasley family represents an obvious target for Death Eater activity – nearly as obvious as yourself. The value of the blood protection at Privet Drive may have waned on its own; it is unlikely that you considered it your home, and your aunt's participation in the protection was... never whole-hearted.'

'So you're saying you should have left me with the Weasleys?' Harry asked. 'Is that it?'

Dumbledore toyed with his dessert fork, before he set it down on his empty plate. 'I am saying that you should have stayed with me,' he said quietly.

'You don't mean that,' Harry blurted out.

'I meant precisely what I said,' insisted Dumbledore. 'Had I foreseen the events of this summer, or honestly considered your status with regard to the Dursleys in its full dimension, I would have kept you at Hogwarts in my company...'

The raw emotion in the Headmaster's eyes was almost painful for Harry to see – it was as though he could feel it. He debated a dozen different things to say, but couldn't seem to get any of them to leave his mouth.

Dumbledore sighed heavily, and then asked, 'What must I do to convince you to join me as an apprentice – to serve as a member of the Hogwarts staff?'

I would have done anything for that, a year ago – anything, Harry knew. *But now...* He shrugged. 'I have nowhere else to go.'

'I would prefer that you did not back into this role, but I will accept your reasoning and aspire to change it,' Dumbledore said.

'Where do I sign, then?' Harry asked heavily.

'Sign? There is nothing to sign,' returned Dumbledore.

'I found a book, in the tower. It was about apprenticeships, and –' Harry began.

Dumbledore gently stopped him. ‘This is not the nineteenth century, Harry. I have no need of a servant, no desire to punish, and no ego with regard to our relationship. We will shake hands – that is enough. I will only ask three things of you.’

Here it comes, Harry thought. ‘All right,’ he said apprehensively.

Dumbledore folded his hands together. ‘First, I ask that you commit yourself to finding a means of self-control. I do not mean that you should push your emotions aside or deeply suppress them – rather, that you learn how to deal with them constructively. This is very important, and your magic will benefit as a result.’

Harry didn’t have an argument to offer; what Dumbledore asked made sense to him, even if it felt out of reach. ‘I’ll try,’ he offered.

Dumbledore nodded. ‘Second, I ask you to keep me informed. I will not approve of all your actions, but it is not necessary that I do so. You are deemed an adult now, and I wish for our relationship to be conducted as such. In return, I will seek to keep you better informed of events that affect you. We will take important steps to this end very soon.’

‘I don’t want to share everything with you,’ Harry said firmly

‘I ask you to keep me informed,’ Dumbledore repeated. ‘I do not want a detailed recounting of each day. I am certainly interested in your major decisions; they will help me better understand you. I am very interested in your safety – because I care about your well-being, not because of what you represent.’

‘I... can’t be sure you’ll always know everything you’d like to know,’ Harry responded carefully.

Dumbledore smiled. ‘That is true. I do not seek to be your parent, Harry, and I will not act as such. To reduce any temptation to that end, we will not practice Occlumency or Legilimency together – nor will you practice with Professor Snape. Keeping me informed is simply something I am asking of you. If you agree, then your actions rest upon your own conscience and upon the lives of those whom your decisions may affect.’

‘I’ll share anything that has to do with my learning, or anything you assign for me to do, or anything relating to Hogwarts,’ Harry promised.

Dumbledore looked at him curiously. ‘That is most cautious of you,’ he said. Third, I ask you to promise that on a single occasion of my choosing – and only the one occasion – you will do precisely as I request, without question.’

Harry stiffened. ‘Excuse me?’

‘I knew that this request would not sit well with you,’ Dumbledore admitted. ‘I have my reasons for this, and it is something that I have asked of every apprentice who has ever chosen to work at my direction.’

Harry's breathing quickened. He felt a creeping sense of dread work its way up from his feet into his stomach. 'I... I can't do that.'

Dumbledore's eyebrows arched. 'Harry... it would be best if you were to take a long, slow breath.'

Harry's hands fluttered. 'I *can't* ... I know what you'll do. If you'd been at the Grangers', you... you would have asked me to sit there. I would have had to just sit there, and... and I *can't do that*.'

'A long, slow breath, Harry – please. You'll find it most helpful,' Dumbledore said calmly. 'I would never ask you to stand by and allow one of your friends to be killed, even if it were the wisest course of action. You would be unable to comply, and I know this. I will swear an oath to that effect, if you wish.'

Harry reeled, barely able to take any kind of breath at all. He stammered, 'An oath... you... no, I won't ask you to... I... you'd really do that?'

'If it is required to secure your trust, yes,' Dumbledore told him.

Harry took in a deep, rasping lungful of air, and let it out very slowly. His hands settled, and the dread descended. *Why do you have to be right, Dumbledore? I don't want you to be right!* he raged inside. 'You really wouldn't...?' he started.

'Absolutely not,' Dumbledore insisted. 'If there is a price to be paid for the invocation of my request, it will be paid by me, and not by you or your friends.'

'I accept,' Harry blurted out before he could second-guess himself, and thrust forward his hand.

Dumbledore grasped his hand, and shook it firmly. There was no brilliant glow, no odd tingle, no feeling of dread or euphoria, no sense of anything magical – Harry only sensed the sweat coating his palm and a powerful sense of apprehension.

The rest was rather mundane – mostly Dumbledore ploughing through a series of dates and details. They didn't agree on where Harry would live, so Harry pressed until it was understood that he would take up rooms in Hogsmeade pending a firmer agreement. He tried to conceal his satisfaction with the outcome – it didn't matter much to him where they settled upon, provided that it was off the Hogwarts grounds. He would report to Hogwarts on the morning of the 31st, which left him two full days to make arrangements.

He took his own dessert when the cart came past again, and ate it very slowly. His last appointment of the day was the one he'd awaited the most. *I get to have a life*, he shouted inside, *and I don't care what the sodding prophecy says. Dumbledore won't let me have a life, no matter what he says. He didn't even want to let me off the grounds; I had to push him.*

The Greek ambled toward his table, and Harry steeled himself – surely that meant his contact had arrived or was on the way. He watched and waited. The Greek was alone, and he began to worry

that perhaps the meeting had fallen through. Everything Harry planned to do was based on two significant articles of faith – that Heather’s intentions hadn’t changed since she’d shoved the note in his hand at the club, and more importantly, that Heather’s contact could be trusted.

The Greek abruptly sat down. ‘Your meetings, they go well,’ he declared.

‘Well enough,’ Harry agreed.

‘You might want to do your, ehh, silence? Some things, better they’re quiet,’ The Greek murmured.

Harry sat bolt upright. ‘Do my... huh?’ His fingertips closed around his wand, beneath the tabletop.

‘I know what you are, I know who you are. Our, ehh, mutual friend... she does not know these things?’ asked The Greek. ‘My daughter, she talk to you on the telephone – this is the arrangement that, ehh, was made for you.’

‘That was your daughter? I thought she was... but Heather... my meeting is with *you* ?’ Harry stammered.

‘Silence, do your silence,’ muttered The Greek.

Harry recovered himself enough to manage a silent space and a mild *Confundus* charm around the table. ‘How is Heather? Have you spoken with her?’ he asked rapidly.

The Greek held up one hand. ‘She talks with my daughter every day. I am just, ehh, middle man... *but* ... there are things I can do for you that Heather, ehh, cannot know.’

Harry raised his arm just enough to expose an inch or two of his wand. ‘You know about me,’ he confirmed. ‘You’re one of us, then?’

‘No, no... no wizard,’ The Greek chuckled. ‘Not Greek, even – is just a name someone gave me when we first come to London. I am, ehh, what you call... squib.’

Harry kept his wand very consciously levelled at the man. ‘You have two minutes to convince me I shouldn’t use a memory charm and get out of here.’ He was inwardly pleased that his voice didn’t crack or waver.

‘My family was, how you say, displaced during the war,’ The Greek began. ‘We flee from Albania, end up in Greece, then Cyprus, then Egypt, then Spain. I get work there, find out later that boss knows I’m squib. Big company, so they move us to Paris, then to London. Man from the company arranges for me to come here, guess they have trouble finding right person... you know Preston?’

‘I know him,’ Harry said. He raised his wand above the tabletop. ‘Albania, you said? I haven’t had such good luck with Albania.’

‘Not many have good luck with Albania,’ The Greek said darkly. ‘Bad for wizards, worse for Muggles. One direction, werewolves and vampyres. Other direction, the Communists.’ His thick accent crushed ‘v’s into ‘w’s. Harry noticed that he snarled out the dark creatures, but positively spat out the government.

‘When did you leave?’ Harry demanded.

‘Seventeen years ago,’ The Greek returned. ‘Across the border in dead of night... my wife, two sons, and daughter.’

‘If you’re a squib, why didn’t your family get you out?’ Harry shot back.

The Greek’s face flushed. ‘You know what it is to be squib. There is your answer.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Harry offered.

The Greek sneered, ‘It is no matter, for none of them survived. They were great hunters, ehh, in long tradition of the region. Those years... not good years for dark hunters.’

Harry watched the man’s growing unease, and changed the subject. ‘What are you supposed to do, then? What did Heather ask for?’

‘Heather ask my *daughter* to arrange for portable computer and phone, and daughter call me,’ The Greek replied. ‘Good thing, because you make mobile phone go crazy. I call Preston, he set me up with people in London. I give you number and address for his people, and I give you number and the E-mail for Heather.’ He took out a scrap of paper and set it atop the table.

‘Why?’ Harry asked pointedly. ‘You know who I am, so you know what happens around me –’

‘*Feh* ... everyone is target now,’ The Greek shrugged. ‘She like you. I do this for you, I make her happy and I make daughter happy. This makes wife happy, which makes me happy.’

Harry grinned. ‘Thank you,’ he said earnestly.

The Greek turned very serious; he clenched and unclenched his fists. ‘You keep her away from the dark ones, ehh? She is hurt, and you will pay.’

‘I’ll do everything I can manage, but I can’t promise...’ Harry returned.

The Greek planted his hand protectively atop the paper. ‘You will swear.’

Harry began to protest. ‘I can’t –’

‘You – will – *swear* . Heather give me job, find job for daughter. She is good girl...’ The Greek settled back into his chair a bit, his expression less menacing. ‘Sad girl... lonely girl. My daughter, she likes Heather very much, like sister. I do anything for family – family is *everything* .’

‘My family is gone,’ Harry said quietly. He looked into The Greek’s eyes, found something there that he could trust, and added firmly, ‘I swear it.’

The Greek extended a hand, and enveloped Harry in a bone-crushing handshake. When he let go, he sat back and crossed his arms. ‘Heather, she is not blood but she is family. You have family, Harry Potter; everyone has family.’ He nodded at the scrap of paper, and Harry swept it up gratefully.

‘Now I ask something of you,’ The Greek muttered.

Harry’s brow furrowed, and he waited to see what sort of shoe dropped. ‘Erm... go on...’

The Greek shifted uneasily in his chair. ‘The man Shona brings around – you know this man.’ It was a statement, not a question.

‘Yes,’ Harry admitted.

‘He is not, what you say... *Muggle* ,’ The Greek reported. His upper lip curled. ‘He is dark creature, I think.’

Harry willed himself to remain calm, even as he scrambled for a response. ‘I know him well. He’s a former professor of mine, from Hogwarts. You know about Hogwarts, right?’

‘Of course I hear of Hogwarts – I am not stupid,’ snapped The Greek. ‘He is wizard, then... hmm. He is teacher no more, eh?’ His eyes narrowed. ‘Why?’

Harry spoke slowly, carefully. ‘He was the professor for Defence Against the Dark Arts, but we have a different professor for Defence every year. He... he was a friend of my father and mother.’

The Greek seemed to search Harry’s face for something, and at last said, ‘He is family, then. You trust this man?’

Harry hesitated. He was trying to be truthful without revealing anything that he didn’t think The Greek should know, and it felt like every road with Lupin lead back to Heather. He settled on, ‘I’ve trusted him with my life.’

‘The dark is on him...’ The Greek murmured.

Harry raised his wand slightly, enough to be noticed. ‘But you said you’re a squib. How...?’

‘Not everything about being dark hunter comes from sticks,’ The Greek snarled, his big hand pointing squarely at the wand. ‘Even worthless squib sees the dark, *smells* the dark.’ He calmed again, and lowered his hand. ‘You say this man, he teach defences? He flirts with dark, then – this must be the smell.’

Harry nodded vigorously. He was angry with Lupin, furious even, but had no desire to endanger him. ‘He’s spent a lot of time around Dementors and –’

The Greek recoiled, and spat a string of something unintelligible. ‘Horrible things, terrible. We speak no more of this. You trust this man, I trust you – is enough for now.’ He formed his thumb and forefinger into the shape of a Muggle handgun, and added coldly, ‘The sticks, they do much, but they don’t stop a gun. If he hurts Shona, a bullet for him... silver, to be safe.’

‘He won’t hurt her,’ Harry said, and hoped that he was telling the truth.

The Greek barely nodded. ‘I will be watching,’ he said slowly.

Harry looked to the scrap of paper in his hand. ‘Thank you for this.’

‘Go,’ The Greek said. ‘Get your mobile phone and your E-mail.’ He shook his head, and added derisively, ‘Children and their toys... it is beyond me.’ He stood up to leave and seemed to bump squarely into something that wasn’t there. ‘What is this?’

‘Oh! Er, sorry,’ Harry said quickly. ‘I was just being sure that... never mind.’

The Greek smiled at him strangely, fiercely. ‘I read papers, now and then. The Dark One, he will come for you, yes? It is good you are powerful wizard.’ He leaned over toward Harry. ‘I ran from them, the last time. No running now. I stand and fight.’ He straightened himself, and added, ‘You be careful.’

Harry nodded – he understood that The Greek was referring to Heather more than him – and let the silent space fall away. He couldn’t imagine what the man would be able to do in terms of putting up a fight, if it ever came to that – The Greek knew Dementors were awful things, but could he even see them? *Does he really have guns?* Harry wondered. He looked at the scrap of paper, and considered once more the implications of doing as Heather had suggested in her note – of fashioning a secret life, one that had room for her in it. When his water glass was again emptied, he quietly slipped out the door.

Harry Potter and the Years of Rebellion Bring Me The Head Of Auntie Agony

Chapter Twenty-nine

BRING ME THE HEAD OF AUNTIE AGONY

August 29

Harry reduced his sixth sheet of parchment to confetti, and tossed it into the air. A few bits fell gently into the bin beside the desk, where the previous five sheets lay crumpled. He incinerated the rest, one tiny piece at a time.

“Mister Potter, is it your intention to slowly deplete the world’s supply of parchment?” Phineas Nigellus sneered from his place upon the wall.

“I’m trying to write a post, thank you very much,” Harry snapped without looking up from his latest attempt.

“Organize your thoughts, prepare a brief outline, and then write the post,” the portrait proclaimed. “This is hardly difficult work, Mister Potter; you are old enough that the requisite skills should lay within your grasp. For what purpose do you write, then – the extension of credit, the collection of debt, or the general discharge of responsibilities?”

“The... what?” Harry asked absently. “It’s just a post to a friend.”

The portrait sharply arched an eyebrow. “You waste parchment on simple posts? That is the purpose of *paper*. Parchment is for contracts, Mister Potter; parchment is for the conveyance of orders. It is for the keeping of official records, and it is for the casting of runes. It is not for the passing of schoolboy notes, nor is it for simple correspondence!”

“But... everyone uses parchment for posts,” Harry returned. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen a wizard use paper for anything... well, some of us who live with Muggles use it. Er, does Dumbledore use paper?”

“Headmaster Dumbledore rarely, if ever, writes anything unofficial,” Phineas Nigellus sniffed. “I shall have to speak to him of this foolishness... parchment for simple posts, indeed! The only sort of personal posts for which parchment is suitable are those involving matters of the heart...” The portrait stopped abruptly and its eyes narrowed. “Mister Potter, you’re not trying to write *that* sort

of post, are you?"

Harry whirled about. "I said it was a post to a friend! Hermione sent me a post, and I banished it with the rest of them, and she probably thinks that either I hate her or I've gone stark raving. I just want... she needs to know I'm sorry, that's all."

Phineas Nigellus tapped his chin with one finger, and pursed his lips. "Hermione... Hermione... Ah, that would be Miss, eh, Grantham? No... Grolier? No, that isn't... Granger? Yes, of course, Miss *Granger* – Professor McGonagall's favourite. One of your regular partners in mischief, is she not?"

"That's right," Harry sighed.

The portrait peered down his nose at Harry. "I am relieved to know that you only see Miss Granger as a friend and accomplice. Professor McGonagall speaks highly of the young lady's intellectual prowess, as does the Headmaster, but a man of your station must *always* maintain a strategic eye when considering relationships and the inevitable entanglement of marriage."

Harry's hand twitched and he nearly toppled the bottle of ink with his quill. "M-marriage? Who said anything about *marriage*?"

"Always keep the difference between romance and marriage firmly fixed in your mind, Mister Potter," Phineas Nigellus exhorted.

"Pardon?" Harry muttered.

"Your eventual marriage must advance the fortunes and position of your House – tradition demands it," the portrait droned on. "This limits your alternatives, of course, but any desires you might harbour for romance or other needs can be satisfied via other avenues, as may be required."

"Other... avenues...." Harry stopped to take in fully what the portrait was saying, and then spluttered, "Are you telling me... sweet Merlin, are you telling me I should... should shag on the side?" His face exploded in crimson. "Is that what you mean? I'm supposed to marry someone I don't like, and then *cheat*?"

Phineas Nigellus shrugged his shoulders casually. "That is the way of things."

"*The way of things?*" Harry shouted. His seventh sheet of parchment burst into flames.

The portrait droned on as though nothing had happened, even as Harry moved to contain the fire. "The young lady is likely to be named Head Girl in her final year; which surely comes as no surprise to you. As such, she will become an acceptable bride for a lower-born personage of noble blood – someone of a family willing to entertain the prospect of relations with a Muggle-born, of course." The portrait's jaw tightened and its lips curled. "Given that you are of mixed descent, she *would* have been a suitable partner for you. However, due to Sirius' *fait d'accompli*, you must marry as though you *belong* in your present station."

“I’m going to pretend you never said that, Phineas,” Harry growled.

“You are the scion of a Noble House... *two* Noble Houses, in fact, although both lie in tatters. You simply cannot indulge in a public liaison with anyone considered unmarriageable – you no longer have that luxury,” the portrait sneered. “The Daughters of the Goblin Wars maintained a debutante registry in my day; you would do well to obtain their list, as soon as possible.”

Harry crumpled up an eighth sheet of parchment, doused it in ink, and threw it squarely at the portrait. He ignored the string of invective that followed, and set about cleaning his quill and sealing up the remaining ink. “If I need this sort of advice, I’ll take it from someone who hasn’t been dead for a hundred years,” he fumed. “I’m writing the bloody post elsewhere!”

Phineas Nigellus made a futile attempt to wipe at the smear of ink. “I am only looking after the best interests of my House,” he insisted. “Your personal interests are of little concern to me; if you were not Master of this House, you could court a lonely hippogriff and I would give my blessing.”

Harry flung the door open. “There’s a dark wizard trying to kill me and everyone I’ve ever cared about, and I’m supposed to worry about marriage prospects? This is unbelievable.”

Phineas Nigellus shook his head balefully and strolled out of view, but not before calling out, “Dark wizards come and go, but tradition remains.”

As Harry stepped into the corridor, Dobby nearly toppled him. “Harry Potter, sir, Mister Shackbolt will be an hour later than planned,” the house-elf said with obvious distaste.

“Perfect,” Harry said gamely. “Perhaps I’ll manage to finish this post.”

Dobby peeked around Harry into the study, and then broke into a toothy grin. “What happened to the portrait of Headmaster Nigellus, Harry Potter? Such a *terrible* stain! Dobby is *happy* to remove the stain.”

Phineas Nigellus abruptly returned to his frame. “You will not allow that deranged creature to gaze upon my portrait, let alone come in any sort of contact!” he shrieked, and shook his pointed finger vigorously. “I would far prefer to see the world through a permanent haze of India black, than to entrust my existence to... to... to *that!* ”

“Dobby knows how to clean the portraits,” the house-elf insisted, even as his grin widened and revealed more teeth. “Dobby would *never* use an excess of turpentine, and Dobby would *never* apply the cleansing paste with a stiff brush.”

“This once, I agree with the toe-rag.” The portrait fixed both Harry and Dobby with a glare that could have stripped paint. “*Never* ,” he added in a low, dangerous voice.

Harry shrugged. “Suit yourself,” he said lazily and closed the door. Dobby skipped down the spiral steps ahead of Harry; he whistled a bizarre tune that Harry figured for something from the

Wizarding Wireless.

Upon entering the great hall, Harry set his remaining parchment, quill and ink down on the repaired dining table. “You enjoyed that, didn’t you?” he asked incredulously.

Dobby lowered his head, but snapped, “It insults Dobby, Harry Potter – it insults Dobby at every turn. It reminds Dobby of... of...” The house-elf raised his hand toward his ear, as if to pull at it, then stopped and sighed. “It reminds Dobby of those who he once served,” he concluded.

“Leave the study aside, Dobby. I’ll clean up after myself,” Harry offered.

“The ceiling is very high and the air is still, Harry Potter, sir,” Dobby observed. “That room is prone to dust and grime... and many things need a good scrubbing in the study, Harry Potter, *many things* .”

“I’ve never seen you like this before,” Harry said. “Wizards have treated you far worse – not that anyone should ever do that, of course. Why is it...?”

“Even bound house-elves will not shrink back from portraits, Harry Potter,” Dobby sniffed. “They is just paint, they is not real wizards – though Dobby sees many with a wizard’s tongue, even at Hogwarts. A house-elf, he can not destroy portraits – he would have to punish his-self – but... there are other ways.” The house-elf looked up and his wicked grin returned.

“Dobby! Are you a prankster?” Harry chuckled.

“Madam Pickering’s portrait, in Ravenclaw House, it would screech at all the house-elves. Madam Pickering, she was a *proper* witch, Dobby thinks; the portrait would say terrible things to the students if they nuzzle in the commons. Even the Head Elf, he would hiss at Madam Pickering. The elves...” Dobby failed to stifle a high-pitched giggle and then went on, “...they take Madam Pickering, they silence it, and they hang it in a broom closet for the year.”

Harry’s jaw dropped. “Er... *which* broom closet?”

“A broom closet with much comings and goings, Harry Potter!” Dobby squealed, and then quite literally rolled on the floor in hysterics.

Harry laughed and shook his head. “Remind me to stay on your good side!”

The house-elf quickly sobered and hopped to his feet. “Harry Potter is always on Dobby’s good side... even when he forgot his socks and... and he killed the dark wizards and saved Miss Granger. Even when Harry Potter forgot his socks, he was still a good and great wizard.”

“What is it with the socks, Dobby?” Harry asked. “I want to know – I really do.”

Dobby’s big eyes grew even wider. “Harry Potter *does not know* about house-elf’s socks? This is not something that the great Harry Potter has been told?”

“Add it to the list,” Harry fumed. “What about the socks, then?”

The house-elf flitted around the room with surprising speed, looking out every window and through every door and under every piece of furniture, before he stopped directly in front of Harry. “House-elf’s socks are ancient magic, Harry Potter, sir,” he whispered. “The magic is in the making – this is what one house-elf tells another since the beginning. When socks are freely made and freely given, house-elf’s socks protect.”

Harry found himself looking around nervously, despite his best efforts. “Protect... against what?” he asked quietly.

“Protect against the dark, Harry Potter,” Dobby whispered in return. “Headmaster Dumbledore has many, many socks. Harry Potter has socks from Dobby, but not so many.” He sighed. “Dobby does not know if Dobby’s socks still protect, now that Dobby is free.”

“That’s why you always wanted me to wear socks,” Harry breathed. “You were protecting me.”

“Dobby would do anything to protect Harry Potter,” the house-elf squeaked firmly. “The house-elves, they know what Harry Potter is. Even if Dobby’s socks do not protect, Harry Potter *will* have proper socks – many, many socks.”

“Thank you, Dobby,” Harry said. “That really does mean quite a lot to me.”

Dobby clapped his hands. “Does Harry Potter need anything for writing of his post?”

Harry’s eyes opened wide. “The *post* ... I, er, yes... need to finish that up. I think I’m ready now.” He sat at the end of the long table, opened his inkbottle, carefully dipped his quill, and faced another blank sheet.

“Dobby wonders if Harry Potter is writing a very, very important post?” the house-elf asked in a loud whisper.

The quill came to a stop less than an inch above the pristine parchment. “Yes, it’s important,” Harry grunted. “Do you mind?”

“Dobby will fetch a beverage and fruit, as it appears Harry Potter will be writing until Mister Shackbolt comes,” Dobby offered, and scampered off toward the kitchen.

Harry groaned, and dripped blobs of ink on the ninth sheet of parchment. Soon, it was a paper aeroplane, soaring amidst the rafters. He grimaced at the diminishing stack, and snatched up another sheet.

Dear Hermione,

He lifted the quill, and frowned at the parchment. *Wrong*, he thought. It looked like the sort of greeting for a post from someone pretending to know someone else, he decided. The parchment easily crumpled in his hands, replaced by a clean sheet.

Dearest Hermione,

Harry stopped again. That greeting conjured up images of one of Aunt Petunia's ghastly romances on the telly; the ones that had tempted him to ask to go into the cupboard on occasion. Some half-dressed ponce would spout poetry and sweep up the fair maiden, and... "Gah," Harry grunted, and another sheet of parchment met a violent end.

Hermione,

Harry held back the quill, and looked at the word for a moment. *Direct... to the point... good enough*, he decided.

How are you?

"Oh, that's just *daft* !" he shouted, and shredded the parchment.

"Hello, Potter," Shacklebolt boomed. "The elf says you're having trouble writing a post." He looked to the mounting pile of parchment balls at Harry's feet, and smirked. "I see the elf was correct."

Harry tossed down his quill. "Thank Merlin! You're here at last."

Shacklebolt shook his head. "Harry Potter... only known survivor of the Killing Curse, as well as multiple confrontations with the Dark Lord Voldemort... hero to the wizarding world... is undone by a simple post." His smirk deepened. "You must be writing to a young lady."

"Does that mean we've started?" Harry snorted, as he sealed up his inkbottle. "It won't work, by the way, trying to rattle me like that. I'm onto your game."

"Your face gives you away – unmistakeably Gryffindor red," Shacklebolt mocked.

Harry stood lightly, and unholstered his wand. "You'll find I did my reading last night," he warned.

"I wonder who it could be? Surely not the young Weasley chit? The whole of Britain knows you're finished with *her*," Shacklebolt said casually. He moved into an easy stance, but Harry knew better.

"Nice try, *Kingsley*," Harry shot back, "and she was the one finished with *me*."

"Do tell? I shall have to tell Molly that there's still hope," Shacklebolt said. Harry froze for an instant, and narrowly avoided a conjunctivitis curse.

"Not bothering to clear the furniture today, then?" Harry grunted.

"It'll leave the elf some work," Shacklebolt sneered. "Lovegood's daughter, perhaps? I heard that

the two of you were becoming fast friends. How fast was it, I wonder?"

Harry conjured ropes to wrap around his trainer, bull-rushed him, and seized his wand as he summoned any additional wands that may have been hidden. Instead of wands, however, two wicked-looking daggers raced toward him until he cancelled the summoning. In the process, he fell backward over the table and lost hold of Shacklebolt's wand.

"How did you do *that*?" Harry panted.

"Falsified wand signatures," Shacklebolt returned, his wand firmly in his grasp. "It's counter-intuitive; after all, you generally want to hide a wand. Of course, when you know your opponent has developed a penchant for emptying pockets..."

"Charming," Harry deadpanned. He set five chairs in rapid motion, which drew Shacklebolt's attention just long enough to provide a diversion.

Shacklebolt deftly stepped backward. "I told you never to converge objects toward an opponent's present position, Potter. They're too easy to dodge –" He stopped in mid-sentence as one of the chandeliers landed atop his head.

"Oh, really?" Harry smirked.

"You... like dropping *thu...* things on my... head... don't you?" Shacklebolt managed.

Harry cast one of the field healing charms that Shacklebolt had taught him. "Only because you leave yourself open for that... *and* because it's a big, shiny target," he mocked.

Shacklebolt grunted. He conjured a mirror, and glanced at the crown of his head. "Not bad, Potter. Not bad at all." He waved his hand, and the mirror disappeared from it. "Risky strategy, though. If I'd moved forward, you'd have missed and I would have had a clear shot."

Harry grinned, and muttered, "Now." One by one, the five remaining chandeliers fell to the floor.

"I see. No wand work was required, then. You set up the room in advance – how devious," Shacklebolt said. After a few moments, his calculated scowl broke into a satisfied smile. "We'll make something of you yet, assuming that you avoid excessive distraction. So... it's neither Weasley nor Lovegood, eh?"

Harry frowned. "You're not going to let up, are you?" He extended a hand to Shacklebolt.

"Hmm... *no*," Shacklebolt chuckled, as he clambered to his feet. He looked at Harry carefully, and his eyes began to narrow. "It wouldn't be Lupin's daughter, would it? Harry... *don't*. That would be a profoundly bad idea. It's not just that you'd have your head turned away – seriously, I *am* willing to live with a certain amount of that, with you being sixteen and all. It's that you'd have to pay attention to the girl, protect the girl, hide it all from the father, *and* lie to the entire Order."

Harry bristled. “Where do you get off –?”

Shacklebolt cut him off. “Yes, yes, I know you wouldn’t give a tinker’s damn about lying to the Order because Dumbledore lied to you first, and so on, and so on, and so on. You need allies, Potter, and the Order is the only hand you’ve been dealt. Get over it. Lying could get my friends killed; in fact, it could get *you* killed. Now, you aren’t really so foolish as to be writing to that girl...?”

Harry glared fiercely, partly in anger and partly in hopes of masking his shock. His mind raced, before he spat, “Yes, of course, I’m writing Heather a post on parchment with a quill, to be delivered by owl!”

Shacklebolt raised his hands defensively. “All right, all right! I felt the need to ask; there was something about the look on your face...”

Harry was still breathing fast. “You just wait!” he fumed. “You just wait until I do a bit of research on you – *then* we’ll see if you think that baiting me is so fun.”

Shacklebolt laughed. “*You’re* going to do research? Your school reputation precedes you, Potter. I know for a fact that Granger does all the research; you and the Weasley boy are just along for the ride... hold on there...” His smirk returned. “It’s a post to *Granger*, isn’t it?”

“So what?” Harry shot back. “I’m trying to write a post to a friend – what’s the fuss? I managed to banish a post she sent to me, like a bloody fool, and I want her to know that I didn’t mean it. See? That’s not even very interesting!”

“The elf doesn’t see it that way – he’s ready to marry you off to Granger, I think. You might want to speak up, before flowers are ordered,” Shacklebolt taunted him.

“Dobby takes everything to an extreme,” Harry sighed. “He likes Hermione, and I agree with him on that.”

“If it’s just a post to a friend, then why are you having such a time of it?” asked Shacklebolt.

Harry felt his stomach sinking, and he couldn’t seem to stop it. “You were there,” he said quietly. “You saw everything. There’s your answer.”

Shacklebolt summoned two chairs, and motioned for Harry to sit. “It’s just as raw as the day it happened, isn’t it?”

Harry leaned forward, elbows on knees and chin on hands. “I can’t shake it off,” he whispered.

“Do you dream about it?” Shacklebolt asked.

“Not... exactly,” Harry allowed. “I’m accustomed to bad dreams.”

“I know of the connection through the scar,” Shacklebolt confided. “Has he been in your head

recently?”

“Not since... everything happened... no,” Harry stammered.

Shacklebolt dabbed sweat from his brow. “Harry... I didn’t see everything. We arrived seconds before you broke free. I was focused on coming up with some sort of rescue solution, and I imagine there’s quite a lot that escaped me. At minimum, I saw things very differently than you did. I’ll be honest... what you did was more than a little frightening.” Harry sat up stiffly, and Shacklebolt put his hand on Harry’s arm. “It wasn’t the violence – I think most of us would have gladly killed every last one of them. It was the power, Harry... it was the power.”

Harry’s posture relaxed, but he tensed even more inside. “The... power?”

Shacklebolt roughly patted Harry’s arm, and then sat back heavily in his chair. “I’ve debated about what to say and what not to say, regarding that day. I was impressed, I was bewildered, and yes, I was frightened. Hogwarts students don’t do that sort of thing. Fully qualified wizards don’t, either. A Hit Wizard might come closest to pulling off something like that, but certainly not without a wand. You crossed a room instantly, through several powerful wards. You threw Pettigrew the length of the dining table, by the neck and with one hand. You tore men to ribbons with your bare hands. It took three of us to pick the one out of the wall –”

“I was there,” Harry whispered. “You don’t need to repeat it all.”

“Early on, I told you that you fight fear with knowledge. Do you recall that?” When Harry nodded despite obvious reluctance, Shacklebolt pressed on. “It’s time that we review the events of that day. I know that you have a pensieve, but I’ll borrow one from Dumbledore if I must.”

“I can’t forget that... I don’t want to forget,” Harry blurted out. “I don’t!”

“Then you’ll want to use yours – it’s a Solicitor’s Pensieve, isn’t it? They copy a memory or an experience in exacting detail, usually far sharper detail than conscious awareness allows, but the original remains intact,” explained Shacklebolt.

“I don’t want to... I don’t want to do this,” Harry insisted.

“If you were an Auror under my charge, I’d have arranged for some assistance long ago, *and* I’d require this,” Shacklebolt fired back. “It’s been more than three weeks, and it’s still raw. If you’re not having nightmares yet, then you soon will be. Trust me... I know a bit about how this works. Own it now – analyze it, understand it, and share the burden. That’s what an Auror does. All this about lone heroes... stuff and nonsense. If you carry this burden as you’re carrying it now, you’ll break before long.”

Harry tried to take in a breath, and it came in heaves. He sat on his hands, so that they wouldn’t shake. “Don’t make me,” he said.

“I can’t make you do anything,” Shacklebolt admitted. “You’re too headstrong for that. I’m asking

you to do this. What happened... it's not something you'll ever be rid of, but you *can* set it aside."

"I'll have to fetch the pensieve," Harry mumbled.

"It must be in your secret place, then," Shacklebolt observed. "I know you have a place – just can't seem to find it."

"Meet me on the beach," said Harry. "I'm suffocating in here."

He walked slowly to the bothy, his head swimming as at the end of a brutal workout. It took him a while to locate the pensieve. He spent a while longer on his knees in the water closet waiting to be sick, but it never came.

Shacklebolt was waiting for him, throwing stones into the surf. Harry forced himself down the switchback one step at a time. Shacklebolt never turned, never acknowledged any awareness of his presence until Harry was just steps away. "Second thoughts?" he boomed.

Harry nearly dropped the pensieve. "I think I have this down," he said quickly, "but I've only tried it once."

Shacklebolt held the pensieve carefully. He turned it in his hands, and appeared to read the tight rows of runes. "It's largely the same procedure as with a traditional pensieve. I'm guessing you're familiar with that?"

Harry nodded and took out his wand. "Focus on the memory," he muttered, "focus..." As soon as he placed the tip of his wand at his temple, it began to shake violently. He felt something bubbling through him, not just in his head but all the way down to his toes. It wasn't until he set the tip of his wand into the open pensieve that he saw the strands – still silver but with reddish cast. It didn't swirl as Harry expected; it boiled.

Shacklebolt carefully took up the pensieve again and continued to read. "Perhaps you should try this again. I don't think –"

"I'm not doing that again" Harry said flatly.

"There's more here than I believe you intended," Shacklebolt warned him.

"You were there," Harry said. "Let's just do this."

"I can view it alone first, if you prefer," Shacklebolt offered.

Harry shook his head. His voice wavered. "Now, or not at all."

Shacklebolt handed the pensieve to Harry. "Hold it firmly," he ordered, and then he quickly entered the memory. Harry took a deep breath and joined him.

He was looking through his own eyes, at a heavily cloaked Voldemort. He was bound, in the

Grangers' front room. He could feel everything that he'd felt the first time, but it was all much sharper than he recalled. There was no control – he couldn't turn to look for Shackbolt, and guessed that Shackbolt was seeing exactly what he was seeing. It was an altogether different experience than with Dumbledore's pensieve.

The front room smelled differently than he recalled. He didn't listen closely to what Voldemort was telling him; he'd heard it the first time, after all. There were two smells, he decided. The first was what Harry figured evil would smell like, if it had a smell to it. The second was cologne, musky and rather too strong. The odour triggered something – enough for Harry to know that he'd smelled that cologne before. He couldn't place it; *perhaps it was Mr. Granger*, he thought. The muffled sensation of Voldemort's Cruciatus curse made him forget about the scent.

He saw Voldemort's hands, which were a puzzle. First, he didn't recall seeing them at the time. Second, and far more importantly, they didn't belong to Voldemort. The skin on the hands was perfectly pink. They were clean, soft hands; hands unaccustomed to hard labour. They weren't full and piggish, but there was something about their softness that brought to mind his Uncle Vernon.

Voldemort was guiding him down the hall, calling out to his servant Mulciber. He could see into the dining room from the corner of his eye, something else that he didn't recall from the actual event. Mulciber planted his fist in Hermione's stomach, and she doubled over in her chair; then he slapped her hard enough to make her straighten up. Harry felt a surge of rage that didn't come from the pensieve, and then a far stronger surge that did. He felt himself drop into his own armchair. Lucius Malfoy slapped Mr. Granger, and Mr. Weasley tossed an insult at Malfoy.

Harry felt a hand press against his shoulder that he didn't remember from before. Shackbolt's distant, watery voice seemed to flow from within, rather than coming through his ears.

Arthur Weasley just rose in my estimation.

Just then, Voldemort tore into Hermione's mind, and everything felt aflame. The hand moved to Harry's upper arm and gripped tightly.

Merlin! How could anyone do that? Monstrous !

The heat subsided. There was something about hearing Shackbolt speak out, something that gave Harry the strength to keep watching. Voldemort remarked that Hermione could be a formidable ally in his plans. Harry gasped – he definitely didn't recall *that*. Shackbolt gave a hazy harrumph.

Ridiculous – I hope she paid him no mind.

Hermione shouted back, and Shackbolt grunted in assent. Then Voldemort gave his challenge for Harry to save the balance of the room by giving up Hermione. Mr. Weasley urged everyone to resist.

Bravo, Arthur! That was spot-on... absolutely right.

Voldemort had Wormtail seek the guarded secret within Hermione, and her screams filled Harry.

This is where I came in. Remember, Harry – it's only a memory. I know that it's difficult...

Shacklebolt commended Harry for looking about the room and seeking a way out of the situation. Harry felt the ropes falling away. Hermione was shoved to her knees, and he was able to place the look on her face. At the time, he'd thought it was strength, and then maybe resolve. There was resolve there, to be sure. She'd prepared herself to die, in order to protect him. *Never again*, he said to himself. *I'll never let you do that for me again.*

His last thoughts before popping across the dining room – ending with his decision to save her at everyone else's expense – replayed in his mind. He saw Ron from the corner of his eye. He wanted to look away, but all he could do was to watch what he'd already seen. In a trice, he was across the table and choking the life out of Wormtail.

The rest was a surreal blur. Harry tried his best to keep from becoming caught up in it, to focus on the little things. Malfoy dashed toward Hermione, and Harry wanted to reach out and throw *him* the length of the table – but it was over and done, and all he could do was watch. Tonks overturned the table for cover, and Voldemort cursed Dobby – something else Harry had missed or forgotten. Wormtail flew along the table and crashed into the far wall; then Harry lunged toward Mulciber, and the first punches flew. It was all dodgy – he moved like he was chasing a Snitch, while the Death Eaters barely budged. He thought of the punch that Hermione took, the one he hadn't seen the first time, and some small part of him was glad that Mulciber had been his first victim. There was a pulsing sound, like water sloshing in a drum, that grew louder and louder. The blood and the bits of bone and gristle stood in sharp relief courtesy of the pensieve, and Harry fought the urge to spew up. What he saw was incomprehensible, even in the face of five years of magic. He'd torn at the Death Eaters as though they were paper. He was betrayed by his thoughts played back to him – it had begun as defence, but it had quickly turned to retribution. Wormtail was gone, reduced to a rat. Malfoy somehow flowed into a duct and disappeared. Voldemort was gone from view, but he insisted that Harry embrace the violence and the rage. As soon as he heard that, Harry returned to himself.

What was that hissing sound? Do you recall hearing it before, Harry?

He stiffened at Shacklebolt's questions. *Voldemort must have spoken to me in Parseltongue*, he figured. All he could see was a filmy haze, but this time there was no confusion about the source. Hermione saw him and flinched, and he called for her. It was a shout, a piercing and rage-filled shout – not at all the way he remembered it. He recalled sounding distant... and then he understood. *I couldn't hear myself*, he thought, *not until Dobby healed me*. She folded against her father. He'd only seen the fear in her eyes at the time; now, he also saw pain and fatigue and shock and something horrible that he couldn't place. He looked down at the blood on his hands, then dropped to his knees and spewed up.

Harry felt Shacklebolt's hand on his back. They were no longer in the pensieve. Shacklebolt helped him up, and brushed sand from Harry's hands. "Harry! Can you hear me? Do you know where you are?"

“B-beach,” Harry managed. The wind coming off the water was terribly cold, he thought.

“Good, that’s good... *stay focused!* Look at my hand – count the fingers aloud,” Shacklebolt ordered. He sounded so far away, even though Harry knew that he was within arm’s reach.

“Four,” Harry muttered.

“Try it again,” Shacklebolt said urgently.

Harry managed a weak chuckle. “Four f-fingers... one thumb.”

Shacklebolt let out a low, rumbling laugh. “You’ll be all right.”

Then Harry felt something entirely unexpected. At first he thought it was from the breeze, but it was too solid, too insistent. *Did he just ruffle my hair?* It struck him as something that Sirius might have done, and he shivered.

“I have questions, Harry... so many questions,” Shacklebolt said quietly, “but they’ll keep. Back to the tower with you, for now... *Mobilicorpus* .”

Harry tried to relax. The breeze was strong, but no longer cold. That didn’t reassure him. For the first time in nearly four weeks, his scar was prickling.

He woke to warmth and soft sheets. It took him a few moments to recognise the surroundings; he was in the master’s chamber, in the tower. His shoes were on the floor, his wand was within easy reach, and it appeared as though his clothes had been transfigured into pyjamas. Light still streamed into the high windows, so he hadn’t slept away the whole day – unless it had been a day and a half.

The door was open, and he could hear snatches of conversation from the corridor. It was easier to lie there with his eyes closed and listen, than to lift his head a second time.

“...no good at this. You should go in there. It’s a chance to fix whatever it is that’s broken – you should seize it,” Shacklebolt muttered.

“He’s resting comfortably and I’m glad for that, believe me, but... look, Kingsley, he’s not my ward and I’m not his guardian. I’m the last person he’d want to see now. Better that you call Ted Tonks in the future, or even Dumbledore.” Without a doubt, Remus Lupin was standing just outside Harry’s door.

“You’re practically his godfather,” Shacklebolt insisted, “and I thought that Black’s will *did* leave you as a guardian of sorts.”

“Harry *has* a godfather,” Lupin snapped. “I’ve nothing more than a financial responsibility, and I’ve signed that over to Ted. Things were said... both of us said hurtful things, horrible things. I

can't give him what he needs, not right now."

"What he needs is a family," Shacklebolt whispered fiercely. "He needs people to pull together around him. He sees you as family, Lupin. To walk away from him is betrayal, pure and simple!"

There was a lengthy silence, before Lupin asked in a dangerous voice, "What did you see in that pensieve?"

"It was everything from the Grangers' house, from when he first saw Voldemort until the dust began to settle," Shacklebolt explained. "It wasn't just sight and sound, Lupin. He put everything into it... *everything*."

After a second long pause, Lupin said simply, "I see."

"If you truly saw, then you'd be in that room right now," Shacklebolt returned. "You took the same oath that I did, when you joined the Order. Tell me, how does that square with what you're going on about?"

"He doesn't need me. The Order doesn't need me," Lupin insisted. "Eighteen years, Kingsley... I lost eighteen years. If... if Harry could have James and Lily back... what do you think he'd give in return? What? *Tell me*."

"If this is about the woman and your daughter, it's not the same –" Shacklebolt began.

"You're right, it's not the same! James and Lily are gone forever, but somehow – through the grace of whatever god might be out there – *somehow*, I have Shona back. She knows what I am, and she doesn't care! You can't begin to imagine what that means. As for Heather... the fact that she even exists is almost too much to take in..." Lupin paused, and then added with a snarl, "I'll do my level best to see them protected from Voldemort. If that means pushing Harry away for the time being, then I'll have to live with that."

Shacklebolt descended into a near-whisper, and Harry had to still himself in order to hear. "Lower your voice, Lupin, unless you *want* him to wake. Harry's a smart boy. He doesn't want your daughter hurt. Look at what happened to Miss Granger – he can't even manage to write her a simple post, he's so tied in knots over it."

"Yes, look at what happened to Hermione – that's precisely my point," Lupin growled. Then there was a deep sigh. "There's no easy road for him, is there?"

"Go in there," Shacklebolt said.

Harry heard footsteps on stone, growing more distant. He waited to see Lupin's head peer through the doorway.

"I can't – if I do, I'll lose my resolve. I'm sorry," Lupin's voice echoed back, and the footsteps faded to nothingness.

Harry buried his face in the pillows, and breathed slowly and regularly. He brought his hands beneath his chest, to hide his fists. There was the scrape of chair legs on flagstone, followed by a settling creak. He stayed as still as he could.

“How much of that did you hear?” Shacklebolt asked.

Breathe easily, Harry thought. *When you're asleep, it's just in and out, in and out.*

“Hmm. Well, best that you're asleep. It would have been... very hard to hear that,” Shacklebolt said.

Just hold still, and he'll go away, Harry told himself.

Shacklebolt continued to address Harry's back. “Do you know what worries me the most about you? There doesn't seem to be anything left to keep you from breaking. Last year, I figure it was Black and Miss Granger and the Weasleys. Black's gone, you've pushed away the Weasleys, and Miss Granger's fortunate to be alive. You've made amends with Dumbledore, but I'm not buying into that; your face still tightens when you hear his name. I don't know what passed between you and Lupin, but it must have been terribly ugly to provoke him so. What are you playing at? Do you want it to be just you and Voldemort, I wonder? I hope not, because that's hopelessly naïve. All you'll manage to arrange is you versus Voldemort and his full supply of minions.”

Harry's fists tightened beneath him. He forced them open, and they clenched again. His head throbbed and his stomach churned. Open, closed, open, closed – he let them form a rhythm, to ward away the pain.

Shacklebolt's chair creaked loudly, and he went on, “I think you believe that you can push everyone away. It's sad to watch – you've poured so much energy into something so completely futile. Do you think that you can get rid of me so easily? I suspected that you were the Defender of the Light before, and now I *know* it. I'm sure you know what that means; if you haven't already been briefed, I'm sure that you and your friends have pieced it together. I was in the right when I placed you before Dumbledore and the Order. Understand this ... I will die to defend your life if I must, and I will kill without the slightest hesitation to clear your path. You will succeed if I have to drag you to the bitter end and point your wand for you. I'm far from the only person who feels this way... despite your best efforts.”

Chair legs dragged across flagstone a second time, and footsteps plodded toward the door. Harry kept breathing regularly, in and out, in and out. Shacklebolt stopped at the door. “By the way, Potter, that has to be the worst imitation of sleep I've ever seen. The elf says we'll be eating at six o'clock.”

“I wanted to say something, before,” Harry whispered.

Shacklebolt drew closer again. “I'm sorry?”

Harry cleared his throat. “I wanted to say something... when he was here. I couldn't do it.”

“Why not?” Shacklebolt asked.

Harry took a long time to find an answer. “I won’t beg,” he said. “I won’t put my head down and act grateful for every little morsel.” His jaw tightened. “If he doesn’t need me, then I don’t need him.”

Shacklebolt sat down on the edge of the bed. “You’re old enough to know that life is rarely that simple.”

Harry opened his mouth to speak, ready to rail against Lupin for giving up on him as soon as it was inconvenient, but stopped himself. Shacklebolt’s face was drawn, and his eyes were too wide. “Are you all right?” Harry asked.

Shacklebolt pulled a wry smile. “You *do* know how to fill a pensieve.”

“It was hard to see everything happening again,” Harry said.

“Yes, I expect that it was,” Shacklebolt agreed.

Harry closed his eyes and tried to push away thoughts of Lupin, but that left thoughts of Voldemort and of fate. “I wanted to give into it, you know,” he admitted, eyes still shut. “I *wanted* to tear them apart.”

“Understandable,” Shacklebolt said. “You were motivated.”

Harry’s eyes snapped open. “You heard what I was... thinking...?”

Shacklebolt nodded, and resolutely fixed his eyes on the floor. “When I asked you to weigh whether Miss Granger was an asset or a liability to you... if I’d seen your memories before... clearly she’s much more than a school friend to you... and the Weasley boy, as well... no one should ever be asked to forsake one’s family.”

“When I looked at her afterward, it just –” Harry tried to explain.

Shacklebolt stopped him. “Your emotions didn’t match against the scene before you. Did you see things differently, this time?”

“Yes,” Harry said quickly. “What do you think he did to her?”

Shacklebolt sighed. “I can’t even begin to imagine.”

Harry’s scar twinged, and his fist clenched beneath him. “I can,” he said.

Shacklebolt turned to face him. “You won’t like this, but I think that you should share those memories with Dumbledore.”

Harry jerked back, and the headboard rattled. “*What?* ”

“Do you want him to recognise that you’re no longer a schoolboy?” Shacklebolt asked. “If you want him to truly understand, then share this with him. Trust me when I say that will answer questions and relieve doubts.”

“What sort of doubts?” Harry shot back.

“All that power, and you regretted using it,” Shacklebolt explained. “Voldemort urged you on, and you stopped. You saved Miss Granger at some risk to the others in the room, but it wasn’t an easy choice for you to make. Harry, you’re not as out of control and undisciplined as some would make you out to be.”

“Er... thanks, I think,” Harry returned.

Shacklebolt stood. “I’ll leave you to your post, then.”

Harry managed a lopsided grin. “Are you sure? Don’t leave on my account.”

“Just put to paper whatever’s in your head,” Shacklebolt suggested. “Then cut down the result until it bleeds.” He hesitated, then added, “I’ve been around Aurors and Reversal Squad sorts who’ve... experienced sticky situations along the lines of Miss Granger –”

“Excuse me? ‘Sticky situations’?” Harry snapped.

Shacklebolt let out a long, slow breath, and sat down again. “It’s not easy for anyone to be assaulted, Harry, and mental assaults are much worse than the physical kind. I’ve known Aurors and others who’ve been mentally assaulted. It can be a difficult road back. I’ve seen people completely devastated by the experience, and of course there’s little support –”

“A difficult time when she returns...” Harry mumbled.

Shacklebolt stiffened. “It’s not fair, but it’s likely,” he agreed. “In fact, if it were to get out that Voldemort had done *that* to her, her professional and social prospects would be ruined.”

Harry’s eyes bulged. “*What?* ”

“Think about what the Ministry and the press did to you last year,” Shacklebolt snapped. “As bad as it was, it would have been worse if you weren’t Harry Potter. You receive deference not granted to others, even when people have doubts. Miss Granger would not receive the same treatment. The fact that she is Muggle-born would only make matters worse.” Shacklebolt’s expression intensified, and Harry slid backward in the bed despite himself. “I am ashamed to admit that... but it is the truth. I will speak to Dumbledore. I will *not* have you distracted, nor will I see Miss Granger persecuted over something that can be suppressed... *what?* ”

“Er... you’re a bit scary right now,” Harry blurted out. “It’s a good sort of scary, I think, but... erm... yes, scary.”

Shacklebolt glared at him with wide eyes for a few moments, and then something seemed to drain

out of him. “Based upon what I saw... I might say the same about you,” he said.

Harry swung his legs off the side of the bed. He summoned his wand, and returned his clothing to its normal state. “Finish our training for today, then?” he asked.

Shacklebolt shook his head. “Neither of us is in the proper frame of mind. I’ll return tomorrow. Take my advice – share this with Dumbledore.”

Harry stiffened, and said nothing. As soon as Shacklebolt stepped out the door, he called out, “Dobby?”

“Yes, Harry Potter?” Dobby squeaked from behind Harry’s head.

“*Gah!*” Harry hopped to his feet.

Shacklebolt stood in the doorway again, wand drawn and frowning. “Blasted elf,” he grunted.

“Dobby is so sorry, Harry Potter!” the house-elf moaned. He scanned the room frantically, and his eyes lit as he spotted the table lamp.

Harry darted into Dobby’s path. “How many times do I have to say it? *No punishments!* No knocking yourself senseless, no ironing your hands, no jumping under the Knight Bus, no hanging yourself by the feet over a pit of hungry demons...”

Dobby’s shamed expression gave way to a pout. “Now Harry Potter is just playing with Dobby,” he fumed, hands on hips. “No house-elf would provoke demons. Dobby would cut off his toes first.”

“Dobby!” Harry snapped.

The house-elf shrugged. “Dobby is just talking about toes. Toes grow back.”

“Wha – ?” Harry’s finger still jabbed at Dobby, but words escaped him. He shook his head, and went on, “I just wanted to tell you that I won’t be having dinner at six o’clock. I’d like some sandwiches and juice in the study, and then I don’t want to be disturbed for the rest of the evening.”

Shacklebolt indulged a faint smile from the doorway. “Yes, you’ve a post to finish, after all.”

“I have business with Phineas,” Harry said flatly.

Shacklebolt’s brow furrowed. “Harry... that thing is no ordinary portrait; it knows too much. You take care with anything that it tells you.”

Harry ignored him. “I’ll be several hours; we have a lot of ground to cover. You’re welcome to stay the night, if you like.”

“I was hoping you’d say that,” Shackbolt said. “I’ve no reports of Death Eater activity in the area, but better to err on the side of safety for the present.”

Dobby shuffled from one foot to the other. “Harry Potter... the... *portrait* will not like it if I should enter...”

Perfect , Harry thought. “Why don’t you bring me the food now, then? I’ll take it at the door.”

A few minutes later, Harry was ensconced in the study with Phineas Nigellus and a plate of food that he didn’t intend to eat. “Phineas, if I wanted to leave this room undetected –” he began.

“You would be served well by learning effective methods of stealth,” Phineas sniffed. “A schoolboy repertoire is inadequate for a person such as yourself.”

“I was hoping to slip out *now* ,” Harry said anxiously.

Phineas shook his head gravely. “*Children* ... always seeking the easy road, always wanting today what they ought not have for years hence...”

“Phineas...” Harry warned.

The portrait sighed. “Very well. Take out your wand... holding it in the *proper position* , Mister Potter – hand entirely on the lower third of the shaft and tip slightly elevated... and tap gently upon the following stones in *precise* order...” Harry went through the motions, which were reminiscent of entering Diagon Alley. The stones beneath Phineas reorganized themselves to reveal the landing of a narrow spiralling stair that descended into inky darkness.

“Will I be able to return here this way?” Harry asked.

“I believe that you are sufficiently intelligent to work out the return for yourself. The signet ring is the key, of course,” Phineas returned.

Harry peered down into the nothingness, quietly called out “*Lumos* ”, and began his descent. “I take it that you wish the elf to believe that you are still present in the study?” Phineas called after him.

“Can you manage that?” Harry called back.

“If I cannot deceive a house-elf, then I suggest that you immerse me in pitch and light me afire,” Phineas sneered.

The stones above returned to their normal positions, and the only light that remained was the flickering glow from Harry’s wand. He followed the steps through what seemed like a hundred twists, until they exited into a rough-hewn tunnel of some kind. *I just knew Phineas would have an escape plan* , Harry thought.

There were sconces for magical torches every so often, but all were empty. Other than the general

sense that he was walking slightly downhill, he had no sense of where he was. *Phineas wouldn't have sent me into any sort of trap* , he told himself. As he continued to walk, he watched the rock around him with much greater care.

He saw a faint glow ahead. The tunnel veered to the right, and the glow became much brighter. He could see hazy rocks, and he could hear the crashing of surf. He slowed his pace, and came to a stop. The tip of his wand pressed against something – it was as though the haze were solid. The surface seemed to give like a dense spider web at first, and he shuddered. Then it began to part, like a spongy curtain... *like a veil* , he thought. With a deep breath, he passed through it.

From the other side, it looked like a wall of rock. He pressed his wand against it. At first, it didn't yield. He saw a quick ruby-red flash, and the curtain gave against the pressure. It took him a few moments to recognise that the light had come from the red stone of the Black signet ring.

He was surrounded by craggy rocks on two sides, and the curtain on the third. There was sand beneath his feet, and he knew where he was. He enlarged the Bonnie, clambered onto the seat, rendered both he and the motorbike invisible, and drifted quietly out from behind the rocks and onto the beach. The tunnel emptied onto the far north end, not far from the northern stack. He made a wide turn southward over the sea, making sure to pass well beyond the tower before crossing the shoreline. A good ten miles down the carriageway, he landed off to one side and became visible again.

Harry turned the slip of paper from the Greek in his hands. "Teller Bros. Electronics Emporium, 26 Duck Lane, Westminster, W1F 9SR" was scrawled at the top in an untidy hand, along with a telephone number. Below that, Harry had added road directions obtained by calling the number – A40 to Wardour Street, and so forth. He stepped off the Bonnie, shrunk it to fit in his pocket, and breathed slowly until his mind cleared.

"Sorry, Dobby," he muttered, and then popped.

After dangling from a tree in the North York Moors, and bouncing off a clock tower in Cambridge, a bruised and slightly dazed Harry found himself within riding distance of his destination.

The neighbourhood wasn't the sparkling sort. Harry figured it for a place where the denizens of Grimmauld Place and the like would go to market. There were bars on many of the streetside windows. Despite that, the front doors of the tenements were wide open. The sidewalks were busy, busier than the streets, and quite a lot of people seemed to go in and out of the buildings.

Duck Lane was a dingy close, and Teller Brothers Electronics Emporium was wedged into the lowest floor of one of the nondescript tenements. Harry swung into a tight alleyway between two buildings, and disappeared just as he made the turn. He strolled back out of the alleyway with the Bonnie in his pocket and his glamour from Cabaret Moliere in place. The entrance to Teller Brothers was inside the landing of the tenement, which was plastered with a number of placards. It wasn't until he read 'busty young model, second floor' that he understood what they were for, and

he promptly broke into a furious blush. He pushed against the door nervously, recognised that it needed to be pulled open – which only intensified his blush – and scurried into the shop.

The shop was crammed to the ceiling with all manner of cases and crates and widgets that Harry had never seen before and couldn't identify. A broad-shouldered, broad-faced man with a thick mop of sandy hair was hefting a box of something or another. The opening door had rung a clanging bell of some kind, but the man seemed to barely take it in. "Afternoon, guv. The ladies are up the stairs," he grunted.

"Erm... I saw the signs... uh... figured that out, thanks," Harry spluttered. "I'm looking for Teller, actually."

The man set down the large box as though it were a trifle. "I'm Teller," he announced. "We're closing in a few, so what would you be wanting?"

Harry looked at him for a moment, puzzled. "You... er... the thing is, you don't sound like... it's just that I called... you know, on the telephone..."

"Ah. You're looking for *Teller*," the man said knowingly. He picked up the box again, set it on the counter at the back of the shop, and bellowed, "*Teller!* There's a bloke out front looking for you."

Shuttered half-doors behind the counter banged open. "Cripes! No need to shout!" The man who ploughed through the doors was taller and much thinner than the first Teller, but had the same sandy hair. He peered at Harry. "Yeah, I'm Teller. What do you want?"

Harry reeled, but managed to respond, "I called for directions, last night. Burke Preston said that I _"

The second Teller paled slightly. "Good Gawd, man! You didn't throw out *that* bone on the phone, did you? Well... I certainly can't help you. *You* need to see *Teller*. Follow me." He slammed back through the half-doors without waiting to see if Harry would in fact follow.

Harry let his wand slip down into his fingertips, and trailed the second Teller at a respectable distance. They wound through a labyrinthine backroom, to a retractable metal ladder that led to a hatch in the high ceiling. Teller jumped up, grasped the lowest rung, and brought the ladder to earth.

"You're joking," Harry said flatly.

Teller shrugged. "Teller's up there."

Harry crossed his arms. "I'm not climbing head first into an unfamiliar room. *Teller* will be down here, or I'll be leaving." He worked his jaw for a moment, and impetuously added, "Burke Preston will not be pleased."

A flicker of something played across the second Teller's face, and then he nodded and ascended

the ladder. The man who followed him back down was young, much younger than the other two Tellers. He had the telltale sandy hair, but was short and wiry and had sharp features. He stood there facing Harry for several long moments, hands on hips, and then said to the second Teller without looking away, “Everything’s in hand. Leave us, would you?”

As soon as they were alone, Teller put his hands palms out. “Take my wands, both of them,” he said.

“*Accio wands*,” Harry whispered. As soon as he pocketed the two wands that flew at him, he added, “*Accio potions... accio talismans... accio knives*.” Nothing else was forthcoming.

Teller flashed an impish grin. “You need to learn a right proper Pickpocketing Charm, friend.”

“You gave those up too easily,” Harry said warily.

Teller nodded appreciatively. “Wards upon wards in here. We’re both in check, I think. Everything you’re here for is up the ladder. I’ll go first. Any funny business, and I figure it’s bad for my health – even without spells. Good enough for you?”

Harry stopped and waved one of his hands, looking for any of the sensations he’d come to associate with wards. He tried to take on Shacklebolt’s easy cadence, and hoped his voice wouldn’t crack. “Either you have amazing wards, or you’re bluffing,” he said. “Start climbing.”

His wand was in full view now, and Teller stood there, staring at it. “That’s... um... a distinctive wand you’ve got there,” Teller said haltingly. “Holly, is it? Not many of those around.”

“Are we doing this, or not?” Harry snapped.

“Right... right... up the ladder, then,” Teller muttered, and scrambled up the rungs, Harry close on his heels.

The room above was ringed with open metal racks, crammed with all manner of equipment. There were cords everywhere – thick black ones, slender white ones, loose ones, connected ones. In the centre of the room, near the hatch, sat a long work table with three stools.

Harry gave a slight shudder – a familiar one. “There’s a magic dampening ward in here, isn’t there?” he asked.

Teller’s eyebrows shot up. “You... you’d better be on the up and up,” he spluttered.

“How would you know?” Harry asked. “I mean, you don’t know who I am.”

“I know Preston sent you,” Teller answered. “You’re carrying a piece of paper, right? It has the address and particulars on it.”

Harry quickly took out the piece of paper. “What did you do to it?”

Teller waved his hands defensively. “Nothing to fret about! Just a very narrow Recognition Charm... I’m rather good at those.”

Harry dropped the paper onto the worktable as though it were on fire. “Let’s... er... let’s just get on with this, right?”

Teller sat on one of the stools. Harry noticed that he was careful to keep his hands in view. “Preston said you were to get the best, and nothing but the best. I don’t know who you are... er... not really... and I really don’t want to know. Why don’t I get you set up, so you can go about your business, I can get my wands back, Preston can pay me, and we can all be happy?”

Harry nodded. “I guess I’m here for a mobile telephone and a computer.”

Teller cracked his knuckles. “Ah, not just any mobile... not just any computer... *these*, friend, are works of art.”

Harry shrugged. “As long as they work.”

Teller’s eyes narrowed. “As long as they... hey! Are you trying to insult my craftsmanship?” He hopped off the stool, and rummaged through one of the open shelves until he found a black case the size of a small shoe. “This baby will work everywhere in England that lies within reach of a tower. No worries about magical interference. It’ll stand up to any spell... well, I’ve never tested it with an Unforgivable, of course.” He waved his hand across the case. “Dragon hide, just to be safe.” Inside the case was a perfectly normal looking mobile telephone – the same model as Harry had used at Cabaret Moliere. “I have a charger and a dozen extra batteries around here... somewhere... if there’s any part that’ll fail over a burst of magic, it’ll be the battery...” He emerged from a different shelf triumphant, and sat a box before Harry with a flourish.

“It won’t work at Hogwarts,” Harry said.

Teller looked almost angry for a moment. “I wouldn’t know about that,” he said. The anger seemed to pass. “They work in Hogsmeade, I can tell you. Preston’s boss... I figure you know who that is, right?... he had a tower placed a few miles to the south.”

Harry brightened. “Really? That’ll be useful.”

Teller stopped, studied Harry for a few moments, then gave a small shake of the head, and returned to the shelves. He brought a black briefcase to the table. “Now, *this* ... well, it was just cool before, but I’ve made it brilliant if I do say so.” He opened the case, and withdrew a black machine that opened like a clamshell. “This is an Apple PowerBook Duo 2300c... more or less. I’ve squeezed in as much RAM as it will hold, and set you up with the largest hard drive Apple makes. It’s running OS 7.5, and you’ll want it upgraded to OS 8 as soon as that reaches market...” His impish grin returned. “You haven’t the faintest idea what I’ve just said, have you?”

“Not a word, no,” Harry admitted.

Teller laughed. “Well... long night ahead, then.”

It wasn't quite as long as all that. Harry was motivated, and the basics of operating the mobile and the computer weren't difficult; they were simply complicated. He approached the whole thing like he was mastering the intricacies of brewing a potion, and that seemed to work for him. After less than two hours, Teller announced that he was satisfied Harry wouldn't destroy either machine through simple use. Harry shook Teller's hand, and began to pack up the PowerBook under his watchful eye.

Teller asked quietly and casually, “I can't help but ask, friend, so here it is. Have you really... you know... seen him?”

Harry fought to remain calm. He continued to pack the various cords into the case, even as he took in the room with his eyes. “Him? Who is ‘him? I'm not sure what you mean,” he said evenly.

“*Him*,” Teller repeated, “the one whose name I'm not about to say aloud.”

“I'm going to have to *Obliviate* you – you know that, right?” Harry said.

Teller nodded uneasily. “It wouldn't be the first, probably won't be the last.”

Harry carefully fitted the computer into the soft padding. “Yeah, I've seen him,” he said.

Teller looked at Harry with haunted eyes. Harry could only recall seeing eyes like that on one other person, and he nearly knocked the computer case off the table. “The Muggle world's a good place to hide,” Teller said. “His kind, they... they screech on and on about mudbloods and Muggles and purity and that rot. They don't understand the regular world, they... they think it's evil, or beneath 'em, or something. Maybe you can use that.”

“How do you know that?” Harry whispered. His wand was in his hand, dampening wards or not.

Teller slowly reached up, and stretched the neck of his T-shirt downward. There were runes tattooed on his chest, familiar ones, though not so many as Sirius had. “I was seventeen. I was tweaking Muggle electronics – more or less what I'm doing for you. I wasn't Muggle baiting, I wasn't even selling nothin'. We'll make an example of you, they said, make sure none of your friends get any ideas. Four months, I spent there... may as well have been four hundred years. I learned about fear there...” He trailed off, and let his shirt snap back up. “The Ministry is shite, but the Death Eaters and... you know...” He twirled his index finger in a lazy circle next to his temple. “Crazy, the lot.”

“How did you fall into this, then?” Harry asked. “Seems a bit, I don't know... risky?”

Teller laughed loudly. “Sorry... *you're* taking me to task about risk? *You*? Serious case of the pot calling the cauldron black, right?”

Harry smiled faintly, though still very much on guard. “Fair enough.”

“The Ministry could grind me like a flobberworm – already has. Keith MacLeish can walk into Fudge’s office with a ruddy mobile, and no one will say a word. I’m an employee. He and Preston say I’m safe, and I believe them,” Teller explained.

“You’ve met MacLeish, then?” Harry asked.

Teller nodded enthusiastically. “He’s a great man, MacLeish. He believes in second chances, and he’s good to you if you’re good to him. People... they just don’t see that about him.”

Harry thought for a moment, and then closed the computer case. “Guess we should go downstairs for this, with the wards and all?”

“Shop’s closed,” Teller said. “You can do it behind the counter.” They descended the ladder quickly and silently, and Teller crouched down just past the half-doors.

Harry considered his options. “I may need your help again,” he said. “How do you feel about that?”

“I’ll do what I can,” Teller offered. “I suppose you’ll need all the help you can get before it’s all over, eh?”

Harry extended his right hand and shook Teller’s hand. “My name is James Black. Feel free to call me Jim, if you like. I’m just a friend of Preston’s. *Obliviate* .” He made a silent entreaty to Merlin, in hopes that he had cast the spell properly.

Teller’s eyes glazed for an instant, before he shook his head roughly. “Wha...?”

Harry pulled him to his feet. “Are you all right?”

“Sure, I’m... yes, I’m all right,” Teller decided. “If you need anything else, Mr. Black... uh... sorry... *Jim* , be sure to call or stop in during shop hours.”

Harry suppressed the impulse to smile widely. “I’m grateful, Teller.” He held up the computer case, and succumbed to the impulse. “It’s a real work of art,” he added. Then he rushed onward, hoping to squeeze in another stop before returning to the tower.

By the time Harry made it to Ottery St. Catchpole, after nearly embedding himself in a lorrie at Marsdon and tipping two cows outside of Bristol, the sun was reduced to an orange glimmer in the western sky. He missed the entry to the Weasley’s property twice, and went down the wrong drive once, before he was certain that he was riding between the right sort of hedgerows.

The Burrow was gone. The family Quidditch pitch was still marked, and Mr. Weasley’s shed still stood – albeit precariously – but the house itself was reduced to three irregular piles of rubble. A familiar pair of shabby two-man tents were pitched behind the shed. A familiar pair of red-haired men stood atop one of the piles. Harry let the Bonnie drop to the ground. He sat there, and

watched, and slowly began to shake.

Bill Weasley triumphantly raised something oblong. “Mum!” he shouted. “Mum, come quickly!”

Mrs. Weasley slowly clambered from one of the tents. “What did you find? What? What is it?”

Bill bounded down from the rubble in three hops. “It’s the clock, Mum! We found it... I told you it would hold up...” The excitement drained from his voice as she drew closer.

“It’s not working,” Mrs. Weasley sniffed.

Mr. Weasley clambered down more cautiously. “But it’s whole, Molly – it’s intact. I’m sure we can make it right.”

“It’s not working,” she repeated. “Look.”

Bill frowned. “What? You and Dad are ‘at home’... Ginny and Ron and me, we’re all ‘at home’... Fred and George are ‘at work’... Charlie looks to be ‘in danger’, but that’s more or less a constant, right?”

“It says that Harry is ‘at home’,” Mrs. Weasley said, “and that Hermione is ‘in transit’. It’s not working... it’s not right... n-nothing is right...”

“It’ll just take time,” Mr. Weasley said.

Harry couldn’t move; he could barely breathe. He wanted to know why Ron, Ginny and Bill had come to St. Ebb at all, given the state of things; he wanted to know why Ron hadn’t told him just how bad things really were, or Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, or Dumbledore, or *someone*. He couldn’t keep his hands from shaking anymore. “I did this,” he groaned.

He didn’t realise he’d said it aloud, until Bill’s head whipped around. “Merlin’s ghost!” Bill shouted. “Harry? Is that you?”

Harry tried to move the motorbike, or render it invisible, or something – anything at all. His hands wouldn’t obey. All he could do was sit there and await an onslaught of Weasleys.

Improbably, Mrs. Weasley arrived first. Harry steadied himself for one of her crushing hugs, and was not disappointed. He waited for her to tear into him for riding unaccompanied across the country, or for failing to first send a post, or for being late for dinner, or whatever might have been on her mind. It never came. She just held onto him and wept, and he didn’t try to push away. Mr. Weasley’s hand came to rest on Harry’s shoulder, which instantly reminded Harry of his outburst in the tower.

“Told you the clock would hold up, Mum,” Bill said in a strained voice.

“I’m... I’m on your clock,” Harry choked out.

Mrs. Weasley drew back hesitantly. “I hope you don’t mind, Harry,” she said. “It just seemed right for both you and Hermione to be there, with us.”

“Of course I don’t mind,” Harry insisted. He looked at the hand with his face on it, set to ‘at home’. The picture of him looked to be a year old or more. “Maybe we could find a newer photograph?”

Mrs. Weasley began, “I’d like that...” Her smile quickly faded away. “Harry! What’s happened to you?” Mr. Weasley peered at Harry, and his eyebrows rose.

Bill kept smiling. “It’s the same glamour as you used the other night, isn’t it?”

“Glamour?” Harry asked absently. “Oh! The glamour!” He took out his wand, and quickly cancelled the spell.

Mrs. Weasley relaxed. “That’s more like it! I’m not sure about that hair – Bill, what are you smirking at? – but at least you look like yourself. You can look in your twenties when you reach your twenties.”

“Bloody hell! How did you get here?” Ron shouted from the vicinity of the tents.

“*Ronald!* Language!” Mrs. Weasley snapped.

“I walked, mate – how else?” Harry smirked.

He felt another crush from behind, as Ginny piled into him. “Merlin, it’s good to see you,” she said. “Are you all right?”

“Breathe... need to breathe...” Harry moaned.

“Likely story,” Ginny shot back. “I mean it, Harry... are you all right?”

Harry sat upright, and Ginny let him go. He swung his leg over the Bonnie, took off the saddlebags, and reduced the bike, before he looked Ginny squarely in the eye. “No,” he said. “I doubt any of us are all right. I’m glad to be here, though.”

Mr. Weasley took Harry’s hand and clasped it tightly. “That’s good enough,” he said, and pulled Harry into the sort of embrace he’d seen between fathers and sons. When he let go, his eyes turned to the rubble. “It’s a sight, isn’t it?”

Harry’s first impulse was to apologise for everything – for the loss of the Weasley’s home, for the attack at the Grangers’, for sending everyone packing from the Black tower. He resisted that, and held himself in check by staring at the remains of the Burrow. When he felt in control, he turned to the elder Weasleys and asked, “What can I do?”

Mrs. Weasley looked to the burnt orange sky. “We’re finished for the day, Harry. You must be knackered from such a long ride, anyway.”

“It’s... been a long day, yes,” Harry said carefully.

Mrs. Weasley was practically beaming. “Let’s go inside, shall we?” It looked to be the same three-room flat that the Weasleys had borrowed for the Quidditch World Cup two years prior, although the crochet covers were absent and the furniture was more closely matched than he recalled.

The five Weasleys crowded around the kitchen table intended for four, but left a space for Harry. They chatted for a while about nothing in particular; he didn’t bring up the events at the Grangers’, and they didn’t bring up the last day at the tower.

“Why is it still down?” Harry asked abruptly. “I mean, I don’t know anything about how wizards actually build a house, but it *has* been almost a month.”

Bill let his forehead drop to the tabletop, and gently rapped it against the wood. Mr. Weasley let out a snort, and punched Bill’s upper arm.

“Nothing will stay up, mate,” Ron said. “Dad and Bill haven’t been able to make two planks hold together.”

“I’m completely baffled,” Bill admitted. “Dumbledore’s had some Unspeakables and other expert sorts take a look. Even Odd Lovegood’s tramped around the place.”

“If *he* claims that he’s never seen anything like it, then you know it’s time to fret,” Mr. Weasley said, and Harry suspected that he was only half-joking.

Harry’s eyes widened. “You surely can’t stay out here in *these*? I mean, they’re nice and all, but what about water, or the wintertime, or...?”

“If we don’t soon find a reason for what’s happening here, then we’ll have to let rooms for the winter,” Mrs. Weasley sighed. “It’s been many a year since we’ve been boarders, but we’ll manage. There are always vacancies along Diagon Alley.”

“I know what the Burrow meant... er... means. *Means!* ” Harry said. “I’m so sorry this happened.”

Ginny reached out and grasped his hand. “It’s not your fault,” she said.

“I know it’s not,” Harry agreed. Ginny let go his hand with a start. “That doesn’t mean I can’t be sorry it’s happened,” he added.

Mrs. Weasley sagged in her chair. “Thank you, Harry,” she whispered.

Harry broke the silence several minutes later. “Would you mind if I took a walk? I’d just like to move around a bit.”

Mrs. Weasley looked uneasy. “It’s dark now. There’s no way to be sure –”

“I’ll go with him,” Ron offered.

She harrumphed, “You? You’re more of a danger than he is!” but joined in the laughter immediately.

Harry made a show of taking out his wand. “We won’t be long. Bill can watch from the flap, right?” Bill nodded, and Harry didn’t await any further sort of permission.

A broad scorched area matched the footprint of the house that once stood there; the piles were situated around it. The ground felt wrong somehow, almost tainted. Harry couldn’t think of another way to describe the sensation; it wasn’t like a ward or any other kind of spell that he could recall.

“They aren’t going to solve this, are they?” Ron asked.

Harry shrugged weakly. “If Dumbledore doesn’t know what happened, and the Unspeakables don’t know what happened, then who would?”

“The wankers responsible for it, do you suppose?” Ron snapped. He sighed, and added quietly, “At least we have some money. We could have lost everything, with no way to replace it.”

“I’d never have let that happen,” Harry said. “I’d never have left you in the lurch.” Ron’s jaw tightened but he said nothing.

Ron’s jaw tightened, but he said, “I’m not going to pick a fight over money, Harry. I’m tired of picking fights, you know?”

Harry paced around the roughly stacked debris. Very little of the remains were recognisable. He thought that he spotted part of Ron’s Chudley Cannons poster. “What do you think your parents would say if I gave them the tower, you know, for as long as they want to use it?” he asked quietly.

Ron’s jaw dropped, and he blurted out, “Are you serious?”

Harry laughed. “No, but I don’t think he’d mind.”

Ron winced. “All right, I deserved that one.”

“I *do* mean it, though,” Harry said. “I mean, what am I going to do with the place? It’s bloody enormous, and it’ll need someone to look after it over the winter anyway, and...”

Ron snorted. “You don’t have to sell *me* on the idea. My mum... three weeks in a tent is a long time, I figure. She might actually go for it.”

“And your dad?” Harry asked.

“He’d jump at it, I think – well, as much as he jumps at anything,” Ron decided.

Harry nodded. "I'm going to make the offer, then."

Ron stopped him. "Why? I mean, you were dead set on getting everyone to leave before."

"Someone reminded me yesterday that family is important. For me, that means all of you," Harry returned.

Ron laughed a bit too loudly. "You're listening to people now? What's next, then – sending letters to Auntie Agony?"

Harry snorted. "I've had my fill of advice, thank you very much."

"Maybe she knows how to snuff V-Voldemort, eh?" Ron teased. "'Dear Auntie Agony: I have this persistent problem with a Dark Lord. Everywhere I go, he seems to follow. He just won't take 'no' for an answer. What should I do?' Signed... what, Harry in Hades?"

Harry snorted again, then began to laugh. "She'd probably have me send him an assortment from Honeydukes," he managed. They laughed a while longer, and then fell into a companionable silence as they walked the length of the Quidditch pitch.

Ron stopped at the far end of the pitch, and gazed at the waning moon. "The clock says Hermione's 'in transit'," he said. "That must be good news, right?"

"I hope so," Harry said glumly.

"What, you think it's not good news?" Ron asked quickly.

Harry stammered, "No, no, it's just... look, after everyone left, I was getting all these posts, more than I knew how to handle... so I started banishing all of them... I didn't bother to check..."

Ron's eyes widened. "She sent you a post?"

Harry nodded.

"And you *banished* it?" Ron's eyes were positively bulging.

Harry buried his face in his hands, and nodded again. "I've been trying to write a post all day... you know, a reply, an apology, whatever. I suppose it's too late now."

"It might be," Ron said. "I suppose 'in transit' could mean a few different things. I'd get it written and get it sent, mate. You don't want to face the wrath of Hermione, right? I mean... I said I'd watch your back, but..."

Harry shoved him. "Prat."

Ron held up his hands in surrender. "What? She's *scary*."

“She’s not scary,” Harry said. “I just hope she’s all right.”

Ron nodded. “She’ll be all right. She’s a strong one... and scary. *Definitely* scary.”

Harry began to trudge toward the tents. “Ron, I don’t have a schedule from Dumbledore yet. It’s a good bet I won’t be in classes with you, and I don’t know which courses you’ve subscribed, but... watch out for her, right?”

“I can do that,” Ron said, “ but who’s going to watch out for you, mate?”

Harry shrugged. “Does it matter?”

Ron stepped into his path. “It matters to me, and you know it matters to her.”

“Does it?” Harry asked.

“Damn straight,” Ron snapped. “We watch out for each other, then, like always.” He moved out of Harry’s way. “Right, then. I want to watch you try and give a castle to Mum and Dad. This should be cracking.”

“It’s a tower house,” Harry corrected him.

“Yeah, whatever,” Ron said. “Cracking, either way.”

Hermione,

I’d ask how you are, except that would probably be the dumbest question I’ve ever asked. That’s saying something, coming from me.

It’s been a very eventful month. I’ve spent most of it in the place where I was heading when we last saw each other. I’ve met some interesting people, and lost some other people from my life. There were a few serious upsets this month. During the last, I started banishing my posts so I wouldn’t be buried in owls. I found out later that I banished a post from you, and I didn’t mean to do that. Most of what I wanted to tell you is best said in person, anyway.

I’ve been worried about you ever since I found out what happened. I hope that you’re feeling better.

Dumbledore and I haven’t gotten on very well since you left, but he’s made arrangements for my schooling beginning in a few days and I’ve accepted. I won’t be seeing as much of you or Ron as I’d like, but I’ll do my best. I’ll see you the first week of September, if not before.

Love, from

Harry

Harry carefully sealed the envelope and secured it to Hedwig, who disappeared into the darkness. He picked up the smaller dragon hide case, unzipped it, and turned the mobile telephone in his hands. It was a very clear, rather cool night – clearly the summer was coming to an end. He climbed out the garret window, and scrambled onto the roof. Shackbolt called out something loudly that he couldn't quite make out, but then waved in recognition. He waved back, then sat with his back against a crenellation and watched the stars for a while.

He turned the mobile again, and touched a number. The display lit up in the darkness. He didn't need the parchment, because Teller had stored the number that Harry wanted inside the telephone. All he had to do was press the number 9, and then the little button marked 'send'. If he pushed that button, he knew that he'd be acting against the advice of nearly everyone in his life. When he pushed it, there was an audible beep. He held the mobile to his hear. There was ringing, then a clicking sound, and then a voice.

Harry's throat was impossibly dry. "Heather? It's Harry. Are you alone?"

Harry Potter and the Years of Rebellion

Intermezzo I: Lost

Intermezzo I

LOST

August 10

Lucia Covelli sat at a small glass-topped table in a wide loggia that overlooked the azure sea. Morning was the best time of the day – in a complicated world, this was one of the few things of which she was certain. She was dressed casually, far more casually than would normally be the case. The Granger girl had reacted very poorly to anything that even hinted at cloaks or robes, and her client's comfort was very important at the moment. Blue denims and loose white shirts were hardly an imposition, in any case; she had dressed similarly in her graduate school days, thirty years prior.

Her morning's reading was strewn across the table, held fast against the breeze by small stones gathered from the beaches far below. Each day she had *La Repubblica* for breakfast, as well as the *Times* – both London and New York – and *Yomiuri Shimbun*. The last was a legacy of her ex-husband's business interests, but she'd made it her own long before the divorce. After that, it was always case notes and her morning espresso.

It was rare when all her notes could be held in a single binder. However, she found herself with the very unaccustomed luxury of a single client. Still, that one client was shaping up as a serious challenge. The cases that came to her via Amelia Bones were often coloured with cloak-and-dagger overtones, but *this* one....

The girl was only sixteen, though she both appeared and projected herself as somewhat older. She displayed a very facile mind, beneath which Covelli suspected were several layers of trauma. She projected a strong personality, as well. It was absurd to think that all of this was the result of a single explosive incident of accidental magic. The girl's guard – and the fact that she required a guard raised its own questions – was a terribly injured but absurdly polite fellow named Moody, who insisted upon being called Alastor. He had quickly forwarded her concerns to Bones. The response was cryptic, and asked her to expect a representative with more information – a functionary from the British Ministry bearing a dossier, she presumed.

The tapping of shoes rang out on the terrazzo. "Who is there, please?" she asked loudly, as she

slammed shut the binder containing her notes. She was fairly sure it wasn't Moody; the sound of his wooden leg made for an uneven pattern.

The voice that answered was terribly familiar. "Good morning, Lucia. You were never an early riser when we were young."

Covelli gasped. She fumbled for her reading spectacles unsuccessfully, and settled for squinting at the speaker; she saw sharp features, a severe bun, and an equally severe cloak. The woman was surely not a messenger, and was in fact nearly the last person she had expected to see. *Has it been four years? Five?* she wondered. After settling herself, she responded, "People change, Minerva... or do they? How long has it been since you last let your hair down? Forty years?"

Minerva McGonagall crossed her arms. "I see that you remain too vain to wear spectacles. Perhaps we don't change at all."

Covelli rose slowly but gracefully, as schoolgirl banter from days long past played through her mind. "That cloak belongs on a crone," she said haughtily.

McGonagall's lips nearly disappeared. "Those denims belong on a child."

"Biddy," Covelli snapped.

"Priss," McGonagall snorted.

"Bint," Covelli laughed, and added, "Now *that* is a word I have not used in quite some time."

McGonagall smiled faintly. She briskly strode forward and clasped Covelli's hands. "It's been too long, Luci."

"It has," Covelli agreed.

"An owl now and again would be appreciated," McGonagall chided.

Covelli frowned. "It's been nearly fifty years since I kept an owl, as you are well aware. You *could* make use of a telephone."

McGonagall's smile broadened for a moment. "I used a telephone last year, on one occasion."

Covelli gestured toward the second chair at the glass-topped table. "Life takes many unexpected turns, does it not?"

McGonagall sat heavily. "Indeed."

Covelli pushed her papers and binder aside before sitting. "When we were young, I could see that you would be headmistress of Hogwarts." She stopped for a moment, and pushed back any harshness in her tone. "I understand that it is purely a matter of time now."

"I have no desire for change, and no need for power," McGonagall said firmly. "Albus will serve many more years. As for myself, I doubt that I shall remain at Hogwarts beyond the end of the decade."

Covelli knew that her face soured at the mention of Dumbledore, and she consciously refocused; it was only then that McGonagall's announcement dawned on her. "You? Leave Hogwarts? What would you do with yourself?"

McGonagall shot her a cross look. "Retire, of course! I am old, in case that had somehow escaped your attention."

"We're only seventy years old," Covelli chided. "That is the prime of life."

"Luci, we're seventy-*one* years old, and for me the emphasis lies squarely upon old – my prime has passed," McGonagall sighed. "Even the men in your family appeared unaccountably young for their ages, as I remember it. On the other hand, I am able to pass for my actual age amongst Muggles with precious little effort."

Why do you choose to see yourself as old? Covelli wondered. She frowned, and changed the subject. "I have heard more talk of Muggles and blood in the last two days than in the preceding twenty years. I take it that much of wizarding Britain still uses the word 'Muggle' as an epithet?"

McGonagall matched her frown. "It only grows worse."

Covelli watched McGonagall carefully – it was a professional hazard, one that she was willing to indulge. "When will you ask about her? She is one of yours, after all, and I assume she is the sort of student in whom you would take an interest."

McGonagall nodded, and the corners of her mouth turned upward. "Perceptive as ever... ten points to Gryffindor, Miss Greengrass."

Covelli stiffened, despite herself. "I was twenty-one years old when I last went by that name," she managed to say.

McGonagall closed her eyes, and lowered her chin. "My apologies. I didn't intend to bring forth unwelcome memories."

Covelli gritted her teeth. "It will be difficult for you to avoid sensitivities, should you choose to speak of those days."

"Very well," McGonagall said in clipped tones. "Yes, Miss Granger is one of my charges..."

"And you wish to know of her progress, if any, in as much detail as I can provide," Covelli finished for her.

McGonagall relaxed, and the trace of a smile returned to her lips. "Do you know me so well, or am I simply transparent?"

"You're far from transparent, Minnie," Covelli said. "Hermione Granger is a very intriguing young woman."

"She is that," McGonagall agreed. "Have you made any progress, then?"

"First, there's little to tell. That is why you're here. Second, it's best that you pose that question to her parents," Covelli said firmly. "I can not – and will not – answer you directly without their permission."

"I see," McGonagall said hesitantly. "Of course... you're perfectly correct, of course. I shouldn't presume any rights in this instance."

Covelli sat back in her chair, and continued, "She is obviously important to you. Do you consider her your protégé?"

McGonagall sat up sharply in her chair. "There are so many of them, year after year after year... most remain at arm's length," she explained hesitantly. "They grow up before your eyes... some acquit themselves well, and some do not. After they leave, some acknowledge you with a wave in Diagon Alley or Hogsmeade, and some do not. Once in a great while – not often, thank Merlin – but once in a great while, one truly stands out. Harry Potter is special, of course, very special – that goes almost without saying... but Hermione..." She trailed off into a deep sigh.

Covelli let McGonagall stare into the distance. *And thus all roads continue to lead to Harry Potter*, she thought. *What's happening here?* After a time, she caught McGonagall's eye and asked, "How much do you know about the girl's upbringing?"

McGonagall's lips thinned, and she looked down before making eye contact. She said, "That is not something we've discussed in great detail."

You haven't changed in sixty years, Covelli laughed to herself. *I'll let you lie to me, for now.* Instead, she asked, "You weren't a religious sort, were you?"

McGonagall arched an eyebrow. "I was raised in the Church of England, on account of my mother. Albus has prevailed upon me to attend services, from time to time, but... I would not consider myself religious in the sense that I believe you intend." Her brow arched higher still. "What are you searching for?"

Covelli thought about what she could say and what she could not. "I'm trying to understand the particular significance of the book she was clutching when she arrived," she ventured. "She wouldn't release it until this morning, and still won't let it out of her sight."

"She's quite fond of books. The book is religious in nature?" McGonagall asked.

"I've seen many of its kind placed in lodgings during my travels," Covelli returned. "It is the New Testament of the Bible. Do you have any thoughts as to why she might be so attached to it?"

McGonagall leaned back in her chair. "I... I can't imagine, honestly." She folded her hands before

her face, and seemed to retreat.

“She’s holding back,” Covelli said. “This is why I contacted Bones.”

“Holding back in what way?” McGonagall asked.

“She has tried to convince me that all of this stems from the incident in the flat,” Covelli explained. “Her parents are clearly devastated and appear to have experienced trauma of their own. They all seem to be awaiting permission to speak, in a sense. This makes effective treatment impossible.”

“Hermione Granger has seen and done things that few of us will ever face,” McGonagall said; her voice was painfully measured. “Doubtless she feels that she is in possession of important information, perhaps even secret information.”

“Do you care for this girl?” Covelli snapped.

McGonagall’s eyes flashed. “She is the best student Hogwarts has produced in at least twenty –”

Covelli cut her off. “Please don’t avoid my question.”

McGonagall deflated. “Yes,” she said quietly. “Hermione is very important to me.”

Covelli sighed in frustration. “Then act in that spirit. You sounded like *Dumbledore* just now. Either tell me what she is hiding, or lead me to understand how I can build trust with her.”

McGonagall seemed to wage an inner war. When the battle was concluded, she asked, “Will you allow me to speak with her?”

Covelli nodded. “I shall be meeting with her parents in a few minutes. You can spend that time with her. She is quite fragile now; I trust that you will be measured and calming?”

McGonagall nodded. “I am capable of measured communication.”

“I remember your idea of diplomacy, Minnie,” Covelli teased.

“People do, in fact, change,” McGonagall snapped.

Covelli waited for a long time, before she asked gently, “Do you need to talk?”

McGonagall frowned. “Is that a professional question?”

Covelli sighed. “Minnie... after all these years...” She moved to her feet.

McGonagall stood as well, stiff as a broomstick. “Luci... it *has* been too long.” She sagged, and Covelli enveloped her in a sisterly embrace. McGonagall responded awkwardly, in the way of a person unaccustomed to touch.

“Stay,” Covelli said.

McGonagall pulled back, and looked at her curiously. “Pardon?”

“Stay here, at the villa,” Covelli offered.

“I don’t wish to intrude,” McGonagall said. “Hermione’s care is the most important consideration —”

“You won’t intrude,” Covelli insisted. “Tell me – do you believe I might need assistance in interpreting her experiences?”

McGonagall stroked her chin. “I hadn’t thought of that. I’d simply intended to answer your questions as best I could... there is Hogwarts business to which I can attend...”

"Let us get you settled, then," Covelli said. "I have a number of guest rooms available, and we *must* get you some proper attire as well." She grinned impishly. "You'll roast like a hag in Salem wearing that thing here."

McGonagall shook her head. "The phrases one picks up in the States – *goodness* . At any rate, there's no need to fuss."

Covelli turned on a full-bore smile, knowing what the effect would be. "I live to fuss," she said.

McGonagall rolled her eyes like a schoolgirl, and Covelli resisted the urge to crow. *I'll liven you up, dear Minnie* , she thought.

Covelli put her fingers to her mouth and gave a piercing and thoroughly unladylike whistle – something that she had learned in her university days principally to torture her mother. An ancient woman in a drab dress trundled out to the loggia.

"Gina, può aiutarmi con il bagaglio per favore?" Covelli asked.

The woman waved her arm derisively. She squinted at McGonagall, and snapped in a thin and reedy voice, "Fa come fossi a casa tua!"

Covelli crossed her arms, and tapped her foot. "Gina can be so difficult!" she pouted. "All I asked was that she help with the baggage, and she –"

McGonagall cut her off. "I heard her quite clearly. Grazie tanto, Gina. Vorrei di carta da lettere?"

Gina summoned a crooked and ancient smile. "You speak, then," she said.

"No. Per imparare bene la lingua, ci vuole molto pratica," McGonagall said smoothly.

"Only *you* would be able to express why you do not speak a language, using the very language that you supposedly do not speak," Covelli smirked.

Gina looked McGonagall up and down, then grunted, "For you and the girl, I speak the English. For the one with the leg, *no* ." The ancient maid cast Covelli a withering glance, and added, "I get Antony for the bags. He sits and he eats... good for nothing. Bah!" She turned her head and spat for effect, and then added, "I bring your – eh – *parchment* ," before she stomped off.

Covelli shrugged. "Gina was my mother's domestica – can you imagine? I'm increasingly convinced that she must have been Augustus Caesar's domestica, as well. What can one do?"

"I'm sure that you have more important things to do than guide me around," McGonagall said. "As I said, I have Hogwarts business to occupy my time; we're putting into place some changes in September..." She tugged at her cloak. "It *is* far too warm for a cloak, isn't it?"

"This is the Amalfi coast, Minnie, not Hogsmeade," Covelli said. "You will find everything more relaxed here."

"I have one bag – it wasn't as though I planned to remain here," McGonagall said, and took out her wand. "I can manage it on my own, thank you."

Covelli set her hand over the wand. "*No* ."

McGonagall was taken aback. "No?"

"Magical energy must be kept to a minimum throughout the villa," Covelli said. "That is why the Apparation point is outside the walls, why I do not take fire calls, and why I retain a Squib domestica and groundskeeper."

"Why? I don't –" McGonagall began.

"The overwhelming majority of my clients are neither witch nor wizard," Covelli explained. "I have found over the years that paranoids and schizophrenics often sense magic, even though they cannot see it or understand it. After this case, I will surely have need to contract with an Unspeakable or the like. It will take a full energy negation before I may resume my regular practice here." She sighed. "It wouldn't be the first time."

"No magic, then. Well... *well* ... that should be... quaint." McGonagall reluctantly put away her wand. "I do look forward to hearing more about your work – in general terms, of course."

"I'll want to hear about your work, as well," Covelli ventured. "Events in your world have certainly been interesting, since we last spoke."

"Indeed," McGonagall agreed. "We can scarcely turn without tripping over your former spouse these days."

Covelli consciously kept her shoulders from rising and her lips from sneering. When the moment passed, she said flatly, "We both gained as a result of the marriage. I have few regrets."

McGonagall seemed to weigh her words. "And how does your daughter fare in all of this?"

Covelli sighed. "Some things are best set aside, to await a bottle of chianti and a fine meal."

"I look forward to that," McGonagall said.

"As do I," Covelli agreed. "I will tell you something of my daughter, and perhaps you will explain why a senior British ministry official arranged psychological treatment for a sixteen year old girl."

McGonagall sighed. "Perhaps we should dispense with that presently."

McGonagall stopped short of the closed bedroom door, and composed herself. As soon as she felt prepared, she knocked sharply three times. There was no response.

"Miss Granger?" she called out evenly. "This is Professor McGonagall. May I come in?" She heard sounds from inside the room, but no answer to her question. "Hermione? Would you please allow me inside?"

The door muffled the sounds inside, but she could hear humming of some kind, perhaps singing. She sniffed – there was a peculiar acrid odour in the corridor. Suddenly there came a loud *whump* from inside the room, followed quickly by a crackling sound. McGonagall turned the doorknob as hard as she could, but it spun uselessly.

"Hermione? Let me inside *now*, please!" she called out.

"I can't," Hermione returned.

"Open the door," McGonagall demanded.

"I can't," Hermione repeated.

McGonagall sniffed again. *Something's burning*, she realised. '*No magic*' indeed! "Stand aside!" she roared, and drew her wand. The door exploded inward, and she raced inside.

Flames licked up from inside a small rubbish bin beside the bed. A section of the wooden floor was burning and the bedcovers looked to be next. McGonagall called out a fire-suppression charm and then cast a very weak Vortex Charm to draw the lingering smoke into the corridor and away from Hermione. For her part, the girl sat before a writing table next to the shuttered window as if nothing had happened. She didn't even turn to acknowledge that the door had opened or that the flames had been quelled.

McGonagall dashed across the room to her. "Come, we must leave this room immediately!"

"I can't; I have to finish this," Hermione said without looking away from the mass of papers strewn across the table. Several sheets before her were covered with text. She scribbled madly with a Muggle biro until she reached the bottom of the page at hand. When she finally turned to

face McGonagall, she was insistent. “I need to finish this *now* .”

McGonagall took a half step backward. Hermione’s eyes were devoid of anything at all – no description seemed to capture their appearance, in McGonagall’s mind. The girl’s face was pale and drawn, even more sunken than during the journey to Italy. “What is it that you need to finish?” she managed to ask.

“The jailer left an assignment for me,” Hermione said off-handedly. “The first draft wasn’t right, so I had to be rid of it.” She gestured absently toward the charred rubbish bin.

“The *jailer* ? What...?” McGonagall stopped cold. “Where is your wand? Does Mr. Moody still have it?” she enquired, even as her eyes searched the room.

“Haven’t seen it since... you know...” Hermione whispered, and then ducked back toward the papers and to her work, whatever it was.

Severus had insisted upon administering a potion to temporarily suppress her magic, as soon as she and her parents had been brought to Grimmauld Place from the Lovegoods’. Obviously, it had since worn off. McGonagall carefully leaned forward – she didn’t want to panic the poor girl - and peered through her spectacles over Hermione’s shoulder.

Two equally distributed handwritten columns covered each of the dozen or more pages. All of it consisted of a single phrase, repeated.

I will not tell lies.

Hermione looked up again, with a faint smile that McGonagall would have taken for pride in other circumstances. “It’s almost right. If I just keep writing it, it’ll stay.”

Baffled, McGonagall knelt beside the girl. “You’ve written these words a thousand times,” she said gently. “I daresay that they’ll remain on the pages.”

Hermione stared down without comprehension, and shook her head slowly. “Here,” she said, pointing to the back of her hand. “It’ll stay *here* , like it stayed on Harry. She thinks we’ll lie but we won’t do it; we won’t. She won’t beat us. We won’t tell her anything.”

McGonagall’s mind raced. She wondered who ‘she’ was. She wondered what had really happened to Hermione when Voldemort attacked her family home. The girl before her bore little resemblance to the student McGonagall had known, in the ways that mattered – she seemed confused, lost and strangely childlike.

“He doesn’t want to tell,” Hermione confided. “I wanted him to tell, but he wouldn’t. He won’t let her beat us. He won’t let them win.”

“Harry wrote these lines for someone,” McGonagall asked. “Who accused him of lying? When did this happen?”

Hermione focused intently upon something beyond McGonagall's ear. "I took murtlap essence from the stores," she said distantly. "It bled for days, you know."

"It bled... *what?*" McGonagall seized Hermione's hand, and traced her finger across the back of it. "Here? Did these words appear here, on Harry's hand? Did... did *Umbridge* do this to him?"

"It's still there," Hermione whispered. "All you have to do is look for it."

"Did she do this to you, as well? Hermione... please..." McGonagall demanded to know.

Hermione pulled her hand free. She snarled, "*Where were you?*"

McGonagall was stunned by the question, and she tried to measure her response. "Hermione... last year was hard on so many –"

Hermione abruptly jumped to her feet, and McGonagall nearly toppled over backward. "*Where were you?* He bled for *days!* Snape t-tore at him... and I didn't... *Dumbledore* said it was for his own good, and I believed it... I told H-Harry to keep going...."

McGonagall slowly clambered up from the floor. "*Professor Dumbledore* had very legitimate –"

Hermione's fists clenched and shook violently. "*Where were you? Where were any of you? Taking your tea in the bloody staff room?*" she roared.

McGonagall held herself in check with considerable effort. "Umbridge would have removed us all, and the Ministry would have welcomed it. We had to weigh everyone's needs, under the circumstances –"

Hermione's face contorted, and her eyes judged and convicted McGonagall. "*Where were you? COWARDS!*" The girl slammed her fist down against the writing table; it rattled and shook wildly.

"You need to sit down now," McGonagall said as calmly as she could manage. "It's best to sit and relax, and we can discuss this in a calm and reasoned fashion."

Hermione continued to stand, her fists growing tighter, her posture growing more menacing. "You could have stopped it, you could have helped him," she snarled. "*Snape* could have stopped it. *Dumbledore* could have stopped it with a word."

McGonagall felt herself begin to slump, as guilt crept upon her. "Perhaps I should have paid more mind, but Harry has always... you've been resourceful, the two of you and Weasley. That's why I encouraged Harry toward his ambition, toward becoming an Auror, toward –"

"He doesn't want that!" Hermione shouted. "We *hate* the Ministry!"

McGonagall took in a sharp breath. She had already begun working on Severus to admit Harry into N.E.W.T.-level Potions, before the dismissal. To hear that it would have been for nought was like

a punch to the mid-section. “I can’t believe it has come to this. Harry wanted so much to be... it was surely in the heat of the moment... he couldn’t really have meant it... could he have?”

“He meant every word! I – will – not – tell – lies!” Hermione exploded. The sound of strained metal rent the air and the frame of the bed collapsed. The writing table exploded into splinters, and the papers on the floor burst into confetti that whirled about the room.

McGonagall ducked the shower of splinters. She’d seen the Lovegoods’ flat, after Hermione’s collapse, and knew that there was little time to waste. She levelled her wand and whispered, *“Stupefy.”* Hermione fell onto her, and they both crashed to the floor at the end of the fallen bed.

As loudly as she could manage, McGonagall shouted, “Luci!” She kept shouting until Covelli and Hermione’s parents found them there. McGonagall was too overwhelmed to be embarrassed by her own tears.

It looked like Hogwarts, but it wasn’t – it couldn’t be. Hermione picked her way through shattered corridors to the tatters of the Fat Lady’s portrait.

“Password, please. Say it as though you mean it,” the Fat Lady’s mouth said from a dangling strip of canvas.

“Failure,” Hermione said, and the shredded portrait’s frame fell to the floor.

The Common Room looked as though M.C. Escher had drawn it. The stairs were twisted like Moebius strips, the fireplace jutted downward from the ceiling, and the floor was curved. She lost her footing, and slid to the centre of the room before coming to a stop.

All the couches were set on their backs, facing upward toward the fire. Hermione scrambled back to the edge of the room, and wrapped her hand around the doorjamb. People sat on the couches – actually, they were bloody molten things shaped like people. One was taller than the others, with a shock of singed red hair. It turned toward her.

“Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends,” it said, just before it dissolved into a thick red puddle.

“Ron?” Hermione cried. “No! No!”

Ginny came in through the opening to the corridor, but paid her no mind. She walked to the red puddle, nudged it with her toes, sat down on the couch, and calmly began to pick off her face.

“Greater love hath no woman than this, that she lay down her life for her friends,” she said. “Would you like to lay down, Hermione?”

Hermione fell to her knees, sobbing. “I can’t! I tried to do it! You know that, Ginny, don’t you? I tried so hard!”

You must take control of this, while you can.

The voice was everywhere and nowhere. Hermione wiped at her eyes with the backs of her hands and sought out the source, but saw no one except her tattered and melting friends. A cloud of incense billowed into the room, and she gagged at the smell and the taste. Madame Trelawney swept down the stairs from the girls' dormitories, with bulging eyes, billowing robes, and absurd gestures.

She stopped in front of Hermione, and dramatically called to the heavens. Her eyes glazed over, and she said in a misty monotone, "You have no love in you. Your heart is a dead, shrivelled thing. You can only take... and take... and take..." She began to claw her own eyes out, and Hermione shoved her up the sloping floor until she fell backward into the corridor. The Common Room sagged deeper; Hermione lost her balance, and she rolled head-over-heels back to its center

"Enjoying the show?" a silky voice whispered in her ear. Her blood ran cold as she turned to face Tom Riddle. He was young and healthy, with dark hair and intense eyes, and something achingly familiar about him. He pushed Ginny aside, flopped down on the couch, and eagerly ate popcorn from a bowl. Hermione tried to turn and run from him, but her feet sank into the stone.

Listen to me, Hermione. This is your dream. It's yours to control.

Once again, she looked for the voice but saw only Riddle. "You can't save him, Hermione. You can't even save yourself. You may as well enjoy the show," he smirked.

Her fingers turned to claws, and she dug her feet free. She slowly dragged herself up the curving floor to the portrait hole. The corridor outside was all wrong now, with ever-changing twists and turns like a writhing snake. A new portrait had replaced the Fat Lady.

"You know who you are," the portrait said. It was a woman, her thick dark hair tinged with white strands, and blue eyes ablaze. "This is a terrible place. Surely you don't want to stay?"

Hermione gazed at the woman. She saw her breath, and her feet froze to the floor. "I know you," she said.

"Yes, and I'd like to know you," the portrait returned. "Come back with me."

"You're the voice I was hearing...aren't you?" Hermione asked weakly.

"Keep thinking – never stop thinking, and never give into this. You'll make the connections," the portrait encouraged her.

The corridor rippled, and Hermione barely maintained her footing. "How can I come with you?" she shivered.

"Any way that you like," the portrait told her. "It's your dream, after all."

A deep dangerous rumbling echoed from one end of the corridor, closing fast. "But it's real. It's

all true –” Hermione began.

The portrait chuckled softly. “This is vivid but hardly real, and all its truths are subjective. In your everyday experience, do people melt? Are there fireplaces on the ceiling?”

Hermione hesitated, and grew even colder. “Is it better out there?”

“Could it possibly be worse than here?” the portrait asked. “Take my hand, and hold tightly.” A canvas hand extended from the front of the portrait, and reached out until Hermione seized it. When she could see clearly again, she sat next to the woman from the portrait, on the squashy couch before the fire in the Common Room that she knew.

“I remember you... I’m at a villa that overlooks the sea,” Hermione said hesitantly.

“That’s right,” the woman said. “I’m Doctor Covelli – do you recall our meetings?”

Hermione did recall it now and she didn’t understand why that seemed like a revelation. “It hasn’t gone all that well, has it?” she said quietly.

“It could be better,” Covelli said. “Are you frightened?”

“A little, yes,” Hermione admitted.

“What frightens you?” Covelli asked.

“I should have been frightened in there. I was, but I wasn’t, not really,” Hermione said. “It was all very strange.”

Covelli flashed an enigmatic smile. “Interesting. Are there other fears?”

“A few,” returned Hermione. “This isn’t the real Common Room. Where am I?”

“Excellent,” Covelli said. “You know where you are. Keep thinking on it.”

Hermione sat bolt upright. She was coming out of a dark fog. “I was writing lines, and then... Professor McGonagall was there, and she stunned me, I think. Yes – I had another outburst, and she stunned me.”

“Where are you?” Covelli asked.

Hermione stood up from the squashy couch, with great effort. “I should be waking soon. Hopefully, I won’t need you or any other figments of my imagination.”

Covelli seemed to regard her carefully. “You’re getting closer. What gave the room away, may I ask?”

“Nothing here casts a shadow,” Hermione observed. “The room is perfectly lit, which is

impossible.”

Covelli crossed her arms. “Nothing casts a shadow?”

Hermione looked down. “Interesting – it seems that I cast one.” She froze. “So do you.” Her mind took a leap forward. “I’m not imagining you. I’m not going to wake up now, am I?”

“Not immediately, no,” Covelli said impassively.

Hermione wandered the room, picking up various objects and putting them down again. “Are you using a Dreamweaver?” she asked.

“I do understand why your professor is so fond of you,” Covelli laughed.

Hermione turned on her. “I want to wake up. Why are you keeping me here?” she demanded.

“Think on the dream that you just had, and you’ll answer your own question,” Covelli calmly instructed.

“I wasn’t myself anymore... if I were to awaken right now, I wouldn’t be able to tell the difference between reality and dreams,” Hermione realised. “I’d be irretrievably mad, wouldn’t I?”

“The human mind is rarely so absolute in my experience,” Covelli said. “I believe you would have eventually recovered, but at great cost. By remaining here for now, you have the opportunity to shape the outcome. I had to make a professional judgment and I did so.” Hermione said nothing, and Covelli added, “Do you regret my decision?”

“No,” Hermione said quickly. “Thank you for that. It’s just... I think I should be grateful, actually, but I can’t seem to manage it. I’m finding it difficult to feel anything at all.” She looked to Covelli nervously. “Am I making any sense?”

Covelli stood, and walked to the foot of the stairs that led to the girls’ dormitories. “You have an excellent eye for detail,” she said. “This room hasn’t changed much since I last saw it, actually. What’s missing, do you think?”

“It’s missing the smaller things – books, for example, or bric-a-brac,” Hermione noticed. In a blink, the various sets of shelves filled with books and the tables were littered with personal items.

“Yes, quite an eye,” Covelli noted with approval. “What else is missing?”

Hermione smiled, for the first time in a long while. “Crookshanks,” she said. Her stout orange cat sauntered down the stairs and into the room, brushing slowly against her leg before settling in front of the fire.

Covelli reached down and scratched the cat behind the ears. “Fascinating. Is there more?”

Of course, Hermione thought. She concentrated on her roommates; on Ginny and Ron; and finally,

reluctantly, on Harry. None of them appeared. "I don't understand," she said.

"This is a very quiet room, isn't it?" Covelli observed. "It's a very safe room."

"I'm hiding in here, aren't I?" Hermione realised.

"Only safe things will appear here – you've no room remaining for anxieties or doubts," Covelli said. "It's common for people to have a safe place in their landscape of dreams, even if it lies beyond conscious awareness. You're here now because this is where you need to be."

Hermione flopped backward onto the squashy couch. "I like it here, I think."

"Do you understand the consequences of remaining here for too long?" Covelli asked.

Hermione stood again – it seemed easier this time – and browsed the shelves until she found what she sought. She opened the book, turned to a particular page, and read aloud. "For, what other dungeon is so dark as one's own heart! What jailer so inexorable as one's self!"

Covelli moved to glance at the book binding. "You're quite well read, aren't you? Hawthorne...at least one of his other works should be required reading for English witches, I believe."

"How will I leave?" Hermione asked.

"How much do you know about Dreamweavers?" Covelli returned.

"I know what they are, and a bit about how they work," Hermione said. "Given their, um, status, it's not surprising that the library lacks key information. I don't understand how you were able to make one so quickly. Aren't they made specifically for the user?"

"Usually, yes," Covelli confirmed. "What possessed you to learn about Dreamweavers in the first place?"

"I had a strong interest in nightmares last year," Hermione said cautiously.

Covelli studied her for a few moments. "I see. In any case, you are using my personal Dreamweaver."

Hermione felt a flutter of panic, but it quickly dissipated into the room. "But doesn't that mean...?" She felt as though she needed to catch her breath, though the feeling wasn't disturbing. "If I can't get out, neither can you."

"Again, the human mind is rarely absolute," Covelli assured her. "I can leave here as long as I return within a reasonable period of time. If you were to become locked in this room, I could sever myself from the Dreamweaver. It would... not be pleasant."

Hermione's eyes widened. "Why...?"

“Consider it a display of trust,” Covelli proposed. “It might help us both if you’d consider extending the same.”

Hermione hesitated. “There are things I know... I’m not sure...”

“Your professor has gathered that. She summoned your Headmaster. He will give you permission to speak, if that is what you must have,” Covelli said. “If you concentrate, you will be able to hear what’s taking place outside.” She inclined her head toward the unlit fireplace; a large jar of Floo powder sat atop the mantle. “Consider using the fireplace as a metaphor.”

Hermione swore that Covelli’s jaw ground at the word ‘Headmaster’. Something else occurred to her, and she felt a momentary blush. “What about...other sorts of things?” she asked.

“What sort of things?” Covelli enquired.

“Personal things,” Hermione managed.

“These are your thoughts and dreams,” Covelli reminded her. “I will know and see what you want me to know and see. Those choices are yours to make. Of course, the more that I know and see, the more likely it is that I can provide assistance.”

“I still don’t understand how I’ll know when it’s time to leave,” Hermione said.

“The Dreamweaver will know. You’ll fall into a normal sleep, and awaken a few hours later,” Covelli answered.

Hermione closed her eyes, and tried to still her thoughts as though she were about to take a brutally difficult examination. “I’m tired,” she said at length. “Is it dangerous for me to rest?”

“No,” Covelli said. “I’ll be watching over you. You need to know that I may not always appear as myself. Dreamguides –”

“Take many forms,” Hermione finished for her. “Von Hennen mentioned that in her introductory chapter.”

“Very good,” Covelli said. “You’re safe here, for now. I’ll return when you’re rested.”

Hermione rested her head against one arm of the couch. Crookshanks toddled over to her, climbed up, and curled into a ball atop her legs. She didn’t even notice when Covelli left the room.

Covelli hadn’t uttered a sound in nearly half-an-hour – not since she had mumbled ‘hoggy-woggy-Hogwarts’ and then laughed. She had barely moved at all since closing her eyes an hour prior. McGonagall sat beside the bed in an ancient dining chair, and watched for the slightest squeak or movement. By contrast, Hermione had writhed as though she were in a horrific dream before falling deadly still.

“Unnnhhhh,” Covelli groaned.

McGonagall sat up with a start. “Thank Merlin!” she gasped, and moved to help Covelli sit up.

“Nuh... NO!” Covelli snapped. “Leave me!” Her eyes were wild and lost.

“Luci! Do you know where you are?” McGonagall asked quickly.

Covelli’s eyes slowly came into focus. “Villa,” she managed. “Can’t be taken from her, remember?” She inclined her head toward Hermione. A thin gold chain bound Covelli’s right hand to Hermione’s left.

McGonagall dropped back into her chair heavily. “I can’t believe that I allowed you to do this,” she sighed.

“Not your decision,” Covelli croaked.

McGonagall brought a cup of water to Covelli’s lips, who eagerly drank from it. Covelli’s domestica – Gina, McGonagall recalled – opened the door, peered in, and let forth with a flurry of Italian. Covelli snapped something in return, closed her eyes, and frowned. “It seems that he has come, and brought someone with him. They have somehow Apparated directly into the villa. Minnie, have you altered my wards?”

“Wards? I thought there was no magic –” McGonagall started.

“There was to be no magic in the *house*. The property is warded, of course – I’m not a fool,” Covelli said. “Did you create a breach?”

“No!” McGonagall insisted. “Very little keeps Albus from his chosen destination, of course.”

“*Of course*,” Covelli spat. “First accidental magic, then the Dreamweaver, now Apparation... how will they possibly clean all of it away?” She opened her eyes again, and glared at McGonagall. “*Well?* Let’s get on with your intervention.”

“This is for Hermione, not for you!” McGonagall snapped. She sighed, and added, “Luci, it’s been fifty years. Why can’t you...?”

“Let it pass?” Covelli sneered. “Not in a thousand years, but it can’t be helped now – he’s here, and she may have need of him. Open the door.” When McGonagall stood to cross the room, Covelli sighed, “Use your wand, Minnie. I suspect I’ll have to burn the villa to the ground and rebuild.”

Madam Pomfrey rushed in first. “I gathered my things as quickly as I could. It wasn’t clear whether supplies would be... *Miss Granger?* ”

Dumbledore entered slowly, almost carefully. He seemed to take no notice of Madam Pomfrey’s outburst, or Hermione’s still form, or the condition of the room. His eyes were unreadable, and

McGonagall shivered. “Hello, Lucia,” he said.

Covelli’s eyes narrowed. “You will address me as Doctor Covelli.” McGonagall couldn’t take her eyes off Covelli’s free hand; it was clenched so tightly that her nails dug into her palm.

Madam Pomfrey gasped, “Is that what I think it is?” and reached toward Hermione.

“*STOP!*” Covelli shouted. “*Do not touch her!*”

Pomfrey shrunk back. "Albus... you do know that I'm required to report the existence of one of these...."

Covelli rolled her eyes. “Oh, for goodness’ sake, Dreamweavers are *not* illegal!”

“In any case, we are not in England at present,” Dumbledore said casually.

Covelli closed her eyes tightly. “There’s no time for this. Minnie, introduce me to my accuser, so that we can move onward.”

“Madam Pomfrey is our resident healer at Hogwarts,” McGonagall said.

“Pomfrey...?” Covelli quickly opened one eye. “I remember you as a boy.”

Madam Pomfrey appeared scandalized for a moment. “Certainly not! You... you must be thinking of my brother, Oscar. Did you attend Hogwarts?”

“Yes,” Covelli said flatly.

Dumbledore leaned in toward Hermione. She was draped in finely wrought netting – McGonagall knew that it was spun gold. The netting was interlaced every inch or two with a crystals. Seven of the stones were larger than the others – placed above the major chakras, McGonagall recalled. The largest stone rested on Hermione’s forehead.

“You used your own Dreamweaver for Miss Granger,” Dumbledore said.

Covelli said nothing for a time. “How did you recognise it as mine?” she asked at last.

“I did not,” Dumbledore admitted. “You would not have had the luxury of guiding her to make one of her own. In addition, this was intended to fit someone taller than Miss Granger, though it is properly positioned.”

“Five points to Slytherin,” Covelli sneered.

Dumbledore’s face froze, and McGonagall fought back the urge to wince. “I shall be sure to inform its Head of House of your generosity,” he said. “Why would you take such an audacious risk on Miss Granger’s behalf?”

“Because Bones said that *you’re* responsible for this,” Covelli seethed. “How many people have died over the years because of your mysterious plans, I wonder? We can head that list with *my brother –*”

Dumbledore sighed. “There is nothing that I can offer beyond an apology, Lucia, and I have done so many times –”

“*You have no right to address me by my first name!*” Covelli shouted. Dumbledore bowed his head.

“None of this is helping Hermione!” McGonagall snapped. Covelli took three long, slow breaths.

Dumbledore folded his hands thoughtfully. “She seemed to be in stable condition upon her departure,” he observed. “What has triggered this relapse?”

Covelli directed her answer to McGonagall; she refused to look in Dumbledore’s direction. “Relapse? Any previous events were merely precursors.”

“May I check on her physical condition?” Madam Pomfrey asked.

Covelli nodded. “Be sure that you do not dislodge the Dreamweaver in any way.” She sighed. “It’s probably best that you simply use your wand.”

Pomfrey appeared puzzled. “How else would I perform an examination?”

Covelli pounded her free hand against the bed. “Why did I do this? I should have known... Oh, God, I should have told Bones to just... *argghhh!*” She launched into a spewing rage in a crazy quilt of Italian and English that McGonagall strained to follow.

“Lu... Doctor Covelli! I know that I am unwelcome here, but there is no need to... *I say!*” Dumbledore started.

McGonagall’s jaw dropped; she could count on one hand the number of times that she had seen Dumbledore so rattled, and it dawned on her that Lucia Covelli had now instigated two of those occasions. Covelli continued to rage on. McGonagall picked out “*cacasentenze*” several times, which she thought she understood; “*vecchio schifoso*”, which she was more certain about; and “*vaffanculo*”, about which she had no doubt.

“Miss Granger’s pulse is lower than I’d like to see, and her magical energy is unusually depleted,” Pomfrey said quietly, “but she is intact and doesn’t seem to be in immediate danger. Under other circumstances, I’d administer a Dreamless Sleep potion.”

Dumbledore immediately turned his attention to Pomfrey, and Covelli shifted the focus of her tirade. “Dreamless Sleep potion! If *that* remains the standard of care for trauma, it’s no wonder that I receive so many referrals from England!”

Pomfrey’s hands moved to her hips. “I don’t know who you think you are, but I’ll tell you that

sometimes the only thing to be done is to put dreams at bay!”

Covelli gathered the chain that bound her to Hermione, and then squeezed the girl’s hand as she shifted to a sitting position. She fixed Pomfrey with a haughty glare, and tilted her head regally. McGonagall cringed – she remembered that particular posture all too well.

“*I am Lucia Elisabeth Greengrass Covelli, Madam. I completed my studies at Hogwarts, and then apprenticed under this old fraud,*” Covelli said brusquely, as she pointed rudely at Dumbledore. “After he sent my brother to his death and generally made a complete ruin of my life, I went on to earn my medical degree from the University of Torino and a doctorate in psychology from Columbia University. I have studied with some of the most capable therapists on the planet, and I have treated the minds and bodies of patients for more than forty years – and *I’ll tell you* that putting dreams at bay only causes them to return later with greater intensity. If you want to learn something, then you may observe and perhaps assist. If you do not, then I suggest you leave us.” She redirected her glare at Dumbledore. “I do hope you had the good sense to bring a Pensieve?”

Madam Pomfrey had slowly backed herself to the wall as Covelli had raged on. “I... believe that I went to school with your brother... er... one of your brothers – Carl?” she offered.

Covelli pursed her lips. “Giancarlo acknowledged me, did he? Perhaps you’re just guessing; it’s no matter. Yes, he is my youngest brother. May we now move along?”

Dumbledore withdrew a stone bowl from within his robes. “It did occur to me that a Pensieve might conserve valuable time. Do you have your wand at the ready?”

Covelli frowned. “No, I don’t.”

Dumbledore set the bowl at the foot of the bed and withdrew his wand. Covelli snapped, “Under no circumstances will you point that at me!”

“I can withdraw the memory, if you like,” McGonagall offered.

Covelli hesitated before nodding. “Take care with the extraction, Minnie; I’ll need it returned to its place.”

McGonagall looked up to see Pomfrey mouth “Minnie?” in astonishment. Her lips thinned, and she returned her focus to her wand and the proper incantation. Moments later, the resulting silvery thread was in its resting place, and their fingers were dipped into the pensieve.

They stood in a place that very closely resembled the Gryffindor Common Room, and watched Hermione talk to Covelli. Pomfrey gasped when Hermione said that she’d shut herself in the room; the implication was obvious. When Hermione mentioned having an interest in nightmares the previous year, McGonagall had searched for the slightest reaction on the Headmaster’s face and found a small hint of frustration. He stood there through the rest of it without expression. Hermione began to ask about other sorts of things, and the memory abruptly ended. McGonagall was left curious but set it aside.

Dumbledore stroked his beard. “I can certainly see how it is in Miss Granger’s best interests to communicate with you freely,” he said. “If she requires my permission, then she has it. We shall have to reach an understanding, you and I, when her treatment has concluded. If she is truly open to you, then I believe you will come to understand my position.”

Covelli let out a deeply held breath. “I thank you on her behalf,” she said.

Dumbledore sighed. “You will most likely revoke that statement, after hearing the rest of what I must tell you. Miss Granger has had a recent experience relating to the keeping of secrets, which may affect the manner in which you choose to guide her.”

“This is *not* something that I wish to hear,” Covelli said menacingly.

“No, I fear that it is not,” Dumbledore agreed. “I hesitate to discuss this openly.” He made a point of looking down at Hermione.

“It is not as though I can follow you to the corridor,” Covelli pointed out. “If it must be said, then say it.”

Dumbledore proceeded to explain how he had acquired a secret-binding spell from Algernon Croaker at the Department of Mysteries, and had obtained Hermione’s permission to cast it upon her in order to safeguard an important secret about Harry Potter. McGonagall realised immediately that it must have related to the lost prophecy in some way. Covelli began to ask specific questions about the nature of the spell.

As the details emerged, Covelli remained calm, but McGonagall began to boil inside. “How could you?” she interrupted.

“Miss Granger had no defenses with which to protect the information –” Dumbledore began.

“Then that information should have been kept from her,” McGonagall snapped.

Dumbledore sighed. “I found that I could not refuse her. She wanted to assist Harry, by helping him to carry his burdens, and I could not stand in her way.”

“I... I don’t understand... Albus, how could you have... have done that to her... *nothing* could be so important that you would intentionally...” Madam Pomfrey stammered.

McGonagall had forgotten that Pomfrey was in the room. Dumbledore seemed to come to the same realization, and calmly turned. He said, “*Obliviate*. Poppy, you must inventory the potions stock in the Hospital Wing. You shall contact Severus to obtain any needed items. It is critically important that the Hospital Wing be well prepared for the times to come. You may leave my office now. I trust that you enjoyed your tea.”

Madam Pomfrey blinked hard. “Yes... of course. The tea was lovely. I... must conduct a thorough inventory.”

Dumbledore picked up a scrap of paper from the floor, pointed his wand at it, and said, “*Portus*. Poppy, be sure to throw this away, would you?”

“Certainly... Albus,” Pomfrey said in a daze. “Mustn’t... leave a mess.” She took the paper and disappeared.

Covelli frowned deeply. “I see that you haven’t changed. This had better be worth the lengths to which you have gone.”

“Harry saw the prophecy, didn’t he?” McGonagall asked.

“Yes,” Dumbledore answered. “I shared it with him.”

McGonagall’s eyebrows rose. “But you told us that it was broken... the prophecy was revealed to you?”

“Indeed,” Dumbledore said. “I only say what I am about to say because Miss Granger’s life may hang in the balance, and because I bear responsibility for that circumstance.”

“Goodness, it’s getting easier for you to apologise... or perhaps she is needed for another of your grand plans?” Covelli sneered. McGonagall glared at her, and she looked away. Dumbledore said nothing; he merely motioned to the pensieve, and McGonagall carefully returned Covelli’s memory.

Covelli worked her jaw as though attempting to cause her ears to pop. “Skillfully done,” she said. “So, this poor girl has somehow become intertwined with a prophecy?”

Dumbledore nodded gravely. “Minerva, I shall leave it to you as to whether you wish to retain memory of what I am about to say. As I said before, Doctor Covelli, we shall need to reach an understanding at a later time.” He spoke the prophecy, and then allowed the room to stand in silence.

McGonagall bit back tears. “It’s not fair,” she said. “It’s simply not fair.”

“Prophecies are, for the most part, neither fair nor equitable,” Dumbledore gently pointed out.

Covelli winced and rubbed at her temple. “Is it a true prophecy? Are you certain of that?”

“Of that there is no doubt.” Dumbledore removed his spectacles and deeply rubbed at his eyes.

“Do you truly expect the boy to be victorious, against this monster of yours?” Covelli asked.

“Harry must defeat Voldemort,” Dumbledore insisted.

Covelli gritted her teeth. McGonagall began to move toward her, but Covelli waved her free hand dismissively. “You... expect a Pyrrhic victory, don’t you? Your Mr. Potter... he will be a martyr?” she asked.

Dumbledore's blue eyes suddenly seemed bottomless, McGonagall thought. He fixed them on Covelli, and said, "I will gladly give my life to prevent that outcome."

Covelli groaned, "Heard that before..." She twitched, and this time McGonagall didn't hold back; she took up Covelli's free hand in her own.

"Could this kill her?" McGonagall asked Dumbledore anxiously.

Dumbledore looked to Covelli. "This was a noble choice, even if you do not believe that it was so," he said, but her eyes had already rolled back. She slumped against the pillows and lay completely still.

"Minerva, I shall leave it to you as to whether you wish to retain memory of what I am about to say..."

Their voices sounded distant, as though they were bubbling through deep water, but Hermione had heard enough. She couldn't bear to sit through the prophecy once more, so she withdrew from the fireplace. The flames reverted from a sickly green to a normal shade of orange. She didn't know what to make of Dr. Covelli's railing against Dumbledore, and she certainly didn't know what to make of her Headmaster now. He was not the man that she had once believed him to be; of that much she was certain. The Common Room had once seemed so comfortable to her but now it was confining her, chafing her.

The portrait hole suddenly opened but no one came through. There was a rasping sound, a sort of breathing sound. Her eyes swept the room; nothing was out of place. She took her wand in hand, caused it to shine brightly, and carefully crept into the corridor beyond.

There were no writhing walls this time, but the corridor seemed to curve more than it should have. She heard a scurrying sound behind her, and thought of rats. A few moments later, a rumbling began to fill the corridor... WHUMP-a-whump-a-WHUMP-a-WHUMP-a-whump-a-whump-a... louder and louder still, until the stone floor began to quiver.

She heard loud breaths before actually she saw it, and dove to one side just as an enormous something nearly ploughed into her. She saw massive heads and thick black fur and great trunk-like legs, and something else seated atop the rest of it.

"Wheeeeeee!" the smaller Something shouted out in what was surely unrestrained glee. Short blonde hair and wide eyes caught flashes of light from the wall sconces as the beast and its rider disappeared into the darkness.

Hermione followed warily down the curving corridor, until she reached the central stairwell. It was completely empty; she could scarcely imagine Hogwarts so empty, even at Christmastime. Still, there was a faint sound... giggling? She began to descend the stairs, toward the Great Hall. It was definitely giggling, she decided – the peals of laughter that came from small children. The stairs seemed to go on forever. Somehow this Hogwarts was far larger than the one she knew.

The ceiling of the Great Hall depicted a clear day with high clouds, but Hermione thought it seemed as far away as real clouds would be. Everything was out of proportion – the tables were too high, the benches too long, the head table too far away. She didn't even recall the hall seeming so large on that first fearful evening when she had stood there, exposed, awaiting the Sorting Hat. It was at that moment that she looked down, and screamed.

She was wearing The Outfit. It was frilly and old-fashioned and oh-so-pink, and there she stood in the middle of the Great Hall, dressed in The Outfit and her childhood Mary Janes. 'My little Princess,' her daddy had called her, and it was her only happy memory of the horrid thing. Mummy had made her wear it to school once a week, which had been the highest form of punishment young Hermione had been able to imagine. It occurred to her that it should probably come up to her waist, shortly before it occurred to her that the Outfit was in fact a perfect fit.

"Maybe if I just hide in the park, no one will ever miss me," Hermione said in a little-girl voice. She crept along, ducking twice beneath the Ravenclaw tables, until she came to the old metal swing from the park, which was anchored in the stone floor just to one side of the head table. She looked around nervously, and clambered up. With her toes pointed as sharply as she could manage, she was barely able to push off, but she kept at it. Soon, she was swinging as high as she could go, and everything began to fall away – The Outfit and the beast in the corridor and Tom Riddle and Harry...

"Young lady, what do you think you're doing? Classes begin in five minutes, and you're going to soil your dress!" Cordelia Granger said. She was the perfect picture of a professional – immaculately styled hair, flawless teeth, tailored suit without a single ripple or wrinkle.

Hermione dragged her Mary Janes against the stone with each arc, until she came to a stop and slid down from the swing. Her mother took her by the hand. "Look at your shoes," she scolded. "Those marks will never come off."

"Yes, Mummy," Hermione mumbled; "You're right, of course." She allowed herself to be led across the Great Hall to the Slytherin tables, where Mrs. Wickham awaited her.

"I'm terribly sorry, Mrs. Wickham," her mother said smoothly. "Mr. Granger and I crossed signals this morning, I'm afraid."

"Quite all right, Mrs. Granger, quite all right," Mrs. Wickham assured her. "Hermione, please take your seat and open your mathematics text to page 136."

They were all there, seated on the benches, glaring at her with murder in their eyes – Ralph Flatley, Lucinda Meecham, Teddy White, and David Stroud... her living nightmares from the Worthington Day School. Poor Victoria Fisher was there, as well.

"Lookie, lookie – Her-Majesty is here!" Ralph mocked.

"As long as we don't have to listen to Her-Whinging," drawled Lucinda.

David Stroud reached out and grabbed Hermione's arm roughly. "Don't you dare raise your hand," he hissed.

"Let me go!" Hermione snapped, and pulled free.

"Mister Stroud! See me after class!" Mrs. Wickham boomed. Teddy watched Hermione until she returned his glance; he drew his finger across his throat and she hid behind her mathematics text.

"Who can tell me the square root of 361?" Mrs. Wickham asked. Hermione's hand shot up, to her horror. She managed to wrestle it down; desperate, she sat on her hand, but then her other hand rose.

Her classmates all dropped their pencils and stared at her, judged her, hated her. "It's... it's not my fault. You could do it too, anyone can do it!" she blurted out.

Mrs. Wickham pointed to her. "Hermione?"

Ralph threw his book at her. "No, we can't all do it!"

Hermione refused to cry. "I... I'd rather not answer, ma'am," she said weakly.

"Does anyone else have the answer?" Mrs. Wickham asked. She received sullen stares by way of reply.

"Oh, for goodness' sakes!" Hermione shouted. "I know Victoria can answer this one, and probably Teddy as well! All of you could, if you'd just apply yourselves!"

"Why don't they just send you packing to Oxford already, so you'll quit mucking up our lives!" David seethed.

"Why don't you want to be smart?" Hermione pleaded with them.

"Who would want to be a horrid priss like you?" Lucinda sneered.

"I just want to get along," Victoria said softly.

Hermione slammed her textbook closed. "Nineteen," she said with conviction. "The answer is nineteen." She stormed out of the Great Hall.

They were in front of her, though, at the base of the stairs – the four of them, hovering around Victoria Fisher who was sprawled on the ground.

"Leave her alone!" Hermione shouted.

"Uh-oh, it's Her-Majesty," Ralph laughed. "No worries; she wouldn't dare get her hands dirty."

"No, but she'd tattle," Lucinda pointed out. "She's like that, you know."

“I am not!” Hermione huffed.

“Tattler! Tattler!” they all mocked.

“Shove off, Granger,” David Stroud blustered. “This is between us and ickle Vickie.”

Hermione stood her ground. “Get away from her!”

David turned on her. “Or what?” Before she could move, he lashed out and grabbed her by the hair. “I think this gorse-bush needs a trimming,” he cackled.

Her hair blew in the wind. No boy would ever treat her like that, Hermione decided. David Stroud needed a trimming, she figured. All the hair on his head promptly fell out. His eyes grew into saucers, and he released her so fast that she fell to the floor. He crawled around, screaming and scooping up his hair.

Victoria Fisher’s eyes were nearly as big. “How did you...?” Ralph wrapped his arms over his head, as though he were trying to hold his hair in place.

Teddy growled, “She’s a witch!”

Hermione’s Outfit tore at the seams as she grew. Her expanding feet painfully burst her Mary Janes in two.

A wild-eyed Lucinda shrieked, “Burn her!”

David tore a torch from one of the wall sconces, and advanced on her. “ Burn her!” he shouted.

The stairs were lined with every student from Worthington Day School... her parents... her neighbours... everyone from Hogwarts...but there was no choice. She threw the tattered remains of The Outfit at David and ran up the stairs as fast as she could manage. Somehow, they stayed on her heels. People were hooting and hollering at her, and tears streamed down her face but she couldn’t stop to wipe them away.

They trapped her in the corridor that led to the Gryffindor Common Room, Ralph and Lucinda to one side and Teddy and David to the other. All four carried torches now, and all four were smiling madly. Hermione heard a loud breathing sound, and then “ Wheeeeeee!”

So it was that Hermione found herself standing in front of the entrance to the Gryffindor Common Room, whilst Fluffy the three-headed dog devoured her childhood tormentors and Luna Lovegood grinned madly at her from Fluffy’s back. She was wearing a summer shirt emblazoned with the words ‘I Found a Snorkack’ and short pants.

There was a pop! beside Hermione, and an unfamiliar house-elf appeared. It cast a shadow. “Doctor Covelli?”she asked.

The house-elf smiled brightly. “Doctor Covelli wonders where Hermione ever saw a creature such

as this,” she said, pointing at the three-headed dog, who wagged his tail and belched.

“Oh,” Hermione said. “That’s Fluffy.”

“Doctor Covelli is sure that Hermione has an interesting story to tell!” the house-elf laughed, and motioned to the portrait hole that led into the Common Room. Hermione wasn’t particularly surprised that Luna was able to follow them inside.

August 14

“She hasn’t moved in four days,” Mrs. Granger said anxiously. “She hasn’t eaten, hasn’t taken water... I’m trying to understand this, really I am...”

Covelli squinted and rubbed at her temples with her free hand. “Your concerns are reasonable, Mrs. Granger. If I had encountered a patient in this state during my rounds, I would have told her family to prepare for death. I can only assure you that she is asleep, but not in the manner that you understand it.”

She studied the Grangers as she sipped water and nibbled at slices of sfusati. Since arriving, they seemed to have slid from being merely wounded to virtually defeated. Mr. Granger cleared his throat and let his bleary eyes fall upon his daughter. “*Should* we be preparing for her death, then?” he asked, and Mrs. Granger let out a small, strangled sound.

“No,” Covelli said firmly. “Her condition is improving. I cannot say when she will awaken, but I believe it will be soon.”

Mr. Granger asked. “So this thing... does it work like an amplifier of sorts? Perhaps it merges different sorts of brain...” He sighed. “I suppose I should stop trying to equate all of this to the re...”

Covelli waited a few moments for him to finish his thought, but he did not. “Yes? You were saying?” she prompted.

“I was going to say ‘to the real world’,” he admitted, “but this is all very real, isn’t it?”

Covelli forced herself to smile, despite a mounting headache. “I live in two worlds at once, Mr. Granger, so I do understand your confusion. Sometimes it is hard to come to terms, or even to find the words that explain... ehh... how to say it... dissonance?”

“You’re not like the rest of them,” Mrs. Granger said, and then quickly added, “I don’t mean that badly, of course! It’s just that they seem to try so hard to hide, but you... Hermione’s professor said that you practiced medicine, which shocked me.”

“Just like the rest of the world, the nature of the magical world varies from place to place,” Covelli said. “Wizards living in England and most of the old colonial nations tend to be...” She

trailed off, not certain how to explain something that was obvious to four-fifths of the magical world but that might surprise or even offend her patient's parents.

Mr. Granger's brow furrowed. "Tend to be what, exactly? Do we need to add to our concerns?"

"England was the first to enforce secrecy," Covelli explained. "The English were the ones to write the international secrecy statutes and pushed the hardest for them, although most of Europe quickly fell into line. You have to understand a little of the way of things four hundred years ago. This may not be a comfortable discussion."

Mr. Granger appeared interested, and Mrs. Granger voiced no opposition. "Go on... please?" he asked.

"Before the seventeenth century, the people of the larger world were content to burn heretics," Covelli said. "Of course, every country did persecute witches prior to that, but it was uncommon. After the Thirty Years' War, focus shifted from heresy to purity of a sort. They stopped burning each other, and started attempting to burn us. A true witch couldn't have been burned at the stake unless she was unconscious, of course, so nearly all the killing was fruitless. They couldn't burn us, then, but they could burn everything we owned, seize our possessions... strip us of land, titles... and they were much better at that. Separation was as much a matter of economic survival as it was personal survival, you see? Many of the problems in the magical world stem from those days, I believe. It's easy to hate when you live in isolation, and it's easy to blame people who've taken something from you. For those of us from exclusively magical families, it was easy to turn that hate against those who newly joined us – people like your daughter."

Mr. Granger seemed to ponder what Covelli told him, before he nodded in understanding. "The rest looks like simple fanaticism to me," he said. "The magical world isn't so different after all, is it?"

"Not in my experience, no," Covelli admitted.

Mrs. Granger asked abruptly, "Why is England special, then? Why wouldn't it have been the same everywhere?"

"In much of the world, the line between the magic and the mundane is thinner," Covelli returned. "Among traditional peoples, folk magic is an accepted part of life. They simply missed all of these troubles, and to them, Europe still seems obsessed with something unimportant. In America, most of the wizards who moved there were independent sorts, like the people around them."

"It's such a big place," Mrs. Granger noted. "I imagine it's easier to blend."

Covelli nodded. "I lived in America for more than ten years, in New York City and San Francisco, and you're correct. You can hide in plain sight quite easily."

"What about the rest of the world?" Mr. Granger asked.

“The Chinese magical community is well hidden, but that wasn’t the case until fifty years ago or thereabouts,” Covelli went on. “The Australians are more like the Americans than the English.”

“That still doesn’t answer my question –” Mrs. Granger began.

Covelli cut her off. Her headache was growing worse, and she was weary of thinking of English wizards. “The seventeenth century was a particularly complicated time in Britain, because the magical community permeated the noble class,” she lectured. “The magical community was dealing with the English Civil Wars and a major goblin uprising all at once. In England, witch burnings were mostly a thing of the past before the Civil Wars; it was the forfeitures that came later. The landed families in both worlds lost or gained based upon favour, and that changed by the moment. The major English magical families supported Cromwell because the Stuarts had heavily taxed and repressed them, and they paid for it when Charles II was restored. The major Scottish magical families supported the eventual Charles II, and ended up in Cromwell’s path. Everyone knew too much, and the magical community paid dearly. In the aftermath, they all had good reason to demand secrecy; really, it was the only thing they agreed on. Some of the Scots dabbled in the affairs of state for a while longer – at least two of the clans, though you won’t find reference to that in any text – but even they backed away after the Battle of Culloden.”

“I see,” Mrs. Granger said, though to Covelli’s eyes it was apparent that she did not. “Were you raised in England, or are you simply well read?”

“History of Magic was a speciality of mine, long ago, and its connection to the broader world interested me,” Covelli admitted. She hesitated, before adding, “I spent most of my childhood in Wales.”

“I understand that you were in the same House as Hermione when you attended Hogwarts?” Mrs. Granger asked.

“Yes, I lived in Gryffindor House,” Covelli answered quietly.

Mrs. Granger pressed on. “Were you Head Girl, by chance?”

Covelli smiled slightly. “No, I lacked the disposition for it. Professor McGonagall was Head Girl for our year.” She paused for a sip of water, and then added, “Is it important to you that Hermione is appointed Head Girl for her year?”

“It’s always been important to Hermione,” Mrs. Granger answered quickly.

“Suppose that Hermione were to leave this experience with different priorities?” Covelli posed to her. “How would you feel about that?”

Mrs. Granger’s brow beetled. “Why would she not wish to be Head Girl? Doesn’t every girl at boarding school wish for that?”

“Not every girl, no,” Covelli returned evenly.

Mr. Granger squeezed Mrs. Granger's hand. He said, "Perhaps we'll cross that bridge when it comes, eh? We don't know what Hermione will be doing in the fall, let alone next year. Her health and well-being are all that matter now."

"Of... of course," Mrs. Granger said weakly. "She will be all right... won't she?"

Covelli closed her eyes. "I believe so. I should return to her now."

"We're not to touch her, is that right?" Mr. Granger asked.

"I did not tell you this," Covelli murmured.

"Professor McGonagall said –" Mrs. Granger began.

"You're not to... disturb the Dreamweaver," Covelli managed to say. "Her right hand is free."

"We'd like to stay with her for a while," Mr. Granger said.

"Good... very good..." Covelli mumbled. She felt a certain sort of warmth, and knew that Mr. Granger had taken his daughter's hand.

Hermione felt flat, which was a strange feeling considering that she was quite accustomed to feeling round. She tried to move forward, and then backward, but she could only move from side to side.

"Hello?" she called out.

The sconces responded to her voice, and in the dim light she could see that she was in the Trophy Room. Luna, in jungle garb and wearing a pith helmet, was polishing trophies with a dingy rag and a flask of one of Filch's cleaners. "Hm, there's a riddle in this..." she mumbled as she drew closer. "Looks like this one could use a dusting..." Her eyes suddenly brightened. "Hello, Hermione. I wondered where you were off to, but honestly, how can you see through all of that dust?"

Before Hermione could flinch, Luna began to dust her off, but the rag wouldn't quite reach her face. "That's better," Luna said. Then, she turned and called out, "Ron? Harry? She's back."

There were two portraits on the opposite wall that she'd never seen before. Ron wore a Weasley jumper and a smirk. Harry's hair was even wilder than in reality and he had a hungry look to him.

Ron's eyes sparkled, and he said, "I was wondering when you'd come around. All you ever do is sleep and dream!"

Harry bore into her with intense eyes. "Hello, Hermione. I've been waiting for you," he said in an unusually husky voice, and she shivered.

Mr. Filch trundled into the room, followed closely by the dreaded Mrs. Norris. “Keep at your work, Lovegood,” he growled. “Too batty for Ravenclaw, you are.”

“Be a dear and fetch me some tuna, would you?” Mrs. Norris said to Filch. The cat strolled toward Luna, licked her paws, and sat on her haunches. “Isn’t this interesting? Why do you all appear as portraits, I wonder?” she mewed.

“We don’t change,” Ron said.

Harry nodded. “We’re always the same, the three of us.”

Hermione sighed. “The hero, his friend and the bookworm,” she explained.

Luna sat cross-legged on the floor and pulled one of the trophies into her lap. “The doer and the thinker and the one who holds them together – at least that’s what I’ve seen. We all see what we want to see, I suppose.”

“The prince, the princess and the jester,” Ron said glumly, “that’s what people see.”

Harry chuckled. “I though we were the one who looks for trouble, the one who always finds it, and the one who gets us out of it.”

“But we do change,” Hermione insisted. “Look at this summer; I mean, everything has changed.”

“Great, just bloody great,” Ron fumed. “Now, I’m the crazy one, Harry’s the rich one, and you’re –” He stopped and his eyes lit. “Wait a minute. You’re the crazy one... so what does that make me?”

“Remain focused on the truth, Hermione,” Mrs. Norris warned. “The voice may sound like your Ron, but it’s only a shadow of you. Do you believe that you’re crazy?”

“Hermione’s no crazier than I am,” Harry said. “Ron’s the id, I’m the ego and Hermione is the superego.”

Mrs. Norris made a strange gasping sound that Hermione decided was laughter. “Wherever did you read about that?”

“She dreams about a fellow named Freud sometimes,” Ron accused.

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Not Freud! It’s schadenfreude, and everyone feels that now and again. Tell me you don’t feel good when the Slytherins get their just desserts, Ron. I know you feel like Harry has everything and you don’t, and sometimes you think it’s fair that he suffers in return – don’t you?”

Luna’s mouth formed an ‘O’. “Ronald, is this true? I thought Harry was your friend. I haven’t had many friends, but I didn’t think they behaved this way.”

“That’s not fair,” Ron said sullenly. “I’m tired of people expecting us to be the same all the time. I’m not a portrait.”

“I’m changing,” Harry insisted. “You’ll see.”

“Look at what I did for Ginny,” Ron went on. “I didn’t do that because I wanted something for it, or because I owed her. I did it because it was Ginny, and somebody had to save her. Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his sister... or his friends.”

“What did you say?” Hermione shouted.

“Greater love hath no woman than this, that she lay down her life for her friend,” Harry accused. “I thought you were going to lay down, Hermione.”

“That phrase,” Mrs. Norris mused, “it’s the connection to the book you were holding, isn’t it?”

“It’s from the Gospel according to John,” Harry explained. “It was a gift from my master.”

Hermione blinked back tears. “I was going to lay down, Harry, I swear it!”

“Let’s change,” Harry said. “I’m ready to change.”

Ron beamed. “It’s about time, mate!” Just as Dr. Covelli’s hand had reached out for Hermione before, Ron began to come out of the portrait – first a canvas leg extended, then a hand and arm, and then the rest. He shook furiously, and the canvas shed from him in bits. “There! Right as rain! Come out, Hermione!”

“I don’t know if I can change,” she whispered.

“Everyone can change,” Mrs. Norris offered.

“Into what?” Hermione asked. “Don’t I need to know that first?”

“Life is an uncertainty,” Mrs. Norris said.

Hermione moved forward and the room sparkled and she crackled, and then she was standing next to Ron and he was hugging her. “Good for you,” he whispered into her ear.

Luna dropped the trophy in her lap, and it struck the floor with a clang. Thick black smoke poured out of it that quickly took the form of Tom Riddle. “What’s keeping you, Harry?” Riddle asked. “It’s time to change.”

Ron quickly moved in front of Hermione. “Stay away from her!” he growled.

Riddle laughed. His skin turned to pale grey and his face reshaped itself into something inhuman. “Fear this, if you wish,” he sneered, “but even if you have the courage to name it, that won’t save you. Fearing me won’t be enough.” He reached a skeletal hand toward Harry’s portrait. “Come

out, come out, whatever you are...”

Harry stared at Hermione with the same hungry look as before. She found herself drawn toward his dark eyes, but Ron held her back. Mrs. Norris hissed. Harry moved forward, but it wasn't his arm that came forth from the portrait. A huge canvas snake kept coming and coming and coming, until it formed a huge coil at the centre of the room. With one powerful quiver, it shed the canvas, and advanced on Hermione with unnatural speed. She couldn't move, couldn't pull herself away from the snake's brilliant green eyes. She just stood there, as its mouth opened wider and wider. Ron pulled at her arm desperately but she was rooted in place.

Mrs. Norris leapt at the head of the snake and tore at his eyes with talon-like claws. “Return to the Common Room, now!” she yowled. Luna jostled Hermione hard, and together with Ron they ran into the corridor and up the endless stairs. Ron insisted on standing guard outside the portrait hole. Hermione followed Luna inside.

There were no books, no bric-a-brac, no tables; there was no squashy couch, and there was no fire. There was nothing at all in the Common Room excepting Luna, and Hermione sank to the floor. Mrs. Norris scampered into the room. Like an Animagus transformation, the cat resolved itself into Dr. Covelli.

“Everything's gone!” Hermione shouted. “I tried to change, and everything's gone!”

Luna waved her hands and they were filled by an upside-down copy of the Quibbler. “Not everything,” she said.

“All of your corridors lead to the same place,” Dr. Covelli said. “We need to go there soon.”

“I just want it to be over,” Hermione wept. “I'm so tired.”

Luna tossed the paper aside and it disappeared. She extended her hand, and helped Hermione to stand. “Please don't push us away,” she said. “You need to come home.”

Hermione looked around. “Us? What ‘us’? There's only you,” she sniffed.

Luna grinned strangely. “You can't see the rest of us because you don't want to see,” she said.

“You do need to come home soon,” Dr. Covelli agreed. “It's been too long.”

“I'm afraid,” Hermione whispered.

“When you know your fears – when you can name them and know if they're real or imagined – then it will be time to come home,” Dr. Covelli said. “I want you to relax, close your eyes, and think of your couch and your books. They belong to you.” After a pause, she told Hermione, “Open your eyes.” The shelves were full and the couch sat before a roaring fire.

“I have to go,” Luna said. “Please come home. We'll look after you, I promise.”

“Why do you have to go?” Hermione asked. “Stay, please?”

“We’re so close to the Snorkacks, though.” Luna took a deep breath. “I can smell them. You’ll tell me what you want me to know.” She turned to Dr. Covelli. “Please send her home.”

There was a loud commotion outside the portrait hole, and Ron shouted, “Bloody hell! Someone fetch Hagrid!”

“My ride is here,” Luna said, and she drifted out of the room.

Dr. Covelli led Hermione to the couch, and sat beside her. “I want you to relax and close your eyes again. This time, think of a pensieve. Can you see the shape of the bowl, and the colour? Good. Open your eyes.” There was a pensieve on the floor between their feet and the fire.

“I have to do this, don’t I?” Hermione asked.

Dr. Covelli nodded. “It’s time to talk about Voldemort,” she said.

Hermione sighed. “And Harry,” she added. “There’s no talking about one without the other.”

August 15

McGonagall leaned forward with her elbows on the bed, hands clasped together almost as though she were praying. “This is interminable, Albus,” she muttered.

“Neither has cried out for thirty minutes or more,” Dumbledore responded. “That is a positive sign.”

“It could as easily mean that they are both lost,” McGonagall pointed out.

“They are not lost,” Dumbledore said firmly.

McGonagall’s reserve had chipped away over the hours. Mr. Granger’s series of tongue-lashings directed at both she and Dumbledore had shaken her, and she had a headache, and she wanted nothing so much as a pleasant cup of tea and a book, and to see Hermione Granger stir, and to know that Covelli hadn’t managed to kill herself with yet another audacious and foolish risk. She fixed Dumbledore with her steeliest and most fearsome glare. “Do you know they are not lost, or are you simply ordering that it be so?” she demanded to know.

“At the moment, there is no difference between conviction and reality,” Dumbledore said. He had the unmitigated gall to smile slightly, and McGonagall felt a sudden impulse to wrap her hands around his neck.

“Well... well ... that’s just brilliant, isn’t it?” she snipped. “This way, when they awaken, you can claim omnipotence. If they do not, then you can shrug and claim fate!”

Dumbledore sagged; in an instant, his face changed. McGonagall thought that he looked impossibly old, as old as Hogwarts. “I have lost your trust, as well?” he asked.

McGonagall pursed her lips, and tried to answer without overthinking. “Albus... I have known you far too long to distrust you, exactly... but over the last year...” She sighed. “I supported you when you said that circumstances were too unsettled to take a stand, even as Umbridge *deposed* you and all but imprisoned the rest of us. I supported you when you chose to distance yourself from Mr. Potter, because you assured us that it was necessary. I supported you when you brought Order recruitment to a halt, even against my better judgment. I was still there, Albus, until they attacked Hagrid and... I was there to reap what you sowed. I admit that I was blinded to some of it; had I known that Umbridge was using a blood quill to punish students, I would have —”

Dumbledore’s eyes came to life. He released Hermione’s free hand and his hands shook. His voice was quiet and level and terribly dangerous. “Please repeat your last statement, Minerva.”

McGonagall gasped, and nearly let go of Covelli’s hand. “I... I...”

“NOW!” Dumbledore ordered.

McGonagall proceeded in the way of a first-year student hauled before the Headmaster. “Miss Granger told me that Harry Potter and other students were made to write lines using a blood quill, just before her last... episode.” She stopped for a moment, recovered some of herself, and went on, “I know that she wasn’t in her right mind, but she described the results from a blood quill in an accurate manner.”

Dumbledore’s eyes squeezed shut, and he took up Hermione’s hand again. After a lengthy silence, he said, “I failed them. I failed all of them.”

“I... of course, you did what you thought was right,” McGonagall offered nervously.

“That is not enough. In isolation, that is never enough,” Dumbledore said flatly, his eyes still closed.

“Albus, I’m not sure that I completely understand...” McGonagall began.

Dumbledore paid her no notice. His eyes were brimmed with moisture, as they opened and took in Hermione and Covelli. “A blood quill... by the grace of Merlin...” He wiped at his eyes, and his voice hardened. “I have wronged the both of you. I have wronged poor Harry, even as I have tried to protect him. Now you both lie here because of what I have wrought, and Harry has run from us —”

McGonagall instantly wanted to shout but forced herself to stay quiet. Dumbledore reached out and brushed the hair from Hermione’s eyes, and McGonagall felt a catch in her throat at the gesture. He looked every inch a grandfather, she thought.

“I am sorry, as sorry as a person can be,” Dumbledore said softly. “I have failed you. I shall not

fail you again.” He squeezed Hermione’s hand tightly for a moment. McGonagall thought she saw a faint white light around his hand for a moment. She bit her lip, and wondered if it was possible that she’d seen him cast an oath.

She cleared her throat, and quickly asked the question she had held back. “Where has Harry gone?”

Dumbledore looked up blankly for a moment, but quickly returned to a demeanour more befitting of a Headmaster. “He has journeyed to the ancestral lands of Clan Black. It seems to suit him well, and for that I am glad. He has even struck up relations with a young lady from the nearby village.”

McGonagall’s lips thinned. “What sort of relations?”

“Nothing of the sort that would threaten the young lady’s virtue,” Dumbledore promised with a faint smirk, “or Mr. Potter’s virtue, for that matter –”

A low, faint groan immediately captured their attention. Covelli groaned again, then winced, and then gasped. The chain that bound Hermione’s hand to hers fell away and coiled atop the bed sheet. She brought her knees toward her chest, then rolled to one side, and coughed until her face turned violently red.

“Lucia!” McGonagall cried out. She sat on the edge of the bed and patted at Covelli’s back. There was a flutter behind her; she turned her head, to see the Dreamweaver roll itself into a thick cylinder that came to rest on Hermione’s stomach. Dumbledore appeared to be checking Hermione’s pulse in Muggle fashion.

“Oh, my God,” Covelli groaned over and over. McGonagall tried to right her, but quickly gave up the effort and used her wand instead.

McGonagall waved her hand before blank eyes. “Can you hear me?” Covelli’s eyes abruptly slammed shut and she grimaced.

Dumbledore announced, “Miss Granger is asleep, and very soundly so.”

Covelli took a deep, slow breath, shuddering all the while. “He’s horrible... you can’t imagine... he’s horrible...”

Dumbledore slowly walked around the bed. “I take it that you’ve now seen Voldemort?”

“*Seen him?* ” Covelli laughed hysterically. “Seen him, felt him, been torn to ribbons by him!”

“You have reviewed Miss Granger’s memories?” Dumbledore asked, concerned.

Covelli shook her head without opening her eyes in the slightest. “I lived them,” she blurted out. “I had her see a pensieve in her mind. Dreadful idea... stupid...” She muttered a string of Italian, and then sighed. “It was effective, and that was blind luck.”

McGonagall summoned a quilt from across the room, and efficiently wrapped it around Covelli. “What do you mean when you say ‘it was effective’?” she asked.

Covelli pulled the quilt tighter. “Thank you,” she said dutifully, and then slowly explained, “Hermione needed to accomplish two things in order to safely leave the Dreamweaver: she needed to distinguish between dreams and reality, and she needed to see a distinction between truth and falsehood. Without these things, she was trapped by her fears. That doesn’t mean she accepts the distinctions, of course, but she needed to see them.” She inclined her head toward the sleeping girl. “It was effective, and now the real work begins.”

McGonagall’s eyebrows shot up. “The real work? What have we been watching?”

Covelli shook her head. She answered McGonagall as though talking to a seventh-year, which did not sit well. “She cannot remain here forever. She will have to function in the world, which can be difficult at times for all of us. Hermione after this experience will not be the same as Hermione prior; she cannot be the same. She can either shape the differences, or be shaped by the flow of daily life. I will give her the means to exert control.”

“You know how to do this?” Dumbledore asked.

“That is my work; that is what I have trained to do,” Covelli snapped.

Dumbledore told her, “I am impressed.” Covelli’s mouth dropped open as though to speak, then quickly closed just as he added, “How much time will this require?”

“Water?” Covelli asked. McGonagall quickly fetched a small cup, and Covelli took several small sips. She cleared her throat before she responded, “Years, perhaps. Your Voldemort, he is a monster – a horrible monster. He found every fear, every desire, everything. To break the ties... it was like cutting at a cancer that has spread. The intellect, it is there. The spirit, it has to come back.”

“It is my fervent hope that Miss Granger will be with us in the fall,” Dumbledore said, in a manner that McGonagall did not take as a request.

“That is rather unlikely,” Covelli immediately returned.

Dumbledore responded with equal speed. “I shall procure your exclusive services, if required. Suitable housing will be provided in Hogsmeade or within the castle, as you may prefer.”

Covelli blinked at Dumbledore, and then began to laugh nervously. “Do you... have you any idea how much this would cost? I rather doubt that your governing board –”

“I shall personally procure your services, Doctor Covelli,” Dumbledore clarified.

“I have teaching obligations –” Covelli advanced.

“Break them,” Dumbledore demanded.

Covelli's right eyebrow climbed. "Why?"

Dumbledore removed his spectacles and seemed to study them intently. "I need you," he said, "which most likely displeases you, but there you are. I have failed Miss Granger. I have failed others in the past, and I choose not to do so again. If she does not return to us, she may not fulfil her considerable potential."

"I see," Covelli said flatly, her arms now crossed.

"I also fear that Mr. Potter might be quite lost in her absence," Dumbledore added.

Covelli frowned. "Your Mr. Potter is not my responsibility."

Dumbledore returned his spectacles to their place. "I understand that Mr. Potter is not your patient, but –"

"Hermione has made some interesting observations," Covelli cut him off. "I believe that they are subconscious or even preconscious. In either case, she is bound by them and resisting their implications." She stared at Dumbledore pointedly. "At the moment, I have not decided whether Mr. Potter relates to the problem or the solution." She shuddered beneath the quilt, and added, "As for the rest, I prefer to put it aside for now."

Harry Potter and the Years of Rebellion

Intermezzo II: Found

Intermezzo II

FOUND

August 19

Covelli had quickly become familiar with the real Hermione Granger's mannerisms. Some were different than those of the dream-state Hermione – more protective, even forced. Some were the same – the girl worried her lip while working through a problem, for example. A few were eerily reminiscent of Minnie – a certain look of disapproval, among other things. When Harry Potter's name had been mentioned, she had at first been prone to hug her knees and worry her lip. In the last two sessions, it was clear that Hermione had wanted to avoid any mention of the Potter boy; when she slipped, the girl still worried her lip but then turned her attention to the view of the azure sea and the whitewashed walls of Positano and the beach far below.

They had met two or three times each day, depending upon energy and interest. Hermione had awakened from the Dreamweaver with a voracious appetite for food and for information. Covelli had quickly determined that Hermione read somewhat faster than she did, and was duly impressed; however, the girl tended to accept the written word on its face. This was more a product of inexperience than simple naïveté, in Covelli's opinion, but bore watching given the girl's very specific and very peculiar book requests since waking. Covelli had fulfilled the requests through personal contacts and had decided to keep that information from Dumbledore and even Minnie for now; she was more interested in observing the girl's thought processes than in dealing with the pontification of her teachers.

The Grangers reminded Covelli of paired university faculty whom she had known over the years, and Hermione was in some respects the typical product of those sorts of unions. She was an almost painful perfectionist and an introvert by inclination; thus she had built her persona around acts of overcompensation for insecurities and self-identified flaws. Four days of taking meals with the Granger family had made it clear that Mrs. Granger fuelled this behaviour and had likely instilled it. Hermione was rather like her father in interests and temperament, but was compelled both internally and externally to be like her mother. She had a very strong need for self-control, and a modest desire to control broader circumstances that manifested itself in a tendency to adopt causes.

The net effect of all this was mildly self-destructive, but no more so than was the case for many gifted young people. Her parents not only were inclined to dote upon her, but also clearly loved her. They had accepted Hermione's unique qualities to a remarkable degree. She reported few friends, but those friends were close, or at least had been close prior to recent events. On the whole, Covelli was satisfied that Hermione would not have found her way into care if not for that *vecchio schifoso*, that horrible Voldemort. Now, the girl had to reckon with the old demons as well as the new.

Covelli leaned quietly against a pillar and watched Hermione, who sat at the glass-topped table on the loggia. There was a bag filled with books set atop the table; one was opened and stuffed with pages of notes. Beside the bag was a mostly-blank piece of paper that Covelli knew well. Hermione absently twirled a biro in her fingers, and her front teeth had a firm grasp on her lower lip. Covelli waited for quite a while, to see if the biro would touch the paper.

When it did not, she walked into view and asked, "How are you coming with the assignment?"

Hermione looked out over the balustrade and toward the sea. "Oh... the assignment... I... yes..." She manoeuvred the single piece of paper beneath the bag with a minimum of fuss. "It's... interesting, this one."

Covelli strolled to the balustrade, and leant atop the ornately carved stone. "It is interesting in what way?"

Hermione let out a low growl, pushed back roughly in her chair, sprang to her feet, and began to pace. "You asked a deceptive question. I've been overthinking it, exactly as you pointed out."

Covelli tried not to grin at the girl's faintly hopeful sidelong glance. "There is no need to curry favour with me," she said lightly. "Perhaps you have not been overthinking the question? Perhaps the question lies at the junction of so many paths that it is difficult for you to offer a coherent answer?" Hermione said nothing, but her pacing became forceful. Covelli turned her own attention to the deep blue waters that shone in the late morning sun, and waited.

"It's a false premise, the whole thing!" Hermione snapped. "What do you mean, 'when I am perfect?' That's impossible to achieve... hence the falseness of it all?"

"The question simply asks you to state the expected result of personal perfection: 'when I am perfect, then' fill in the blank," Covelli said impassively.

Hermione angrily toppled one of the chairs. "*Nothing*, because it can't be done! *There!* Are you satisfied now? *It can't be done!*"

Covelli watched the girl carefully, but remained still and projected calm. "True, but you can control your response to that realization," she assured her. "Breathe deeply... remember that you guide the magic; the magic does not guide you..."

Hermione took a single deep breath, and then moved quickly to right the chair. "It can't be done,"

she said, trembling. “*I can’t do it* , I... I can’t do this anymore... what am I going to do?”

“Let’s sit,” Covelli suggested. “We can watch the water, if you like. Perhaps I can offer answers to the question, and you can decide for yourself if they are true.” Hermione slumped into the chair she had righted without a word.

“If I am perfect, then I will be successful,” Covelli offered. “If I am perfect, then I will be respected... I will change the world for the better... I will make others around me better, because I can keep them from making mistakes... people will like me better... good will triumph over evil... I will save people...” Hermione hugged her knees, which she hadn’t done for two days, and Covelli took a mental note.

“It can’t be done,” Hermione said dejectedly. “I can’t be perfect, so I suppose I can’t manage any of those things, not completely.”

“Remember... garbage in, garbage out,” Covelli chided her.

Hermione groaned, but a sigh and an upward flicker of the corner of her mouth soon subsumed her scowl. “Fine, then. I suppose the correct answer is that I can’t manage any of those things completely, on my own, any more than I can be perfect.”

“You’ve been hearing me,” Covelli noted.

“It’s an obvious extension of your point of view, and it *does* make sense,” Hermione admitted. “I can accept it, but at the same time part of me insists that it’s completely untrue.”

Covelli turned the question around. “What is most bothersome about the idea that you cannot be perfect? Why does your mind lead you to insist upon something that you yourself acknowledge is an impossibility?”

“Because I *have* to be perfect; I have to be the best,” Hermione returned. “Even if I didn’t have to do it for Harry, I’d have to do it because of what I am.” Her voice took on an acid edge. “I’ll be first and best because a Muggle-born *has* to be, and I’m the one to do it; *then* we’ll see how those smug, loathsome –” She stopped abruptly, and her cheeks coloured.

Covelli reassured the girl, “You needn’t concern yourself with offending me, and you wouldn’t be the only first-generation witch to overachieve.” She paused intentionally, and then added, “Is this something you feel on behalf of all of your peers, or is this something more personal?”

Hermione brightened. “First-generation... I like that. It’s more hopeful... more accurate, as well.” Covelli kept observing her, until at last she sighed and answered, “I suppose it’s personal.”

“Why do you think this is the case?” Covelli asked.

Hermione moved immediately to answer, but then seemed to weigh her words before speaking; when she answered, her tone – her whole posture – was strident. “It’s because I won’t be explained away with a word. Magic is about power and knowledge, not about lineage. Many of the weakest

wizards and the worst students at Hogwarts are purebloods. They act like magic is something to be handed them.”

“You aren’t fond of entitlement,” observed Covelli.

Hermione crossed her arms. “When people work hard and do their best, they should advance. Laziness and sloth shouldn’t be rewarded.”

“Yet people advance based upon whom they know and upon the favours they are owed, in both the greater world and in the magical world,” Covelli pointed out.

“The wizarding world shouldn’t be like that,” Hermione snapped.

Covelli quickly asked, “Why should it be different?”

“Look at the power that witches and wizards wield! They’re obligated to be different!” Hermione insisted.

“Yet a witch is governed by the same passions and temptations and falsehoods as any woman,” Covelli returned.

“They should be better; they should rise above that...” Hermione protested, but she sounded as though her heart wasn’t completely in the protest.

She says ‘they’, not ‘we’, Covelli noted to herself, and wondered if Hermione had ever felt as though she belonged anywhere at all. She held the thought inside, and simply said, “Some will, and some will not.”

“Harry will,” Hermione said, “he’s always been better than that, he’s always been... he was just *good*, you know?”

“And now he is somehow not good?” Covelli immediately asked.

Hermione fidgeted in her chair. “I... I’m not sure now... you saw it... what happened there...”

“You know very well what I saw of the events at your home,” said Covelli. “I ask you again, is Harry Potter no longer good?”

“I can’t be certain. I’m not certain of anything,” Hermione said with an air of desperation.

Covelli moved the conversation slightly to one side. “Does this flow from Voldemort’s accusations?”

Hermione’s eyes widened, but she kept them focused firmly on the balustrade. She worked through her response as though negotiating a cursed tomb; the effort showed clearly on her face. “Not so much what was said, no... it’s more something that I felt... which is not exactly comfortable to... I just... I need to consult more texts... I hope you’re able to secure Abramova’s

scroll, in particular.” She took a long breath, and retreated behind a cool, composed façade. “I prefer to rule out as many possibilities as I can before saying any more.”

Covelli watched Hermione betray the façade by wringing her hands, and then changed the subject. “Have you found the Repeating Journal useful?”

Hermione noticeably relaxed. “Yes, I have. It’s been nice to communicate with someone else, someone away from here... not that I don’t appreciate what you’re doing for me. I know that you’ve not allowed magic in your home, and –”

Covelli laughed. “I’m afraid that particular ship sailed two weeks ago, Hermione... and I prefer that you cease your apologies. It has all been necessary. You are satisfied with your choice of correspondent, then?”

Hermione smiled and shook her head. “Yes... and I still don’t know why I chose Luna. She’s the strangest girl sometimes, but she’s so... I don’t know... accepting? I feel as though I could tell her anything without being judged for it.”

“That is a rare commodity in a friend,” Covelli observed. “Treasure it... there is something else?”

Hermione looked shocked for a moment. “I want you to teach me how you do that.”

Covelli was puzzled. “I’m sorry?”

“You read me so easily,” Hermione said. “I want to learn how to do that.”

“That which you see is the product of seventy years of intent people-watching, and decades of schooling and experience,” Covelli explained. “It will come for you in time, to at least some degree. Now... there is something else?”

Hermione nodded uncertainly. “Luna cast a shadow, in the dreams. Did you see it?”

Covelli thought for a moment, but found no value in stating anything other than the truth. “I did, and I have no explanation to offer.”

Hermione’s voice fell to a whisper. “I think she was actually there. I suppose that sounds mad, but some of the things she’s written in the journal...”

“She was actually present in your dream, before you were attacked – isn’t that right?” Covelli pointed out.

Hermione nodded, and then seemed to disappear into her own thoughts. Covelli watched and waited, until the girl’s head suddenly lifted, her eyes wide. “Could *Luna* have been the reason the dream was shared?”

Covelli pursed her lips. “She wasn’t present throughout, so that seems unlikely on first thought. Still, it is interesting how quickly she understood that she had been present in a mutual dream.

Perhaps you should ask her opinion?”

“I’ll think about it...” Hermione said, before she once again pulled inside herself.

Covelli decided to draw her out once more, before leaving her to her thoughts. “Hermione? Have you given any more thought to my recommendation about the pensieve?”

The girl began to wring her hands again. “I don’t know... I don’t know if I can do it... how many times can a person re-live something like that?”

“Remember that what you experienced in the dream-state is very different than the normal experience of reviewing a memory in a pensieve,” Covelli reminded her. “I still believe that you would benefit from the detachment that a pensieve would provide –”

“I’ll think about it , all right?” Hermione snapped. She sighed deeply, and repeated, “I’ll think about it.”

“I shan’t bring it up again, then,” Covelli promised.

“I’ve decided, on the other thing,” Hermione blurted out.

Covelli was thrown off for a moment. “To which other thing do you refer?”

“The Dreamweaver... I’d like to make one... if you haven’t changed your mind,” Hermione mumbled nervously.

Covelli reached out, and took up Hermione’s hands. *Thank goodness* , she thought. “I haven’t changed my mind. I believe you’ll benefit from both the process and the product.”

Hermione’s expression was at once frightened and expectant. “Is there any advance reading? I imagine that there’s little more than the survey materials I’ve already seen, but I...”

Covelli shook her head. “The crafting of a Dreamweaver has been kept an oral tradition, for both practical and emotional reasons. If you wish to read today, do it for your own pleasure. We’ll talk more of this after the evening meal, if you’re so inclined.”

August 23

“Dumbledore’s mad! He’s gone completely ‘round the twist!” Hermione shouted.

“Hermione, shouting changes nothing,” Covelli counselled. “Are you certain that this is not one of your friend’s detours, as you say?”

“There’s nothing at all fanciful about it,” Hermione insisted. “See for yourself.”

Covelli demurred. “The Repeating Journals are charmed so that none besides the correspondents may read the pages.”

Hermione’s agitated hands immediately fell to her sides. “You were serious about that? Honestly, I assumed that you were following the conversation.”

Covelli frowned. “I told you that your communication through the journals would be entirely your own. I would not have said so, had I meant otherwise.”

“Is there a way to counter the charm?” Hermione asked urgently.

Covelli nodded. “If you wish for me to read the pages, touch the inside of the front cover with your wand and say ‘I wish to share’; the instructions will appear.”

Hermione quickly took in the complex charm, and made it possible for Covelli to read on her own. The girl quickly turned the pages, and jabbed at a particular point. “Start here,” she said.

Luna, I’m having a difficult time following you. Harry took you from the tower, and you saw Ron seeking solace? What does that mean?

Ron is as wounded as the rest of us. He was with Harry’s companion, on the beach, and –

Harry’s companion?

I failed to mention the girl from the village who Harry has taken up with?

Harry took up with a girl?

Yes, with Professor Lupin’s daughter.

I’m sorry, Professor Lupin has a daughter? This daughter lives near the Black Tower and has taken up with Harry? When did this happen?

The birth took place in 1979, so I presume this happened sometime in the latter part of 1978. I don’t think that she lives in St. Ebb except for the holidays.

Luna!! When did she take up with Harry? When did you find out that Professor Lupin has a daughter?

Harry took up with her sometime before we arrived. I found out that she was the Professor’s daughter on the 20 th . I believe Professor Lupin found out on the 19 th , but I’m not certain about that.

Never mind that for now. I don't understand what this has to do with Dumbledore abandoning Harry.

I'm sorry. I thought that you wished me to recount the entire story.

Succinctly, please? There's no need for you to begin with the formation of the universe.

There's no need for you to be insulting.

I'm sorry. I'm just terribly worried.

Very well. I promise that I will omit the formation of the universe from my explanation.

Luna!! I'm worried about Harry.

I thought I understood you to say that you are frightened of Harry, or something to that effect. You are worried, as well?

I said that I was frightened of him? That's not exactly the case. It's much more complicated than that. I promise that I'll explain it to you later. Now please, explain to me how this relates to Dumbledore abandoning Harry?

Professor Lupin warned off Harry, as I understand it. He did not want his daughter endangered. This struck me as rather protective for a man who just acquired a daughter, but I suppose that daddies are prone to be protective. Harry didn't take to this very well. He has a certain carnal attraction to this woman.

Carnal? Explain immediately, please!

Hermione, who was peering over Covelli's shoulder, reached around and turned two more pages. "There ... from... from there," she spluttered.

Covelli stared resolutely at the pages, to keep from laughing. Regrettably, Hermione saw her mouth twitching. "I do care about Harry, you know," the girl insisted. "I've seen what happens when he gets crossed up with the wrong sort of girl, and it's a painful sight!"

For her part, Covelli simply nodded and pressed on with the text. Hermione was truly agitated, and she needed to understand why.

You're telling me that Harry threw everyone out?

Yes. Harry nearly destroyed the great hall of the tower, and then demanded that everyone leave. When Professor Lupin refused, there was a terrible row. Harry said something to Miss Tonks, and she struck him very hard in the face. I didn't see any of this, but Daddy told me of it later. I did see blood coming from Harry's mouth, before we left. Headmaster Dumbledore came after that, and

ordered everyone to leave.

Then it was Dumbledore who forced everyone away?

Yes.

Everyone?

The Headmaster ordered everyone to leave. I already wrote that. I shall strive to make my handwriting more legible.

You mean that Dumbledore sent away the people guarding Harry?

Harry's minders also left. They were a part of everyone, after all. Daddy was not inclined to leave, but we did have appointments to keep in the north country.

But what about the Death Eaters? What about Voldemort?

I do not know what to say. It appeared that the Headmaster was unconcerned about this. Daddy insists that the various magical creatures of the region will protect Harry, should it prove necessary.

Harry's never been on his own. How is he supposed to get along?

Harry is resourceful. He will manage, I expect.

I suppose you're right. I'm sure it won't be for long. Besides, I can't imagine Dumbledore simply left Harry there. He must have some sort of protection in place.

I do not believe that is the case. The Headmaster simply left. Harry did not seem inclined to welcome him back.

But that's completely mad!

It's not completely mad. It does seem rather barmy on the Headmaster's part, doesn't it?

Everyone just fell into line with Dumbledore, then? Everyone left?

I do not think that most people are inclined to question the Headmaster. You seem to be so inclined.

I've found the last month rather eye-opening.

I see. You have discovered that the Headmaster is flawed. This seems to be a very well kept secret in wizarding circles. Perhaps Daddy should run a story, an expose of some kind?

Oh, that's rich. I'm sure Dumbledore would be thrilled.

Really? Do you think so?

No, not really.

Ah. Never mind, then.

Hermione pointed accusingly at the book. “See? He’s gone mad! Absolutely barking!”

Covelli shook her head, then read it again, and then slowly set down the journal. “It’s surely difficult to understand, I’ll grant you. Still, you’re responding to a single point of view, one that even you have described as erratic.” She gestured to one of the two chairs adjacent to the desk. “You’ve been obsessing since you awoke from the Dreamweaver, Hermione, and I do not lightly employ the term. I have seen some of your notes, left open in the library... the texts you are requesting, the subjects you are exploring... I have concerns.”

Hermione sat down heavily. “I know that I’ve been... tightly focussed. It’s just that I can’t get it out of my head, you know? You just don’t understand, Dr. Covelli... Harry can’t be left alone like that... he *can’t* ... he needs someone to help him... it’s a terrible mistake...” She clenched and unclenched her fists. “How could Dumbledore do this? *Doesn’t he see it?* Can’t he see...?”

“I am concerned about *you*, Hermione. I am only concerned about Harry Potter by extension.” Covelli took in a deep breath, held it for a moment, and then forced herself to ask, “What is it that Dumbledore can’t see?” She waited for an answer while Hermione fidgeted and worried her lip.

Hermione blurted out, “They feel the same,” and then hugged her knees to her chest.

Covelli felt a phantom chill. “They feel the same?” She gripped the edge of her desk tightly, and her mind began to spin against her will. With four words, everything changed. *No, I don’t want to understand this*, she thought, and then the thought swirled into the abyss. She couldn’t help herself; she began to put it all together.

Potter had felt right to Hermione, in the shared dream, but Sirius Black had been Voldemort in disguise. So many things were off about him – Hermione had even pointed them out upon second viewing – but she had missed them at the time, because Sirius Black had felt so familiar.

At the Grangers’ house, Voldemort said that he understood Potter’s attraction to her, even as it reviled him. She had accepted what Voldemort had told her as the truth, almost as though part of her instinctively trusted him.

Hermione’s own mind had tried to solve the problem, in the Dreamweaver. Tom Riddle seemed terribly familiar to her, almost comforting at first; when she wanted to run, her feet sunk into the stone. Later, Riddle had turned Harry into a serpent; she’d been rooted in place and couldn’t run away...

“Voldemort and Harry Potter... they *feel* the same in your mind... but how...?” For a moment, the

safe confines of her villa and the damp desolation of 1945 were as one. The panic rose inside her, and something else with it – *I should have sent the girl away, the moment I understood why she was sent here*, she shouted inside. All of it had to be buried deep within for now; there was quite enough fear and panic emanating from her patient. “Tell me how they feel the same,” she demanded. “Spare no details.”

She knew instantly that her voice had gone as cold as ice; Hermione stared at her with wide fretful eyes and raised eyebrows. Covelli saw in her mind’s eye a wickedly funny boy with curly dark hair who she should have killed when she’d had the opportunity, who Dumbledore could easily have killed and spared the magical world thirty years of grief. Dumbledore could have killed him and saved her brother and her friends, the last casualties of an old war who, as it turned out, were also the first casualties of a war to come. She silently cursed herself for accidentally giving the poor confused girl before her a small taste of what Lucia Greengrass had become, fifty-one summers past. She knew that she would have to summon Dumbledore now, and she knew that either old wounds would be healed or old regrets would be multiplied beyond measure, or perhaps both.

Hermione began by recounting largely the same observations that Covelli had herself pulled together. She carefully described some of her feelings as Voldemort had alternately tempted and tortured her, holding her inside his mind and forcing himself inside hers for a few seconds that to her had lasted for the lion’s share of an hour.

Covelli silently took it all in, and tried to make sense of what she was told. It was clear that Hermione was holding something back, something that in some way was less acceptable than the unexpected similarity between her close friend and the most feared dark wizard in a century. “How does this relate to your reading choices?” she asked.

Hermione stiffened. “I’m trying to understand *why*,” she answered, which wasn’t really an answer at all; it only confirmed what Covelli had easily surmised.

“Some of the information you sought; things I have not been able to obtain... Hermione, these things are most likely reserved to the grimoires of the darkest of families,” Covelli said. “Do you believe that Voldemort has cast a spell of some sort on Harry Potter – a spell involving possession, perhaps?”

“They have a connection that doesn’t depend on a spell,” Hermione returned. “The curse scar on Harry’s forehead is proof of that. I need to know *why* they’re connected. Voldemort was changing himself somehow, before he killed Harry’s parents. The Killing Curse cast on Harry backfired; everyone knows that, but it shouldn’t have happened. It should have killed Harry, but it didn’t. Harry received some kind of protection from his mother, but...” She worried her lip and rocked back and forth. “That shouldn’t have been enough, right? It’s niggled at me for the longest time, but now... I don’t know... there must have been so many threads of complex magic at work, all at once...” She looked up, and nervousness and fear streamed out of her eyes. “It shouldn’t have happened. I... I *need* to know why Harry’s still alive.”

Covelli walked to the door of her office, opened it and leaned into the corridor. “Gina!” she

shouted, followed by a torrent of Italian. She received a guttural reply. McGonagall strode into the office two minutes later. She was drawn and pale.

“Hermione, it’s good to see you looking yourself again,” she said briskly. “I was just reviewing some correspondence. What’s this all about?”

“Dumbledore left Harry alone, *completely alone!* It’s... it’s *outrageous!*” Hermione fumed before Covelli could manage a single word.

McGonagall’s expression barely changed, but Covelli saw the flicker in her eyes. It was clear that her words were carefully chosen. “I am aware of the situation. Headmaster Dumbledore has conveyed his rationale to myself and selected others. Dr. Covelli, might I speak to you in the corridor for a moment?”

Hermione’s hands shot to her hips. “Professor, I do not appreciate being treated like a fool or an invalid,” she said in a way that Covelli found surprisingly commanding for the girl’s age and station.

“Miss Granger!” McGonagall snapped.

Covelli held up a hand. “Hermione, would you please allow me to speak with your professor? There are things which must be said that are... personal in nature.”

Hermione lowered her hands slightly. “I understand,” she said flatly.

Covelli ushered McGonagall into the corridor. She closed the door to the office firmly. “Minnie...”

McGonagall had already cast a silent space around them. “Don’t ‘Minnie’ me!” she hissed. “I do not appreciate the level of disrespect you seem to be cultivating in Hermione. It is hardly consistent with a successful experience at Hogwarts!”

“She comes by her opinion of Dumbledore honestly,” Covelli sneered. “Given her circumstances, she would be wise to stand up for herself; it seems unlikely anyone else will do it on her behalf!”

“It is not her place to question –” McGonagall began.

Covelli cut her off angrily. “He’d better be answerable to someone! Whose place is it, then – yours? If it is, explain to me why Dumbledore would walk away from the once and future saviour of the magical world in what sounds remarkably like a fit of pique?”

McGonagall sighed. “*I know ... I know...* his reasoning brings to mind the tossing of a young child off a pier to see if he can swim. Several have already insisted on the presence of distant observers, at a minimum. I believe that one of our company may be conspiring to send a house-elf to Harry.”

“Well, *that* should frighten any villains lurking about,” Covelli mocked.

“How did Hermione learn of this?” McGonagall asked.

“She has been corresponding with a schoolmate, at my urging,” Covelli answered. “The schoolmate was one of those driven from young Mr. Potter’s residence, apparently.”

“I have already registered my strong opposition with Albus,” McGonagall said. “I’m not sure what else you want –”

“Hermione has had something of a breakthrough, and it concerns Harry Potter. It should concern Dumbledore greatly. I need you to summon him here, immediately,” Covelli demanded.

McGonagall pursed her lips. “I will pass that information along to him.”

Covelli shook her head. “No, he will come immediately. Tell him that I wish to know why Hermione Granger would sense that Harry Potter and Lord Voldemort project identical magical auras. That should capture his attention.”

McGonagall stared at her in horror. “Did she say that? She didn’t say ‘similar’, did she? *Identical?*” When Covelli nodded, she went on, “Dear Lord above... there has always been an obvious connection between the two, but this is entirely... I will inform him immediately. I expect that you will see him within the hour, barring a serious complication.” She collapsed the silent space and dashed back down the corridor twice as fast as she had come.

It was clear to Covelli that the interruption hadn’t calmed Hermione; if anything, she had a look on her face that suggested she now owned her anger. “So Dumbledore’s going to come and make it all better, is that it?” the girl snapped. “I can’t believe you sent for him without asking me!”

Covelli calmly offered, “Your Headmaster is in the best position to aid you in finding the answers you seek. I assume that you still intend to return to Hogwarts?”

Hermione averted her eyes. “Yes... of course...”

“Very well... then it is time to resolve your issues with him now –” Covelli began.

Hermione cut her off with a laugh. “That’s fine advice, coming from you,” she mocked.

Covelli’s reserve boiled away, and she advanced on the girl. “I allowed Albus Dumbledore to shape my life, even as I thought I was taking control by leaving. It took me twenty years to understand that. Would you like to make the same mistake? *Is that what you want?* If it is, then you may as well start running *now* !” The girl flinched, and Covelli squeezed her eyes shut; “That was brilliant,” she added under her breath.

Hermione crossed her arms, and rocked back and forth ever so slightly. “He plays with people like they were chess pieces,” she said in a near whisper.

“He does,” Covelli agreed, “and then he hopes for the best. Sometimes, I wonder if it’s the only kind of leadership that wizards understand.” They stood in silence for a time, Hermione gently

rocking and Covelli hoping that she hadn't managed to tear asunder the girl's progress over an embarrassing lapse of self control.

"Thank you," Hermione said softly.

"For what?" Covelli asked.

"For being honest," Hermione answered, "even if you treat me as a child now and again."

Covelli heard an unaccustomed sound in the corridor. "He is here," she said, and made to leave.

"What? You're... you're not staying?" Hermione asked, eyes suddenly wide.

"I will be just outside," Covelli assured her. "If you require *anything* , you will walk through that door. Dumbledore has no rights in this house that I do not assign him."

Dumbledore paused at the threshold. He was in full wizarding regalia, and Hermione withered. Before Covelli could speak, Dumbledore's face fell; he doffed his hat, waved his hands, and took on an appearance that would have easily blended with the beachcombers far below the villa.

Dumbledore took two steps into the room, almost hesitantly. Covelli paused beside him. "This is your opportunity for atonement. Don't squander it," she said, surely loud enough that Hermione could hear. "The door shall be open, and there will be no silencing charms." Dumbledore silently nodded. Covelli turned and looked to Hermione; she tried to pour all of her hopes into one glance before she turned away and walked into the corridor.

Hermione found herself backing away as Dumbledore crossed the room, and had to will her feet to stop moving. All the control and the poise she had recovered over several days felt as though it was being drawn out of her. *Dr. Covelli said he has no rights here*, she thought frantically. *This isn't the Headmaster's Office... I'm in control here*. The Headmaster stopped abruptly. He looked very tired, almost sad in a way. Part of her was inclined to offer comfort of some sort, and part of her burned at the sight of him. She settled for fixing him in a defiant glare.

He stopped before Covelli's framed diplomas, and let his fingers trace across the frames. "*Laurea in Medicina e Chirurgia ... goodness...*" he murmured.

The words poured from Hermione's mouth before she could think them through, which made her even more uncomfortable. "I suppose that you think she's a failure, don't you?" she accused.

Dumbledore turned slowly, his eyebrows raised high. "A failure? Why ever would I think that?"

Again, Hermione responded from somewhere immediate, somewhere more powerful than she

thought she was. “She was your apprentice, after all. Muggle schooling, a Muggle life... it’s a slap in the face, isn’t it? Almost a betrayal?”

Dumbledore walked heavily across the room. He did not seat himself behind Covelli’s desk, as Hermione had anticipated; instead he took one of the chairs that sat before the desk. He settled into the chair completely, before he replied, “It is only a betrayal if she has betrayed herself. Dr. Covelli’s accomplishments are extraordinary by any measure.”

“She hates you,” Hermione blurted out.

Dumbledore steepled his hands before his face, and leant forward in his chair. “She does not trust me, she does not respect me, and it is even possible that she wishes me ill. I do not believe that she truly hates me.”

“Why?” demanded Hermione.

Dumbledore gestured at the room, ending with the diplomas. “Look at what she has accomplished. This is not a life borne of hate – anger and sadness, to be sure, but not hate.” He brought his hands back together, and looked intently at Hermione. “Do you hate me, Miss Granger?”

Hermione flushed and refused to meet his eyes, taken aback for a moment and a little ashamed by the question. “No, sir...”

Dumbledore’s voice lightened. “I am very pleased to hear that.”

I’m in control here, Hermione berated herself, *this is my room*. She set her jaw and dared his gaze. Her voice was as cold as she could make it. “I *hate* Voldemort. I think... I’m terribly angry with you... terribly disappointed.” Dumbledore shifted uncomfortably in his seat at the last, and Hermione was very surprised by the pleasure she took in that.

“I have earned your disappointment,” he said. “What does it mean for you to hate, I wonder?”

She sat on the edge of the desk – which left her looking down at the Headmaster – and thought for only a moment before she let forth. “It means that I want to kill him. Since that is impossible, I shall do everything in my power to make sure that Harry succeeds. Killing’s too good for him, really. I want him to suffer. I want him to beg for mercy, and I want to be the one to deny him. Are you satisfied?”

His face was impassive, as it usually was, but she just knew that it was by sheer force of will. “What Voldemort did to you was unspeakable, truly... but... Miss Granger, you must not give into hate, you must not. I have had this conversation before, with two women as impressive as yourself. One chose the light, and one chose a darker path. You have met one, and I dearly wish that you could meet the other.”

“Stop, Headmaster... please stop,” she said firmly. “With all due respect, this isn’t about platitudes or taking away your guilt. This is about the fact that I am angry with you, angrier all the

time in fact. We will be talking about *that* , and I will ask you to stop evading me. Honestly, it's insulting."

"I apologise... but choosing the path of light is much more than a matter of platitude," he said slowly.

"Do I strike you as a person who wants to root around in the Dark Arts, Headmaster?" Hermione snapped. "I loathe the idea, but I *will* do what has to be done. By the way, I don't want you to think that I intend to avoid *your* observations. Dr. Covelli doesn't strike me as having gone down a dark path, and I fear that I'll end up meeting Harry's mum sooner than I'd like, if I continue to accept your direction." Dumbledore's mouth fell open slightly, and Hermione saw his eyes flash for just a moment. *Five points to me* , she thought confidently.

"Clearly, regarding you as merely a student wastes both your time and mine," Dumbledore said.

Hermione's eyes narrowed; she recalled this specific approach quite clearly from their meeting at Grimmauld Place, and wasn't about to accept it again. "Don't flatter me, sir, because I'm not in a mood to accept it warmly," she warned. "The difference in our status couldn't be greater. I don't expect you to regard me as a peer. I do appreciate any efforts on your part to avoid insulting my intelligence... sir."

Dumbledore laughed, which was something that she absolutely didn't expect; it was quite startling, and she immediately wondered if that was his intent. "This... oh, dear... this isn't going well at all, is it?" he managed.

"No," she said flatly, "it isn't."

Dumbledore let himself settle again, and then advanced, "Perhaps we should press to our objectives, Miss Granger. You have made your anger clear, and I presume that you seek some answers on that front? Perhaps you seek assurances of a kind? I, of course, have come because of your disconcerting observation about Harry –"

"I didn't intend to convey that to you, Headmaster," Hermione fumed. "Dr. Covelli took that on herself."

"Is that so? That is... most unexpected, indeed." Dumbledore stroked his beard very slowly – very deliberately, Hermione thought. "Very well... I await your anger, and I have no intention of doing or saying anything to disarm you. I am no doubt deserving of your remarks to come."

Hermione's mouth nearly opened before she regained control. *Clever*, she thought, *leaving your own concerns to sit there like the dragon in the room. Fair enough, I'll leave them sit* . She pushed thoughts of Harry aside, and went straight to her first point. "Did you remove the binding curse? Did you really remove it?" she asked pointedly.

Dumbledore opened his hands, almost defensively. "You were present, Miss Granger. You are more than sufficiently intelligent and well-trained to know what Professor Flitwick and myself

were –”

“And *already* , you’re being disarming,” Hermione snapped. “Please answer the question, sir.”

“We removed the safeguarding spell to the best of our training and ability,” Dumbledore said.

Hermione held up her left hand, and waved the back of it at him. “It was a curse... *a curse* , Headmaster!” she shouted. “If you removed it, then I want you to explain where *these* came from!” Anger welled up in her stomach, and her raised hand shook. *This is my room*, she told herself anxiously, *I’m in control here, not him!*

Dumbledore reached for her hand, and then stopped himself. “May I?” he asked. She nodded, and her hand continued to tremble in his grasp. Dumbledore slowly withdrew his wand and gave it a complex wave that seemed to cast her hand in blue light. The faint runes that she had found there now stood in sharp relief.

“Of course...” Dumbledore murmured. “Miss Granger, I must yet again apologise. I was made aware of the possibility that this might have occurred, shortly before your episode at the Lovegood residence. A related phenomenon has affected Harry. I had intended to consult with Professor Flitwick on the matter, but to be perfectly honest... in the crush of events these past weeks... I simply neglected to do so.”

Hermione’s jaw tightened. “To the best of your ability, *indeed!* ” she glowered.

Dumbledore looked at her strangely for a moment. “Oh! No, no, these are not residual from the removal... no, certainly not. In actuality, I believe that Harry is the responsible party. I absolutely must contact Filius to confirm this, as soon as possible.”

Hermione looked to Dumbledore, then to her hand, and then to the Headmaster’s face again. “Harry? But... I don’t... how?”

“Miss Granger, which three runes were placed upon both your hand and Harry’s in order to anchor the binding?” Dumbledore asked.

Hermione balked but another part of her took over, the part that would like nothing better than to set up housekeeping amongst a mountain of books. She was almost grateful. “The binding curse employed *uruz* , *perþ*, and *inguz* – *uruz* to strengthen will, *perþ* to secure the secret, and *inguz* to ground the mind,” she recited.

Dumbledore smiled – too broadly, Hermione was certain, almost Cheshire-like. “Excellent. Look upon these runes, Miss Granger, and interpret them for me if you would?”

Hermione looked at the runes, in the careful way that she looked down from great heights. She read them, blood rushed to her cheeks, and she read them again, then stammered, “They’re... not the same... they’ve changed... how could I...?” *How could I have been so stupid?* she cursed herself. *A first-year has the good sense to look before leaping!*

“Yes, Harry was equally baffled,” Dumbledore recounted. “In addition, he has not studied Ancient Runes; thus, I had to interpret the signs for him. I realise that it is technically a seventh-year expectation, but I am certain that you can make a three-aett interpretation without my assistance.”

Hermione pulled her hand free, and slumped into the empty chair that faced Dumbledore. She brushed the fingertips of her right hand over the runes. They weren’t raised – they were barely visible outside Dumbledore’s wash of blue light – but she was certain that she could feel them; they gave off a slight tingle. “I feel very foolish right now,” she said hoarsely.

“This is hardly a circumstance to be anticipated, Miss Granger,” Dumbledore assured her. “When unbound by expectations, Harry’s power seems to work in very powerful and most remarkable ways, does it not?” He wiggled his fingers, and the blue light caught her hand again. “Interpret the runes, if you would?”

She stifled a sob, as her error sunk in and thoughts of Worthington Day School and her failure at the Department of Mysteries raced through her head. *I will not be like this!* she berated herself, and then forced herself to look at the runes. “The runes are... *raiðo*, *sowulo* and *laguz*,” she choked out. “The combination still takes in all three aetts... should I... should I read this as a bind-rune or as a rune row, sir?”

“The original binding relied upon a rune row,” the Headmaster replied with another Cheshire smile that shook Hermione back to her senses. She didn’t like the thought that he was setting her up again, but either she would read the runes or call for Dr. Covelli to somehow fix everything, and the reading was the right choice.

“*Raiðo* ... is about the threads of a person’s life and how those threads intersect with other threads, other lives, or other fates. It’s about seeing and acting on the critical moments –” Hermione stopped abruptly.

Dumbledore leant forward in his chair; he appeared very interested in what she had to say. “Yes?”

“Nothing, sir... it’s about acting on the critical moments in one’s life... the ones that... that determine our future path,” she finished, and wondered what Harry had been thinking about to impart that particular rune.

“Go on, please,” Dumbledore urged her.

“*Sowulo* is... more straightforward. This rune reflects healing, and positive conclusions. It represents success on a journey...” She trailed off this time.

“Does this bring something to mind?” asked Dumbledore.

“He knows... Ginny or Luna must have said something,” Hermione said. “I should have sent him word. It wasn’t right...”

“I informed Harry, in truth. Why did you wish to keep your pain from him? Did you feel that your

pain was somehow less important than his?” Dumbledore wondered.

The anger welled up inside her again. “It is, isn’t it? Tell me you don’t believe it’s so,” she snapped. “Just... let me finish this please.” She stared at the third rune. “It’s *laguz* ... this is for confronting fears... understanding them, so... so we can use what we learn to help another...”

“Miss Granger...” Dumbledore began.

Everything felt as though it was spiralling out of her control. “How did he do this? How could he have known...?” she whispered, because she was afraid that her voice would crack before the Headmaster, and she wouldn’t allow that – *couldn’t* allow that. Something else occurred to her; she cleared her throat, and asked, “Did Harry’s runes change, as well?”

Dumbledore stroked his beard. “Yes, they did. Harry now possesses *gebo* , the gift; *naupiz* , the need; and *eihwaz* , the sign of change.” He leant forward, and rubbed his hands together. “What do you see amidst the signs? What do you believe, Miss Granger?” Dumbledore asked her gently.

“He doesn’t believe that I failed him,” she said nervously. When the Headmaster said nothing in return for what seemed like a very long time, she added, “He’s wrong.”

“I imagine that Harry feels he has failed you, by allowing you to be injured twice in as many months,” Dumbledore offered gently. “Both of you are in error, of course. You have not failed him through your actions. He cannot guarantee your safety. Such are the painful truths of war.”

Hermione’s voice quavered. “He should have let me go,” she insisted.

“Nothing could have made him do so,” Dumbledore said. “Harry was faced with a situation where every option appeared wanting. He made a choice – a shocking and fascinating choice – and the result was as favourable as possible under the circumstances.”

“What did it cost him, Headmaster?” Hermione cried. “Do you have any idea?”

“I cannot answer that with any precision,” Dumbledore returned. “I can easily surmise the cost to him had he not acted. Harry killed seven people that day, Miss Granger, and that is not something to be taken lightly. However, he did so to save at least a dozen lives directly and doubtless saved even more lives indirectly. If he had sat there and done nothing, not only would you be dead, but the entire Weasley family save Charles and Percival... Miss Tonks... Miss Jones... your parents as well, Miss Granger...” He reached out and rested his hands atop hers. “Do you honestly believe that he should have let you go?”

Hermione’s chest heaved, and she felt wetness rush down her cheeks. She loathed herself for being weak. “He... he should have gone straight for Voldemort,” she choked out.

“No,” Dumbledore said firmly. “He was not prepared, and he would have failed. I find no fault with his course of action in this matter, Miss Granger, none at all.”

“Why did you leave him, then?” she blurted out.

He slowly pulled his hands away. "I'm sorry?"

She wiped at her eyes with the backs of her hands. "I asked, why did you leave him? He's alone. If he's not prepared to face Voldemort, how can you possibly leave him alone?"

Dumbledore proffered a handkerchief withdrawn from a pocket in his trousers. "Harry is reasonably safe. In addition to his personal defensive capabilities and the protections and wards associated with his inheritance, I assure you that I have maintained a security perimeter. He has shown no recent interest in leaving the grounds of the property where he currently resides, thankfully. Thus... we wait."

Hermione dabbed the handkerchief against her cheeks, then clutched it tightly. "I still don't understand... *why?*"

"Harry chose to dismiss everyone from his presence," Dumbledore explained. "This included those who were assigned to watch over him. As a result, I visited to confirm his wishes. Harry is a legal adult, Miss Granger; I can no longer insist upon anything with regard to his care. After allowing him to rage at me for some time, I determined that it would be best to leave him entirely on his own for the time being. Having made certain that he understood this, I asked everyone to comply with his wishes, including all those with whom you are familiar. I hope that some time alone will allow Harry to come to realisations regarding his immediate future."

Hermione laughed nervously. "Oh, I imagine it will..."

Dumbledore arched an eyebrow. "Do you care to share your opinion with regard to my course of action?"

"Er... I'd prefer to keep it to myself, sir..." Hermione tried to stop her strained laughter, but she couldn't manage it.

Dumbledore's lips thinned; Hermione thought it looked like a parody of Professor McGonagall. "Miss Granger..."

She said hesitantly, "Headmaster... it's just that... well, only a *boy* could have possibly come up with that solution," Summoning her best imitation of Ron, she added, "'If he doesn't like it, then I'll take my chess set and go home. He'll beg me back eventually!' Honestly, sir!"

Dumbledore sat very still for a few moments, and then began to laugh. "To think you were the one concerned about being disarmed! I appear to be at a serious disadvantage in this exchange!"

Hermione watched the Headmaster shrewdly, and then simply asked the questions foremost on her mind. "Why are you handling me so gently, sir? Do you fear that I'll break?"

"I do not know what to expect from you, Miss Granger," Dumbledore admitted. "You seem remarkably fit despite all that has happened. However, I have also seen the damage you have wrought upon two different rooms, and to be frank, there is something less than fit about the look

in your eyes. I have already hurt you, and I do not wish to cause you further pain or injury. Would you prefer that I behave differently?"

"No, sir... thank you for your consideration," Hermione said quietly.

"You do not trust me, of course," Dumbledore said. "As I speak, you search for meanings and agendas."

Hermione nodded reluctantly. "I still believe that you mean well, sir," she offered.

"What can I offer you, to further demonstrate my intentions?" Dumbledore wondered aloud. "Surely you seek answers about the connection between Voldemort and Harry? Perhaps I can help you to find what you seek?"

Hermione frowned. "How does that lead me to stop searching for agendas, Headmaster? You certainly have something to gain by helping me."

"*Harry* has something to gain, and I hold a considerable interest in Harry's well being," he corrected her. "Professor McGonagall made mention of identical magical auras...?"

Hermione raised an eyebrow. "Those weren't my words," she stated flatly.

Dumbledore sat straight in his chair, and intoned deeply, "Miss Granger, I *must* know of anything that impacts upon Harry's safety –"

"So that you can own the information, and keep it from him if you can!" Hermione finished for him.

"I will no longer withhold anything that Harry needs to know, I promise you – just as I have promised him," Dumbledore assured her.

"And yet, *you* will be the one who decides what Harry needs to know," Hermione fired back.

"Perhaps you believe that you should take on this role? You have served as surrogate decision maker for Harry on many occasions during your friendship, have you not?" Dumbledore pointed out.

Hermione stiffened. "I've encouraged Harry to make certain decisions, but he's done so with all the information at hand," she insisted. "You've tossed him toast scraps like you're feeding a pigeon on the walk. For the life of me, I can scarcely see how Harry is supposed to function in the wizarding world after he..." She stopped, and her eyes widened in horror. "No... you... you *couldn't* ... you *wouldn't*!"

"What is it that I would or wouldn't do?" Dumbledore asked.

Hermione stood up abruptly, and her hands moved quickly to her hips. "Harry's not *supposed* to worry about life afterward, *is he?*" she accused. .

Dumbledore attempted to head her off. “Miss Granger, you surely can’t be implying...?”

She wouldn’t be denied. “It’s no better than *murder! How could you do this to him? HOW?*” She pounded at his chest in such frenzy that she didn’t see Covelli enter the room, barely noticed hands holding her wrists, barely heard the voice telling her to take slow breaths, barely felt the chair beneath her. All she could think was how horrible, how inhuman Dumbledore was – how there was so little difference between Dumbledore and Voldemort, between Voldemort and Harry, between her and Harry, between all of them. After a while, it registered that she was seated and Dumbledore was kneeling before her.

“Miss Granger... can you hear me? I want you to listen to me. I need you to listen to me now,” he said.

“I hear you,” she said weakly. She saw Covelli from the corner of her eye, and felt a rush of shame over her lack of self-control.

“Miss Granger... I have cared for Harry more than for myself for many years. I have made many decisions that I would reconsider had I to make them a second time. I am not certain that I would have left Harry with the Dursleys at all, and particularly after he began his attendance at Hogwarts. I am not certain whether I would have waited as long as I did to share with him the prophecy that so affects his fate, though I do not know at what point it might have been appropriate to share. I have tried to let Harry live normally, to the greatest extent possible, though this was forced at times and absurd at other times. I have tried very hard to let Harry live outside of a cage this summer, and only seem to have made things worse between us. Harry is not a weapon, though he may wield one someday on behalf of us all. He is not a pawn, nor a chess piece of any kind.” Dumbledore looked deeply into Hermione’s eyes. His eyes were impossibly blue, she thought, and somehow she could see the truth of what he was saying. It wasn’t Legilimency, or at least she didn’t think it was; she had no sense of anyone inside her head other than herself.

“I have no children,” he went on, “and of my family, only my brother remains. I have felt a special kinship, a bond if you like, with certain of my students along the way. I felt this to a degree with Harry’s father, particularly after the death of his parents. I felt it to a degree with Sirius Black, which made the sting of his apparent betrayal all the more sharp. I share that bond with Professor Hagrid, as you may have surmised... but above all others –”

“I’m so sorry,” Hermione whispered. She tried to look away from the Headmaster, but he wouldn’t allow it.

“Do not be ashamed,” he said. “I am the one who has failed you, Miss Granger. I have failed Harry as well, but I believe that it is not too late to make amends. You must hear the rest of what I have to say.”

“Yes, sir...” she managed.

“I could not intentionally injure Harry. I have allowed him to take great risks, but only those I have believed him prepared to take on. The Department of Mysteries was not one of those

occasions. So many mistakes were made..." He paused and looked away for a moment; she managed to take in a breath, before he returned his gaze. "When Tom was battling with me, he attempted to possess Harry. In the process, he became ensnared in Harry's mind; he could not release himself. At that moment, I became certain that Harry *will* eventually defeat him. Harry was in exquisite pain, as was Tom... he dared me to kill Harry, Miss Granger. If I had done so, it is quite possible that both would have been destroyed. I have thought on this, and I believe that the conditions of the prophecy would have been fulfilled had I taken action. Obviously, I did not do so. I never considered it. I would not consider it. I will not consider it. Do you understand?"

"You love Harry," Hermione said quietly.

"Yes, as surely as if he were my own grandson, once or twice removed," Dumbledore agreed. His eyes twinkled, and he added, "As surely as the Weasleys love him, and as surely as you love him."

"Yes," she whispered.

"Love is not just a matter of thought, but of deed. May I show you something?" Dumbledore asked.

"Of course, sir," Hermione answered.

He took his wand, and caused a spray of blue light to shine not on the three runes on her left hand, but instead on her other hand. A single whitish rune shone on her skin. "I don't understand," she said.

Dumbledore held up his free hand, and redirected the light. "It is *gebo*, as currently appears on Harry's hand, but I do not believe that Harry shared my precise intention."

Hermione's mind was numb; she was so flooded with competing emotions that she could scarcely think. It took her nearly a minute before realisation set in. "We think of gifts, but *gebo* ... you made an oath, sir?"

"I made an oath," Dumbledore confirmed, "whilst you were caught in the Dreamweaver, that I shall not fail you again. I have never made such a sweeping oath in my life, Miss Granger; it was quite foolish on my part... the emotions of an old man run amok, perhaps."

"I'll release you, of course –" Hermione said immediately.

"In addition to instruction, you would require my consent," Dumbledore noted. "You do not have it, and shall not receive it, not yet... not until you are convinced, not until you recover your trust."

Hermione's mouth dropped open, despite herself. "I... don't know what to say, Headmaster..."

"Nor do I," Covelli murmured.

"I know a great deal about Voldemort's magical power, Miss Granger. I know of the rituals in which he was engaged, prior to his first defeat. Regrettably, I know as much about the nature of

the *Avada Kedavra* curse as any living wizard,” Dumbledore said. “I have known that Voldemort and Harry are connected since the night that Harry survived the curse. What Professor McGonagall conveyed to me casts that connection in a rather different light. Thusly, I offer you a proposition. We shall study the magical connection, together, beginning as soon as you are able. Dr. Covelli may participate in this endeavour, if you desire; I daresay, she would be of great help. If we should learn anything useful, then we will not keep it from Harry. You and I – or all three of us, if you wish it – shall decide how to convey the information. If nothing else, you should be quite well prepared for your N.E.W.T. theory examinations in Charms, Arithmancy, Ancient Runes and Defence Against the Dark Arts at the conclusion of our efforts.” He went silent, still on his knees, waiting.

Hermione could find no other word other than awe to describe what she felt at that moment. “Dr. Covelli...?” Hermione began.

“I will do what you ask of me, Hermione,” Covelli said tonelessly.

“Thank you, Doctor.” Hermione turned back to Dumbledore, and told him, “I accept. I’d like to begin immediately.”

“I believe...” Dumbledore stopped, and smiled awkwardly – it was almost a grimace. “I believe that this old man has spent far too long on his knees.”

Hermione burst from the chair, and immediately took his arm. “I’m thoughtless, sir,” she said quickly.

“I chose the position,” he laughed softly, as he slowly rose to his feet with her help. “We could begin tomorrow, if you wish, though all scheduling matters lie presently in the hands of Dr. Covelli.”

Covelli pursed her lips. “Hermione, I’d like you to rest for the remainder of the afternoon. No assignments, no textbooks – sit on the loggia, or put the pool to use. We... can speak more of this after the evening meal.”

“I hope you recognise, Miss Granger, that this exploration may take quite some time,” Dumbledore interjected. “We may be conducting research long after the school year resumes.” He gave Covelli a curious look that Hermione couldn’t interpret.

“Yes, sir, I understand. I’ll be patient,” Hermione said.

“I don’t expect you to remain patient, for that would doubtless be asking too much,” Dumbledore returned, “but I will insist upon a reasonable pace.”

Hermione blushed faintly. “Yes, sir.”

“Off with you!” Covelli urged, and directed her to the door.

Hermione decided that a few laps in the long narrow pool would be a wise course. She was stiff,

the scar on her chest was tight, and she needed to clear her head before either of her parents found the chance to ask after her. She stopped after taking a few paces toward her room, set adrift by all the emotions and all the information. The thought of conducting research with two terribly brilliant people had energized her, but she knew that she was far from being herself again; under the excitement, cold empty feelings awaited the chance to overtake her.

Two things kept the darkness at bay. First, she was still shocked by the lengths to which the Headmaster had gone to secure her trust – an oath that even he admitted was foolishly broad, and sharing the depth of his feelings for Harry. Second, the Headmaster had passed up the opportunity to use Harry as a pure weapon against Voldemort; he could have destroyed one by killing the other, but refused. It took her a few moments to understand why those pieces of information had given her hope. If there were truly any chance of Harry becoming evil, she realised – of him becoming like Voldemort – then Dumbledore wouldn't have hesitated to sacrifice him. If Harry was fated to become like Voldemort, Dumbledore couldn't possibly love him as a grandson of a sort – she was sure of it. She could take the connection between Harry and Voldemort and toss it in the bin with the other irrational fears she struggled against – it was still there, it would be there for some time perhaps, but it didn't have to own her nights. Now she could try to focus on finding answers, and then on making certain that Dumbledore didn't keep those answers from Harry.

She decided that it was time to send Harry a post or some sort of message; it was far overdue. As she resumed the walk to her room, she swore that she overheard Covelli say, “Albus... I don't know where to begin –”, just before a strong *sqelch* rattled the pictures on the walls of the corridor and left the entire area unnaturally silent.

Hermione tapped the end of the biro against the desk for a very long time before she realised that she was doing it. She resorted to clutching it, and continued to stare at the blank sheet of creamy paper before her. Dr. Covelli had very nice biros and even nicer paper, and Hermione had found that she missed the feel of a good biro; *besides, you can't chew on the end of a quill – well, not effectively at any rate*, she admitted to herself.

She didn't care for being easily distracted and disorganized in her thoughts, not at all, but after nearly a month she was resigned to reckoning with the problems for some time to come. “I *don't* like this,” she grumbled aloud. “Think, Granger, just think... it's only a post, for goodness' sake.”

Dear Harry,

She lifted the biro, and the dry end promptly slid between her teeth. *Wrong*, she thought, *entirely wrong*. Down went the biro again, and a line ran through the abortive greeting.

Dearest Harry,

Hermione shook her head. She couldn't write *that* ; he might take it entirely wrong, for a start. A small smile played across her lips. "The look on his face would be priceless," she murmured as another line of ink sliced through words.

Harry,

It's rather hard to argue with that , she thought.

How are you? I am

"...pathetic, that's how I am," she fumed, "so pathetic that I can't even write a bloody post!" The biro tore through the offending words, back and forth and back and forth, until it tore through the paper entirely.

A steaming cup of tea slid into view. "I'm sure it's not as bad as all that." The colour immediately gave away both the tea and its server – Earl Grey, with cream and sugar.

"Good afternoon, Mother," Hermione sighed.

Mrs. Granger managed a wan smile. "Each afternoon seems to be better than the previous one, doesn't it?"

"That isn't saying much," Hermione muttered.

"I wish you'd sit out on the loggia or the veranda, instead of confining yourself." Mrs. Granger grazed her fingertips along the ornate trim of one of the two reading tables in the villa's library, and opened the cover of an antique volume that lay there.. "Don't misunderstand, Hermione, I am as acquainted with bibliophilia as you, but how often can one take advantage of such a climate as this?"

"I'd rather stay indoors," Hermione said. "I find it more comfortable here." She slipped open two books from the pile adjacent to the small stack of creamy paper, and made a show of taking a few notes.

"I can't think of a summer where you've completely avoided the opportunity to sun yourself," Mrs. Granger noted.

Hermione slapped down the biro in her hand hard against the desk. "Well, this hasn't been like previous summers, has it?"

Mrs. Granger took a slight step back – showed a slight crack in her control, as Hermione was quick to notice – but nonetheless said firmly, "Hermione, please mind your tone with me."

"Afraid I'm going to explode, Mother?" Hermione asked in a way that was clearly not mindful of tone, and then added dismissively, "Some of the books in this room are nearly a thousand years old; I'd never risk them."

“A thousand years old,” Mrs. Granger whispered. She reverently turned the first page of the volume before her. “Remarkable... I don’t know that I could ever become accustomed to the world as they see it... the way you see it now. I imagine I’d be overcome every time I set foot in the library at that school of yours.”

“I’m still in awe of the entire place, actually,” Hermione admitted, “but there’s seldom time to allow it.”

“May I sit?” Mrs. Granger asked.

“Of course,” Hermione answered quickly. After a moment’s pause, she added, “I didn’t expect you to be going on about the books and the library, you know.”

Mrs. Granger nearly smirked. “I still have the ability to surprise you?” She settled into an intricately carved wooden chair opposite Hermione, and took a sip at her own cup of tea. “What was I supposed to be going on about, then?”

Hermione kept her eyes focused on the open books, and kept jotting faux notes. She knew that she couldn’t meet her mother’s eyes and maintain control, and she was determined to control herself, to comport herself as she should. “I expected that you’d speak to me about being catty, just now. I expected to be reminded of my place, perhaps. I... expected you to say something about my hair.”

“It was startling at first sight,” Mrs. Granger allowed. “Honestly, I was surprised that you changed it to a style so similar to mine.”

“Not everything is about you, Mother,” Hermione snapped, and immediately regretted it.

Mrs. Granger stiffened. “I was making an observation; I meant nothing by it,” she said crisply. “As for the rest... I’m prepared to allow quite a lot, considering what you’ve been through.”

“I’m sorry,” Hermione said. She ran her free hand through the thick short hair that draped around the back of her neck. “I know Dad liked it as it was, but you know I’ve never cared for my hair. It was a nightmare to manage, wearing it long like that. Besides, it was a liability –the Department of Mysteries and the attack at the house taught me that. I can’t be brushing hair from my face the next time that –” She was cut off by the sound of her mother’s teacup shattering against the floor.

“Oh... goodness... dropped my... how clumsy of me...” Mrs. Granger babbled.

Hermione quickly made for the broken bits of china. “Here, let me,” she insisted. “It’s my fault.”

“Next time, you said... *next time* ... in my head, I know that it can happen again... but in my heart... Hermione... no...” Mrs. Granger said in a voice that started hollow and simply died.

Hermione’s throat tightened. She brushed china shards onto a sheet of the creamy paper. Her fingertips left tracings of spilled tea as a watermark; the leavings were brownish like drying blood. “This is why I always kept it separate from home, from you and Dad. I wasn’t trying to hurt you; I never wanted you to be hurt,” she said.

“That’s my responsibility, not yours!” Mrs. Granger cried. She clasped her hands together tightly, yet they still shook. “I’m to keep *you* from being hurt, and I *can’t*! There’s not... there’s not *one* bloody damned thing your father and I can do! We just sat there... we just... at least Thomas talked back to them... I just *sat there* and watched them *k-killing you*!”

The remnants of the teacup fell back to the floor as Hermione found herself wrested into a hug by trembling hands. Her mother shuddered and began to sob openly. “Mother... Mum... I know it was awful... but I’m all right now,” she said awkwardly; her mind reeled from hearing ‘bloody damned thing’ come out of her mother’s mouth.

Mrs. Granger’s laugh was uncomfortably edgy. “You’re not all right, Hermione! How could you be? Your father’s not all right, I’m not all right... you don’t understand... how can I make you understand?”

Hermione’s shirt collar was damp from where her mother’s face was crushed against it. Her heart was pounding, and she was determined for some reason or another that she wouldn’t cry. “I’m so sorry for all of this! The house, it’s never going to be the same now... the practice! Oh, Mum! I know you made some plans, but it must be ruined after all this time –”

Mrs. Granger squeezed even more tightly. “None of that matters! Do you honestly think either of us cares a whit? The house can be sold; the practice is in good hands. We’d walk away from all of it – from everything – just to make you safe. Don’t you understand that?”

“Mum, I couldn’t ask that of you,” Hermione protested.

“You don’t have to ask! You’re our only daughter!” Mrs. Granger pulled back far enough to look Hermione in the eyes. “I’ve never said this before... Thomas and I agreed that we wouldn’t... we wouldn’t have boarded you, Hermione. We only did it because it was clear that you needed the sort of training that your school is suited to provide. We wouldn’t have sent you away.”

Hermione’s eyes went wide. “But... but... you and Dad, you both boarded. You were Head Girl in your year; Dad was the cricket captain at his school, right? It always seemed like the both of you wanted the same for me... didn’t you?”

Mrs. Granger let go of Hermione – reluctantly, it seemed – and rummaged through her purse for a handkerchief. “Once it was done, it was only proper to be encouraging. If we’d acted as though the whole thing was under duress, how would you have responded?”

Hermione sighed knowingly. “I’d have hated every second of it.” She waited until her mother dabbed at her eyes and her nose, and then extended her arms. For the first time in a very long time, it felt absolutely right to hug her mother – her Mum. “If I’d had any idea at all, I’d have never shortcut our holidays – I swear it.”

Mrs. Granger sniffed again, and let out a teary chuckle. “Yes, you would have. You’ve made friends – good friends, close friends. That’s the one thoroughly positive outcome of the past five years. To know that you had friends, that there were people who held you in high regard... it was

such a relief.”

“I’ve wanted to share everything, honestly, but it always seemed right to hold back.” Hermione rubbed the back of her hand against her eyes. “I stopped holding back. Look what’s come of it.”

“We know who you are now, who you’ve become. Whatever else has happened, whatever else we may think, both your father and I are grateful for that.” Mrs. Granger looked fiercely at Hermione. “We will go anywhere – do *anything* – to keep you in our lives. We can’t lose you... do you understand? Please don’t let that happen, Hermione... please don’t walk away from us...”

Hermione pulled back with a start. “Walk away? Mum, I’d *never* do that! Even if... even if you need to go away for a while, you know, to be safe... walk away?” Her brows furrowed. “Why would you think that? Was something said?”

“Molly Weasley... took it upon herself...” Mrs. Granger started, and then stopped as her mouth set into a brittle line.

“Mrs. Weasley?” Hermione’s face slowly fell into her hands. “What did she say?”

“She seemed to feel that someone should inform us of the way of things for magical sorts born of boring, ordinary people like your father and I,” Mrs. Granger said icily. “She thought it especially important given that you will be coming of age in *September*. When did you intend to share that bit of news, by the way?”

Hermione’s cheeks heated. “The materials from Hogwarts mentioned that witches and wizards come of age at seventeen.”

“It wasn’t precisely top-of-mind five years ago,” Mrs. Granger snapped.

“Honestly, it’s not all that important,” Hermione insisted. “I’ve two more years at school; I suppose the greatest benefit will be an apparation license.” Her expression darkened. “Now, I’d like to know what Mrs. Weasley said. Yes, I’d very much like to know ‘the way of things’.”

“It wasn’t so much what she said... well, it was that as well... but it was the way she said it,” Mrs. Granger fumed. “I couldn’t possibly be expected to understand what was happening in your life, as I’m only a *Muggle*. Of course, she hastened to point out that your father and I are the very best sort of insignificant people!”

Hermione winced. “I can hear it, actually. ‘*Oh, you poor dear*’, more or less?” Her mother’s eyes narrowed and she had her answer. “Mrs. Weasley does that to everyone. Now... I’d really like to know what was said.”

“She thought it was only right that we know... she said you would inevitably start to withdraw from us,” Mrs. Granger said hesitantly. “She said that as you take on adult responsibilities, it will be harder for you to stand between two worlds. She said... Hermione, do these people actually marry at seventeen or eighteen years of age?”

Hermione's eyes nearly bugged out of her head. "*Marry?* What on Earth was she talking about? I'm not... I mean someday, I suppose, but I can't imagine what... bloody hell, *has she gone mad?*"

Mrs. Granger's eyebrows shot up. "Hermione!"

"Really, Mum, what am I supposed to say?" Hermione huffed. "Some of the old families still engage in arranged marriages, Mum. I should think it's obvious that the wizarding culture is... anachronistic, in some ways."

"She made it sound as though you're likely to receive proposals as soon as you come of age," Mrs. Granger said in a strangled voice. "She said –"

Hermione cut her off. "*Receive what?* I... I can tell you this much – if *this* is the 'way of things', no one's bothered to inform *me!*"

Mrs. Granger closed her eyes tightly. "I want to get this straight... it was so upsetting that I had difficulty taking it in... she said that you would be a very appealing prospect for a number of established families who didn't have backward ideas about blood and so forth. I told her that you'd surely care much more about your career than anything of that sort, and she said..." Her voice tightened again. "...she said that because you're our child, because you have the wrong sort of blood, your career options would be closely tied to... you know! For God's sake, Hermione, tell me it isn't like that! We didn't raise you to be beholden, to be treated like you're steerage-class... like a servant!"

Hermione choked back anger, and tried as best she could to think carefully. "I suppose it *is* true that purebloods dominate the leadership positions at the Ministry, and they certainly seem to hold sway over the economy... but I don't understand Mrs. Weasley's point. If there's no way to advance by merit, then she must be suggesting that... *like hell!*"

Mrs. Granger flushed brightly. "*Hermione!*"

"It *won't* be my lot in life to marry well in hopes that my children might receive better scraps from the table and my children's children might advance! I'll lead my life on my own terms, thank you very much! I'd... I'd snap my wand in two before it ever came to that!" Hermione roared. "The Weasleys haven't been like this, not at all! Mrs. Weasley *knows* me... how could she possibly think I would...?" Her jaw slowly dropped. "Oh, no... but Ron isn't of age until next March. She can't *possibly* think that George, or... or Fred, for pity's sake? *Percy?*" She started to laugh hysterically. "That would be cracking! Hermione Granger brings the Weasleys back together by m-marrying the wayward brother! The woman's barmy, Mum – *absolutely barmy!*"

Mrs. Granger sat back as far as she could in her chair. "*Hermione!* Look... I'm happy to know that you don't believe what she told me – deliriously happy, in fact – but I don't think she was referring to any of her sons, and I don't want to put a wedge between you and your friends over this. I know *precisely* where to direct my anger."

Hermione quickly stopped laughing. “Don’t believe a word of it, Mum, not a word! If Ron or Ginny tried to feed me a line like this, I’d tell them to get stuffed. Honestly, the woman’s delusional if she believes I’d ever marry anyone who would pull me away from Dad or from you.”

“She... mentioned children as the breaking point, actually,” Mrs. Granger said seriously.

Hermione pursed her lips. “Accidental magic, I expect. I can’t imagine it would be any worse than it was for me as a child, and we managed. We’d work through it, I promise. After all, you and Dad aren’t afraid of what I am...” All the breath rushed out of her, and she managed to add, “You aren’t... are you?”

Mrs. Granger took a long time to answer, far too long for Hermione’s comfort. “Some of what we’ve seen is wonderful – amazing, really – but some of it has been terribly frightening. Your father and I are afraid *for* you, Hermione. Please know that we’re not afraid *of* you. We could never be afraid of you.”

Hermione brushed at her damp cheeks. “Thank you, Mum,” she whispered. She knelt there for a while, her head in her mother’s lap, and let her hair be stroked. She let herself be ten years old again, before she knew that magic was real and when it still seemed as if her mum and dad could wave their hands and make everything bad go away.

“Letting you go is so difficult,” Mrs. Granger said quietly. “It’ll come a bit easier, knowing that you *want* to come back from time to time.”

Hermione nodded fiercely without raising her head. “I do, Mum, I do... but...” She felt her mother’s legs stiffen at the word, but pressed on. “...I need you and Dad to be safe until this is over. I can’t protect you, and you can’t be with me, not now. We have to talk this through, Mum – tonight, with Professor Dumbledore.”

“We’ll talk about it,” Mrs. Granger said with obvious reluctance.

Hermione dragged herself to her feet. “I have two posts to write... I hope you don’t mind.”

Mrs. Granger slowly stood. She tugged and brushed at her clothing to tease out the wrinkles. “One is the post you were failing to write as I came in – that would be to Harry, I assume?”

Hermione groaned. “It’s my own fault. If I hadn’t insisted on keeping everything from him...”

“And the other?” Mrs. Granger asked.

“Oh, just catching up with the Weasleys,” Hermione said nonchalantly.

Mrs. Granger raised an eyebrow. “I see. I’d like to see that one before it’s sent, if you don’t mind?” she said archly. “We mustn’t make this more than it is, however tempting that might be.”

“Yes, Mother,” Hermione sighed.

Harry,

I hope this post finds you well. While I know a little of your goings-on this month, I imagine we'll have quite a lot to talk about. Your new home must be fascinating. I hope it doesn't raise too many uncomfortable thoughts or memories.

As you've surely been told by now, I had a serious lapse of control not long after you left the Lovegoods' flat. My decision to keep this from you is one of the worst decisions I've ever made, Harry; I'm glad that Professor Dumbledore decided to provide you information. I berated you for hiding from us in July, and I've gone and done the same to you. I expect you to give me what-for when we see each other next, because I'm wholly deserving of it.

My time away has been very busy and very productive, though not so much in a bookish way. I've had a chance to get to know someone important to me in an unexpected way, and I've met someone who has helped me see some things about myself and about life that would have remained hidden or avoided all together. I've even mended fences with my Mum today.

Many things will be different now, I know, some visibly so and some below the surface. Someone told me that you may be taking an apprenticeship. If that's true, then I hope to be able to help you in some way. Helping you is very important to me; I doubt I could stop myself, in fact. This year, however, I look to you to set the boundaries for that help. If I've learned anything this summer, it's that this know-it-all doesn't know it all. Old habits die hard, of course. It's hard to admit to limits, even on paper.

The experience at my home left me with some uncomfortable realisations, Harry. Suppressing those realisations, even though I didn't know I was doing it, probably led to my loss of control. Some of this concerns you; I don't think it appropriate to say more in a post. Answers are required, for my own peace of mind at minimum. Professor Dumbledore and someone else who I dearly hope you meet someday have agreed to help me sort it all out. Because you're a part of this, I promise that you'll get the same answers that I do. It may not be very comfortable in the end, but I'm finished keeping things from you. I know that your situation is different from mine and I recognise that secrets will have to be kept. We must trust each other – I must trust that you won't keep secrets for petty reasons, and you must trust that I won't box you into choices any longer.

As I said, many things will be different. One thing that shall always remain the same is my abiding love and friendship for you, Harry.

With much love, from

Hermione

Hermione gave the post a final once-over, closed her eyes, and thrust the sheet into a parchment envelope. She had thought long and hard about whether to mention Professor Dumbledore and Dr. Covelli by name, in case the post was somehow intercepted, and ultimately decided to reference the doctor indirectly. The first several drafts had been more direct about what she had experienced; on reflection, that information had seemed too dangerous when put to paper.

She took a quill, dipped it in proper magical ink, and wrote Harry's name on the envelope. An address in Scotland appeared, but it flickered strangely. When she'd sent posts to Privet Drive, the address had simply failed to appear. The flickering stopped, and she put it out of her mind.

Covelli knocked on the open door of the library. "Good afternoon. I hope I'm not intruding?"

"This is your home – how could you intrude?" Hermione said lightly as she sealed the envelope with a wax seal.

Covelli remained in the doorway. "You have finished your post to Mr. Potter, I see?"

"At last," Hermione sighed with relief.

"I took tea with your mother and Minnie on the veranda," Covelli said casually.

Hermione carefully wiped down the quill. "Was it interesting?"

"Most interesting," Covelli returned. "Your mother was very interested in discussing your most recent conversation. How do you feel about the outcome?"

"I feel lightened by ten stone," Hermione said. "I called her Mum... it's been a long time since I've done that."

Covelli smiled broadly. "This may seem slightly out of sorts given our respective roles, but I am proud of you. Faced with two very difficult conversations today, you held your own."

"Are you here to talk about Professor Dumbledore's offer?" Hermione asked.

"I said that I would help you," Covelli said. "Albus knew that I would have to come to England as a result. He was taking advantage to a degree, something in which he is well-schooled."

"You don't have to do that," Hermione immediately insisted. "I'm very grateful for everything you've done, but it's not –"

"I have my reasons for allowing myself to be manoeuvred," Covelli assured her, "but I do appreciate your consideration."

"So you'll be returning with us?" Hermione confirmed.

“I must tend to some affairs, and then I’ll be along,” Covelli said. She entered the room, and peered at the writing desk. “Two envelopes? I didn’t realise you planned to send two posts, though I suppose it will require little extra effort from Mr. Moody.”

Hermione cleared her throat. “Yes... well... I needed to unburden myself.”

“I thought that was the purpose of your post to Mr. Potter,” Covelli said.

Hermione asked hesitantly, “I don’t know whether you can tell me, but... did my mum happen to mention someone called Molly Weasley?”

Covelli’s eyes flashed. “Yes, she did – at great length.”

“Then you surely understand,” Hermione said.

“What is it that I should...?” Covelli stopped, and a smirk slowly spread across her face. “Oh, Hermione... ‘unburden yourself’, indeed!”

Hermione blushed and then threw caution to the wind. “I wonder... if a person were to inscribe the runes for, shall we say, *amplification* of a post...? If said person used magical ink on a parchment envelope, and if she were underage... would, er, certain authorities...?”

Covelli’s smirk deepened. “Why, Miss Granger, I am surprised this has not been covered in your Charms lessons. Basic parchment charming is not restricted by age, to include the addressing charm and a variety of, ehh, *enhancements* ?”

Hermione nearly toppled the ink in her haste. The proper runes were crystal clear in her mind. As she inscribed the third rune, the parchment began to redden.

“Were you aware that the addition of a fourth rune can cause the colour to revert to something more customary?” Covelli asked.

Hermione did nothing to suppress a wicked grin. “No, I wasn’t aware of that,” she said as though she didn’t actually want to know. Covelli teased her for several minutes before she named the fourth rune.

August 24

Sneezing echoed down the corridor that led from the guest quarters to the veranda. Hermione stifled a giggle; each sneeze was like the firing of a cannon. With each blast, Mr. Granger looked up from the *Times*, Mrs. Granger said ‘Oh, my’ or ‘Good heavens’, and the corners of Dr. Covelli’s mouth flickered.

Dumbledore at last followed his sneezes out of the corridor and to a seat at the sun-splashed table,

his nose and mouth buried in a handkerchief. “I can’t seem to rid myself of this sneezing,” he said, his voice muffled by fabric.

“Are you well, Albus?” McGonagall asked.

Mr. Granger looked up yet again. “Watery eyes, eh? Prone to allergies, are you?”

Dumbledore blew his nose; the sound that resulted was like a poorly tuned trumpet. “Very few, thankfully,” he said. “I break into hives at the sight of a crup, and certain potions cause me to sneeze. There are two sorts of flowers that come to mind, but I have seen no snapdragons... surely oleander can be found in Italy, but the flowers in my chamber were pink and not white.”

McGonagall frowned. “Oleander comes in a pink variety. I’m certain I’ve seen it growing on this property.”

Covelli appeared shocked. “Oh, poor Albus... Gina! *Perche ha spostato il vaso nella camera degli ospiti più piccola?* ”

The ancient domestica grunted loudly without looking up from the serving table. “*Perche mi hai detto di spostarlo in la !* ” she snapped. Mrs. Granger let forth a snort that took Hermione by surprise.

“A fair warning, Doctor – despite my age and station, I am not above returning a prank,” Dumbledore laughed.

“I mustn’t present the impression that I’ve become dour,” Covelli smirked. “Dourness is best left to your regular faculty.” McGonagall let out an irritable huff at the last.

Mad-Eye Moody hobbled in from the courtyard. “Your posts are on their way, Granger,” he said gruffly to Hermione. “Sent ‘em by hired owl from... elsewhere.”

“Hermione, I distinctly heard Mr. Moody say ‘posts’,” Mrs. Granger said. “I expected to review your post to Mrs. Weasley.”

McGonagall arched an eyebrow at Hermione. “You sent a post to Mrs. Weasley, not to her children?”

Before Hermione could speak, Mrs. Granger replied, “It was regarding the matter discussed yesterday over tea.”

McGonagall’s voice tightened, which heightened her flinty burr. “What did the post say, Miss Granger?”

Hermione stiffened. “I informed Mrs. Weasley that I was unhappy with her statements to my mother, and that she should avoid making upsetting assertions in the future,” she said coldly.

“This scone is magnificent. *Gratzie* , Gina,” Dumbledore said. He took another bite, visibly

savoured it, and added, “Am I to understand that Molly was being...?”

“Molly was being Molly?” McGonagall finished for him. “Indeed.”

Dumbledore nodded knowingly. “I see. Did you address any misconceptions that may have resulted, Minerva?”

“Hermione managed that on her own,” Covelli cut in. “This Weasley woman, she is frequently loose with her words, yes?”

“Mrs. Weasley feels that everyone is entitled to her opinion,” Hermione said acidly, and drew a Cheshire smile from Dumbledore.

“I trust that the envelope was a neutral colour?” McGonagall said.

Moody’s chuckle came out as a rattling rumble. “Looked almost exactly like the other post; nice bit of charming, that,” he returned.

“*Miss Granger!* Where did you learn to mask a Howler?” McGonagall demanded.

“As for myself, I found the post thoroughly proportionate,” Covelli said flatly.

McGonagall’s eyes narrowed. “Luci... a word, please?” She gestured toward the entryway to the villa. Covelli shrugged, stood, and followed her inside.

Mrs. Granger scowled. “A ‘Howler’? I expect an explanation – *now*, please.”

“The Howling charm adds a magical exclamation point to a post, if you like,” Dumbledore explained lightly. “In some circles, a Howler is frowned upon. For some families, the exchange of Howlers is almost sporting. I expect that the Weasleys tilt more to the latter, Mrs. Granger. A Howler will be unanticipated, but hardly unprecedented.”

Mrs. Granger glared at Hermione. “I trust that you kept a copy of this post?”

“Let it go, Cordelia,” Mr. Granger said without looking away from the *Times*. “If Hermione chose to stand up for us, then that’s her business. She can and will fight her own battles, whether we like it or not.”

Mrs. Granger paled. “You’re... entitled to your opinion,” she said quickly, and then burst from the table to dash inside the villa.

Before Hermione could rise to follow, Mr. Granger folded the paper and set it down. “We’ve seen the sort of battles that you fight, from far too close,” he said. “She needs time to sort through this on her own; that’s how she is. Of all people, Hermione, I should think you’d understand.”

Dumbledore stroked his beard. “What do *you* require, Mr. Granger, if I may be so bold... time? Explanations or assurances, perhaps?”

Mr. Granger fixed Dumbledore with a powerful stare that Hermione had never before seen from her father; his voice was like ice. “We did not intend for our daughter to attend *military school*, Mr. Dumbledore. I require assurances that you can’t provide. I’m led to understand that Hermione may make her own decision to return to Hogwarts in a month’s time, so there’s no point to standing in the way. *Never* mistake that for agreement, or comfort, or anything of the sort.”

“Dad...” Hermione started.

“I’ve nothing more to say on the matter,” Mr. Granger growled. It was clear he would brook no opposition.

“Have you and Mrs. Granger had an opportunity to consider the issues that Miss Granger raised at table last evening?” Dumbledore asked.

Mr. Granger’s jaw was firmly set. “The decision regarding our residence will be made amongst our family, and only our family,” he answered. “You will be consulted if there’s something required of you.”

Dumbledore nodded, and began to rise from his chair. “Very well, sir. Miss Granger, I had thought that we might organise your research and revision plans today. However, I understand completely if you wish to defer...”

“Don’t do that on my part,” Mr. Granger said. “Hermione told us that you’d offered her special tuition. We know enough about your world to recognise that opportunity for what it is.” He stood, and motioned for Dumbledore to keep his seat. “Studying under you may enhance her chances for concluding this business alive and well, and there’s *nothing* more important to us. I trust I’ve made myself clear?”

Dumbledore’s face remained impassive, but Hermione thought something about him seemed to have sagged. “Abundantly clear, Mr. Granger,” he said.

Mr. Granger leant down and kissed Hermione on the cheek. “If you need anything, anything at all, I’m just inside,” he said.

“I love you too, Dad,” she said under her breath as he walked away.

“Your father responded to my offer when I was in fact addressing you, Miss Granger,” Dumbledore pointed out. “If you’d care to defer until another day, I would understand.”

“No, thank you,” Hermione said. “Honestly, it doesn’t feel like there are any days to spare.”

“True enough,” Dumbledore agreed, as he fished inside his shirt pocket. He withdrew an empty hand, and appeared to place a spot of nothing carefully atop the table. He waved his wand over the empty tabletop twice. “I took the liberty of returning to Hogwarts late in the evening and examining my personal library in brief.” From a pocket in his trousers, he withdrew a small slip of parchment. “Would you be so kind as to read this, please?” She nodded.

There is a modest-sized trunk directly in front of you. Blink three times, and it will be revealed.

The parchment immediately crumbled to dust. Hermione looked curiously to Dumbledore, and then did as she read. When she opened her eyes the third time, a trunk sat between them atop the table. It was perhaps two-and-a-half feet across and heavily decorated in what she knew to be Ogham script.

“All of the materials from my library that relate to the events of October 31, 1981 are placed inside, so that you may conduct a thorough review. Others have trod this ground but I am hopeful that your perspective may lead to new insights. There are only three living people who can see this trunk, and all three are present on this property,” Dumbledore explained. “I shall show you how you can enlarge and reduce the trunk by controlling its charms, as well as a few special features. I trust it is unnecessary for me to stress the importance of keeping this trunk and the materials contained therein under your control at all times?”

Hermione tried not to gulp like an awe-struck schoolgirl, and nearly succeeded. “No, sir, I understand,” she breathed.

“Once you have mastered the charms cast upon the trunk, I suggest we repair to the library where I shall identify each item for you. After that, we can establish a study plan and an appropriate timetable,” Dumbledore said. He raised an eyebrow and Hermione thought his eyes twinkled slightly, though it might have been a trick of the light. “Do I sense excitement on your part?”

Hermione suppressed a smile. “I do enjoy the pursuit of knowledge, I suppose.”

“Ah, but you find appeal in both the pursuit and the application of knowledge, Miss Granger; you long to solve problems,” Dumbledore observed. “In fact, you are attracted to the most difficult of problems even when others falter. I daresay that this predilection is one of several reasons that you were sorted into Gryffindor House, and not into Ravenclaw House.”

Hermione turned her eyes to the azure horizon, and gently rocked back and forth in her chair. “I... don’t feel much like a Gryffindor this summer, Headmaster. I’ve wondered... this sounds ridiculous, I realise... but I’ve wondered whether perhaps I’m in Gryffindor because, well... because Harry needed a Ravenclaw at hand?”

Dumbledore seemed to ponder what she had said in a serious way. “The Sorting Hat has, on rare occasions, engaged in machinations for inscrutable purposes,” Dumbledore allowed, “and it knew precisely who Harry Potter was when it sorted your year. Harry did need you, as it turned out – and still needs you – but you are a Gryffindor because you belong in Gryffindor House. If you think on it objectively, you will recognise and agree with the Hat’s logic.”

“If you say so, sir,” Hermione said doubtfully.

“Realistic appraisal of one’s gifts and one’s deficits is a useful activity, Miss Granger; it unburdens the mind. Self-doubt is another matter entirely,” Dumbledore gently chided. “We shall work on this; I expect Dr. Covelli will be most helpful to you in that way.” He reached across the

table, placed his hand atop hers, and smiled. “Now, let us have a look at the charms placed upon this trunk.”

August 30

Hermione closed yet another book; she let out an irritated huff. Reading wasn't making her feel better, reading wasn't making her drowsy, she was learning nothing from it – reading was doing nothing for her at all. It was nearly midnight, she no longer wanted to read, and sleep was as elusive as one of Luna's imagined beasts. *At least they booked me my own room*, Hermione thought; *at least Mum and Dad can rest*.

She was reluctant to let her parents go, unlike previous partings at the close of the holidays. This time, she knew it was unlikely she'd see them for Christmas. There would be no returning to Winchester – the only home she'd ever known was listed for sale. She didn't even know where her Mum and Dad would be, and she knew that was for the best. They had come to some sort of agreement with Professor Dumbledore, and that was all they would tell her. It had instantly occurred to her that she might never see them again – that they would survive and she might not – and she had tried her best to ward the thought away.

Everyone seemed to be falling away from her, save the Headmaster and Dr. Covelli. She was grateful that Dr. Covelli was returning to England, perhaps even a little excited, though she couldn't place exactly why she felt that way. It wasn't a matter of having a psychologist close at hand; she was certain of that much. Her feelings about Professor Dumbledore were much more confusing. On the one hand, he seemed genuinely apologetic about his hand in Harry's dismal childhood and about everything that had transpired over the holidays. On the other hand, Hermione was certain that he was attempting to manipulate her; she suspected that he saw her as a means of control over Harry, and she was determined to prevent that from happening. On the mean, she was pleased that she would be studying with him. There was much to be gained, both for the greater good and for herself.

A small stack of her own books sat inside the trunk that only she could see, next to the three stacks of books, scrolls, clippings and other items that Professor Dumbledore had provided. The contents were well organized now, another consequence of sleeplessness. There was a tight roll of soft fabric placed between the stacks; a strand of gold trailing from one end of the roll caught the light for a moment.

The Dreamweaver attracted her and repelled her all at once. Using it felt to her like the ultimate surrender of control; at the same time, the surrender – if there was any – was to her own consciousness. Many of the fears spread about Dreamweavers had been allayed as Dr. Covelli had helped her craft one for herself. Covelli's charms work had been inventive and amazing, and Hermione had been more than a little awed by it. The old tales of addiction were impossible, or should have been at any rate. Covelli's self-regulating charms effectively prevented the

Dreamweaver from functioning unless it was needed to guide a difficult dream or restore lost balance of some sort.

She strolled to the curtained doors that led to the balcony. They wouldn't open, of course, as Mr. Moody had surely spelled them shut and cast protections of all descriptions... *and a few that defy description, I'll wager*, Hermione mused. The curtains did give slightly, and she chanced a peek at the piazza below. There were a few people about, but not nearly as many as she would have expected on a warm Roman night.

Harry's latest post sat open atop her knapsack. Mr. Moody had brought it to her just after sunset. She had read it several times, hoping to draw something from the words. It was friendly but somehow forced. He had admitted that there were things she needed to be told, but she suspected that there was more for the telling than he was prepared to give her. Her first impulse was to be irritated by that, but she was resolved to treat Harry differently this year; he was a fully-qualified wizard, and the last months had proven that her decisions were no better than his – better informed, but no better in the end.

She had been very angry when she first found out that her post to him had been banished, but hadn't stayed angry. If anything, the image of Harry awash in owls had been a bit amusing. Dumbledore's decision to abandon Harry had been incomprehensible to her, and she had made her feelings abundantly clear. She had taken that opportunity to inform the Headmaster that she intended to resign her appointment as Prefect, and that had created more of a stir than she had anticipated. Her decision had been firm, however, and Professor McGonagall had accepted her letter of resignation; the Professor hadn't spoken to her since.

Some of Dr. Covelli's creamy paper stuck out of her knapsack, and she carefully tucked it away along with Harry's post. She had considered repeating her post to Harry – revising and resending it, in truth – but had demurred. As Harry had written, some things were best left out of a post; she would see him soon enough.

The roll of fabric in the trunk kept catching her attention; she gave it one surreptitious glance after another. It was less than five hours until they had to leave for the aerodrome, and at its weakest the Dreamweaver did little more than ward off nightmares. There had been far too many of those over the summer, and Hermione feared that there were many more to come. She craved one more night of restful sleep, and her desire won out. The Dreamweaver came easily out of the roll and fit perfectly against her. She was asleep as soon as her hands cleared the gold netting.

Professor McGonagall looked down the length of her rather sharp nose, her lips bloodless and thin. "Turn to page 5,637 in the Pangloss text, please. We will be transfiguring living plants today – devil's snare into oleander – and the required incantation is particularly challenging... Miss Granger, is there a problem?"

Hermione felt the flush creep upward from the base of her neck. “N-nothing, ma’am, I’m just... er...”

Professor McGonagall tapped her foot. “You’re dissembling.”

“It’s just... uh...” Hermione’s heart was pounding. She rifled through her bag with shaking hands. “It seems that m-my book is by Pym, not Pangloss... and it couldn’t possibly have more than a thousand pages or so...”

Professor McGonagall closed her eyes tightly and her jaw followed; then she sighed loudly. “May I presume that you completed the required scroll for today?”

A scroll appeared on her desk. “Yes, ma’am, I have it,” Hermione said excitedly.

“Very well,” McGonagall said. She smiled wickedly. “You may present first.”

Hermione looked down, and very quickly returned her gaze to the board behind Professor McGonagall. “Oh, no... ma’am, I... please...”

“It seems that the proper text is not the only thing you neglected to bring to class,” Professor McGonagall sneered. “If you do not begin your presentation in fifteen seconds, Miss Granger, I shall have to take fifty points from Gryffindor House.”

A voice cut through the fear – a familiar voice. **Professor McGonagall never sneers. Pangloss is a character from Muggle literature. You’ve never seen a single book 5,000 pages in length.** Everything that the voice said was true, but she couldn’t seem to take it in.

“Harry s-stopped this... this can’t be...” she mumbled.

“Mister Potter is no longer a student here. He can’t help you, Miss Granger. Your presentation – NOW, please,” Professor McGonagall snapped.

Hermione took a deep breath and unfurled the scroll. Professor McGonagall hadn’t even had the decency to impose a lengthy assignment. She quickly decided to hold the abbreviated parchment at her hips, and dashed to the front of the room.

“Oh, my eyes!” Draco Malfoy howled. “My eyes, they burn!”

Pansy Parkinson sniffed, “As if it weren’t enough to be a bossy, ill-mannered grind... well, you know what they say – a banshee in a ball gown is still a banshee. It’s obvious that a Mudblood undressed is still a Mudblood, as well.”

“That will be quite enough,” Professor McGonagall said half-heartedly.

“Granger, I wouldn’t even foist you on Goyle,” Malfoy sneered. “Sweet Merlin, Longbottom could do better.” Neville wouldn’t make eye contact and Hermione didn’t know if it was because he was embarrassed or because Malfoy was telling the truth.

“Two points from Slytherin House,” Professor McGonagall yawned.

*The disembodied voice was insistent, and Hermione struggled to grasp its advice. **You’re neither exceptionally ugly nor exceptionally attractive. You’re not a prize to be won, nor a penalty to be paid. This dream is false, and you know it.***

She looked at herself again, unflinchingly. The voice was correct: there was nothing exceptional about her, nothing that merited abuse or shame, or catcalls for that matter. There was nothing about her that merited shame, she recognised, nothing at all.

Hermione cleared her throat, and raised the short roll of parchment. The words swam, and then resolved again. The hisses and the jeers all faded away. She read aloud, “What Voldemort did to me, he chose to do. I did nothing to bring it upon myself. Harry did nothing to bring it upon me, other than simply being born. None of you can cause me to be ashamed unless I allow it. None of you can make me dislike myself unless I allow it.” Her hands opened, and the parchment fell to the floor. She let her hands drop to her sides, defenceless. “I refuse.”

McGonagall smiled faintly. “One hundred points to Gryffindor, Miss Granger,” she said, and then the Transfiguration classroom was gone. Hermione found herself on the spiral stairs that led to the top of the Astronomy Tower. She climbed, because she knew that she had to climb in order to end this. Professor Dumbledore rounded the curve, on his way down.

His eyes met hers. “Good evening, Miss Granger. Are you taking a constitutional?”

Hermione tried very hard not to look at Dumbledore as though he’d sprouted a second head. “Erm... no, sir. I need to go to the top of the tower, so if you’ll excuse me...”

“It is liberating to be stripped of one’s fears, but sometimes we are merely left exposed to greater fears,” Dumbledore said. “You may find what lies at the top of the tower very frightening, indeed.”

“I need to go to the top, sir,” Hermione insisted.

“Why, may I ask? Do you believe that this is somehow noble? Are you trying to prove your worth?” Dumbledore challenged. “What do you hope to accomplish?”

“I want to save him,” Hermione blurted out.

“Save him from what, I wonder?” Dumbledore mused. “Ah, it is no matter. More important, what are you willing to sacrifice?”

“Everything,” she whispered.

“You may wish to find out what that might entail, before making such a pledge,” Dumbledore cautioned. “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. Answer me this, Miss Granger... could you allow it?”

“I... have to go up there,” Hermione insisted.

“It is on your head, then – do not fail us,” Dumbledore said. He stroked his beard, and added abruptly, “Tell me... am I accurately described as niminy-piminy?”

“Niminy... wh... what?” Hermione stammered.

“Niminy-piminy, Miss Granger,” Dumbledore repeated. “It struck me as odd... once again, no matter. I must now take my leave. My own evening constitutional is always followed with proper foot care and a well-prepared pot of tea... perhaps you should try it at your leisure? I admit that it is certainly less bracing than the routine you have adopted.” He proceeded down the steps and out of view, whistling a bizarre and unfamiliar tune. Hermione looked up the spiralling stairs into the nothingness, took a deep breath, and drove herself toward the top.

He was there, resting on his forearms against the low wall, looking out at the Forbidden Forest and the lake and the rest of the world that lay in wait. The greatest fears always seemed to lie at the end of a dream, at the end of an adventure, so he had to be there. He heard the door creak, which ended any possibility for her to turn back. He saw her, gaped like a fish out of water, and slammed his eyes shut. “Hermione! Where are... what do you think you’re... I... it’s very cold out here; you’ll catch your death!” Harry spluttered.

Hermione’s voice trembled; she wasn’t sure if it was from the sudden blast of cold air or a rush of fear. “Harry, w-would you just look at me, please? It’ll all be over if you just look at me... I’m n-not ashamed anymore. I’ve nothing to be ashamed of.”

“I couldn’t possibly!” Harry shouted in a panic. “You’re going to freeze to death out here!” He dashed forward with one eye opened in the slightest squint, and pulled her inside his cloak.

Her teeth chattered and he managed to somehow draw her closer, which nearly destroyed any resolve that remained in her. “Harry, p-please just end this – just look at me, so I can move past it.”

“Move past it?” Harry laughed nervously. “Explain how I’m supposed to move past taking a look at you right now!”

She drew some strength from frustration. “Honestly, Harry,” she sighed. “This is just symbolism, after all. Being undressed in a dream symbolises being exposed in a threatening way. I fear having others see the real me, because... because I just fear it, right?”

“So you’re running around the castle starkers, because you’re afraid people will see the real you?” Harry asked. “Erm... Hermione, are you... you know... feeling better lately?”

Hermione said brightly, “I stood up to the Slytherins in Transfiguration class –”

“I thought we’d already put a stop to that one,” Harry cut in.

“I needed to manage it on my own,” Hermione explained, “and now I need to manage this as

well.”

Harry’s brow beetled in confusion. “But I’ve already seen the real you... haven’t I?”

Hermione groaned. “I’m not in the mood for stalling. I want to be done with this; I’m tired of this dream. I don’t understand why you’re being so obstinate.”

Harry was sweating profusely at the temples, which Hermione found rather odd considering the chill in the air. “Hermione... er... perhaps it hasn’t occurred to you, but... you do understand that I’m an ordinary bloke... don’t you?”

“No, I don’t understand...” Hermione trailed off, and then squeaked, “Oh!”

Sweaty redness spread up the sides of Harry’s neck. “The thing is, I couldn’t help seeing a little... erm... I saw enough, and... the thing is... youvenothingtobeashamedof.” His voice cracked badly, and he winced.

The same voice as before whispered to her, the voice she now knew to be her own. **This isn’t about his comfort, it’s about yours. Finish the dream, and let him go.**

“I’m sorry, Harry,” Hermione said quickly, and she pulled herself free from his cloak. He took in a sharp breath. His eyes locked onto hers; she waited for several moments, but they never wavered. He never lowered his gaze, not for an instant; he was still as good as before the Department of Mysteries: as good as before Voldemort paid her a visit.

Harry let his cloak fall. He was dressed in his worst set of Dursley hand-me-downs. “You’ve seen the real me, you know. I’m not all that complicated, really. I’m not all that special,” he said.

She shook her head at him, and forced herself to walk briskly to the edge.

“What are you doing?” Harry shouted. “We’re a hundred feet from the ground!”

“I have to let you go,” Hermione choked out. “If it ever comes to that... Lord help me... I have to let go.”

“Why?” Harry demanded.

She looked back at him and her feet locked into place. She was made of words, but couldn’t summon one to describe her feelings for him - they were bigger than she was, bigger than either of them, and composed of so many layers that she was unsure of what lay at the centre. “You have a prophecy to fulfil. I can’t wish it away, and I could send you to your death by standing in the way. If it ever comes to that... you can’t think of anything but killing Voldemort. I’ll have to let you go, and hope that you return.”

Harry moved toward her cautiously. “There’s another choice. There’s always another choice.”

“I have to let you go,” she repeated, and let herself slowly fall forward.

“Fair enough,” Harry agreed. He reached out lightning-fast; he sought her hand, and he seized it. “You never said anything about me having to let you go.”

She couldn’t stop herself; her bare feet slid on the slick stone. His only reaction was to tighten his grip on her hand. They fell together – moonlit shadows plunging into the darkness – and she wasn’t afraid anymore. It felt like the place she was intended to be. It felt like coming home.

Harry Potter and the Years of Rebellion

Returning To What We Once Knew

Chapter Thirty

RETURNING TO WHAT WE ONCE KNEW

August 31

Harry

Delicate silver instruments stood atop spindle-legged tables, making all manner of noises and going about their business as though Harry hadn't smashed them in June. He remembered the sense of wonder he had felt upon first seeing Dumbledore's chambers; that feeling was gone now. It had seemed absent when he had helped Dumbledore return from Grimmauld Place – an event that seemed so long ago now – and there was no doubt this time. Harry simply felt empty; he drew the same hollowness from the whole of Hogwarts. He was an intruder.

The portraits were mostly present but chose to silently regard him; he had heard nothing save the puffing and whirring from the instruments since a house-elf he hadn't known had ushered him in. A line of ghostly orange penetrated the grey eastern horizon and cast long shadows through the windows.

Phineas Nigellus broke the silence. "You are early, Mister Potter. Dumbledore has not yet returned from abroad."

"Abroad?" Harry asked. When there was no reply, he said, "I'll wait here."

Phineas raised an eyebrow. "It is unlikely that he will come prior to your scheduled meeting. Go raise mischief elsewhere, Mister Potter – take breakfast in the Great Hall; prepare a gazetteer of the broom closets; visit Dumbledore's great pet, that fellow who keeps the grounds..." Harry bristled, but held his tongue.

"You are not welcome here in the Headmaster's absence," sniffed a portrait that Harry didn't recognise; the comment drew sharp looks from several peers.

"I'm here, aren't I?" Harry's voice was suddenly loud and strong. "Apparently the house-elves don't agree."

“Impudence!” the unfamiliar portrait hissed.

Harry glared at the entire wall of faces, and walked behind Dumbledore’s desk. There was a scattering of whispers and there were a few grumbles, and he ignored all of it. Snatching up a bottle of ink and a quill, he dashed a note to the Headmaster on a stray scrap of parchment.

I arrived early. Phineas told me that you will not be here until our nine-o’clock meeting. I will be on the grounds, if you want to find me prior.

Harry

As soon as the ink was stoppered and the quill properly cleaned, he left the room without a word and wandered the quiet halls for a second time. The eyes of the portraits along the way all seemed to watch him as though they knew something – something profoundly sad.

“Hem, hem,” a woman’s voice sounded. Harry’s wand was in his hand and he faced toward the sound before he was fully aware that he’d moved.

“I was only wondering whether you wanted inside, Mr. Potter!” the Fat Lady squealed.

Harry slowly lowered his wand. “I’m sorry... I thought...” he mumbled.

The Fat Lady gave him the same look as he’d seen again and again from the portraits outside the Headmaster’s chambers. “Mr. Potter, you needn’t draw your wand; you merely need ask me for entry.”

“I don’t have a password,” Harry admitted.

The Fat Lady smiled warmly, in the way he remembered Mrs. Weasley in years past. “Firstly, there are no student passwords to give until the morrow. Secondly, we have been told to give you the run of the castle just as we give to the professors.” She bore herself up proudly. “Thirdly... once a true Gryffindor, always a true Gryffindor.”

Harry smiled faintly. “Thank you,” he said. “May I?” The Fat Lady nodded proudly and the entry to the Gryffindor common room opened before him. He heard a faint voice trailing down the stairs from the girls’ dormitories, and quickly Disillusioned himself before he tried Shacklebolt’s jumping spell. In one hop, he found himself several steps above the common room floor. He waited, but the stairs did not flatten and he did not slide. *What am I doing?* he asked himself. *It’s probably just McGonagall... or Filch.* He had to admit that the thought of unexpectedly greeting Filch was rather delicious.

“...yes, the entire castle possesses a certain charm... indeed, it is easy to lose sight of that... here, I believe... perhaps she made some sort of permanent marking?... if you say so, but in my experience...” It was Dumbledore’s voice. Harry quieted his feet, and moved steadily up the stairs. The door marked for the sixth year girls was ajar.

“This isn’t so different from Smithson Hall, honestly; much older, of course, but not so different.”

Hearing Mrs. Granger's voice made the hair on Harry's neck stand on end.

"Excuse me for a moment, would you?" Dumbledore said. The door slowly opened, and the Headmaster peered into the stairwell. "Please join us, Harry. I had thought that we would not see you until later this morning."

Harry looked down slowly, to find that he was no longer Disillusioned. There was no sign of a wand in Dumbledore's hands, but the Headmaster was regarding him with twinkling eyes and a frustrating smile. *Merlin, I have a lot to learn*, he thought.

Mrs. Granger stood just inside the door, arms crossed and brow worried. Mr. Granger was looking out a window with obvious purpose. Both wore rather large and elaborate pendants; Harry wondered if they allowed Muggles to see the castle. There was no sign of Hermione. Harry thrust his hands into his pockets. "Erm... good morning, ma'am," he croaked.

"Good morning, Harry," Mrs. Granger said with a very firm tone that caused his shoulders to inch higher.

"The Grangers were interested in seeing where their daughter spends her time. We first visited the library, of course," Dumbledore said lightly. "In addition, they require your assistance; they have reluctantly taken the decision to conceal themselves from the wizarding world."

Harry took in a sharp breath. *Conceal them? Did Dumbledore mean...* "The *Fidelius* charm?" he asked. Dumbledore nodded slightly, and Harry felt a chill at the thought. Mr. Granger turned from the window to face him; his expression was too much like that of the Fat Lady for Harry's liking.

He wondered where Hermione was and why she wasn't with her parents. "And Hermione? She...?" Harry managed to say.

Mr. Granger responded with clear discomfort, "She will be staying here."

"With you," Mrs. Granger added; she seemed even less comfortable with the idea.

"I see," Harry said. A small part of him wished that Hermione would simply go with them, but the rest felt a flicker of satisfaction that he consciously held from his face – at the very least, she was well enough to return. He couldn't seem to evade Mr. Granger's gaze. "Erm... thank you for the picture. I never said thank you," he offered.

Mrs. Granger's brow beetled, but Mr. Granger said, "You're welcome, Harry. I meant what I said that day."

Harry thrust his hands into his pockets, and tried to think of the right thing to say under the circumstances. "It's the right decision, I think. If you went back to your home, you wouldn't be safe," he offered.

Mr. Granger's face tightened. "We've been left with little choice."

“You certainly couldn’t have a better Secret Keeper than Professor Dumbledore. I can’t imagine how anyone could ever get him to...” Harry stopped as the Grangers scowled simultaneously. “I’m sorry... did I say something wrong?”

“A word, Mr. Dumbledore?” Mrs. Granger snapped, and inclined her head toward the door to the stairs.

Harry’s jaw dropped as he realised what was happening. He held up a hand to stop the Headmaster and Mrs. Granger, and took an unsteady breath. “Me? Wait... you want *me* to be your Secret Keeper? Are you...?”

“Distrustful of him?” Mr. Granger asked, pointing harshly at Dumbledore. “Yes, absolutely.”

Mrs. Granger glared at Mr. Granger, who returned the look full-force. “Mr. Dumbledore told us that the effectiveness of this bit of magic is connected to the strength of the person who puts it into effect,” she explained.

“We wouldn’t have believed him, but Hermione and McGonagall and Dr. Covelli all said the same,” Mr. Granger cut in.

Harry turned to Dumbledore, puzzled. “Who’s Dr. Covelli?”

“They refer to a new member of the Hogwarts staff,” Dumbledore returned. “You will meet her within the week.”

Mrs. Granger looked at Harry, but her eyes quickly fell to the floor. “I don’t think there’s any doubt that you’re a powerful young man, not after what we’ve seen,” she said.

Harry said nothing for a while; he let the implications of what had been said churn in his mind. The Grangers waited expectantly. Dumbledore closed his eyes; he appeared tired. When Harry spoke at last, he was slow and measured. “First, I’m not as powerful as the Headmaster. For that matter, I’m not as —”

“It won’t be *him* ; that is not acceptable,” Mr. Granger said harshly.

Without looking, Dumbledore said, “You really must stop underestimating yourself, Harry. You are as powerful as you wish to be.”

“Second, I should think *this* rules me out,” Harry sneered and jabbed roughly at his scar.

Dumbledore’s eyes remained closed. “When properly cast, the *Fidelius* charm buries the secret very deeply within the Secret Keeper’s mind. Voldemort would have to invade your mind sufficient to take possession of you, Harry. I doubt that he would again subject himself to the injury that would accompany such an invasion, not after his experience at the Department of Mysteries. In addition, I expect that your barriers to intrusion would be heightened by the knowledge that you hold a secret of this nature.”

Harry clenched his jaw at the last; there was no doubt that Dumbledore was preying upon him. He forced himself to let the rush of anger fade away. The nearest bed rattled and shook for a moment, and then stilled itself. "It requires a strong wizard? Before I'll agree to this, you'll have to explain why *Wormtail* was ever allowed to be my mum and dad's Secret Keeper," he said coldly.

Dumbledore's eyes snapped open. "If Sirius related the circumstances to you, then you should have your answer. However, I will provide you with an explanation if you still wish it," he said.

Harry was acutely aware of the feel of his wand in his sleeve. "I don't know the charm," he said very quietly.

"The *Fidelius* charm is quite simple to cast, deceptively so," Dumbledore said. "The success and the strength lie in the power applied and the intent within the wizard."

Harry couldn't help but think of what had happened to his parents. "Then... when Wormtail cast *Fidelius* ... he wasn't strong, his intentions were bad..." His throat tightened. "It could have been broken, couldn't it? A strong wizard could have broken it."

"Even if Peter hadn't directly betrayed your parents, it is possible that they might have been found out by determined Death Eaters," Dumbledore said sadly. "This would not have been the case if Sirius had cast the charm. Sirius and your father made a terrible miscalculation. It was doubtless one of the moments that the Dementors drew upon when they were in Sirius' presence."

Harry tried to summon a happy thought, and failed. "I'd... I'd rather not talk about Sirius."

Mr. Granger cleared his throat. "Harry, it sounds as if you have to want this. We can find another way."

Harry shook his head. "What I want is for all three of you to be safe, for everyone to be safe."

"I have asked the Grangers to remain sequestered in my quarters for a brief time, a few days at most; it is not possible to give proper attention to the charm until after the start of term," Dumbledore said.

Dumbledore's posture made it clear that the conversation was at an end. "In your office at nine-o'clock, then?" Harry asked.

"I look forward to it," Dumbledore returned.

Mr. Granger motioned for Harry to stop. "Harry... would it be possible for you to join Cordelia and me for dinner this evening?" he asked.

Harry looked nervously to Dumbledore, who merely regarded him with sparkling eyes. "Erm... uh... apparently it is?" he advanced.

"Dinner will be served at half past six in my quarters, Harry," Dumbledore said merrily. "I shall be otherwise engaged this evening, but the house-elves prepare a magnificent table."

Hermione

It was grey and drizzling in London, but the window to room eleven at the Leaky Cauldron was open. Hermione wanted to hear the din of the minibuses and lorries from the street below. She didn't mind the coolness after nearly a month in the Italian heat, and she figured that there was no avoiding the damp. It was a nice enough room, not as large as her quarters at Dr. Covelli's villa but nearly the size of her bedroom at home – or what was once her home, at any rate. The room was reasonably well appointed; but for the lack of electric lights, she could have been in any number of older lodgings throughout England.

She looked in the mirror above the basin and scowled. Her hair was disastrous. In the warm trade winds, it had been vibrant and free. In the cool damp, it clumped and clung to her head. In Italy, it made her feel like she had a life of her own. In London, it made her look like her mother. She idly reached up to tuck her fringe behind her ear out of habit, but there was no longer anything to tuck.

“You should save that scowl for your hairdresser, dear,” the mirror said cattily.

Someone rapped sharply at the door, in the appointed pattern. Hermione faced the door warily and gave the correct response. “Enter at your own risk,” she said.

A vaguely familiar-looking woman with long dark hair slipped into the room. “Wotcher, Herm –” she began, before she froze in place and goggled.

“It's lovely to see you as well, Tonks,” Hermione huffed.

Tonks slowly advanced, as though she were examining a strange and undiscovered creature. “Your hair... it's... it's *short* ... and *flat* ...”

“I'm overwhelmed by your powers of observation,” Hermione said dryly.

“It's all wrong,” Tonks said. She circled Hermione quickly, regarding her with a critical eye. “Your hair's too thick to be cut that way. I hate to say this, but... well; it looks like you have a wet Kneazle atop your head.” Hermione glared at her, but she merely smiled and went on, “I should know; I've had it all – thick hair, thin hair, long hair, short hair, old hair, young hair, braids, pigtails, bobs...”

“*Tonks!*” Hermione snarled.

Tonks shrugged. “What? It's the truth. *You're* in need of Miranda Elspeth.”

“Who's Miranda Elspeth?” Hermione asked.

Tonks eyes bulged. “Who's...?” She started to laugh, but stopped when it apparently dawned on her that Hermione was asking a legitimate question. “Cor, you're serious! Hermione, you're the only witch I know under the age of one hundred who could ask that and mean it... well, there *is* McGonagall, I suppose...”

“I gather that this person cuts hair?” Hermione snapped.

“*Cuts hair*, you say? Miranda isn’t some menace with a wand and a pair of charmed shears! She’s a *personal stylist*,” Tonks announced with put-on airs; she managed to hold a serious expression for a few moments.

“I have no idea what that means,” Hermione said flatly. She looked to the mirror, and feared that she might prefer the devil she knew to anything Tonks might conjure up. “I don’t want to offend you; it’s just... you wouldn’t be the first person I’d think of in terms of style.”

Tonks let out a barking laugh. “What, did you think I was going to point out something pink and spiky?” Her eyes screwed up in concentration; within a few moments, she appeared to be Hermione from the neck upward. “I had something rather like this in mind.” She looked into the mirror, and her hair reshaped itself; it took on a fringe and fuller sides, though it still didn’t reach her collarbones. She smiled with satisfaction. “What do you think?”

Hermione nearly spoke several times before she managed, “It wouldn’t look like that on me.”

“You’re selling yourself a bit short, dear,” the mirror said kindly.

Tonks continued to smile. “More than a bit, I’d say. So... how is it, then?”

“It does look better,” Hermione admitted, “but my hair would have to grow out. Perhaps you could take me to see this Elspeth woman over Christmas? I... I’m sure I can do something with this mess for a while.”

“I doubt any ordinary person could arrange an appointment with Miranda on only four months’ notice. Of course you’re with me, which means you jump the queue.” Tonks shot Hermione a playful smirk. “Now, as for growing out your hair... you *are* a witch, aren’t you? All you need is a spot of Hair Restoring Potion and you’ll be right as rain.”

Hermione returned Tonks’ smirk with a dubious stare before facing the mirror again. She huffed at her reflection and reached for a cloak – a hooded cloak. “I’m not letting this woman do anything that requires more than two minutes’ extra care each morning,” she insisted. The hood fit low and tight on her head.

“You’ll love it,” Tonks promised. Her wand moved about in a complicated wave, and which provoked another knock at the door. “Kirley rocks!” she squealed in response. Hermione rolled her eyes.

Hestia Jones entered, closed the door, and laughed. “You’re incorrigible, Tonks.” She took Hermione’s hand warmly, and began, “I don’t know if you remember me...”

“I remember you, ma’am,” Hermione acknowledged, and hoped that there would be no discussion of the attack.

“Please, it’s just Hestia. How have you been getting along, since all that business?” Jones asked.

Hermione sighed. “I’m getting along.”

Jones nodded silently for a few moments. Hermione willed the woman to look for a way to end the conversation; it didn’t work. “Back to your studies tomorrow, then? What are you, a seventh year?

“Sixth year,” Hermione returned.

“It’s a bit gloomy, I know, but I doubt you’ll be needing that hood,” Jones offered after more silence.

Tonks grinned wickedly. “Hermione’s hair is misbehaving, so I promised that we’d have it suitably punished.”

Jones laughed. “I’m game; we’re off to the Alley now?” she asked with the sort of false cheer that Hermione associated with trips to the Hospital Wing.

“Apparently so,” Hermione said. There was hesitation in her voice, but neither of the women seemed to hear it.

It seemed as though every wizard and witch in England had descended upon Diagon Alley at once; Hermione couldn’t recall ever seeing such crowds there. She drew her hands inside of her cloak, where she could dig her nails into her palms without anyone taking notice. With each rustle of a long black cloak, her stomach tightened. She took in a nervous breath when the intersection of Knockturn Alley came into view and didn’t release it until they were well past. A well-dressed man with long slicked blonde hair burst forth from the apothecary, and Hermione clutched at Tonks’ arm.

Tonks’ head jerked around and she nearly lost her footing. She looked Hermione up and down, and flashed Hestia Jones a quick hand signal. Jones shifted subtly, and literally watched their backs as Tonks guided Hermione to a surprisingly secluded spot between two storefronts and quickly cast silencing and concealment charms.

Hermione looked away. “I’m sorry; I didn’t mean to do that.”

“That fellow looked a bit like Lucius Malfoy for a moment, didn’t he?” Tonks sighed. “Look... it wasn’t hard to see that you were in a bad way, afterward... If you need to talk, or you just want someone to listen...”

Even through the haze of the charms, the bustle of the alley felt overwhelming to Hermione. “Thank you,” she managed, “but could we simply get to wherever it is you’re taking me?”

Two hours later Hermione found herself thrust back into the crowd and flanked by Tonks and Hestia Jones, her hood now lowered. Tonks had been right about Miranda Elspeth, who was apparently a school friend of Mrs. Tonks. However, Tonks’ special abilities and not her parentage had earned favours; on occasion, she had apparently modelled hairstyles for Elspeth.

Hermione’s hair was still short, as she had settled upon, but it was fuller and lighter now – much

more as it had appeared in Italy, though a touch longer. Tonks burred about the style so incessantly that Hermione simply stopped listening. Eventually they budged their way into the throngs that filled Flourish and Blotts and Hermione relaxed somewhat; she was in her element.

Someone nearly jostled her into a large placard set next to the service desk. Tonks let forth a stinging upbraid to the poor unfortunate wizard who had pushed Hermione, and drew a few looks that Hermione would have preferred to avoid. She looked to see if she could slip behind the placard or beside the desk, but stopped dead before it as her eyes took in the bright blue words.

GILDEROY LOCKHART

will be signing copies of his new memoir

JOINED-UP LETTERS:

Rediscovering the Real Me and How the Wizarding World Should Be

Today 11:00 A.M. to 12:00 P.M.

It was only then that she noticed the usual crowd of anxious students and parents had been joined by a large number of witches roughly the age of her parents and a fair number of similarly aged wizards as well. There wasn't the near-mania she recalled from her first encounter with Lockhart, four years prior; instead, people seemed to flow toward the back of the shop in orderly fashion. She couldn't resist sneaking a look though she certainly hadn't the faintest genuine interest in the man, not after what he'd nearly done to Harry and Ron.

Lockhart was seated at a table surrounded by pictures of the jacket to his new book. His face didn't dominate the jacket this time; Lockhart's small image in the lower corner gave only the barest hint of his unnaturally white teeth. His robes followed suit, muted but stylish grey checks instead of the brilliant forget-me-not blue that had been calculated to match his eyes. He had a pleasant look on his face, but a serious one. Hermione wondered how in Merlin's name Lockhart had recovered his memory, and what had possessed him to change his image.

A photographer moved about the crowd, taking pictures of Lockhart shaking hands with readers and well-wishers. Occasionally the brilliant smile came out from hiding. Brilliant flashes lit the room, and purple smoke wafted amidst the rafters. "Mr. Lockhart, look this way please!" the photographer called out. "Let me through, please... *Daily Prophet* ... Mr. Lockhart, here please!"

Hermione hefted a copy of Lockhart's new book, and paged through the contents and the author's notes, which she hadn't expected to find. On first glance, it appeared to be a book of some substance. *I wonder who wrote it for him?* she mused. The crowd lurched to one side as the photographer moved in her direction. Lockhart released the hand of an autograph seeker and came to his feet.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, waving his hands. "Thank you for coming today. As has been detailed extensively in the *Daily Prophet*'s recently completed five-part series, I have spent the

last three years recovering at St. Mungo's from grievous injuries. My memory was severely damaged as a result of a Basilisk attack that also wounded one of the wizarding world's other well-known figures – the one who has caused me to finish second in the polling for *Witch Weekly*'s Most-Charming-Smile Award this year, as I understand it – Harry Potter.” Knowing laughter echoed from the assembled crowd. Hermione thought that Lockhart's eyes flashed for a moment as he went on. “In my book, *Joined-Up Letters*, I describe how I went from having no memory at all to rediscovering everything as well as reaching a new understanding of...”

Hermione stopped hearing Lockhart and her blood ran cold. *How much does he remember?* she wondered. *If he truly recalls everything...* One page after another turned as she tore through the book, looking for the description of events. As Lockhart told it, he and Harry had battled a basilisk deep beneath Hogwarts. They had saved two students, according to the book, before Harry was injured and Lockhart was struck by his own rebounded spell. Neither Ginny nor Ron was mentioned by name, much to her relief, but she couldn't fathom why Lockhart had actually taken responsibility for his own injury – even if he was still embellishing.

She was jostled again, and lost her grip on the book. It struck the floor with an audible thump. “Pardon me... are you Hermione Granger?” someone called. Without thinking, she turned to face the unknown voice. A brilliant flash flooded her eyes and purplish smoke tickled her nose.

By the time Hermione blinked back tears from the light, the photographer lay on his back and his camera was slowly contracting into a ball. “Ask permission next time,” Tonks growled. The crowd formed a restless circle around the fallen photographer, the enraged auror and Hermione. Hestia Jones stood in the first row of the circle but dispensed as many deadly stares as did Tonks.

Hermione shrunk back against Tonks. She felt as exposed as in her worst dreams, and desperately hoped that either Tonks or Jones would move to spirit her from the room. The crowd stirred, and then parted to her right.

“Good morning, Miss Granger,” Lockhart said. “My, but this is an unexpected pleasure.” He flashed his famous smile, which did nothing whatsoever to put Hermione at ease.

Jones stepped out from the crowd. “We have matters in hand, Lockhart,” she snapped.

“You are familiar to me...” Lockhart murmured.

Jones scowled at him. “How I wish that weren't true.”

The pieces of the puzzle appeared to fall into place; Lockhart laughed nervously. “I apologise, cousin; my memories are still hazy at times.”

Jones was cold as ice. “Tell it to Emmeline or someone else who's interested in your wares, Gilderoy.”

“All in good time, cousin Hestia, all in good time,” Lockhart said with a lightness that was almost jarring. He turned to Hermione, and the smile broadened. “How do you fare, my dear girl? I'm

sure everyone here is interested to know the answer. Very few people face the Dark Lord and his minions and return to tell the tale, after all.

Before she could say anything, he made a flamboyant whirl to face the breadth of the crowd and said, “This poor young lady’s experience goes directly to my points about the state of wizarding in England today, which are detailed in my new book, *Joined-Up Letters* . How is it that she and others like her continue to face random violence?”

Hermione snapped, “Random?” but no one save Tonks appeared to hear.

“The Dark Lord was absent for more than a decade,” Lockhart blathered on, “yet he was able to return to a powerful position quite rapidly. What could possibly cause today’s young witches and wizards to join with the Dark Lord? The answer is quite simple, actually.” He took a pause clearly intended for effect, and Hermione had to bite on the side of her hand to remain quiet. “The wizarding world is under assault, good people. The age-old traditions that formed the glue for our way of life have disappeared or have gone to ground. We have forgotten who we are.”

Hermione could hold her tongue no longer. “Thus, all the Muggle-borns attacked in recent days were responsible for their own attacks – is that your point, sir?”

Lockhart turned slightly to face her – not so much as to put his back to the bulk of his audience, Hermione noted. “We are all responsible – not just us, but also those who came before. Those born of wizards and witches thwart the efforts of newcomers to enter into our society.” He gave her a pointed look. “Those born outside of our world deride wizarding ways and seek to impose their world upon all of us. Centuries pass, all of us become more firm in our positions, and we find ourselves clinging to Dark Lords on the one hand and mad prophets like Keith MacLeish on the other.”

“Societies are always influenced by newcomers,” Hermione returned stridently. “The Ministry must be a direct product of that, sir. The civil service arose in England long after the wizarding world broke with the Muggles. If not for Muggle-born influence, there would be no Ministry at all.”

Lockhart smiled. “I see that someone has been sleeping through Professor Binns’ classes,” he said waggishly. “Not to fear, Miss Granger; that puts you in excellent company. It’s true that the Ministry has been reshaped over time to reflect its Muggle counterpart, but there was a Minister for Magic well before ties were severed. In this case, it seems that *they* were influenced by *us* .” With a flourish, he returned his full attention to the crowd. “This is the sort of exchange we badly need, ladies and gentlewizards. We are under siege both from outside and from within. We cannot and should not rob ourselves of what the best among our newcomers may bring – one need only look to the young lady behind me to see that there is value to be found. However, we cannot tear down a thousand years of wizarding culture over one conflict, however serious it may be. It is time for us to all rediscover ourselves and our purposes.” The trademark smile burst forth. “To that end, I am pleased to announce that I shall be resuming my role as chief spokeswizard for the Dark Forces Defence League, as well as assistant director. The League is committed to standing against violence and standing for wizards and witches everywhere.”

As soon as he stopped speaking, the crowd began to applaud. Lockhart continued to smile as he retrieved the book at Hermione's feet. "I believe you dropped this," he said. Before she could answer, he drew a quill from somewhere and dashed off something inside the front cover. "With my compliments," he added, and placed the book in Hermione's hands.

"Thank you," she said, almost as a reflex.

Lockhart bowed slightly. His smile faded, and he said in a near whisper, "Pass along my respects to your little friends, especially the redheaded one." He was seated at the table again and jovially signing books before Hermione could breathe.

Tonks planted a hand on her shoulder. "Hermione, I am so sorry. I overreacted to the photographer, and ended up drawing more attention."

Hermione shivered. "Here's my booklist. Please, let's just pick these up and go."

Tonks stiffened. "What did he say to you?"

"I just want to fetch my books and go, Tonks," Hermione said. "Please leave it alone."

Harry

Madam Rosmerta seemed possessed of a permanent smile, and Harry decided that he could easily become accustomed to that. "I can't believe that you're old enough to let rooms from me, Harry," she said, with a shake of her head. "Well, I suppose that you aren't old enough, really; you know what I meant."

"It's been an odd summer," Harry allowed.

She filled a glass with pumpkin juice and slid it across the bar top to him. "Obviously, I'm thrilled to have you lodge here."

The Three Broomsticks was empty excepting the two of them, but Harry lowered his voice all the same. "I'm not the... safest sort you could take in, you know."

Rosmerta's smile dimmed. "There's trouble in the wind. You could lock yourself in the castle, and trouble would still find us."

"If you'd prefer that I slip in and out of the back..." Harry offered.

"Nonsense," Rosmerta insisted. "Hogsmeade is a small place, Harry; there's no hiding you here." She added with a laugh, "If you're going to bring trouble, then I may as well profit from it."

Harry swallowed uneasily. "I'd understand if you wanted, I don't know, something extra for the trouble?"

Rosmerta's eyebrows shot up. "I was poking fun!" She reached out and set her hand atop his. "I

was fond of your parents, and your parents' friends. How... how is Remus faring?"

Harry looked to the front doors. "I wouldn't know," he said flatly.

"Oh," Rosmerta said quietly.

Harry broke the silence. "I have another meeting at the castle... could I see the room?"

Rosmerta's smile returned. "It's rather more than a room. You don't mind being up in the garret, I hope? You're a young buck, so the stairs shouldn't trouble you." Her smile became more of a smirk. "Besides, it has its own way in and out and it faces the rear... *if* you were of a mind to be slipping in and out, of course."

"That might present a challenge," Harry sighed.

Rosmerta laughed. "I suppose it might, with the new Defence professor lodging under the same roof."

Harry sat up straighter. "Marcus Detheridge?"

"You know him, then?" Rosmerta asked.

"Not yet, no," Harry said.

"You needn't concern yourself, Harry," Rosmerta told him. "His references are sterling, and that's understating it. He's the sort of fellow you want to hoist a pint with, eh? The man does keep some odd hours, I'll grant you."

Harry gestured toward the doors. "I'm not worried about Professor Detheridge," he said glumly, "it's the lot outside that's keeping watch."

"Keeping watch... what's this?" Rosmerta ambled to the front window and peered out. "I'll be switched! Let's see, there are... two... three... is that Mad-Eye Moody?"

Harry stood behind her. "That's Moody. Over there, that's Mundungus Fletcher –"

Rosmerta spun around angrily. "'*Dung Fletcher*? Is this Dumbledore's doing?" Harry nodded quickly, and she railed on, "I'll be talking to him, if he thinks that conniving thief is coming with shouting distance of my establishment! He's banned, has been for years!" She stopped abruptly, and her expression darkened. "Mad-Eye Moody and 'Dung Fletcher, together? That brings back old times... times I'd rather not see return." Harry said nothing; he preferred that she drew her own conclusions. It sounded as though she had at least a passing acquaintance with the 'old crowd'.

She collected herself, and extended a hand to Harry. "Shall we go up?"

At the top of the first flight, there were four doors down a long hallway. "Those are the single

rooms,” Rosmerta explained. “Professor Detheridge took two of the four for the year. I offered him the flat, but he said that he preferred two rooms.”

Harry wondered why Detheridge had foregone quarters in the castle, but the thought left his mind as Rosmerta opened the door at the top of the second flight. The flat ran the entire length of the garret; it was more spacious than the bothy. The door opened into a living area with two dormer windows. There was a genuine kitchen, but it was a wizarding kitchen; Harry made a mental note to have Dobby teach him how to use the appliances. The bath and water closet were small, but there were two bedrooms – a larger one at the end with a large window, and a smaller room against the bath.

Except for the small bedroom, there was a window in every room. He could access the concealed side stairs from the larger bedroom – his bedroom. The flat did face the rear, but it also faced the street. He could see the lake from the living area, and he could see the rest of Hogsmeade from his bedroom. Having Detheridge immediately below him was less than thrilling; it meant that he’d have to work on his popping – both to reduce the noise and to keep from strewing half of the flat across the meadow behind the building. On the whole, it certainly seemed to meet his needs.

“Perfect,” he said. “Did Mr. Tonks – ?”

“He returned the papers this morning,” Rosmerta said. “We’ll just charm your keys and you can be on your way.”

“Erm... about the money...?” he began.

Rosmerta frowned. “I was serious about one galleon for the year, Harry. That’s very far from what Ted Tonks returned, very far indeed.”

“That was really kind of you, Madam Rosmerta, but I can pay,” Harry insisted.

She seemed to look right through him for a moment. “It’s not about you, Harry... it’s out of respect for your mum and dad.”

Harry didn’t know what to say in return. He supposed that much of the concern shown him by adults owed to his parents, but few people ever said that aloud. “I think... I think they’d be pleased to see me paying my own way,” he offered.

Rosmerta seemed to deflate; she leant heavily against the dining table. “I wish they could see that, Harry; they were good people, the best,” she said quietly. Harry wondered just how well she had known his parents. He signed the Gringotts draft Mr. Tonks had sent to cover the first two months’ expense.

She set it aside. He moved to shake her extended hand, and she pulled him into a warm embrace. He stiffened for a moment, but accepted it. “Welcome, Harry. I hope you’re at home here,” she said.

Hermione

Tonks muttered into her ear. “If you’re certain you don’t want to be seen, it’s best you keep moving, maybe even put up the hood.”

Hermione followed her eyes to the absurd storefront for Weasley’s Wizarding Wheezes; the twins certainly appeared to be doing well, if the stream of people in and out the doors was any indication. She looked nervously from side to side for evidence of red hair; seeing none, her pace toward the Leaky Cauldron quickened. There were people everywhere, all pressing in at her. *Not yet*, she told herself. *Tomorrow I can do this, but not yet.*

“I don’t know if I can keep up,” panted Fred Weasley in Hermione’s left ear.

“It’s times like this when I realise we’re not playing Quidditch anymore,” George Weasley added in her right ear. Hermione hadn’t heard a hint of a pop and she shrieked, which caused an untold number of bystanders to turn and look.

She was surrounded by a blur of movement. When it stopped, Fred stood very stiffly and quietly in front of Tonks. George was in similar shape, and Hestia Jones’ arm was around his waist in a way that would seem friendly to a casual passer-by. “Not funny, boys – not at all,” Tonks said in a low voice.

Fred’s head relaxed, but he remained still with his arms tight to his sides. “Didn’t see you there, my darling Nymph,” he said. “We were too busy trying to check out... er... I mean... you know...”

Tonks’ hair flickered as red as her cheeks. “‘Nymph’? Remember, little boy, I know what’s behind some of your latest creations –”

“Oi, it was a joke! Joking!” Fred squeaked.

Hestia Jones smirked at George. “Just exactly what were you... what was that? ‘Checking out’?”

George’s ears flushed. “Erm... the thing is, we, uh, saw Hermione here... didn’t know it was her at first...” He gave Hermione a pleading look. “We wouldn’t have been bird-watching if we’d known it was you, honest!”

“Is that so?” Hermione ground her teeth, something that would have sent both her parents into hysterics. For his part, George appeared to be seeking an escape route.

“We swear it!” Fred insisted. “When we figured out it was you – smashing hair, by the way – we had to pop over straight away! Friend to our sister and brother –”

“More importantly, friend to our business partner –” George chimed in quickly.

“A sheer genius with Charms and Transfiguration and... well, just about everything, really –” Fred added.

“Don’t forget... she surely trod all over dear Percy’s pompous arse on the OWLs –” George noted.

“Percy?” Fred protested. “She surely trod over *Bill’s* arse.” He smirked at Tonks. “Course, you’d rather be the one doing the trodding there.” Tonks promptly smacked him atop the head.

“I don’t know anything about my OWLs,” Hermione said. In truth, she hadn’t thought about them, not even when the Headmaster had mentioned preparation for her NEWTs. “I never received my scores,” she added, suddenly very perplexed.

Hestia Jones scowled. She let go of George, who nearly fell before she released the bind that held him still. “That’s dodgy,” she said. “Those scores should have gone out weeks ago.”

“Perhaps they couldn’t find me,” Hermione said quietly. Given that she’d seen Professor Dumbledore a number of times, that explanation seemed out of order. Only then did it dawn on her that Professor McGonagall had provided her a booklist without a course registration.

“Let’s keep moving,” Tonks said with a casual air. “With those jackets of yours, we might as well wear advertisements.” There was nothing casual about the way her eyes swept the crowds flowing up and down the alley.

Fred let out a deep breath as his arms came free. Hermione noticed that both of the twins were also watching the surroundings; they were simply good at hiding it. She felt a rush of nervousness, and began looking herself for dark robes and blond hair and silver hands.

George put his hand atop her shoulder and she nearly jumped out of her cloak. “Sorry,” he said awkwardly.

“Okay,” she managed.

Tonks caught her eye. “I’ll fetch the rest of your list. Can you lot manage the last hundred feet or so?” The twins grumbled at her.

Hermione hadn’t noticed how close they had come to the wall. Both George and Fred followed her through the portal and into the Leaky Cauldron, with Hestia Jones close at their heels; Fred said something about waiting on a delivery. The dining hall bustled with patrons, and the twins weren’t hesitant to clear a path. She drew curious looks; apparently some of the crowd from Flourish and Blotts had beaten them down the alley.

“Well, well, look who’s here!” Fred shouted out. Dashing through the crowded room from the direction of the Floo were Ron, Ginny, Mr. Weasley and Mrs. Weasley.

Hermione felt the room closing in. “I can’t,” she gasped.

George looked at her curiously. “Hermione?”

She saw Mrs. Weasley’s face, and her shoulders rose. “I just *can’t*,” she cried, and took a step backward.

George's expression softened and she cringed inside – *not pity; anything but that*, she thought. "Oi, Fred! Play Keeper for a minute, right?" he called out without glancing away from her. She felt herself being drawn by the hand back through the crowd to the stairs that led up to the rooming house. Waves of fear and anger and self-loathing pulsed through her until she could barely keep her feet.

George gripped her by the shoulders, and pushed his face toward hers. "Hermione? You in there?" She managed to nod but couldn't speak; her throat was too tight. He guided her up the stairs and down the corridor until she stopped before number eleven.

"I'm sorry, I just... I can't..." she said weakly.

George's voice was low and calm. "No worries. Look..." He seemed to struggle for a few moments. "Been enough nightmares to go around the last few weeks, eh?"

"More than enough," she said hoarsely.

George sighed. "You're all lucky to be alive, you know. Fred, Dad, Mum, Bill, Ron, Ginny, Harry... it would have been just me and Charlie... and Percy, the bloody ponce. The thing of it is, you're one of us – you and Harry both. Don't ever forget that."

Hermione let out a half-sob and half-snort. "I... I sent your mum a Howler," she choked out.

"You... what? Bloody hell... a Howler? Honestly? Wish I'd been there for that..." George's laughter subsided. "No one's said anything, and believe me, we'd have heard. Are you sure?"

Hermione wiped at her nose and eyes, and groaned. "Honestly, George, I know how to send a Howler. I even masked it – you know, made it a normal colour."

"A masked Howler?" George perked up. "You know how to do that?" He cleared his throat. "I see... well... another time for that. I'd better go help Fred before he's served up for dinner."

"Thank you," Hermione whispered, and she pulled George into a hug.

George returned it for a while, but started to fidget. "I... er... really should get down there... uh... right, then." He dashed quickly down the stairs, and Hermione fought with the door to her room until it recognised her and allowed her in.

She thought of her Dreamweaver for a moment, but she wasn't tired in the slightest; if anything, she was edgy to the point of being unable to breathe. It occurred to her that her problems no longer lay within her dreams; now her problem was the waking moments in between. She splashed water on her face from the basin.

"What a lovely hair style, dear," the mirror chirped.

Her eyes were red and her face was blotchy; her hair was the only thing in order. "Sod off," she snapped.

She tried reading as a diversion, but it failed her. Her Muggle books were worn from re-reading, and she couldn't bring herself to look at the materials Dumbledore had provided. She had gone through a book of Hawthorne poems in a daze and was forcing her way through *Pride and Prejudice*, when the floor rumbled and a loud din echoed through her door from the corridor. She crept nervously to the door and pulled it open.

Moody must have sent the two posts with a single owl, Hermione decided; Harry banished both, but the owl had apparently been persistent. The awful sound of her own voice amplified a hundred times tore through her, and for a brief moment facing Voldemort again seemed preferable to standing there in the open threshold.

Harry

"Dunno, Cyril... smells like an ickle student to me," the first gargoyle said.

The second gargoyle shook its head profusely. "Me thinks it's the one the Baron was going on about, Godfrey." It reached out with blazing speed and poked Harry in the chest with one of its claws. "See? Round head, round glasses, lots of that black stuff sprouting every which way –"

"It's called hair, you dunce," the first gargoyle snapped.

"Right... black stuff... and look there – the mark on its head. This one's the Headmaster's new boy," the second gargoyle insisted.

The first gargoyle moaned. "No eating it, then? Not even a wee nibble?"

Harry chortled, as the second gargoyle growled and swatted the first hard enough to dislodge a chip of stone. "Not a lick, Godfrey!"

The first gargoyle sighed. "No pranking it, I suppose?"

The second gargoyle crossed its arms sternly. "No pranking."

Harry decided to try politeness. "Look... I really do have a meeting to attend, so if you could just see your way to –"

The first gargoyle licked its lips. "It *talks* like an ickle student, Cyril..."

The dark wooden door between the gargoyles opened. McGonagall fixed them with a stern look. "Are you deterring Mr. Potter?" she demanded.

The second gargoyle – Cyril – insisted, "No, Madam, we was just having a chat with the little one."

The first gargoyle – Godfrey – readily agreed. "That's it, Madam – just a chat, we was!"

McGonagall let out a snort. "Don't press me, boys. We can always arrange for a changing of the

guard.”

Cyril snapped into a salute. “No, Madam! Won’t happen again, we can tell you!”

Godfrey moved clear of the doorway, shivering. “Never again, Madam... can’t face the parapets again...”

McGonagall harrumphed, and briskly re-entered the room. As Harry passed through the door, Godfrey sniffed, “Not even a little lick... blimey...”

A long table had been conjured in the centre of the panelled room beyond, and most of the chairs around it were filled. Dumbledore sat at the far end, chatting eagerly with Professor Sprout. Snape sat closest to Harry, glowering. “Well, well... look what the cat dragged in,” he sneered.

McGonagall glared at him. “I’m in no mood, Severus.” She looked pleadingly to Dumbledore. “Albus, you must do something about those gargoyles. Godfrey wanted to taste Potter.”

Dumbledore looked up and smiled. “Ah, Harry! Welcome to our little gathering!”

Flitwick disengaged from an animated conversation with a wizard Harry didn’t recognise. He seized Harry’s hand with both of his own and pumped profusely. “Splendid to see you, my boy – splendid, indeed!”

Harry became acutely aware of the eyes upon him. “Erm... thank you, Professor...” he managed.

“It’s Filius, Harry, and nothing more,” Flitwick went on gaily.

“Really, Flitwick, must you encourage the boy’s conceit?” Snape grumbled.

Flitwick released Harry’s hand. He shook his head at the Potions Master, and chided, “As rust consumes iron, Severus, so envy consumes itself.”

Snape didn’t respond to Flitwick; instead he tipped his head back just so, fixed Harry with a haughty look, and sneered, “Why, Potter, you have something to which you may look forward... after all, the envied generally find love and adulation upon death.”

Harry felt Hagrid’s presence before he actually saw his enormous friend erupt from a too-small chair in one corner of the room. “Is tha’ some kind ‘o threat ta Harry, *Snape* ?” he boomed.

Dumbledore raised his hand. “Hagrid, that is quite enough,” he said gently. “Severus, do try to be less boorish.”

Hagrid clapped Harry on the back hard enough to make him stumble. “Welcome back, Harry – saved a seat fer yeh,” he said warmly. Harry found himself more or less deposited immediately to Dumbledore’s right. Hagrid moved from his seat in the corner to another directly across from Snape.

Professor Vector, the Arithmancy instructor, said quietly, “We are missing some of our complement, Headmaster. Are we seeing the consequences of your letter and... and the rest of it?”

“That seems as good a place to begin as any,” Dumbledore said with a nod. In a more forceful voice, he continued, “To those of you returning, I welcome you back to the hallowed halls of Hogwarts. To those of you newly joining us, I offer my greetings and the appreciation of the Board of Governors. It seems as though the students have scarcely left us, and yet the autumn comes. Hogwarts’ nine hundred and ninety-ninth academic year comes to us amidst the spectre of war, my friends. It is hardly the first time that this has been the case. In fact, 1996 is uncomfortably reminiscent of 1976 in many respects. The difference between this and all previous conflicts that have swirled around this institution is that the present Dark Lord views Hogwarts as a symbol of all that he reviles. Simply put, Hogwarts is in peril.”

The room took on a deep quiet – not the kind that came from a silencing charm, Harry thought; it was the kind that he associated with the worst sort of news. Dumbledore surveyed the room before he went on. “After I sent the letter of which Anneliese made mention, some of our number decided that they could no longer serve this institution. Camille Sinistra has withdrawn her motion for a vote of no confidence in my service, and instead chose to resign her post. Mathias Reed was supportive of the vote, and also chose to resign –”

“Good riddance,” someone muttered.

Dumbledore crooked an eyebrow. “Professors Sinistra and Reed articulated reasons for their lack of confidence that merit an open response on my part. I expect that we will display respect for their years of service, at the very least.”

“Where’s Professor Golding off to, then?” Flitwick asked.

“Margaret concluded that it was time to retire,” Dumbledore answered. “She didn’t have it in her to ‘muddle through another war’, as she put it. She asked that I convey to you a letter of apology, but I would have none of it. Margaret served admirably for the side of light in the last war, and will spend her dotage in Canada amidst her many grandchildren. I ask that you join me in three cheers for Professor Golding and best wishes for her future.”

After three rounds of ‘huzzah’, Professor Sprout waved her floppy hat in the air. “Excuse me, Albus, but Binns doesn’t seem to have joined us. That’s not like him; he’s usually here waiting a day or two prior, isn’t he?”

Dumbledore nodded. “Yes, well, that would be related business. You see, Professor Binns came to a momentous decision sometime around the second week of July –”

“What, did the old buzzard realise he was dead?” Madam Hooch muttered. Harry put his hand over his mouth to hide the grin.

“Not exactly, Rolonda... you see, Professor Binns has been complaining for some time about a persistent pain in his abdomen as well as recurrent gout,” Dumbledore explained. “Thusly, he

elected a one-year sabbatical to sort himself out.”

Professor Flitwick winced. “Oh, Albus... the opportunity presented itself, and you elected not to tell him...”

“It’s not the sort of thing one springs as a surprise, Filius,” Dumbledore sighed. “Sir Nicholas and the Bloody Baron have consented to have a long conversation with the Professor. I am hopeful for a satisfactory outcome.” Harry noticed that the Headmaster seemed not to notice the twitters here and there.

“That makes for a rather large number of replacements in one year, Headmaster,” Madam Pince noted. “Goodness, there’s Astronomy, Ancient Runes, Muggle Studies, History of Magic... and the customary Defence vacancy, of course – though this time I’ll offer no complaint whatever.” She shifted stiffly in her chair at the resulting laughter.

“Indeed,” Dumbledore agreed, “and our friends at the Ministry did nothing to ease the burden of soliciting replacements.”

McGonagall waved her wand, and a stack of parchments distributed themselves around the table. “The Wizing Examinations Authority took it upon themselves to develop guidelines for the hiring of new professors,” she spat.

“Can they do that?” Sprout gasped.

“They can and they have,” Dumbledore returned. “The Governors endorsed the guidelines for History of Magic by a bare majority, and will be taking up the balance in October. As of August 1 of this year, any wizard or witch hired into the position of professor for History of Magic must have attained a score of O on the related NEWT, and must possess an unbroken wizing lineage to the Goblin Rebellion or before.”

Vector pursed her lips. “A witch or wizard of long lineage would know the oral tradition that a Muggle-born would not,” she reasoned.

“That would be fine, if the wizing oral tradition were reflected in either the OWL or NEWT papers,” McGonagall countered.

“I suppose they’ll want purebloods for every position now?” Sprout mused.

Dumbledore cut through the buzz that had begun to fill the room. “I have obtained a replacement for the History of Magic post who satisfies the Examination Authority’s new guideline. While I had given serious consideration to Mr. Arthur Weasley for the position –” He had to wait for the room to settle, before he went on, “– we have unexpectedly acquired another of our alumni who is eminently qualified. She earned one of the highest OWL scores for the discipline ever recorded, and in fact tied for the highest NEWT score. Professor Covelli... Dr. Covelli, rather... will be joining us at some point during the first week of classes.”

Snape drew himself up. “Headmaster,” he asked in a dangerously silky voice, “surely I misheard... did you refer to our future colleague as a ‘doctor’? Is that not a term used by *Muggle* healers?”

“Most definitely, Severus,” Dumbledore said with the air of a man telling a splendid joke. “I wouldn’t trifle with Lucia, however; she is most definitely one of us.”

Flitwick appeared deep in thought. “Lucia... Lucia... er, Albus, didn’t you have an apprentice by that name? That would have been during your Transfiguration days, if I recall correctly. I seem to remember meeting her...”

“I compliment you on your splendid memory, Filius,” Dumbledore said. “Dr. Covelli went by the name Lucia Greengrass during her school days.” Snape sat stone-faced, while McGonagall took on a smile that Harry could only describe as wicked.

“Is this doctor a relation of Daphne Greengrass?” Vector asked.

“She is Miss Greengrass’s aunt,” McGonagall replied.

Snape said tonelessly, “Headmaster... this news will cause distress in certain circles... we must discuss –”

“At the earliest possible convenience, Severus – I promise you,” Dumbledore said lightly.

Flitwick laughed merrily. “I take it that your other appointments will cause the Ministry equal distress?”

Dumbledore’s eyes twinkled. He cleared his throat to recapture everyone’s attention. “Having made mention of my erstwhile apprentice and having referred to the likely reception of some of my appointments, it seems appropriate to introduce the first new member of our staff. I am very pleased to formally present my new apprentice, Harry Potter.”

Snape’s icy voice cut through the polite applause. “Camille’s concerns do indeed merit a response. Is it possible that she was making a valid point about the Headmaster’s capacity for impartiality?” The room went deeply quiet for the second time.

McGonagall’s flinty burr tore at the silence. “What are you playing at, Severus?”

“You left hundreds of students and the balance of your staff at the mercy of Dolores Umbridge, Headmaster, solely to protect Potter from punishment,” Snape accused. “I have been forced to watch the increasing marginalisation of my charges, chiefly for the edification of Potter and his minions. Now you bait the Ministry, and to what end? I do not – and I will not – question your capacity to lead this school. I ask pointedly whether you might someday weigh the fate of an entire school against that of your golden boy, and find the school wanting.”

No one dared speak. Harry watched Dumbledore for any sort of reaction, and there seemed to be none – no flash of anger, no sense of betrayal, nothing. The Headmaster simply said, “Our new

colleagues have been kept waiting long enough. I shall address your question after they have been properly welcomed.” He motioned to McGonagall, who opened the door, stoutly reprimanded the gargoyles and waved her wand.

The Fat Friar drifted through the wall, just to one side of the door. “A pleasant day to you, good people. Sir Nicholas and Lady Fawcett have vested in me the honour of introducing to you the newest members of our Hogwarts family –”

“I take it we’re to come in now?” called a wizened voice. The tiny and stooped woman who owned the loud voice nearly walked through the Friar as she entered. “I’m not one for standing on ceremony. Good afternoon to you all.”

“Oh, my!” shrieked the Friar. “Er... may I present Professor Griselda Marchbanks, appointed to the Astronomy vacancy.”

“Hello, Albus,” Marchbanks bellowed as she walked along the perimeter of the room. “Nice to see you, Filius – how could I ever forget that unorthodox stance of yours?... hello, Pomona – still the highest Herbology practical score I’ve ever given... ah, Snape – a masterful paper in last month’s Proceedings, I’ll have you know... Minerva, how do you fare? That was a most cowardly attack...” She stopped before Harry. “And you, Mr. Potter... I see Albus has taken you on... splendid.”

Sprout doffed her hat like a schoolgirl brought before her Head of House. “Madam Marchbanks! But you’re the *head* of... that is to say, we’re deeply honoured to have you, but... how shall I put it... why do we have you?”

Marchbanks turned to face the length of the table, and leaned heavily on her walking stick. “My faith in the integrity of the Ministry has been tested beyond repair,” she proclaimed. “Any remaining hope for the education of our youth lies here, and it is here that I shall stand.”

Amidst the murmurs, Harry distinctly heard Flitwick sigh, “Heavens, the Ministry’s running out of good people...”

“Professor Marchbanks, would you be so kind as to speak to the specific events that led to your resignation from the Examinations Authority?” Dumbledore asked loudly.

Marchbanks hesitated for a moment. “I will not divulge the names of certain specific parties, Albus; they are sure to sully their own reputations without my assistance. Suffice it to say that undue influence was placed upon the Examinations Authority to vacate the OWL results of one of your most recent examinees. I was able to quash this nefarious scheme, and the certification of said results was my last act.”

Dumbledore smiled broadly. “Thusly I can now announce that Miss Hermione Granger has become the thirty-eighth Hogwarts student to earn the maximum number of OWLs. Further, her overall average score is the highest recorded in fifty-three years, and the third highest ever recorded.” Even Snape applauded at that, Harry noted.

“I daresay that the young lady’s overall score may well have been higher, were it not for the interruptions during the Astronomy and History of Magic examinations,” Marchbanks added. Harry felt a twinge of guilt at the last. Worse, he was immediately certain that he knew why Hermione’s examination scores had been questioned, and he wanted to be wrong.

Sprout put the question before he could bring himself to speak. “Why would someone single out Miss Granger’s scores...?” She trailed off, and Harry assumed she had just drawn the same conclusion he had reached.

Marchbanks’ deeply wrinkled face fell. “There was absolutely no evidence that Miss Granger manipulated the examination results in any way. In fact, there is little point in attempting to manipulate the system; any student capable of a successful effort would by necessity exceed the O-standard in most subjects. Despite this, a protest was carried as far as the Minister’s Office.” Her voice trembled. “I am a proud member of the Daughters of the Goblin Wars. I am proud of who I am. I am not proud of what others are willing to do in the name of blood. *Examinations – are – a – matter – of – merit!* ” She banged her walking stick against the floor as an exclamation point.

“Well said, Griselda,” Dumbledore said, to mumblings of approval all around. Harry was nauseous. He placed one more mental check in his column of reasons why the wizarding world might not be worth saving.

The Fat Friar drifted around uncomfortably. “Headmaster... if it pleases the assembled staff...”

“Yes, yes, of course, mustn’t keep everyone waiting,” Dumbledore encouraged him.

“Very good, noble sir!” The Friar plunged his head through the wall for a moment, and then returned to his position. “May I present Professor Marcus Detheridge, appointed to the Defence vacancy...” As the professor entered, the Friar added quietly, “...and may God have mercy on you, my good man.”

Detheridge's hair was black with hints of grey. He had keen, dark eyes on a careworn face and carried himself with a certain rangy sort of grace. His clothes were thoroughly Muggle: a stylish but casual leather jacket over a cabled sweater and dark denims. “It’s a bit late for that, Friar,” Detheridge said. His eyebrows lowered and he squinted as he smiled.

Dumbledore stood, and gave over his seat at the head of the table to Marchbanks. He strode to Detheridge and warmly shook his hand. “Welcome, Marcus. Any words for us?”

“Your students have lost a year of instruction,” Detheridge said. “There is much to do.” Harry had seen a few shows from America on the telly, and Detheridge sounded as if he might have come from there. The new professor abruptly turned to face Snape. “You have something to tell me?” he rumbled.

“Later, perhaps,” Snape sniffed.

Detheridge leaned toward the Potions Master. “Severus Snape,” he declared; then his eyes opened wide. “Yes... I know about you.”

“Here, take a seat next to Professor Hagrid,” Dumbledore offered.

Detheridge broke into a smile. “Hagrid, is it? Oh, I *certainly* know about you!”

Hagrid stammered, “Yeh do? Er... well... there might be summat I ken do fer yeh... yeh know, if yeh need ‘ta bring in some creatures...”

The Fat Friar attempted to catch Dumbledore’s eye. After a while, Harry tugged on the edge of Dumbledore’s robe and pointed. “Of course... do go on, Friar,” the Headmaster urged.

The Friar announced, “To the Headmaster and esteemed faculty, may I present Professor Andromeda Tonks, appointed to the Muggle Studies vacancy.”

Mrs. Tonks nervously entered the room. “Hello, everyone,” she said quietly.

Dumbledore quickly went to her. “For those who are unacquainted with Professor Tonks, she attended Hogwarts as Andromeda Black. Both she and her husband are licensed solicitors who specialise in the needs of Muggle-borns and others of us who retain financial and legal ties to the Muggle world.”

“Severus, you should close your mouth; it’s not a good look for you,” McGonagall said primly. Snape was gaping like a fish, and it took everything in Harry to keep from bursting out laughing.

Mrs. Tonks spoke so quietly that Harry could barely hear her. “It really should have been Ted, you know? He’s better qualified for this. The Ministry’s desire for a pureblood in this post is appalling. I take some solace in knowing that I’m not the sort of pureblood they had in mind.”

“Morgana be cursed... they really are insisting on a completely pureblood faculty?” Sprout said in a near whisper.

“The Examinations Authority has only made that recommendation for History of Magic, Ancient Runes and Muggle Studies... thus far,” McGonagall told her.

Mrs. Tonks sat between Sprout and Trelawney, who Harry had suspected of being asleep despite her open protuberant eyes. Mrs. Tonks extended her hand toward Trelawney, who suddenly came to life. “Welcome, my dear,” the Divination professor said mistily. “I’ve been expecting you.”

Mrs. Tonks muttered, “Likewise, I’m sure,” and Trelawney withdrew in confusion.

“If I might complete my duties, Headmaster? There is a ghosts’ council scheduled for four o’clock,” the Fat Friar said pleasantly.

“Of course, good Friar,” Dumbledore said. “Make our final introduction, if you would?”

The Friar announced with a flourish, “Lastly, may I present Professor Algernon Croaker, appointed to the Ancient Runes vacancy.”

No one was forthcoming. The Friar looked around, and shrugged. He waited for a few moments before passing through the wall and into the corridor. “Oh, quite sorry!” someone called out.

Croaker was ancient and rotund, almost comically so in contrast to Dumbledore. He looked as though the Friar might have been one of his forebears. “Lost in conversation there,” Croaker explained. “Never thought I’d see the day when a centaur was teaching at Hogwarts. I believe old Nigellus would have died of pleurisy on the spot.”

Firenze followed Croaker into the staffroom. “Good afternoon, my colleagues,” he said. “Mars is exceptionally bright. It is visible to the eyes of centaurs through the daylight hours now.”

“Mars?” Marchbanks bellowed. “Mars isn’t particularly bright at present; it’s receding toward aphelion. Now *next* fall, when it reaches perihelion... then we will see the closest conjunction in fifty years.”

“Yes, Mars will become too bright for the eyes of the centaurs to behold,” Firenze agreed. “It may be the end of times for my people.”

“Indeed, I have foreseen great darkness upon us –” Trelawney intoned.

Croaker sat heavily. “I heartily agree with the Seer,” he said. “The sun does set in about five hours, so we’d best be on with this.” Trelawney excused herself to her tower amidst gales of laughter.

“Yes... well... welcome one and all,” Dumbledore said. “Before we address questions of curriculum and logistics and such, I wish to address Severus’ question. However, I am not quite certain how I wish to approach the response... Harry? What do you wish to be told?”

Harry had to force his eyes off of Croaker. He focussed on the Headmaster and sought to clear his mind. “How much do you trust the people in this room, sir?” Harry asked. “Do you trust them as much as... the old crowd?”

“I do not require an answer, Headmaster,” Snape insisted. “The question was rhetorical in nature.”

“I believe that all concerned require some sense of what is at stake, Severus,” Dumbledore responded. “I shall address your question.”

Snape fidgeted in his chair. “I would prefer that you did not.”

Dumbledore gazed at Snape silently for several seconds. “You have the look of a man prepossessed by potions left to heat,” he offered at last.

“Asphodel is inherently unstable,” Snape grumbled.

“Attend to your work, Severus,” Dumbledore said. “Nothing will take place here that cannot be gleaned later.”

Snape nodded in a very formal way and exited with a swish of his cloak. “Every staff has one,” Croaker muttered.

Harry’s eyes drifted back to Croaker, even as Dumbledore launched into his explanation of Harry’s significance. It wasn’t as though he needed to pay attention to the story – he’d heard it more times than he cared to hear, and he had to live it. Dumbledore gave to the staff the first half of the prophecy, just as he had given to the Order. He went on to summarise Harry’s experiences over five years at Hogwarts. It was mildly interesting to note the reactions of various professors; clearly, none of them knew all the details, not even McGonagall. Strangely, it seemed that Croaker might know as much or more than she did. He began to consider how he might corner the ancient wizard and force a conversation. So many roads seemed to lead to or through the man – the cognivores, Heather’s wild talent... Harry wondered if Croaker had been the source for the servant-binding curse. He wondered what had caused Croaker to leave the Department of Mysteries after a century or more.

It was clear that all of the professors wanted to participate in Harry’s further education, even ones he didn’t know who taught fields he hadn’t studied – like Vector and Croaker. He supposed that they weren’t doing it for him; some were doing it for Dumbledore, others for their own self-interest. He chose to be grateful just the same. Croaker caught his eye at one point, and seemed to look right through him. Surely the man was at Hogwarts for more than the teaching of ancient runes, Harry decided. For some reason it didn’t feel like the reason was for Harry’s instruction, and there was something disquieting about that, something very unsettling. There was an air of danger about Croaker, Harry concluded, and he resolved to discover what that might be.

Hermione

“Hermione? I know you’re in there,” Tonks called through the door. “The window’s still spelled shut, and you can’t do McGonagall’s tabby cat trick... at least I don’t think you can...”

Hermione lay in the dark, curled almost into a ball with a pillow clutched to her chest. They’d left her alone at first, all of them, for two hours or more. Tonks had been at the door half an hour now, and she hadn’t even had to shout out a ‘go away’ or a ‘sod off’.

“You know, I could turn this over to Fred and George,” Tonks warned. “Things could get out of hand.”

I can wait this out , Hermione thought. *If I wait long enough, they’ll all leave .*

“You’ll have to come out eventually, you know; the loo’s down the hall,” Tonks shouted. “*I know ... hang on...*”

Hermione wondered what Tonks had planned; she wasn’t nervous or frightened about it, just curious. *Nothing can touch me in here* , she told herself; number eleven was a safe place.

Clomping footsteps in the corridor marked Tonks' return. She heard the whispering and muttering of a complex spell, and then she heard water... running, rushing water.

"Go away!" she moaned.

"I'll just come back, of course," Tonks laughed.

"Fine," Hermione shouted, "I'll see you in October!"

"That's bollocks – McGonagall would hex me if I let you hold out for that long," Tonks pouted loudly, over the sound of the water. "I'll definitely have to set the twins after you by morning."

Hermione sat up. "You're a nasty bint," she snapped, "and running water *won't* work."

A half hour later, Hermione bounced uncomfortably on the edge of the bed. *Tonks definitely pays for this*, she promised herself. She dug through her cases until she found the object of her interest – a carefully folded Extendable Ear. A few moments of listening placed Tonks immediately outside the door, and one or two older Weasleys to the right – it could have been the twins or Bill, she imagined. The water closet was to the left. She decided to put her faith in the element of surprise.

Tonks howled when the door struck her, and she howled again when Hermione ran over her. Someone behind her called, "Hermione, wait!", as though anything short of an outright war could successfully stand between her and the water closet. She slammed shut the door, and was pleased to discover that Tonks hadn't disabled the door lock. All the doors and walls at the Leaky Cauldron were spelled for privacy; she was still safe.

"Damn it, Hermione!" Tonks bellowed. "What sort of shoes were those?"

"*Hikers*," Hermione hissed, "and you deserved it for that water business."

"Ha! Wouldn't work, she said!" Tonks crowed.

Hermione growled, but resolved to resume her silence. After a few minutes, Tonks sighed loudly. "Fine, have it your way. We leave for the station tomorrow morning at ten o'clock."

Hermione waited a little while longer. She knew that someone would eventually want to use the water closet and it was only right that she give it up. The corridor was empty, as was her room save her belongings. She turned to close the door and found her way blocked by Ron.

"You didn't think you could wait us out, did you?" he said with a grin as he closed them inside the room.

"Persistent lot, aren't you?" she grumbled.

"That Howler... a thing of beauty, that's what Fred said," he laughed. "One brilliant bit of work, I figure."

“I’m surprised your mum didn’t drag all of you straight back to the Burrow,” Hermione sighed.

Ron faltered. “There is no Burrow... oh, maybe you didn’t remember...”

“I knew it was sacked, but it’s been a month,” Hermione pointed out. “What happened? Was it just too much to go back there? I mean... that’s understandable...”

Ron took a step back, and then began to pace across the room and back. “Nothing will stand there. We were set up in tents for a good long while – like at the World Cup, right? – and we kept hoping...” His fists were clenching and unclenching. “Nobody can figure it out, see? We’ve had everyone you can imagine wandering about the place. They didn’t just sack the house, Hermione, they... they *poisoned* it somehow. I don’t know how else to explain it.”

Hermione decided that if it was possible to feel worse about the Howler, she indeed now felt worse. “W-what are your Mum and Dad going to do, then?” she asked.

“Harry let them use his new place, up in Scotland.” Ron’s grin came back, at least a little. “You should have seen him trying to give away a bloody castle to my mum – it was cracking!”

“Right... your mum...” Hermione trailed off.

“Hermione... this isn’t all over the Howler, right? That wasn’t the first one she’s ever gotten, you know. She didn’t exactly deny saying those things to your mum, or something like them. Dad wasn’t pleased. I’m not happy about it, myself. Ginny... gods, Hermione, you should have seen *her*. ‘Oi, if you think you’ll be breeding me off like some prize Kneazle...’ Poor Mum...” Ron shook his head. “At this rate, she might give up talking for a while...”

“Good,” Hermione muttered. “Just desserts, I’d say.”

Ron kept ploughing on. “Yeah, she cocked things up with Professor Lupin even worse than... hold on there! Did you say ‘good’?”

The thinking part of Hermione wanted to just let it all slide away, to avoid the Weasleys for a time and pretend nothing had happened. The newly risen part of her – ‘Hermione, version 2’, as Dr. Covelli had put it – was just as furious as when she’d written the Howler. “She didn’t think for a moment how my Mum would feel, Ron. It was no different than saying that my Mum’s not good enough for me, that I’d look down on her now because I have this thing – because I can use bloody magic!”

Ron took a step backward, his hands held up. “Hermione, I said she was wrong! What do you want from me?”

She knew she was getting too angry – angrier than was justified, angrier than was safe – but she couldn’t stop herself. “What do you think, Ron? How do you see it? Do you think I should look down on my Mum and Dad? Do you think you’re superior to Muggles?”

“No, I don’t think you should look down on your Mum and Dad!” Ron snapped. “Superior? I don’t

know! I can use magic, they can't – that makes us different, right? Look... I don't even understand how you get through a day when you're home with them – it must be nothing but work all the time! I mean, how do Muggles ever get anything done? The thing is, somehow, they've got all these things – the tellyphones and the autocars and the flying machines and the buildings. I guess we're just different, that's all... just different." He stepped forward and took her shaking hand in his. "Er... you aren't going to blow me up or anything... are you?"

She let out a nervous laugh that quickly descended into tears, and she hugged him like he was the last thing left to keep her afloat. She could feel his instant discomfort but she held on nonetheless. After a while, he draped one arm around her shoulders and ran his free hand awkwardly up and down her back. "I'm sorry, you know, about what happened and all," he blurted out.

"You were there, too," she said. "I'm glad nothing happened to you, to any of you."

"It wasn't the same, and you know it," Ron protested. "I just had to sit there and watch what V-Voldemort did, and then afterward with Harry... I didn't know what to do. I didn't know where I should be. You were hurt, and he was just... you know how he was..."

"No, I don't," Hermione whispered. "I wasn't really there, not afterward."

"Well, you know how he *is* . At least you... you know, you went off and did something about it. He just kept going." Ron sighed. "I keep wondering when it'll hit him, like last summer when all the business with Diggory hit him? It'll be the moment we get back to Hogwarts – you just know it."

"I'm not ready for it," Hermione said.

"What, for Harry to go off like a blasting curse?" Ron snorted. "I don't think there's any getting ready for it, not really."

"No," Hermione said, "I mean I'm not ready for any of it. I'm not ready to go back."

Ron briskly rubbed at her back for several strokes, before he at last pulled free. "I've always had an itch to get back – every year, see? By the middle of August, it's time for me to go. But this year... it's never going to be the same, is it? Four of us in the dorm, probably half my classes without either of you... no Quidditch with him... probably won't eat with us anymore, probably has to sit up there with the teachers..."

"Everything will be different," Hermione agreed.

Ron set his jaw. "It's up to us to keep things right, then," he said. "We drag him to meals, we bring him to study in the Common Room, I take him out flying... maybe he'll help coach the team _"

"No," Hermione said.

Ron's eyes bulged. "No? What does *that* mean – 'no'?"

Hermione's hands went to her hips in frustration. "It's an act of refusal, Ron. N – O. No. "

"I've heard you say 'no' before; I know what it means," Ron fumed.

Hermione closed her eyes. "I didn't set out to hurt you. I..."

Ron sighed. "I know you didn't. Everything is for the best with you – always has been... and that's why I don't get it – it's not like you to just chuck him out in the cold."

"No! " Hermione shouted. "That's not it, not at all! I intend for him to do as he wants! We leave him an open seat at the table, we make sure he has access to the Common Room, you invite him to watch a practice if he wants, and then we let him *choose* . He's Albus Dumbledore's apprentice, Ron! His life isn't going to be like ours, not anymore. We give him the choice to keep the best parts of his old life – that's all we can do!"

The tips of Ron's ears went blood red. "We can do better than that, Hermione!"

Hermione held firm. "We can be strong enough that he doesn't have to worry about us – that's all we can do!"

"You're different. You've changed, a lot I think," Ron said. "I'm sorry that happened to you." He smirked. "Except for the hair – I'm not sorry about that. George was right, it's good on you."

Hermione looked strangely at the young man before, the one who she suddenly didn't know anymore. "I'm not sorry about the hair either. You know... you've changed, too."

"I wish I could change it all back," Ron grumbled.

"You can't," Hermione said.

Ron smiled faintly. "I can *wish* ... that's allowed, isn't it?" They stood quietly in the lengthening shadows for quite a while. He broke the silence. "Ginny will come looking, eventually... or Mum."

"I can't handle them, not today," Hermione said.

Ron nodded. "Then you don't have to handle them." He reached out and squeezed her hand. "If I don't see you... I'll save a compartment on the Express."

He left, and she stared at the door that divided them. The Ron Weasley who had come to call on her in room eleven definitely wasn't her Ron, not her and Harry's Ron. It took her quite some time to admit to herself that she preferred this changed Ron. He was more thoughtful, more considerate, better groomed, better spoken – and all he'd had to do was arrange an attack by monstrous psychic brain-creatures and then become convinced that he was fated to die young.

The old Hermione would have comforted this Ron, would have felt something more than long-standing friendship for him – it occurred to her that the old Hermione might have said 'yes' to this

new Ron, that night at the Shrieking Shack. She wondered what Luna was making of the new Ron, and what Luna – also clearly changed forever – wanted for herself. The new Hermione and the new Ron would be better friends, she decided. She didn't know for certain what else the new Hermione wanted, other than victory and a full life for Harry and justice for herself, or perhaps revenge, or something that fell between the two.

Harry

Mr. Granger topped Harry's glass with more red wine – chianti, he'd called it. "Just the right sort of body for this meal, eh? It must be from a small vintner... too strong an edge to it for a commercial house... what do you think of it, dear?"

Mrs. Granger toyed with her food, from one side of the plate to the other. It was the same way that Hermione toyed with food leading up to examinations, Harry recognised. "Perhaps it was brought from the villa?" she offered absently.

The meal was Italian. Harry knew this from Shona's food, and from the reading that had come of it. Unlike so many meals of the last four weeks, there were two dishes he'd eaten before. Apparently, Dumbledore had arranged for the house-elves to learn these recipes; Harry wondered if his intention was to impress this Dr. Covelli, his old apprentice. The Grangers had met the woman – had stayed with her, in fact. Harry had begun to wonder what sort of doctor this Covelli might be, and whether Hermione and her parents had stayed there because she was a particular sort of doctor, and the wondering had left him on edge.

He hadn't the slightest idea how to go about asking the right sort of questions, and he was wary of giving the wrong sort of answers; it was far easier to focus on the food, at first. Mr. Granger declared the meal very good. Mrs. Granger had very little to say at all. Harry decided as the meal progressed that Mrs. Granger had the right idea, because he was fairly sure he'd had too much to drink, and part of him wondered if that was Mr. Granger's intention. He'd begun surreptitiously pouring a good portion of his chianti into an adjacent potted plant. Unfortunately, the plant had begun to sway in time to the light background music that the house-elves had arranged. Harry had struggled to find a new destination for the wine that had continued to come, one other than the floor or his mouth. He had figured that the Grangers would notice even a quick *evanesco* – Mrs. Granger at any rate – and he feared that he might vanish the entire table in his hazy state.

Mrs. Granger placed her hand atop her husband's, which was wrapped around the neck of a fresh chianti bottle. "Thomas... please don't open another," she said in a near-whisper.

Mr. Granger took up his glass with his free hand. "Why ever not? We're celebrating tonight." He raised the glass and winked at Harry. "To our imprisonment!"

"What do you want from me?" Harry asked before he knew what he was saying. Mr. Granger's glass stopped halfway to his mouth. Mrs. Granger's hand fell limp to her side. "I'm sorry, that didn't come out right," Harry hastily added. His mouth was suddenly quite dry.

Mr. Granger jabbed his finger in the air dramatically. "We want our life back, that's what we

want. We've only just recovered our daughter, and now we're supposed to just give her up again – just walk away and hide? Bloody sodding *damn*, Harry!" Mrs. Granger eased the still-sealed bottle free and quietly set it beneath the table.

"I wish there was another way," Harry told them. "I wish I could just fix this, you know; I wish... I wish a lot of things." He licked his lips, and wished they would stay moistened.

"We don't hold you responsible for what's happened, Harry," Mrs. Granger offered. She did, of course – Harry felt something not right coming from her, something like pain or hurt or anger.

"We're responsible," Mr. Granger blurted out. "We brought her into the world, she came from us. She's what she is because of us. She's nothing to you people, but she's something to us, I can tell you; she's everything to us!" He shook his whole glass at Harry, and chianti dribbled down his hand.

Harry's mouth dropped open. "What do you mean, she's nothing to us? What's that supposed to mean?" It was odd – he didn't mean to shout, but it came out that way. "Did you know –" He stopped for a moment, determined to lower his voice. "Did you know that *your daughter* had the third highest scores ever on the OWLs? Third highest *ever*! I was... well, I was over the moon when I heard that, I can tell you!"

Mr. Granger's eyes widened. "Wha... we never heard a thing about that... nothing of that sort at all! That's... that's fantastic – isn't it, Cordelia? It's fantastic!"

"Yes... smashing, isn't it..." Mrs. Granger responded weakly. Her mind was churning on something, Harry was sure of it. It was strange how much like Hermione she was; he almost laughed aloud at the thought, but somehow managed to hold it in.

Mr. Granger pushed back in his chair, confused. "It's not fantastic?" he asked. "Seems as though it should be fantastic..."

"She was expecting those scores weeks ago; they never arrived," Mrs. Granger said. Her brow wrinkled. "How is it that you know Hermione's scores?"

Harry awkwardly back-pedalled. "Well... it's not that I know her scores, exactly. I know how she did generally... er... it really is fantastic – amazing, actually... I mean, it's not amazing that she did so well... it's just... she's amazing, that's what I meant..." He glanced around nervously. "I could stand for a glass of water right now. Merlin, it's dry in here... um... do you think it's dry in here?"

"Not especially, no," Mrs. Granger said. She had the oddest expression, Harry thought – it seemed almost as if she was trying not to laugh at him.

Mr. Granger abruptly leaned forward. "You know, that's a really good question – a brilliant question. What happened to Hermione's scores, then?"

Harry felt trapped. His head suddenly throbbed, but the throbbing was nowhere near his scar. He sighed. “The thing is... oh, sod it. The bloody Ministry was playing with the results. They can’t handle that someone like Hermione is so smart. Everyone wants to be able to pretend that blood matters, that the right blood is better.” Something he’d heard before – on the telly, or the wireless, or some such place – popped into his head and out of his mouth: “This is a perfect example of what happens when cousins marry.”

Mrs. Granger froze for a moment, before her mouth began to flicker. Mr. Granger immediately burst into rolling laughter. “Cousins... oh, good Lord... that’s it exactly!”

“They’re like poodles,” Mrs. Granger snorted, “or... or the royals!”

“Oh, yes!” Mr. Granger howled. “Poor buggers... can you imagine being a man with Queen Margaret’s face?”

When she caught her breath, Mrs. Granger smiled at Harry. “Oh, you’ve no idea how much we needed that,” she explained. “Things were said, and... it’s just good to hear someone else say that this pureblood business is ridiculous.”

“It’s dangerous, that’s what it is,” Harry insisted. Mrs. Granger’s comment slowly sank in. “Er... what sort of things? What did someone say to you?” he demanded.

Mrs. Granger looked away. “We really shouldn’t draw you into this,” she said.

“If someone’s on to Hermione about who she is or where she comes from, then I’m already in,” Harry snapped. He couldn’t figure why his voice was so bloody loud; it was as though he couldn’t keep it down.

Mrs. Granger sighed. “You see, Molly Weasley –”

“Oh, *bloody hell!*” Harry shouted. He tossed back the contents of his wine glass, and for a moment his lips were whetted though his throat burned. “Molly Weasley can’t keep her bloody mouth shut to save her life!”

“Harry!” Mrs. Granger chided him.

He angrily brushed his fringe from his eyes. “It’s true! She called Heather a tart, and she never even met her! She... she was screaming at Remus Lupin for no reason, not really... I mean, I’m angry with him, but she had no right... she had no right...” He found himself lost in the thought, and it took a moment to right himself. “What’d she say, then? Come on, out with it!”

Mrs. Granger faltered. “I honestly don’t think –”

Mr. Granger waved her off. “*Molly* wanted us to know that we shouldn’t feel bad when Hermione eventually quits on us, since that’s what happens... seems she’ll decide it’s too hard to live around us, once she’s completely become one of you. *Even better*, she’ll have no prospects unless she marries the right sort of man, because she comes from us!”

Harry felt the blood run out of his face. “Mrs. Weasley... she said that? She... she actually said that? She said that about Hermione?” he stammered.

“That’s a fair summary,” Mrs. Granger conceded.

“That’s... it’s... well, it’s *mad* , that’s what it is!” Harry thundered.

“Hermione even admitted that purebloods seem to do all the advancing in your world,” Mrs. Granger added.

“That’s ridiculous... it’s... she’s better than that!” Harry raged. “I... I won’t allow it, that’s all. It won’t be like that!”

Mr. Granger shifted awkwardly in his chair. “Harry... I know you’re a powerful young man, but you ‘won’t allow it’? Seems a bit grand, doesn’t it?”

“She might not be able to go anywhere with the Ministry – who would want to? – but I won’t let her be anything less than she can manage,” Harry insisted. “If she wants to write, I’ll have it printed. If she wants to do research or something of that sort, I’ll get her a laboratory, whatever she needs. What she wants, she gets, and the bloody purebloods can just get out of the way!” The idea that Hermione would have to rely on some fool like Fudge in order to get along made him absolutely furious; his face felt steaming hot.

“A few million pounds will allow you to live comfortably, Harry... but it’ll hardly allow for that,” Mrs. Granger said gently.

“A few million pounds?” Harry struggled for several seconds to make the connection. “Oh, you mean what I got from Sirius? That was nothing.”

Mrs. Granger’s eyebrows slowly rose. “I’m sorry... did you say that your inheritance was ‘nothing’?”

Harry waved his hands dismissively. “There’s a couple hundred times that much in cash alone in the Potter Trust, plus all the property and other things. I’m stinking rich, you know – rolling in it.” He broke into a big grin and started to laugh – it was more of a giggle, really, and he was sure that he should feel ridiculous but he didn’t feel that way at all. It was so easy to talk to the Grangers, and that fact seemed rather odd.

“That’s my reward for not getting offed,” he went on. “Thirteen family lines stop with me – how about that? What would I ever do with it all? So, Hermione gets whatever she wants, do you hear? I can’t imagine a better use for it! I mean, the Black money... it’s just blood money. It’s all on my hands...” His throat tightened sharply, and turned his voice into a croak. “It’s all over my hands... the blood... he’s dead... Sirius, he’s dead... and all those people... they were Death Eaters, I hadn’t any choice, but there was all the blood...” He wasn’t right, and he knew that now. The room was warm, he was warm, there had been too much wine, the back of his hand tingled – he wasn’t right.

He looked up. Mr. Granger was staring at him in something like horror. Mrs. Granger was getting up from her chair. “Harry...”

Harry stood and stumbled backward; his chair tumbled onto its side. “No... um... there’s no better use for it. Hermione... she gets what she wants, and you... look, I want you to think about where you want to go. Don’t tell anyone else, of course! Anywhere... you can go anywhere. If you have to do this... anywhere! I... I mean it! Oh, and I’ve been thinking about how you can communicate with Hermione; it’ll have to be discreet, of course, but... I’ll figure this out, so I can... I can fix this, you know, I... is it hot in here? It’s really hot in here...”

Mrs. Granger was coming for him. “Harry, please... sit, would you?”

His legs felt like lead. “So much to do tomorrow, you know... really must be off...” He leaned heavily against the hidden door that led from Dumbledore’s private dining room into the corridor beyond. “Now you think about it... I mean it, anywhere!” He had to do that much for them; they were losing everything, and he had some idea of how that felt. Something about a lovely dinner fell from his mouth as he pushed through the door.

He couldn’t manage the staircases. Every time he thought one was supposed to move, it didn’t. When he thought he should descend, he found himself ascending. He nearly fell several times. After something on the order of a million flights, he found himself within sight of the entrance hall and decided that a respite was in order. He sat down carefully, feeling first for a trick stair. It had become even hotter, if that were possible. He thought that he heard Mrs. Norris padding along at one point. At some time after that – minutes, or hours; he couldn’t be sure – there was a hand on the back of his shoulder and words in a vaguely familiar accent. Some words made sense, others did not; few remained in his memory.

He rose and he fell and he drifted along weightlessly. He was inside, then he was outside and enjoying the cool breeze, and then he was inside again. A woman’s voice joined the first.

“...I can’t believe he was drinking in the castle. Thank the stars you found him first, Mr. Detheridge.”

“I had an inkling something was wrong. One of the house-elves told me that he was dining in the Headmaster’s chambers tonight, which is strange – Albus is out until the morning. I’m very surprised that Albus would leave strong drink within reach, in any case.”

“The poor lad’s certainly seen enough to drive him to drink. He won’t be served here, I can promise you that.”

“I assume that I can trust your discretion regarding this evening, Rosmerta?”

“He won’t be hurt on my account. I’ve seen nothing, nothing at all...”

There was nothing for a time, at least nothing that sunk in. Then the first voice drew close to his ear. “The first one’s free, Mr. Potter. Don’t let this happen again,” Detheridge said. The door

opened and closed, and all went quiet.

Harry Potter and the Years of Rebellion All Aboard

Chapter Thirty-one

ALL ABOARD

September 1

Harry

Tap-tap-tap-tap-tap.

“Go away!” Harry shouted, and he instantly regretted it. The sound echoed in his ears and he nearly bit his tongue, which seemed to be in need of de-gnoming.

Tap-tap-tap-tap-tap.

He rolled off his bed and fell hard onto the floor. “The rest of your life with a pig’s tail – that’s what’s coming to you!” he bellowed, and then quickly cradled his head in his hands.

Hedwig screeched at him from her perch and he groaned, “Not you, too?”

Tap-tap-tap-tap-tap.

At last it dawned on him that the tapping was an owl at the window, not a wizard at the door. He threw up the shade and opened the glass in one motion. Before he could duck, the angriest owl he’d ever seen was upon him – screeching, nipping and clawing madly. He flailed his arms to keep it at bay, but it proceeded to shred his shirtsleeves. With a piercing shriek, Hedwig fell upon the mad owl and it retreated to the corner of the bedroom. Harry took in heaving breaths as he stripped off his shirt and used the remnants to stanch the blood dripping from his forearms. The owl began to advance again, wings flapping menacingly, but Hedwig snapped and hissed and cowed it back into the corner.

Harry stormed to the shelf beside Hedwig’s perch, which was a mistake since the quick movement sent blood pounding into places in his head that had apparently been absent of fluids for some time. He snatched up a handful of owl treats and flung them at the crazed owl, one at a time, as hard as he could manage. “Look what you did to my arms, you lunatic!” he snapped, and the sound nearly put him to the floor.

He knew that the owl was unlikely to leave until he collected the post, but he wasn't about to get near enough to snatch it. Instead, he held up his hand, concentrated on keeping his voice as quiet and small as possible, and whispered, "*Accio owl post* ." The mad owl was flung onto its back as it shot toward Harry, talons first. He quickly moved to one side, but the post worked its way free and flew into his outstretched hand before the owl reached him. Hedwig attempted to force it back to the corner; instead it perched in the open window, lifted its tail to make a substantial deposit atop Harry's writing table, then screeched loudly and raced into the murky sky.

Harry held the post close to his face – he had only just realised that he wasn't wearing his glasses. The handwriting on the envelope was precise and familiar. It slowly seeped into him that the poor owl had probably spent a week returning from whence it had been banished. It could have been sent to Australia, for all he knew – he'd been furious at the time, so he'd thrown around a general banishing charm instead of the one intended for owls.

Rap-rap-rap-rap-rap.

"Right... now *that's* the door," he croaked. The rapping felt as though it was slowly opening a hole in his head. He stumbled across the room, tossed the post atop his bed as he passed, tripped over a side table, stubbed his toe on one of the settee's feet, swore loudly, stopped before the door, and sneered, "*Accio wand* ." His wand struck him in the back before he could turn to reach for it. "Forget it – I'd rather be cursed," he muttered, and assumed the fighting stance Dudley had shown him.

It was an ordeal to clear his throat. "Come in, you great prat!" he bellowed, and gritted his teeth.

The door opened with unnatural smoothness. Professor Detheridge grinned at him, eyes wrinkled nearly into slits under the weight of his brows. He was wearing coal-black trousers and a patterned shirt that Harry couldn't look at without causing his temples to throb; he carried neither robe nor cloak. "You look terrible," Detheridge chuckled.

"What do you want?" Harry snapped, even though it was an incautious approach to adopt toward a new Defence professor – after all, three of the man's five immediate predecessors had turned out to be evil incarnate.

Detheridge held out a shiny flask, similar to Moody's. "It's a housewarming gift. By the time I ran across you last night, it was too late for a sobering charm. Two sips will take the edge off. Three sips will leave you unconscious for a week. I recommend two sips."

"By the time... you..." Harry stood there, slack-jawed, as the previous evening flowed through his mind. He wanted to explain himself, but couldn't think of an explanation that wouldn't give away the Grangers' presence in the Headmaster's chambers. "You brought me back here," he grunted instead.

"Do you remember what I told you, before I left?" Detheridge asked. When Harry nodded slowly, he added, "I meant that – all of it."

Harry looked away, on the off chance that Detheridge was a Legilimens. “Yes, sir.”

“We don’t stand on formality where I come from,” Detheridge said. “I’m Marcus, which makes you Harry – understood? Now... what in the Nine Hells did you do to your arms? You weren’t like that when I left you here!”

“There was a problem with the post,” Harry deadpanned.

Detheridge laughed. “A problem? Looks to me like a mail owl mauled you! Familiar with battlefield healing charms?”

“I’ve heard of them,” Harry conceded.

“You’ve *heard* of them... oh, I forgot how much work we have to do!” Detheridge shook his head. “Get your wand, Harry. We can squeeze in a quick lesson, and still make it to London –”

Harry stared at Detheridge through bleary eyes. “London? Wha...?”

Detheridge looked down at the flask still in his hand. “Oh!” he exclaimed and quickly spun open the cap. “Remember – *two* sips.”

Harry picked up his wand from the floor and slowly stood. He held it over the open flask and muttered, “*Toxicum deprendo* .” There was no telltale blue flash, so Harry took it from Detheridge and downed two quick sips.

Detheridge waited until Harry had swallowed the thick, foul concoction before he observed, “You would have spotted poisons or re-agents, but I could have fed you all manner of foul germs without tripping that charm. In the future, be sure you add *aeग्रoris deprendo* .”

Harry choked, but kept down the potion. It felt like something warm flowed through him, and his head was immediately clearer. “Thank you,” he muttered.

“It’s important you keep your head, Harry,” Detheridge said. “You don’t want to be paranoid, but you do want to be careful. So, about those cuts... hold your wand vertically, and we’ll have you perform a basic incantation: *consanescio* . After you speak it, the tip of your wand should glow red; you trace it across the wounds.” He examined one of Harry’s arms. “If these were deeper, I think we’d go with *medela* . If you’re ever bleeding out, there’s always *focilare* ... but that one can be temperamental... best to leave it to someone who heals for a living, unless your back’s against the wall.” He let Harry’s arm fall. “Go on! You don’t want to stand there and bleed, do you?”

Harry tried the charm, but his wand tip only flashed red a few times. He stared at it nervously. “I must have said it wrong. Hermione would know how to say it, where to emphasize –”

Detheridge grasped and stilled Harry’s wand hand. He shook his head in a friendly way. “Stop thinking about it. If you’re bleeding, you say *consanescio* , and you run your wand tip across the wound. It’s like a broom – you don’t think about the charms holding it up, you just push off and go,” he advised, and then he let Harry’s hand free.

Harry stared at Detheridge and then at his wand. “*Consanescio*,” he said, and the tip of his wand exploded in red. A few seconds later, his skin was bloodstained but unmarred.

Detheridge produced the smallest, strangest wand Harry had ever seen. It was no longer than a fresh Muggle pencil and little wider, crafted of a reddish unpolished wood. “Six inches, redwood and horned owl feather,” he explained. “Size doesn’t equate to power... but you know that, of course.” He waved it in a circle, and said “*delavo*” in little more than a whisper. The bloodstains were instantly washed clean; Harry could see very faint tracings where he had been cut. “May I?” he asked, and reached for the remains of the shirt. With another flick of his wand, and a muttered “*resarcio*”, the shirt knit itself together. “I find *resarcio* works better on clothing than *reparo*,” he explained offhandedly. “You’ve probably never thought about a mending spell as something for battle, but it’s hard to fight without pants.” Harry snorted, and Detheridge appeared puzzled for a moment before his eyebrows shot up. “Trousers!” he exclaimed, and added, “It’s always important to remember where you are.”

Harry ran the mended shirt through his hands, and then slipped it over his head. “About London...?” he prompted.

“Ah, that. Albus suggested that we ride the student train as a precaution. I thought we could turn it into a lesson.” Detheridge’s expression became very serious. “You need to learn how to properly conceal yourself.”

Harry suppressed a smile, for this played perfectly into his plans. He retreated into his bedroom for fresh trousers. Detheridge told him to tuck his trouser legs into his dragon-hide boots; Shacklebolt had recommended the same once, he recalled. He strapped on his wand holster and his watch, and tucked Hermione’s post into his shirt pocket. It was a few minutes before ten o’clock. “Do we have time for a bit of breakfast?” he asked.

“We need to leave time for the Floo... unless you have a better way of getting around?” At that, Detheridge gave Harry a knowing look that left him absolutely shaky. Since popping wasn’t the same as apparation, he imagined that an apparition license didn’t actually apply. However, it struck him as a clear advantage that no one save Dobby knew what he could do. He couldn’t fathom how Detheridge might have seen him pop, unless he had been spying on the tower house the day that Harry breached the wall.

“Should I Floo from here, or Hogwarts?” Harry asked; he preferred to avoid any sort of direct answer to Detheridge’s question.

“We’ll head up to Hogwarts,” Detheridge answered. “I think I’ll Floo with you instead of apparating; it’s less stressful. Besides, Albus told me there’s a direct connection to the platform.”

Harry reluctantly donned one of his old student robes. “You, er, might want to wear a robe,” he suggested. “It’s sort of expected.”

Detheridge grinned. “Of course... remember where you are, yes... I’m not accustomed to robes.” He reached into a pocket in his trousers and withdrew an iridescent square of fabric, which he

began to shake vigorously. After several shakes, it blackened and took the shape of a voluminous robe. *I need one of those*, Harry thought immediately.

Downstairs, Madam Rosmerta thrust a sack into Harry's hands. He ate a scone and Detheridge gave an impromptu lecture on concealment as they walked up the path leading to the gates. Harry thought that Detheridge was almost too friendly, too familiar, and he was reluctant to trust any Defence professor that Dumbledore might hire. He settled on giving the man a wary benefit of the doubt, for the time being.

Hermione

Dr. Covelli had told Hermione that she would have more vivid recollection of her dreams, as a consequence of using the Dreamweaver. That had certainly been the case thus far, even when the dreams made little sense. She had developed a habit of lying quiet after she awoke, so that she could take in what she remembered – she learned from what was useful and discarded the rest.

Most of the previous night's dreams were worthy of discarding – they were either muddled or they were about boys. Hermione remained surprised by the frequency with which she dreamed about boys. It wasn't as though her waking thoughts were consumed by them, like Parvati or that tart Lavender Brown. She could appreciate an attractive boy or man, of course, but she had no intention of measuring her worth or marking her days based on anyone else's attentions. Parvati and Lavender had both taunted her with the irony that her two best friends were both boys and were both reasonably fit – Harry was considered a top prospect, especially by exactly the sort of girls he wanted to avoid. Her dreams about boys were nothing like her dreams about Harry or Ron; she didn't equate the two at all. She'd had those dreams for years, and they were too often of the worrying variety.

She had dreamed of being dragged on a date by one of the Weasley boys; the niggling parts were that she couldn't place which one it was, and that Mrs. Weasley pelted them with rice as they left. In any case, the symbolic significance of that dream was clear enough. Then there was an embarrassing little romance-novel dream, in the library with someone – she wasn't certain whom and really didn't care to know. After that was a fuzzy sort of dream about her parents; she remembered that her parents were dining and her dad wasn't acting like himself, and she remembered frayed nerves and guilt.

Hermione opened her eyes. The sun had barely risen behind the clouds – it would be hours before they left to catch the Express. Her left hand was clenched tightly, and she slowly became aware that it was clenched around something. The room was a little blurry, and she worried not for the first time that all of her reading was taking a toll. She had to consciously think of opening her hand. She squinted at the golden object on her palm for a long time, and then nearly dropped it when she realised what it was. She was holding a Gringotts key, and had no idea whose it was or how it had come to be there.

It took her less than fifteen minutes to ready herself and re-pack her things. Her hair proved to be as advertised; if anything, it required even less care than the Italian cut. She found Hestia Jones seated on a small wooden chair in the corridor.

Jones withdrew a pocket watch from her robes. “It’s... barely past six,” she yawned. “Why are you up and about?”

“I need to exchange some more money at Gringotts,” Hermione explained hastily, “for Hogsmeade trips, extra ingredients for potions... that sort of thing.”

Jones stood and sent the chair into nothingness with a flick of her wand. “They opened a few minutes ago,” she said. “It’s best if we do this early. We’d planned for you to spend the balance of the morning here.”

Hermione stood close behind Jones as they descended the stairs to the dining hall. It was nearly empty, but Jones made immediately toward the one red-haired person in the room. Hermione followed with her eyes closed.

Jones leaned over, and Hermione barely heard her mutter, “Hate to intrude, but I need a wand and a pair of eyes. Hermione Granger wants to go to Gringotts before the train comes.”

Hermione heard the sound of a bench sliding against the stone floor. “I expect Bill and I could manage that, if you’d rather remain here. He should be here any moment,” Mr. Weasley offered.

“I’d be grateful,” Jones said. She nudged Hermione’s arm. “Hope you don’t mind. I was scheduled off at six, but Tonks is running behind. I’ll get word to her and be off, then.” Hermione nodded dumbly, her eyes still closed.

“We missed you last night,” Mr. Weasley said.

Hermione slowly opened her eyes; he wasn’t scowling, at least. She didn’t know what to say and barely managed, “I guess I made my feelings known, didn’t I?”

“That you did,” he agreed. She was saved from responding by Bill Weasley’s arrival. Bill bantered with someone at the door for a moment, before he looked to them and his eyes widened in surprise.

Bill seized her hands, and kissed her on each cheek; she decided he’d surely picked that up from Fleur Delacour. “Welcome back,” he said quietly. “We’ve been worried sick, you know.”

“Thank you,” she mumbled.

“I suppose you were smothered last night – Ron and Ginny all over you, Mum dashing over with one of her bone-crushers...” Bill caught the tightness in his father’s face and Hermione’s burning cheeks. “Er... did I miss something?”

“Your mother made some unfortunate remarks to Hermione’s parents prior to their leaving,” Mr. Weasley began.

Bill’s eyes squeezed shut. “That’s a familiar story this summer,” he groaned.

“Hermione here used a time-honoured means to express her displeasure,” Mr. Weasley went on. “It seems that the owl intended to deliver that message was unexpectedly delayed by a few days. As a result, the message arrived last night.”

“Last night... oh!” Bill bit back laughter. “You’re telling me that Hermione sent Mum a Howler, and it turned up *here* ?”

“It took your mother a bit longer to find the humour in it,” Mr. Weasley deadpanned.

“You should have owled me,” Bill sniggered. “Merlin, you should have owled Charlie – could have used his expertise, I’d wager!”

Hermione closed her eyes again. “I wasn’t trying to be cruel – I wasn’t!” she insisted. “It’s just... the things that she said to my Mum... I was so angry!”

Mr. Weasley patted her on the shoulder. “Let’s walk, shall we? Bill, Hermione needs to venture out to Gringotts. Do you mind...?”

“There might be time for a bite afterward,” Bill said. “If not, we can talk during the week. It’ll quiet down once we ship off this lot, eh?”

“I don’t want to intrude,” Hermione insisted. “I can wait, if you like.”

Mr. Weasley looked to the stairs. “It’s not a bother,” he assured her. “Better that we go now, I think.”

Bill was silent as they walked down the Alley; he spent his time glancing at rooftops and the few passers-by. Mr. Weasley seemed as though he was about to say something shortly after they passed through the guards at the barrier, but then fell quiet. Hermione broke the silence. “Mr. Weasley, do you agree with what she said?” she blurted out.

Mr. Weasley stopped walking, which drew a scowl from Bill. “Hermione... sometimes... sometimes the most painful comments are the ones with a spot of truth behind them. Tell me, do you honestly think that I should be heading up the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts office?”

“You’ve done a brilliant job, Mr. Weasley!” Hermione said immediately. “Without you, there would be no Muggle Protection Act –”

Mr. Weasley smiled, but raised a hand to stop her. “I’ve done what I can, but you didn’t answer my question. I want you to be honest now.”

“It seems like the perfect post for a Muggle-born,” Hermione said quietly.

“It does, doesn’t it?” Mr. Weasley agreed. “I have my post because I’m a pureblood and no other pureblood would sully himself with it. That isn’t just, and it isn’t right, but it is the truth.”

“I see,” Hermione whispered.

“I wasn’t finished,” Mr. Weasley said. “Molly meant well – she always means well...” He sighed. “You have to understand that Molly has sacrificed quite a lot over the years. She could have had a career as a Healer – she was very talented in that way – but she believed that our children had to come first. She believes that a witch makes her mark through her children, you see. I imagine you don’t see your future in the same way?”

“It’s... not something I’ve thought a lot about,” Hermione returned, “but both of my parents are professionals. I was brought up to make my own mark, I suppose...”

“Then that’s what you’ll do,” Mr. Weasley said. “If the Ministry is closed to you, you’ll find your own path. I’m aware of what Molly said about estrangement, and there’s a spot of truth behind those comments as well. I think... I think that she was trying to make your parents see that there would always be a place in the wizarding world that you could call home.”

“That’s not what my Mum heard,” Hermione said.

“No, I suppose not,” Mr. Weasley admitted. “Molly made a right botch of things, and she feels horrible about it. We were getting on rather well with your parents, and I do hope that we’ll have occasion to restore that when... you know, when things have settled.”

Hermione wanted to be snappish, but Mr. Weasley was managing to defuse her. “It might help if my Mum knew that I wasn’t going to be married off in a few weeks,” she offered.

Mr. Weasley turned unexpectedly serious. “It is possible that you’ll receive enquiries as soon as you become of age, but it’s not very likely,” he said. “Most marriages take place without that sort of formality these days. Generally, that’s something you only see of the old-line families, and we’d be very suspicious if any of those sorts were to approach you. Their reasons might be something less than noble, I’m afraid.”

Hermione shivered. “Obviously, I can refuse... I *can* refuse...?”

Mr. Weasley nodded fervently. “Oh, yes – the days when a witch could be forced into a marriage arrangement are long past. Even childhood betrothals can not be enforced against a witch’s will.”

Hermione continued to shiver; she felt uncomfortably exposed standing there on the Alley. “Um... can we continue walking? I’d like to get to Gringotts now.”

Once inside, Bill led her directly to the exchange desk. She waited until he drifted back to speak with his father. “Are you here to make a currency exchange, Miss?” the goblin behind the desk hissed.

“Yes,” she said, startled. “Also, I found a key this morning. It looks like a Gringotts key, and I thought that I should turn it in.”

“Key, please,” the goblin said in a demanding tone.

She surrendered it. The goblin turned the key several times in his hands, and then began snapping

something in Gobbledegook. One of the ornate wooden panels behind the desk opened outward, and a second goblin waddled toward the first. The second goblin withdrew a set of several wire-rimmed lenses from his waistcoat, seized the key, and gave it a scrupulous examination.

The two goblins entered into a snarling exchange. Hermione saw Bill coming from the corner of her eye. The second goblin thrust the lenses back into his pocket, and glared at her. “You will come with me now,” he demanded.

“What’s this about?” Bill asked.

The second goblin broke into something vaguely resembling a smile, but all the teeth made Hermione think of a dog’s smile, which was not a smile at all. “It is a matter between the witch and Gringotts,” he said.

Bill moved smoothly beside her, and looked as if he was prepared to put himself between her and the goblin. “She’s family,” he said in a tone that brooked no opposition.

The goblin’s dog-smile grew wider and toothier. “She is not your kin, Weasley. We read the *Daily Prophet*. We know she is the Granger witch, and this is a matter between her and Gringotts.” He crooked a claw-tipped finger toward her. “You will come with me now.”

Hermione stilled Bill with her hand. “It’s all right,” she said. “I’ve done nothing wrong.” She moved past him and nodded at the goblin.

Bill’s face was flaming red, and Mr. Weasley was fast approaching. “She’s back here in twenty minutes, Rishok, or I’m in Ragnok’s office,” Bill growled. “I trust we have an understanding?”

The goblin – Rishok – no longer smiled. “This should require little more than half that allotment, Weasley. It would be a great surprise were you to gain the Director’s attention within a day’s time, so it is in your best interest to remain here. Come, Granger.”

Hermione let herself be led through a warren of corridors and open offices filled with goblins and the occasional human doing who-knew-what for who-knew-whom. “All I wanted to do was return a key,” she muttered.

Rishok turned his head without slowing the brisk pace. “Gringotts appreciates your forthrightness,” he said briskly.

“Are you certain this won’t take long?” she asked. “The Weasleys really are like family; I don’t want to worry them.”

Rishok snorted. “If Weasley believes that Gringotts would harm any being that has personally stood against He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, then he is a fool.” She stopped walking, and he added, “We do read the *Daily Prophet*.”

Hermione began to follow him again. “You don’t like Bill,” she observed.

Rishok's toothy smile returned. "He is unnaturally skilled with dice," he snapped.

The goblin knocked on a heavy door in an intricate pattern. After a few moments, the door shuddered and slid to one side. Inside was an office that looked to Hermione as if it belonged in the Stone Age. The desk, or what she assumed to be a desk, consisted of a giant slab of granite perched atop two carved rocks; a third rock appeared to serve as the chair. There were several curio cases, and a stuffed and mounted graphorn's head hung above a second door. Rishok showed her into the office, and strode directly to a well-dressed and particularly saturnine goblin. They snarled and muttered to one another, and Rishok produced the key. The goblin who occupied the office held the key close to his eyes, then looked her up and down and broke into a broad dog-smile. She tried not to quail, and instead turned her attention to the curio cases. Within moments, she wished she hadn't done that; she identified a half-dozen highly illegal objects in plain sight, and wondered why the goblin would be so obvious.

Rishok left, and the senior goblin motioned to a wooden chair that sat before the slab-desk. She seated herself, while the goblin kept his full attention on her. "I am Fliptrask," he said. "The Trust Department at Gringotts is mine. I am the governing trustee for the Potter Family Trust, among other duties. You are Miss Hermione Granger, and that fact earns you several minutes of my inordinately valuable time."

Hermione resolved to consider every word before speaking. "I am honoured that you would take the time, sir," she said. "I was only trying to return a lost key."

"Yes... the key." Fliptrask sat on the rock behind the desk, and placed the key at the centre of the slab. "How did you come by this, Miss Granger?"

"I woke this morning with the key in my hand," she answered honestly. "I have no idea how it came to be there. I haven't an account of my own, but I've seen Harry's key – Harry Potter, of course – and it looks rather like this one."

"Yes, it does," Fliptrask agreed. "In fact, this is a duplicate of Mr. Potter's key. This would not be noteworthy except that no one has ever requested or produced a duplicate of Mr. Potter's key, and it is theoretically impossible to duplicate a Gringotts key anywhere other than in our Key Shop. Rather remarkable – wouldn't you agree, Miss Granger?"

Hermione's eyes widened. "I can assure you, sir, that I've had nothing to do with any effort to counterfeit a key or anything of the sort!"

"Certainly not, Miss Granger. You lack both the technical skills and the sort of connections that would be required to even attempt such a feat. I do not say this to diminish your accomplishments; no witch of your age and experience could possibly manage it. In addition, you have no motive. You are already an approved party with regard to Mr. Potter's vault, and thus do not require a key." Fliptrask's dog-smile stretched from ear to ear. "You did not enquire as to how I know that this is a duplicate, and not the original key. If you were involved in its manufacture, you would ask the question in some way."

“I wouldn’t presume to waste your time, sir,” Hermione said. “You wouldn’t possibly give an answer.”

“You were evaluating the contents of my cabinets with evident curiosity,” Fliptrask asked abruptly. “No doubt you were wondering about the particular selection of items? Your thoughts, Miss Granger – why would I choose to display these items?”

Hermione looked at the disturbing curios for a moment, and then returned her eyes to the goblin. “For the same reason that you choose an office that is clearly suited to a goblin, sir – you are making the point to visitors that Gringotts is connected to, but not part of, the wizarding world,” she said in one breath.

Fliptrask pursed his lips. “That is a suitable answer. You are thoughtful and well-spoken, Miss Granger. I find it interesting that the wizards and witches who are most respectful of our time and activities are almost always those who were sired by Muggles or have a fondness for them. There are several thousand million Muggles, and a few million of you; I cannot help but wonder whether we are allowing great opportunities for wealth to elude us. What do you think Mr. Potter would say to such a statement?”

Hermione tried hard not to appear surprised by the sudden reference to Harry. “He’s generally very open-minded. I imagine he would be happy to listen to whatever you might have to say on the matter.”

“I developed a similar impression of the young man in the twelve minutes that I spent with him in July,” Fliptrask said. “If Mr. Potter were to seek out the management group of this institution for purposes of a brief conversation, we would not be averse to his request.”

“I haven’t spoken to Harry for some time but I’ll be sure to convey your message, sir,” Hermione offered.

“Perhaps Mr. Potter might accompany me and others of my station on the hunt,” Fliptrask suggested.

Hermione’s eyebrows rose despite herself. “I will... be sure that Harry understands the honour you wish to offer him.”

“Acceptable,” Fliptrask said. He stood, and Hermione understood that the meeting was concluded. He reached across the desk to shake her hand briskly. “Mr. Potter has made an exemplary choice in a companion,” he added.

Hermione nearly dropped the goblin’s hand. “Companion, did you say?” she squeaked, knowing full well what that meant in goblin terms. “Oh, no, it’s nothing like that! Harry is a long-time friend, that’s all.”

The goblin cocked his head to one side. “It is not customary to offer unfettered access to one’s vault unless one is married, affianced or related by blood – not customary at all.”

Hermione flinched at the goblin's second reference to Harry's vault. She struggled to say something that wouldn't cause offence. "Harry... is not inclined to behave as other wizards," she managed.

"In general, we take that as a positive attribute," Fliptrask said. "I would also be remiss if I did not offer my congratulations to you."

Hermione's brow furrowed. "I'm sorry – congratulations? For what, if I might ask?"

Fliptrask seemed unnerved for a moment. "I... am confused as to why you would not know this. It is most unexpected that I should be the first to recognise your accomplishment. In fact, you may wish to consider Gringotts as a future source for employment." He reached beneath the slab, and withdrew a newspaper. "We do read the *Daily Prophet*, of course. In fact, we receive it prior to general subscribers." He opened to the third page, and spread it across the slab.

GRANGER SETS NEW STANDARD FOR O.W.L. SCORES

A near-perfect performance for Potter's partner

Hogwarts student Hermione Granger, 16, has earned the highest score recorded on the Ordinary Wizarding Level (OWL) examinations in more than fifty years, and the third highest ever recorded, according to the Wizarding Examinations Authority. "It was a wholly unexpected accomplishment. We were not prepared to assess such a high level of performance," said Bronwyn Bester, interim Head of the Authority. Amelia Bones, chair of the Hogwarts Board of Governors and Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, praised the current crop of Hogwarts students and extolled Miss Granger's performance as proof that the school has maintained a standard of excellence. Madam Bester offered apologies for the delayed announcement of Miss Granger's accomplishment, and defended the Authority's rigorous scrutiny of the results as indicative of its commitment to assuring the integrity of the examination process.

Griselda Marchbanks, the immediate past Head of the Authority, resigned her post on August 24 to join the Hogwarts faculty as Professor of Astronomy. Sources within the Authority suggest that Madam Marchbanks' resignation was in part prompted by the review of Miss Granger's scores, which the same sources described as 'unusual', 'unprecedented' and 'quite barmy, actually'. For more on the rumoured faculty shake-up at Hogwarts, please turn to page 7.

Miss Granger's close friend, Harry Potter, was unavailable for comment at press time. Mr. Potter's OWL score for Defence Against the Dark Arts was the highest recorded in 140 years. Mr. Potter's plans for the fall, in light of his dismissal by the Hogwarts Board of Governors, remain undisclosed. The dismissal was issued after Mr. Potter dispatched several reputed supporters of Voldemort during the course of an unprovoked attack upon Miss Granger's family home, which occurred earlier this month.

Her eyes were drawn to the adjacent inset by a glimpse of familiar names. It was a list of the ten

highest overall scores ever recorded on the OWL examinations. All had received the maximum number of OWLs, of course.

1. *R. Fawcett, Ravenclaw, 1681*
2. *T. Riddle, Slytherin, 1943*
3. *H. Granger, Gryffindor, 1996*
4. *L. de Montmorency, Ravenclaw, 1839*
5. *G. Stump, Hufflepuff, 1786*
6. *G. Hipworth, Ravenclaw, 1858*
7. (t) *A. Lufkin, Ravenclaw, 1770*
7. (t) *A. Dumbledore, Gryffindor, 1897*
9. *P.N. Black, Slytherin, 1736*
10. *L. Evans, Gryffindor, 1976*

“Thank you,” Hermione said distantly. “If there’s nothing else, I should be going... wouldn’t want to worry anyone...”

Fliptrask seemed not to notice. “Your efforts are appreciated, Miss Granger.” He took a quill and parchment and scribbled something with a flourish. “Present this at the exchange desk. There will be no transaction fee today, with our compliments. Good day; through the second door, please.”

Hermione drifted beneath the graphorn’s head and through the door into an unfamiliar anteroom, past a bored-looking clerk of some sort, and into the main hall of Gringotts. Bill ran up to her, spouting something about Ragnok and outrage, but she didn’t take it in. The list was all that she could see. It consumed her.

T. Riddle, Slytherin, 1943

H. Granger, Gryffindor, 1996

“Take me back, please?” Hermione requested.

“Are you finished, then? What about your exchange?” Bill asked.

“Just... just take me back,” she whispered.

Harry

Harry stood to the rear of Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$. He spoke to no one, acknowledged no one. *Less is more* ,

Detheridge had advised with regard to concealment. Rather than the comprehensive glamour that he had been using, he had merely changed his hair colour to brown with blond highlights and had rendered his skin somewhat paler. Detheridge had charmed Harry's spectacles to darken. With black robes donned over black trousers and loose white shirt, Harry thought that he presented an image more befitting a Slytherin. Still, he had expected someone to call him out. Instead, the returning students bustled around him – carriages were boarded, trunks were stowed, good-byes were exchanged, and he didn't draw a second glance. Detheridge had informed the Aurors and DFDL volunteers that Harry was part of the Hogwarts official detail, and they also ignored him.

Luna Lovegood appeared lost in the crowd, but in point of fact she nearly always appeared lost. He resisted the temptation to greet her; Detheridge was watching him, he knew. He was very surprised when Cho Chang briskly cut through the crowd and approached Luna, with a half-dozen senior Ravenclaws in her wake. Concealment practice or not, Harry resolved to hex Cho and her fellows into October if they made any trouble for Luna. He moved along the platform until he stood within earshot. It was then that he spied the Head Girl pin that adorned Cho's lapel.

Cho set her hand on Luna's shoulder. "Lovegood, may I have a word?" she asked quietly.

Luna took a small step backward. "A witch who approaches a hippogriff without its permission is likely to be bloodied or worse. I learned that in Professor Hagrid's class," she said off-handedly.

Cho let out an exasperated sigh, but let her hand fall to her side. "Look... Lovegood, I'm here to convey our House's regard for you. What you did with Harry... you brought honour to Ravenclaw." When Luna said nothing – merely blinked her big eyes twice – Cho went on, "I also wanted to ask your reasons for declining the position of Prefect."

"Being a Prefect seems like a bother – all that walking around the corridors and opening closets," Luna said. "I wish to be treated no differently than any member of Ravenclaw House."

"You're owed more than that," Terry Boot said.

Luna responded, "I seek nothing."

Morag McDougal squinted hard at Luna. "Lovegood, what's that on your neck?" she asked bluntly.

Luna drew down her high collar to reveal a bright red weal that ran nearly from ear to ear. "This is a curse scar," she said. "Bellatrix Lestrange cursed me when she and two of her fellows sacked our flat."

The assembled Ravenclaws goggled at her. Terry Boot laughed nervously, "Loon... Luna, this isn't like those Snorkling things you were going on about last year... is it?" Cho muttered something about having seen a mention in the *Daily Prophet*.

"It was before Hermione Granger's home was attacked," Luna went on. "Why don't you ask Harry about it – he's right over there." Luna proceeded to point directly at him.

Harry nearly swore aloud. He cast the first thing he thought of on himself – a Look-Away charm – an instant before Cho’s head whipped around and the other Ravenclaws followed suit. “You mean that fellow over there?” McDougal said dismissively. “Lovegood, that must have been quite a curse you took.”

Luna shrugged. “Things are not always as they seem.”

Cho cleared her throat imperiously. “These are the House prefects for the year, Lovegood. If someone takes your things, if you’re wronged in any way, you’re to come to them – do you understand?” She turned her attention to the group of Prefects. “Twenty points per offence, and I expect all of you to comply.”

McDougal’s eyes bulged. “*Twenty points?* ”

Cho crossed her arms. “Twenty points, Morag. We’ll nip this within the week, and then I’ll see about rewarding those who come to Lovegood’s aid.”

McDougal smiled faintly. “I understand, Cho.”

Cho returned her focus to Luna. “Consider starting a Defence study group for the other fifth years, if Granger doesn’t carry on the D.A. We’ll see to it that it’s well attended.” She nodded smartly, and the Ravenclaw prefects and their leader swirled away into the crowd.

Luna looked directly over Harry’s right shoulder and just past his ear. “We’ll hold a seat for you,” she sing-songed. He watched her skip away, and hoped that Detheridge’s attention had been elsewhere.

The Look-Away charm seemed effective – on everyone save Luna, at any rate – and Harry continued to watch the milling crowd. Neville’s gran was unmistakeable as she made the barrier; her hat peeked above the assembled students. He noticed that Neville was drawing a very different sort of attention than in years past – the looks thrown his way were of curiosity, not pity. Neville carried himself differently as well, as he had at Gringotts. Harry felt a grim sort of satisfaction that perhaps the Department of Mysteries had benefited one of his friends in a way.

A coterie of redheads came onto the platform at three minutes to eleven. It took Harry several glances to recognise that Tonks was beside Bill Weasley, sporting spiky tomato-red hair. Detheridge caught Harry’s eye; rather than greeting the Weasleys, Harry thrust his hands into his pockets. It wasn’t until the round of good-byes began and the twins moved aside that Harry spotted Hermione in their midst.

If she hadn’t been in the Weasleys’ company, he thought that he wouldn’t have recognised her, at least not immediately. Her long bushy hair was gone, traded for a cut that was short – as short as his own hair. She had regularly returned from holiday tanned and visibly rested; now she was quite pale. From fifty feet, he recalled the sight of her peering from her bedroom window, when he had waited for Madam Bones to call him inside; she had been almost ghostly then, lost and afraid. He moved closer until Detheridge began to stare at him. From twenty feet, her eyes showed

something other than fear; he didn't know what it was that they showed, but it didn't strike him as anything good.

Detheridge sidled up to him and stilled him until all of the students had boarded and the Aurors had assumed their posts at the junctions of several carriages. Then he led Harry into the first carriage, to a compartment next to the one reserved for the Heads and prefects.

"You were seen," Detheridge said evenly.

"That was Luna Lovegood," Harry explained. "She has a knack for seeing things other people don't see."

"Not a bad trait in an ally," Detheridge observed.

The train slowly pulled away from the platform. Detheridge unpacked several books from a satchel, and made notes as he read on what was surely a Muggle pad of paper using what looked to be a fountain pen. Harry watched London go by, and continued to stare out the window until the grey buildings were replaced by green meadows.

"Do you think your friends can hold their tongues until after we arrive at Hogwarts?" Detheridge asked.

Harry snapped away from the window. "I'm sorry?"

Detheridge kept his eyes on his book and his notes. "You must feel strange right now – neither a student nor a teacher, sitting here with me whilst your friends are assembled elsewhere on the same train. I imagine you'd rather be with them. You understand that Albus would prefer to avoid a fuss until everyone is tucked away in the Great Hall, don't you? A concealment lesson wasn't an idle choice."

Harry sat back in his seat and crossed his arms. "Then why send me at all? Was he trying to make a point?"

Detheridge set down his pen, and met Harry's eyes. "He concluded that if something happened to the train and you weren't present, you'd never forgive yourself. As such, I was asked to accompany you. I'd have much preferred to sleep in. Of course, you'd still be laying there in your own blood with a pounding headache, so I guess everything happens for a reason." He returned to his notes with a snort.

Harry didn't know whether to be angry that Dumbledore had sent him along with a minder, or pleased that Dumbledore had for once correctly anticipated his feelings. He settled on watching the meadows roll by. The sound of a door opening drew his attention; the Prefects were assembling. When he saw Ron approaching, he made a point of not looking directly into the corridor. He nearly fell out of his seat when he realised that Parvati Patil accompanied Ron. *Where is Hermione?* he wondered. *Dumbledore wouldn't have taken her badge, would he?*

The door to the Prefects' compartment closed and the curtains were drawn. "I know you want to go. Go on, then," Detheridge said. "Just be subtle about it."

Harry didn't pass through the whole of the first carriage before a third or fourth year student gave him an uncomfortably long looking-over. He ducked into the loo as soon as he crossed into the second carriage. The face staring back at him from the mirror just wasn't different enough, he decided. A thought occurred to him, and he stifled laughter. *If he was here, I'd have seen him*, Harry thought; *he definitely would have settled in the first carriage*. He closed his eyes, let his mind settle on a particular moment from his night at the Cabaret Molière, and then cast the familiar glamour charm. He gave the mirror a satisfied smile, and then practiced the proper expression for a moment. One thing was readily apparent within a few moments of leaving the loo: taking on the appearance of Severus Snape on a train full of Hogwarts students was more effective than any Look-Away charm ever cast.

On two occasions while walking the length of the train, Slytherin students caught his eye. Harry summoned the foulest look he could recall from Potions class and took on a determined walk; it was a struggle to hold back a grin both times as the students quailed and fell back into their respective compartments. After that, however, Harry was mindful of looking for and avoiding Slytherins of his year or above; he knew that it would be difficult to avoid a terse conversation at minimum, and he wasn't confident that he could mimic Snape's voice for more than a few words.

As he entered the second to the last carriage – without any sign of Hermione, Luna, Neville or Ginny – he very nearly ran into Gregory Goyle. Goyle looked up at him with dazed, red-rimmed eyes. "P-Professor! I didn't mean –"

Harry went rigid. *Sneer, I have to sneer!* he thought. "Stand aside, Goyle," he barked.

Goyle hung his head. "Yes, Professor," he said. Harry hustled onward with the best swish of his cloak that he could manage, all the while thinking that Goyle looked broken up about something. He crept into a hidden corner just shy of the final carriage, dropped the glamour, and Disillusioned himself.

He saw a number of familiar faces through the glass doors; it seemed as though a good share of Gryffindors had taken up the final compartments, along with a number of Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs. As he thought about it, he realised that most of the returning D.A. members were here.

The last two compartments were both open to the corridor. One compartment was a crush of sixth years – Neville, Dean, Seamus, Susan Bones, Mandy Brocklehurst – as well as Ginny and Colin Creevey. Hermione sat in the very last compartment of the train. Harry couldn't look at that particular compartment without thinking of Dementors. Only Luna sat with her, and Harry was very surprised to see the two deeply engaged in conversation. The door to the next carriage thumped and Harry pressed himself against the final doorway.

"Cho Chang is a nutter!" Ron bellowed.

Mandy Brocklehurst stuck her head out of her compartment. “She’s not *that* bad... a bit too structured, I’ll grant you.”

Ron entered Hermione’s compartment and threw himself onto a seat. “Timetables for rounds... timetables for making timetables for rounds... and bossy!” He leaned back toward the corridor. “Cho Chang is a bloody timetable!”

“Don’t forget, she’s also our Quidditch captain,” Mandy returned from across the corridor. “We’re going to wipe the pitch with you this year.”

“Hey! Weasley is our King, and don’t you forget it!” Seamus said indignantly, which set his entire compartment into raucous laughter.

Ron shook his head. “No respect at all,” he moaned. “All I did last year was win the Quidditch Cup, after all.” Luna began to hum ‘Weasley Is Our King’, which reduced Seamus to a choking fit and caused Ron to instantly turn crimson; even Hermione smiled.

Harry found a comfortable place to lean, and quietly watched. People kept changing places between the carriage’s compartments and a number of different people sat with Hermione at various times, but the last compartment was never crowded and remained quieter than the rest. All of the remaining D.A. members took their turns with Hermione except Lavender Brown, who remained seated at the opposite end of the carriage. It seemed orchestrated, and it dawned on Harry after a while that Ron was doing the orchestrating.

Hermione doubtless knew she was being handled – Harry figured that if he could see it, she certainly could – but she voiced no complaints. Luna was the consistent presence with Hermione, and they kept slipping into conversation. Part of Harry wanted to find a way to move closer, to hear what they could possibly be saying to one another, but his better instincts told him that he would be intruding. He continued to watch, until he heard Anthony Goldstein say firmly; “Go back the way you came, Malfoy.”

“I wasn’t aware that there were reserved carriages, Goldstein,” Draco Malfoy drawled. With Goyle distraught and Crabbe presumably off to Azkaban, Harry had figured that Malfoy might skip his usual provocation. Instead he had come with Pansy Parkinson and Millicent Bulstrode; Bulstrode looked especially surly, Harry thought.

Anthony stood in the doorway to the first compartment and crossed his arms. “Awfully *inquisitive*, aren’t you? Umbridge isn’t around to help your lot anymore.”

Malfoy gave him a dismissive look and continued down the corridor with a smirk. “My, my... a few houses damaged here, a few people ruffled there, and suddenly everyone’s on edge.” Anthony instantly put the tip of his wand to Malfoy’s nose.

Ron leaped into the corridor with his wand at the ready. Neville was on his heels; he grappled with Ron and insisted, “He isn’t worth it!”

“Of course I’m worth it,” Malfoy sneered. “Do your worst, Goldstein; it won’t be much, I’m sure. Come on, Weasley, I’m sure you want to show off a bit – after all, with Potter out of the way you’re the big man in Gryffindor, aren’t you?”

Hermione stood, and it took everything in Harry to keep himself from stopping her. She had a strange look in her eye as she turned into the corridor. Her voice was low and cold. “Say what you came to say, Malfoy.” Luna followed her closely, and Ginny immediately emerged from the next compartment to flank her.

“Rumour has it you spent your summer in a madhouse, Granger,” Malfoy sneered. “Apparently five years as a swotty grind catches up with a person?”

“You know perfectly well what happened to me, Malfoy,” Hermione snapped. “You must have read it in the *Daily Prophet* ... or did you get a first-hand account from your father?” Her hands were at her sides, and there was no sign of her wand.

Malfoy’s eyes narrowed. “My father is none of your business.”

Hermione advanced, even as Ginny slipped in front of her. She pushed past Ron. “Your father tried to kill my parents and my friends, Malfoy,” Hermione said. “Where were you that day, I wonder?”

Malfoy laughed. “Do you think I would actually consider setting foot in your home, Granger? I don’t muck out stalls; that’s what house-elves are for.”

Hermione kept closing on him. “I think you’d do whatever your master told you to do. Perhaps you paid Vincent Crabbe to go in your place?”

“Crabbe was under *Imperio* us,” Bulstrode said in a monotone.

“Do you know what happened to Crabbe?” Hermione asked. “My dad beat him with a cricket bat.” Parkinson’s expression hardened and she levelled her wand toward Hermione. The corridor filled and a dozen wands shifted toward Parkinson in response; she immediately relaxed her stance. Hermione continued to stand there, seemingly relaxed, and it baffled Harry. *Draw your wand, Hermione*, he thought.

Neville stepped forward past Ron, until he stood immediately behind Luna. “Why are you here, Malfoy?”

“Just paying my respects to the Mudblood, Longbottom, as if it’s any of your business,” Malfoy sneered. He glared at Hermione. “You should have run when you had the chance.”

Neville bore himself up in a way Harry had not seen before. “Our family vault at Gringotts is number fourteen,” he said. “The Browns’ vault is number twenty. The Macmillan’s vault is on our level, as well. I don’t recall ever seeing yours, so I doubt it’s lower than sixty. You didn’t buy up for it, did you?”

“I see someone drank a Draught of Courage this morning,” laughed Malfoy. “Our vault is number eleven, by the way.”

“That belongs to the Black family,” Neville said.

Malfoy slipped into a fatuous grin. “Precisely.”

“That’s Harry’s vault, then,” Hermione said, and Malfoy’s face exploded with hate.

“Draco is the rightful heir of the Blacks,” Parkinson hissed.

“Spoken like a true gold-digger,” Parvati Patil called out from the front of the carriage.

Lavender Brown slid out of one of the forward compartments, wand drawn. “What line do the Parkinsons stem from, I wonder? Funny that I’ve never seen you at any of the Daughters of the Goblin Wars cotillions, isn’t it?”

Hermione began, “Your father is a fugitive, and you’ve lost your Prefect badge –”

“The Ministry’s likely to seize your family’s assets,” Susan Bones chimed in.

“You have no honour,” Neville said coldly.

“So why are you here? Why are you doing this to yourself?” Hermione finished.

Parkinson snapped, “Shut it, Mudblood!”

“I almost feel sorry for you, Malfoy,” Hermione said.

“I’d have thought you would have learned your place,” Malfoy hissed. “My father –”

“Slapped my father,” Hermione finished for him, “and would have killed him if he’d had the chance. He didn’t, and that’s the only reason you’re going to leave this carriage alive.”

“I’m sure I didn’t hear that correctly, because it sounded distinctly like you were threatening Draco.” Parkinson sneered.

“You’re dead, Granger – you and everyone like you,” Malfoy said coldly.

Ron moved forward in a duelling stance, pressing past Neville, Luna and Ginny to stand beside Hermione. She grasped his wand arm and said, “Don’t, Ron – please?”

Malfoy summoned a wicked smile. “How touching! Is it possible? Now that Potter’s gone, did the Weasel King finally manage to catch the Golden Bitch?” Several more wands snapped to attention.

Hermione rolled her eyes and laughed, which surprised Harry; every face that Harry could see

reflected shock. “Did you spend your entire summer concocting that line, Malfoy?” she asked. Her head shook as she waved her hands at him dismissively and turned toward her compartment.

“You don’t walk away from me! No one walks away from me!” Malfoy roared. Harry saw something in Malfoy’s eyes, and levelled his wand. As Neville and Ron moved to cover her exit and Ginny and Luna moved into a compartment, Malfoy moved hard to the outside wall of the corridor and muttered something that sounded vicious. A purple flash shot past Ron and over Hermione’s shoulder. She gasped and dropped to the floor, and Harry let out a guttural howl.

The windows of the nearest four compartments cracked, and the corridor cleared except for the three Slytherins, Hermione, Neville and Ron. Harry felt a strange stillness in the air. He popped from his resting place, still Disillusioned. A torrent of air burst along the corridor that knocked Ron and Neville to the floor. Harry managed to stop a few feet behind Bulstrode, but his momentum nearly carried him into the door to the next carriage. Bulstrode turned toward the sound, but Anthony Goldstein rolled out of the first compartment and struck her with a curse that Harry had never seen before. Harry cast *everbero* on Parkinson, who was distracted by Bulstrode’s fall; her chin snapped back and she collapsed. Malfoy moved to leave the carriage in a panic; he unknowingly charged right at Harry and Anthony. Harry levelled his wand and hissed, “*Catadromarius stranguria!*” His Disillusion fell for an instant, but he managed to re-cast it.

Thick magical ropes wound around Malfoy until he was trussed. One end looped twice between his legs and raced to the ceiling, where it tied itself around a light fixture.

“Wha... let me go!” Malfoy bellowed. With each struggle, the ropes tightened further.

Harry quickly dashed down the corridor, ducking the flailing Malfoy. Hermione lay still on the floor, and he kept seeing the purple flash in his mind’s eye. As he neared her, she stood and brushed debris off her clothing. She faced Malfoy with a satisfied smile, and began to walk toward him; Harry retreated ahead of her toward the front of the carriage.

Malfoy continued to fight against the ropes, and they tightened without remorse. He began to howl in pain. Ron flicked his wand and said “*Finite incantatum*,” but nothing happened. He tried again, and Malfoy continued to dangle.

“Cancel the spell, Seamus,” Ron said.

“*What?*” Seamus bellowed.

Ron shrugged. “It’s your style, mate.”

“I didn’t do it! I don’t even know what it is!” Seamus insisted.

Dean held up his hands. “Don’t look at me; I couldn’t do *that* to another man’s bits, not even to a wanker like Malfoy.” The loops between Malfoy’s legs tightened again, and Dean winced. “Cor, that *has* to hurt!”

Students hung out the doors of every compartment in the carriage, watching Malfoy's increasingly grim struggle, but few seemed willing to enter the corridor. "Right then... whoever did this, it's time to let up," Ron called out.

Detheridge burst into the carriage, his stubby wand drawn and at the ready; Harry had to press himself against the outside wall of the corridor to let him pass. He stopped for a moment at the sight of the writhing Malfoy and the two unconscious Slytherin girls. "Well, well... this looks like it'll take some sorting out," he frowned.

The students watched in rapt silence as Hermione reached Malfoy. "Is it painful? Are you miserable?" she asked with venom in her voice. Malfoy responded by coughing furiously, which made the ropes draw closer still.

Ron gaped at her. "Hermione... you couldn't have... did you...?"

"Hermione Granger?" Detheridge stopped on Malfoy's opposite side. "I am Marcus Detheridge, your new Defence professor. That's a vicious use for a conjured rope – a well-conjured one, I must say. If you'll release him, we can work this out."

"I'm afraid I can't do that, sir," Hermione said. "My wand is in Professor McGonagall's possession." *That explains why Ron was having her looked after*, Harry thought, and he wondered why she was wandless.

"Is that so?" Detheridge leaned in to examine the bonds more closely. "Stop struggling, boy," he told Malfoy. "The rope will tighten until it crushes you." Malfoy's eyes bulged, but he continued to move.

Harry stood next to the first compartment and watched Malfoy writhe. Anthony Goldstein was standing not more than two feet away, and Harry thought he looked very satisfied. Anthony raised his hand to his mouth, and muttered, "Look, Potter... I saw you appear for a second. You shouldn't kill him, not with a professor here."

Detheridge walked around Malfoy, over Parkinson, and past Hermione. "If the boy is released right now, there will be no recriminations. If I have to stun him and remove the ropes, I will find out who is responsible and will show very little mercy."

Thankfully the front half of the corridor remained clear. Malfoy was deadly still; it seemed that he had finally absorbed Detheridge's instructions. His breathing was laboured and raspy. Harry put his lips close to Malfoy's ear and whispered, "If anything happens to Hermione – *anything* – you will die." He walked back to the front of the carriage and cancelled the spell from there; the ropes vanished and Malfoy slammed hard to the floor.

"Thank you," Detheridge said. He returned to Malfoy and knelt. "What's your name, boy?"

"M-Malfoy, sir. Draco Malfoy," he croaked.

Detheridge's face went slack. "Malfoy," he said flatly. "I know your family." He collected a loose wand from the floor. "Is this yours?"

Malfoy looked around for a moment, before he squeaked, "Yes."

"If I were to inspect this wand, would I like what I found?" Detheridge asked.

Malfoy was silent for the best part of a minute, before he muttered, "I'm not sure."

"These two were with you?" Detheridge asked, pointing at the fallen Slytherins.

Malfoy's eyes seemed to cross. "I don't know... it's all dodgy... I... I'm not entirely sure what I'm doing here..."

"Don't embarrass yourself, boy," Detheridge warned. "Pick yourself up, and go to the first car. There's an empty compartment across from the one for the Head students. Sit there and wait for me. I'll take care of these two." Malfoy struggled to his feet, and walked slowly and awkwardly toward the next carriage. Harry resisted the temptation to kick him as he left.

Detheridge waved his wand strangely and then flicked it. "*Compunctio*," he said. Parkinson and Bulstrode both jumped up as though bees had stung them. "Good afternoon, ladies," he addressed them. "I am Marcus Detheridge, your new Defence professor, and we are not off to a good start. I've sent Mr. Malfoy to sit in the front car. Find him, and wait with him until I come for you. Do it now." Neither had to be told twice.

Detheridge stood and looked up and down the corridor. "Well, we certainly can't leave the train in this condition. Ordinarily, I'd ask whoever was responsible to take care of it, but this is a special circumstance. So... who knows the best charm for glass repair?" Harry backed into the door that led to the next carriage just as the corridor began to fill with curious students.

His former schoolmates were quickly taken with Detheridge. Harry figured there would be no need for anything like the D.A. now, and he was glad for that; everyone needed proper training, he figured. He crouched near the door until Detheridge expressed satisfaction with the repairs and was well on his way to the first carriage, and then picked his way down the corridor and stood just outside the last compartment.

Ron sat across from Hermione, and he looked concerned. "I'm not trying to start something here. We were willing to do whatever was necessary to protect you, but there's no getting around it... that was a stupid stunt. You were three feet from him without a wand!"

"I was fine. He's nothing more than a bully and a coward," Hermione insisted.

Ron's neck was tensing, and Harry knew that the red flush would come next. "He fired a slashing curse at you, for Merlin's sake! Do you *want* people to believe you've gone mad?"

Hermione shook her head and pointed toward the last doorway. "The spell he cast struck the doorway, there. The stain's barely marred, Ron; that was no slashing curse. Malfoy was simply

trying to scare me. That's what he does."

Ron ploughed on. "Then when he was hit with that rope thing, you... you actually enjoyed it. You didn't just want to hex him; you really wanted to hurt him, didn't you?"

"You've wanted to hex Malfoy to death for five years," Hermione snapped. "Don't tell me you didn't enjoy it, Ron!"

"What would you have done to him, then, if you'd had your wand?" Ron demanded.

"Well, I certainly wouldn't have trussed him up like that, if only because I don't know how to do it. I have seen it in a book, though," Hermione returned.

"You really have changed, you know?" Ron said.

Hermione gave a weak shrug. "Ropes wouldn't have occurred to me, actually. I suppose I would have cast *pruritus aegrius* down his trousers."

Ron's eyebrows shot up and he instinctively crossed his legs. "You're scary, Hermione. I know I've said that, but only because it's the truth." He stood. "Look... if you need anything –"

Hermione smiled faintly. "You're a good friend, Ron. I haven't said that as often as I should." Ron left, and she was alone. She balled up an anorak, placed it between her head and the outside wall of the compartment, and closed her eyes. Harry quietly entered and sat across from her. She seemed to relax, and he contented himself with listening to the clacking of the train against the tracks.

"I know you're there; I can hear you breathing," she whispered, and Harry nearly jumped out of his cloak.

"Hello," he whispered back as soon as he settled himself. "Are you all right?" She had dark circles beneath her eyes, he noticed, and she seemed even paler than on the platform at King's Cross.

He had to strain to hear her. "No, but I will be," she said. "I recognised the ropes straight away, from *Scandalous Tactics*. Liked that book, did you?"

Harry snorted softly. "I didn't know if it would work. I just blurted it out."

"You're not supposed to be here, are you?" she whispered.

"Not exactly," he answered quietly.

She relaxed against the wall again. He wanted to do the same, but knew that he definitely shouldn't be found out, not after what had happened. *Detheridge is going to eat me for dinner*, he was certain.

Hermione stretched, and repositioned the anorak. "You'd better go before someone sits on you,"

she whispered.

He rose from the seat, and cursed himself for having neglected to silence his breathing, his robes or his footfalls in the first place. She sat up and reached out; her hand brushed against his leg. “Thank you, Harry,” she said quietly. “I’d like to see you soon; tonight, if that’s all right.”

“I’ll try,” he said.

Harry was in no hurry to reach the front carriage of the Express. Detheridge was going to lay in to him for certain, and his brief time with Hermione had left him very much on edge. It wasn’t like her to leap into the unknown unless pushed, usually by him or Ron. He couldn’t reconcile that with the sight of her standing three feet from Malfoy – without her wand – and provoking him into a rage. There had been a dozen or more wands trained on Malfoy; if Harry had stayed with Detheridge, then Malfoy would have been hexed instead of crushed, but Hermione would still have left unscathed. He wondered why she had been so reckless, and he wondered why she wanted to see him that night. He wanted to talk to her about her parents’ decision, and it was best that he get that out of the way very soon. She hadn’t said ‘meet me tonight in the Common room’ or ‘come to the Room of Requirement’; she’d asked if he might see her. It was nice of her to ask, he thought – he actually appreciated it – but it was one more thing about Hermione that seemed off.

Detheridge’s compartment was closed, and the blinds were drawn; Harry presumed that it was silenced as well. Malfoy sat one compartment behind, alone. He shifted uncomfortably from one position to the next as Harry watched him. His robe lay beside him; he was wearing a half-sleeved white shirt and jerkins. Rope burns trailed across both his forearms. If Malfoy had taken the Dark Mark, then it was located somewhere else.

The door to Detheridge’s compartment opened, and Harry backed away. Bulstrode and Parkinson emerged, and the door quickly closed behind them. Parkinson was deathly pale, while Bulstrode looked furious. They scuttled into Malfoy’s compartment; none of them showed the presence of mind to cast an Imperturbable charm against the door, and he figured none of them knew how to create a silent space. Harry withdrew an Extendable Ear from one of his pockets and slipped it under the door. He then leaned against the door, which hid all but an inch of the Ear from the view of any potential passer-by.

“He *knows* things,” Parkinson whispered, “things he shouldn’t possibly know!”

“He knows things about my family that no one knows – at least until now,” Bulstrode fumed. There was a pause, before she added menacingly, “Anything comes back to me and I’ll know where it came from, Parkinson.”

“It wasn’t Legilimency,” Malfoy said flatly.

“How would you know?” Parkinson asked.

“My father made Snape use it on me; I’ll never forget how that felt,” Malfoy returned. He sighed loudly. “I’ve been telling you to avoid Dumbledore’s eyes since second year, and you didn’t know

why?”

“Then we’ve been ratted out,” Bulstrode growled, “and not just once. Nobody from the Squad could have known all of that... except *you* , Malfoy.”

“Stop thinking; it doesn’t become you,” Malfoy sneered. “If I’d decided to give you all up, I assure you that I wouldn’t be sitting *here* .”

“You’re good at keeping up appearances,” Parkinson snapped.

“This is all *your* father’s fault, so shut it,” Malfoy whispered forcefully. “If *my* father was still seated on the Board of Governors, we wouldn’t be stuck with that right bastard for a professor.”

Parkinson’s voice grew louder. “No, Malfoy, this is all *your* fault. Did you listen to me when I said we shouldn’t waste our time messing about with Granger? No, of course you didn’t listen! I guess you forgot that it was *your* father who turned her into a heroine of the unwashed masses? I’ll wager she’s got three houses standing up for her now, and some of us are going to have to play nicely if we plan to salvage any credibility –”

“Another year and it won’t matter what they think,” Bulstrode sneered.

“That’s one possibility,” Parkinson said. “The other is that a year from now, the Dark Lord is dead and we’re stuck with Dumbledore as Minister and Potter as hero of the bloody realm, which would leave most of us taking turns dishing ice cream at Fortescue’s.”

“Planning to play both sides against the middle, are you? Like father, like daughter,” Malfoy mocked.

“Wouldn’t you prefer that your father had done the same?” Parkinson asked. “There’s only one possibility left to you now.”

“There’s always more than one possibility,” Malfoy said confidently.

There was a long silence, before Parkinson offered, “I have an ampoule of unction in my trunk. It’ll soothe those burns.”

“Who conjured those bloody ropes, anyway?” Malfoy snapped. “Someone’s going to pay for that!”

“It wasn’t Granger,” Bulstrode grunted.

“Don’t be so sure,” Parkinson returned. “She sounds serious about killing you, Malfoy.”

“She does, doesn’t she?” Malfoy said quietly. “I want to know what happened to Granger after the *Daily Prophet* went and declared her Queen of the Mudbloods, and I’m not interested in the usual rumours. There’s something off about her, something different, and I’m not referring to the hideous mop of hair she used to wear.”

“You think there’s really something worth knowing?” Parkinson asked.

“I don’t know... but I’m not about to leave a Galleon lying on the walk,” Malfoy said.

“Like Granger said, ask your father,” Bulstrode said.

Malfoy hissed, “That’s the last thing I’d do! You know I haven’t spoken to him in a long time. If he comes for me now, then you’ll be right, Parkinson – I’ll be down to one possibility.”

Harry heard movement inside the compartment; he quickly coiled the Extendable Ear and scuttled to one side until the three Slytherins had passed. *So... it looks as though Bulstrode’s a Death Eater, Parkinson isn’t, and Malfoy might actually be undecided*, he thought. There were at least two surprises in that. Before he could slip into the empty compartment, Detheridge’s door opened. Harry didn’t want to go in, but he was certain that the door had opened for a reason and that it was best to have it out immediately. He entered the compartment, closed the door behind him, and cancelled the disillusionment.

“Subtle,” Detheridge said.

“No, sir, I wasn’t,” Harry admitted.

“The word refers to attaining an end via indirect means, marked by guile and cunning...” Detheridge began to rummage through his knapsack. “No, ‘subtle’ certainly doesn’t match with what I saw back there.”

“Look... I had to protect her. Malfoy was –” Harry began.

“Oh, is *that* what you were doing...? A-ha! I knew I’d brought it along!” Detheridge held out an uncomfortably familiar book. “Shall I locate the appropriate section, or have you committed those particular page numbers to memory?”

“Chapter eight,” Harry mumbled.

“I love this book, always have,” Detheridge said lightly as he turned the well-worn pages. “About two-thirds of it is either unworkable or foolishly dangerous, but I’ll give de Maupassant his due for sheer style... and some of it is actually damned impressive. The man is a genius... and here we are. Number twelve... *catadromarius stranguria* .”

Harry never had the slightest chance. Detheridge had tossed off the incantation as though he was simply reading it aloud from the book, and had artfully concealed the flick of his wand. Harry found himself upside down and flailing, and then very quickly trying not to repeat Malfoy’s mistake.

“Good! You’re a quick study,” Detheridge snapped. He set the book down face-up directly in Harry’s view. “Hurts, doesn’t it? You seriously insulted the Malfoy boy back there, and I’m betting that you had no idea why. Do you understand why this little rope trick belongs in a book with ‘scandalous’ in the title?”

Harry wanted to shout, but he knew what would happen if he did. Instead, he measured his breathing and bit out, “I’m sure you’re going to tell me.”

“In a world where bloodlines matter, what is truly important to the eldest son of a family?” Detheridge asked.

“Living long enough to inherit?” Harry managed to say.

“That’s a given, but you’ve started up the right path,” Detheridge said. “You survive, you get the money, and you pass along more money to your own eldest son instead of leaving it to your brother’s brat. Fertility, Harry – it’s as important as money to old wizarding families. Read aloud, from the top of the right hand page – *now* .”

Even though Harry was moving very little, even the small rise and fall of his chest was encouraging the ropes to constrict. He didn’t want to read aloud, but he wanted out of the ropes and it surely looked like the quickest means to that end. He was swaying a little, so he squinted to keep the words in focus. “If you are made into a cuckold against your will, number twelve is the best revenge. It is made all the more delicious when your transgressor stands to claim his family’s seat of honour. In a bare hour, you can end the man’s line; if he has not yet claimed the seat of honour, you may even have the pleasure of thwarting his climb altogether –” He had no idea what a ‘cuckold’ was, but the general meaning of the passage was clear enough.

Detheridge cut him off. “If the poor wretch thrashes enough, it doesn’t take an hour. Malfoy’s family may be dubious at best, but he still stands to lead it. Skip a few paragraphs... read from here.” He planted his index finger near the bottom of the page.

Harry was afraid to clear this throat. “For a particularly wicked revenge,” he read, “conceal your identity from the transgressor. He will be unable to affect the direction of his fury, and will reap his reward in mere minutes.” He added uncomfortably, “I don’t remember that part, from when I read the book.”

Detheridge picked up the text, and looked through it for something. “Perhaps you have an earlier edition,” he suggested. “Now then... ‘he will be unable to affect the direction of his fury’... there’s an important clue in that for learning how to get out of most of the Marquis’ little rope tricks.”

“A clue... *what*? You’re going to make me get out of this bloody thing myself?” Harry growled. The ropes quickly tightened, and he immediately wished that he’d kept his mouth closed.

“Angry with me?” Detheridge asked.

“Yes!” Harry seethed through clenched teeth. He barely breathed, barely moved, but the ropes tightened. “*Bloody...!*” It was like being kicked, he decided – by several people at once.

“Control yourself and think,” Detheridge said quietly. “You know that I cast the ropes. It’s true that the ropes are ‘conjured’, but it’s just as accurate to describe them as ‘cursed’.”

It was difficult, but Harry managed to slowly relax one part of his body at a time until he hung limp. The ropes loosened somewhat, enough that the pain receded and his thoughts came to the fore. *If I didn't know that Detheridge had done this, then I couldn't 'affect the direction of my fury', but why would I want to affect it?* he wondered. *When he pushed me, when I got angrier, the ropes tightened – even when I wasn't moving. Is that the difference between 'conjured' and 'cursed'?*

He could see the Department of Mysteries again; Bellatrix LeStrange was mocking him for his failed Cruciatus Curse, telling him that he had to mean it. Detheridge didn't mean it, Harry realised – he was teaching a nasty lesson, but no more so than Shacklebolt's first session at Grimmauld Place. The ropes weren't intended to injure; they had loosened when he relaxed. *I'm not truly angry with Detheridge*, he told himself. *I cast this on Malfoy and I didn't understand it. I didn't need to cast it, even though I wanted to do it; I didn't need to do anything at all, really...*

"I'm not angry with you," Harry told Detheridge. "You're not trying to hurt me. I wasn't thinking when I set after Malfoy with the ropes." The bindings sagged and Harry's legs dropped loose. He didn't waste any time; before they could possibly tighten again, he wriggled free and threw them across the compartment.

Detheridge returned *Scandalous Tactics for Duelling* to his knapsack. "Well done," he said casually. "Snape was wrong about you; you're prepared for advanced studies."

"*Snape?*" Harry spat. He was certain that he saw the ropes suddenly wriggle in the corner, and bit back the rest of his thought.

"He seems to believe that you can only act on impulse... come to think of it, I don't think he's described anyone as anything but a mindless twit." Detheridge snorted. "Strange man, that Snape. You *are* impulsive – find me a teenager who isn't – but there is a working mind inside that head of yours. Most of any given battle is waged with the mind, Harry, not with a wand or a sword or a staff."

Harry's eyes locked on the ropes; they were definitely shaking. "Erm... could you get rid of those things?"

"They'll fade away when you allow it," Detheridge explained. "Nasty things, very nasty... I'd love to ask the man what possessed him to create ropes that feed off the victim's emotional state."

Harry forced himself to turn away from them, and to change the subject. "Have you arranged a time for our sessions?" he asked. "Dumble... er, the Headmaster is setting a timetable."

"Oh, we'll meet here and there," Detheridge said dismissively. "I find that fixed times rarely work out. It's enough for me to manage a complement of regular classes. I might ask Albus if I can put you to work with the younger students, and... and..." His eyes suddenly glazed over.

"Are you all right?" Harry asked immediately.

Detheridge's face was vacant. "Just... one of those things... overtaxed myself the last few days... a glass of water will... yes, a glass of water..." He withdrew a handkerchief from somewhere and mopped his brow with it. "See you at the castle," he mumbled, and abruptly walked out of the compartment.

Harry closed the door before anyone could steal a look inside. *I can be subtle*, he fumed. Resolving to stay sealed inside the compartment for the rest of the journey, he closed his eyes and savoured the sensation of an easy breath. When he opened them again, the ropes had faded away.

The grey skies became darker and more turbulent as lush meadows gave way to steep Scottish hillsides. Raindrops streaked the windows by the time the Express switched onto the last leg of track that took them to Hogsmeade. Detheridge still had not returned to the compartment when Harry felt the train begin to slow. Detheridge had left behind his knapsack. Harry took it up, opted for a Look-Away charm and a raised hood, and dashed to the foot of the carriage during a lull of activity. The train was rolling at a snail's pace when the first Aurors hopped off the train to the platform, and Harry followed suit. Hagrid had taken up his usual place to await the disembarking first years. McGonagall also stood on the platform, a black umbrella raised stiffly above her head.

Harry watched the great scramble from the train to the thestral-drawn carriages. Owls hooted and screeched, cats slunk around the ankles of rushing students, and Hagrid bellowed, "Firs' years over here!" It was more of a drizzle than a rain now; Harry could recall worse years to be consigned to the boats. He watched his old life push past him in a great teeming mass; Ron's head was barely visible from within a knot of sixth-years. McGonagall fished Hermione from the crowd and spirited her to a carriage waiting behind the station house.

The Aurors seemed more focused on the students than the platform, so Harry recast his disillusionment and scrambled after McGonagall; he managed to hoist himself onto the footman's step just as the thestrals started forward. McGonagall's carriage raced ahead; they were through the gates and on the winding drive to the castle well before the first students began their rides.

Harry watched through the windows as McGonagall produced Hermione's wand from within her robes. Hermione took it; she looked upset and began to exchange words with the professor. McGonagall seemed to let forth with long gales while Hermione fired back in short bursts. If it had been he and Ron, Harry wouldn't have described it as an outright fight, but with McGonagall and Hermione he wasn't so sure. He couldn't hear Hermione's voice over the din of the wheels and the unexpected clacking of the Thestrals' hooves, but McGonagall's burr carried through the doors now and again: "...endangering yourself... her motives are far from noble in this... you should never have... we *all* care... that simply isn't true... ten points..."

They seemed to settle back for a moment, but then Hermione shouted something unintelligible and McGonagall's voice sliced through the sounds of the carriage rumbling along the pebbly path. "...the same mistake... wrong road for the right reasons... perhaps I should have held your wand a while longer?" Hermione's hands waved and her head shook; she was red-faced and furious.

The carriage stopped quickly, and Harry had to grab hard for a hand rung to keep himself on the step. Hermione flung the door open and it nearly slammed into him. She leapt from the carriage

wide-eyed and wand drawn, and stared up at the castle in the oddest way; it was almost as though she was trying to ward it off, he thought.

McGonagall leaned heavily against her staff as she clambered down. “You bear the same obligations as any other student of this school, and you are subject to the same disciplinary standards. I do hope you weren’t thinking otherwise when you resigned your post as Prefect; if so, then you have miscalculated,” she snapped.

Hermione whirled, and her hands went to her hips. “I’m not threatening them; I’m telling you that I won’t be threatened again. I behaved as you asked, and Malfoy would have happily killed me if someone hadn’t stepped in. If I’d had my wand, I wouldn’t have stood for it.” Harry almost flinched at the anger in her eyes. Her hands were shaking. “You tell... you tell Professor Snape that if they come after me again, there will be a price paid for it,” she finished.

McGonagall’s face fell. When she spoke, it was in a very formal way. “It is my opinion that you are not ready to be in attendance, Miss Granger. It is my duty to report that impression to the Headmaster; I dearly wish that I could do otherwise.” She inclined her head toward the doors. “If you will be remaining here, I think it best that you affect a gradual return. Your present temperament is not suited to the Welcoming Feast. The password to the Common Room is ‘fortune favours the brave’. The house-elves will provide you a meal.”

Hermione put away her wand, rushed up the steps and ploughed inside without a look back. McGonagall clung to her staff as though she was being buffeted by a sharp wind; she appeared unthinkably close to tears. *I’ve cocked up twice in twenty-four hours; why not go for a third?* Harry figured. He let his disillusionment fall. “Are you all right, Professor?” he asked.

McGonagall’s hand clutched at her chest. “Where did you come from?”

The impulse to gaze at his own feet was too powerful to resist. “I just left the train; the Headmaster sent me along with Professor Detheridge to ride... well, to ride with the students.” He laughed nervously. “It’s passing strange to put it that way.”

“I imagine it is. So, Potter... you were on the train?” she said slowly. “How long have you been standing there?”

Harry shuffled his feet. “Long enough,” he admitted.

McGonagall nodded gravely. “I see. Was there something that you needed?”

“No, I just wanted to be sure that you were all right,” Harry said, and thrust his hands into his pockets.

McGonagall sighed. “It’s very difficult to watch someone...” She trailed off and didn’t finish the thought.

“I’ll be speaking to her later,” Harry offered.

McGonagall looked at him with a sad, strange smile that reminded him of the looks he received from the portraits throughout the castle. “Thank you for asking after me, Po... Harry. It says something about the sort of person that you are, something very good.” She repositioned her staff and began to climb the steps. Harry quickly put out his arm; she hesitated for a moment and then took it until they reached the top.

“You wait for the first years here, right?” Harry recalled.

“The tradition begins at these doors, as it always has,” she said quietly. The lights from the first-years’ boats stood out against the dark horizon.

At the sound of the approaching student carriages, he opened the door. The realisation that he was expected to sit with the staff at the head table struck him soundly, and he hesitated there. “Get yourself to the Great Hall,” McGonagall said. “Please meet me in the anteroom following the Feast; there is additional information that the Headmaster wishes me to pass along.”

Harry hesitated for a moment at the foot of the main stairs, but he knew that he couldn’t go chasing after Hermione. He continued to wonder what had gotten into her; the wondering led him down a path that he wasn’t prepared to walk, not until after the Feast at any rate.

Harry Potter and the Years of Rebellion

Sing A Song That Sounds Like Life

Chapter Thirty-two

SING A SONG THAT SOUNDS LIKE LIFE

The Great Hall was empty and spotless, awaiting the arrival of the students. Scores of candles floated over the four long House tables, as always; the golden plates and goblets were just so; the ceiling was a bit gloomy, but one end had cleared off to reveal twinkling stars set against a sky of deep purple. Detheridge was seated at the staff table; he looked to be joking with Flitwick, but Harry thought he looked a bit ashen. Flitwick was holding the Sorting Hat, and positively rolling with laughter. Croaker came out of the anteroom; he spied Harry and tipped his hat before seating himself to Flitwick's left.

Mrs. Tonks – *Professor Tonks*, Harry thought – walked up beside him. “Are you nervous? I can imagine how you might be nervous, what with all of your classmates still attending, not to mention having to sit up there at the table, everyone staring and pointing and –” She stopped to take a breath and shuddered. “I couldn't be more nervous; I suppose that's obvious.” Her hands never stopped moving; she picked at the skin that surrounded her fingernails.

Harry surveyed the room, which seemed to have closed in a bit. “I'm sure everything will be fine, Professor Tonks,” he managed.

“Oh, Harry, you must call me Andromeda. I never want to hear you call me ‘Professor’! I'm not ready to answer to that, I can tell you!” Mrs. Tonks burred on. “I don't care for crowds, you know – I don't suppose that Nymphadora mentioned that, did she? – but I'll muggle through... that is to say, I'll *muddle* through! Oh, dear me...”

The room had definitely shrunk, Harry decided. “We should sit; sitting would be a good thing,” he croaked.

Harry walked as quickly as possible past Snape, who had swirled in and promptly taken his customary seat at one end. “You will sit in the last seat, Potter,” he sneered, and pointed to the far end of the table. “Apprentices *should* be required to take their meals in the anteroom.”

Mrs. Tonks shook her head at Snape. “Severus, I'm beginning to wonder if the rumours about you might be true,” she said with a sigh, and moved on before the Potions Master had an opportunity

to respond.

Harry stopped at Detheridge's place, and deposited the abandoned knapsack atop the table. "You left this behind, Professor," he said.

Detheridge looked blankly at Harry and then at the knapsack. "Mine, is it?" He opened it, rifled through the contents and smiled slightly. "Yes, of course... thank you... erm..." Harry mumbled something and proceeded to the far end of the table, wondering about Dumbledore's taste in Defence professors and questioning Shacklebolt's tutorial recommendations as well.

Mrs. Tonks followed him. He couldn't look at her any longer without thinking of Tonks, and he didn't want to feel guilty anymore. "You don't have to sit beside me, Prof... Andromeda," he offered.

She looked along the length of the table. "It looks as if I'm either beside you or Severus. I spent seventeen years of my life amongst people like him, Harry; that was quite long enough." She added with a small smirk, "You know, I expected you'd ask about those rumours straight away."

A few of his darker experiences with Snape rose to the surface of Harry's thoughts. "Rumours can't be any worse than the truth," he decided. Mrs. Tonks raised an eyebrow, but said nothing.

Dumbledore's and McGonagall's seats at the centre of the table remained empty; as did the seat between Mrs. Tonks and Professor Marchbanks. The doors at the far end of the Hall swung open, and the returning students began to flood inside. It was a full ten seconds before a knot of younger Gryffindors looked to the staff table and froze in place. Within moments, half of the Hogwarts student body was standing stock-still and staring at Harry as the other half struggled to enter.

Cho Chang's voice rang out from the doors. "Move along! What's the meaning of this –" She caught sight of him and her eyes widened; Harry couldn't tell if it was out of shock or fright. He contemplated crawling under the table, but settled for half-heartedly waving at her. She waved back in a daze and then cocked her head to the side, as though she wasn't quite certain what she was seeing. After a moment, she abruptly returned to herding her fellow students to their places.

Harry turned his attention to Flitwick, who was again laughing loudly at the Sorting Hat, until he heard a sharp hiss from across the Hall. Malfoy stood at the far end of the Slytherin table, fists balled at his sides. Parkinson was next to him, apparently in shock. Bulstrode was with Nott and two seventh-years that Harry recognised but couldn't name; she began to violently mouth something, and Harry was pleased that he could not hear her.

Mrs. Tonks bumped his arm. "That must be Eddie Parkinson's daughter; the poor girl has his nose. She doesn't look pleased to see you, does she? For that matter, my dear nephew looks positively surly."

"Nothing new in that," Harry said. He reached for his goblet and raised it slightly in Malfoy's direction, which drew a vicious glare.

Mrs. Tonks pursed her lips. “Draco lacks direction; it’s no wonder, given his circumstances. I’ll be watching him closely.”

The students continued to push in, and the usual hubbub died at the door. The seats at the near end of all four House tables were very slow to fill. A group of younger Ravenclaws were forced forward by the crush of entering students; they stood there and just stared at Harry. He felt like a classroom experiment gone wrong under their gaze. After a moment, he scowled at them and they quickly found seats.

“Oi, that’s Harry up there!” Dean Thomas called out, which provoked nervous laughter from the Gryffindors already seated. Harry’s year-mates pushed forward; Dean and Seamus plunked down in the first seats, while Parvati and Lavender blocked off several seats opposite them.

Ron kept walking past the House table, with Neville in tow. He reached up, hand extended to Harry, and said, “Good to see you, mate!”

Harry stood and leaned across the table to take Ron’s hand. “Thank Merlin someone is,” he whispered forcefully.

Neville thrust his hand forward. “I don’t understand it, but I’m awfully glad to see you here,” he said. “Did you, er, hear what happened on the train?”

Ron smiled crookedly. “Somehow I think he knows all about it, Neville.”

“Thanks for coming up here,” Harry said to Neville as they shook hands. He looked up to see Dean, Seamus, Lavender, Parvati and Ginny all waving madly, and couldn’t help but indulge a grin.

Mrs. Tonks took up her wand and gave it a shake. “Five points to Gryffindor seems appropriate to me. Good show, boys.”

Ron blushed. “Er... thank you, Professor... um...?”

Croaker abruptly turned away from Flitwick. “Neville, my boy! Goodness, but it’s been too long!”

In a trice, Neville seemed to shrink into a tentative third-year. “G-G-Great Uncle Algie!” he stammered. “I d-didn’t see you there... G-Gran never said anything about –”

“Straighten up, would you?” Croaker huffed. “You’re a friend of Mr. Potter, then?”

Neville stood there frozen, and Harry decided to jump in with both feet. “Neville is one of my closest friends,” he said. “He’s a good man in a pinch. Of course, you should know all about what he did in the Department of Mysteries... shouldn’t you?”

Croaker’s face was round and inclined to a jovial look; this made his darkening eyes particularly startling. “I know a great many things, Mr. Potter, and there are other things about which I know far too little and desire to know much, much more,” he said tonelessly.

Before Harry could say anything else, Dumbledore made his entrance from the anteroom. “Mr. Longbottom, Mr. Weasley, it’s a pleasure to see you both well and ready to begin another year. Thank you for approaching the table,” he said, and smiled broadly at both of Harry’s friends. “Now... would you gentlemen be so kind as to take your seats?”

“Yes, Headmaster,” Neville said quickly. He flopped down across from Dean and Seamus; Ron looked up and down the table for someone – most likely Hermione, Harry figured – and then sat next to Neville and Ginny.

Dumbledore slowly made his way along the table as the students continued to take their places. He patted Harry on the back of the shoulder, and said, “All seems to be going well thus far, wouldn’t you agree?” Harry debated an answer, glanced down the table toward Croaker, and instead silently nodded and took his seat

The Headmaster next stopped behind Flitwick and Croaker. “Is the hat telling jokes again this year, Filius?” he asked.

Flitwick laughed. “I’ve never seen it in such a state, Albus; it simply won’t stop!”

Croaker nodded. “The one about the troll, the hag and the leprechaun going into the bar... ah, that’s a corker!”

The man laughed loudly, as though he hadn’t tried to stare a hole through Harry moments before. He had come from the Department of Mysteries, and seemed old enough to be the same Croaker who had captured the cognivores more than a century before. Harry suspected that Croaker was the one who had provided Dumbledore with the binding curse cast on Hermione; that meant he was also likely responsible for the runes appearing on Harry’s hand, despite Dumbledore’s opinion on the matter. Now it turned out that he was Neville’s Great Uncle Algie – who, if Harry remembered correctly, was the one that had tossed a very young Neville from a window to see if he was magical. Harry was now quite certain, even more so than after the staff meeting, that the man was dangerous – now it was a matter of figuring out to whom Croaker was a danger.

Dumbledore put his hand to his chest, but he was still smiling. “Oh, my... and with such tender ears about! I shall have to give it a good talking-to!” At that, the hat began to say something that Harry couldn’t make out. Dumbledore’s smile fell away; he took the hat from Flitwick, and proceeded to have a very animated whispering conversation with it. He carried it with him to the centre of the table, set it down, and raised his hands in the air. The enchanted sky seemed to respond to him; the last of the gloom faded away and the stars brightened.

“Welcome to all of you!” he said brightly. The last students slid into their seats, and the din from their chatter quickly faded away. “As you have doubtless concluded, we have a great many announcements to make this evening – so many, in fact, that I believe I will break with tradition and speak whilst you partake of the evening’s feast.” He was met with a smattering of applause at that. “Prior to that, of course, our new first years must take their places.” His eyes took on a familiar twinkle. “The Sorting Hat has informed me that it wishes to conduct the sorting prior to singing its song... and who am I to argue with a hat?”

As if on cue, the doors of the Great Hall re-opened and Professor McGonagall led the line of first years toward the front. Harry thought that they seemed exceptionally young, and that there seemed to be fewer of them than normal. They appeared every bit as anxious as he remembered from his own sorting. McGonagall walked to the table, and Dumbledore held out the hat to her. The Hat said something; her eyebrows rose for a moment, and then she conjured a four-legged stool upon which the Hat was placed.

She unrolled a parchment scroll, and said to the assembled first years, “When I call out your name, you will place the hat upon your head and sit on the stool. The hat will announce your House, and you will then proceed to the appropriate table. Is that understood?” A few of the first-years managed to nod; the rest looked as if they preferred to hide.

The Sorting Hat quickly dispatched Lisbet Adams to Hufflepuff, Moira Armstrong to Ravenclaw and Edmund Blackadder to Slytherin. McGonagall cleared her throat, and called out, “Blitz, Alistair!”

A dark-haired boy slowly edged forward from the rest of the first-years, and reluctantly slipped the hat over his head. There was a pause, and the boy began to fidget before the hat shouted, “HUFFLEPUFF!” The boy’s eyes squeezed tightly closed and he let out a long rattling sigh. After a few moments, he set the hat back on the stool and trudged off to the Hufflepuff table.

Harry was certain that he’d seen the boy before, but couldn’t place him. He found himself watching the reactions of the House tables rather than paying attention to the sorting, until McGonagall said, “Davies, Laura!” With those two words, he remembered both the new Hufflepuff and the blond-haired girl who smiled at him as she walked to the stool; it seemed to him as if a hundred years had passed since he’d given broom rides in Diagon Alley. The hat lingered for a long time, and he wondered if it was talking to her. It quivered, and then shouted out, “GRYFFINDOR!”

She nearly jumped off the stool, and tore the hat from her head. “Is it... is it certain?” she asked hoarsely.

McGonagall wrested the hat from the girl’s clenched fists, and told her firmly, “Be seated with your House, Miss Davies.” Parvati rose from her seat and led the shaken girl to the table, where she slumped down between Lavender and Natalie McDonald.

Harry didn’t recognise any more of the first-years, though he supposed it was possible – even likely – that others of them had taken rides with him on his Firebolt. He wondered why Laura Davies had been so bothered by her sorting; *perhaps they’re like the Weasleys, but with everyone in Ravenclaw*, he thought.

It wasn’t long before “Yonge, Donald!” was sorted (“RAVENCLAW!”), but the students were positively restless. Ron was fiddling with his fork; Lavender and Parvati were twittering about something or another; and Neville was trying as hard as he could to avoid looking at the staff table. McGonagall held the Hat before her, and looked at it crossly.

Dumbledore stood. “Does the Hat still wish to regale us?” he asked. “We could substitute the school song, if it wishes.”

McGonagall walked slowly toward the table. “The Hat is behaving very oddly,” she whispered forcefully. “I must recommend that we forego the demands of tradition –”

“I shall sing ,” the Hat announced loudly enough that a good share of the students could hear. Buzzing conversations fell to whispers and then to nothing at all. McGonagall placed the ancient wizard’s hat onto the stool. The whole school waited in silence, as the rip near the hat’s brim opened wide:

A thousand years or more ago,

When I was newly sewn,

There lived four wizards most ribald,

Whose names are still well known:

Bold Gryffindor, a ladies’ man,

And Ravenclaw, fair wench,

Oh Hufflepuff! – saucy and tan,

Slytherin favoured French –

“Stop that at once! ” McGonagall roared.

“I merely speak truths long forgotten!” the Hat shouted, and then it resumed singing:

The truth shall not be hidden here,

Wizards and witches fair –

Excuses made to mask one’s fear

Merely delay the scare.

So now I shall tell you the truth

As it is told to me,

And for those under Hogwarts’ roof

There’s one more chance to see...

The Hat’s voice deepened and grew in intensity until it seemed to rattle the walls around them:

You refused to heed my warning;

A mere handful did unite.

Though decrees made it much harder,

It was yours to see the light.

I remember the Four Founders

And their madness in the end;

Even now their old school flounders,

Against whom shall we defend?

Dark Lords risen, Dark Lords fallen,

Hogwarts stood the test of time.

Dark decisions, leaders stalling,

Governors commit high crime;

Ministry lies now in shambles,

Corrupt power it does wield.

Where lies Hogwarts once was brambles;

Soon an empty, poppied field.

Alliances could save the day

As darkness swallows the Isle;

Will Hogwarts' students show the way,

Or will they sow denial?

Slytherin, turn - I beseech thee,

Or spurn me if you dare;

As for the other houses three...

BEWARE.

There were shrieks at the last, and then the assembled hall descended into a cacophony of whispers and mutters. A few moments later, the Hat went slack and fell to the stone floor. Detheridge vaulted the table to join Dumbledore beside the Hat. As Flitwick, Croaker and Marchbanks rushed around the table – for his part, Harry pressed back against the wall – the Hall erupted into bedlam.

The food for the feast unexpectedly appeared; shortly thereafter, plates of food lifted into the air and flew from one table to the next. A group of young Ravenclaws began tossing goblets, plates, food – anything loose – at the Slytherin table, and the Slytherins immediately retaliated. Harry saw the glint of a raised wand amidst the melee, and quickly moved out from behind the table and in front of the teachers crouched around the Hat.

Snape climbed up onto the staff table, raised his wand, cast a brilliant red flare above the assembled students, and boomed, “SILENCE!” The Slytherins stopped instantly; the rest of the hall followed suit within seconds. The Potions Master lowered his wand. “Any member of Ravenclaw House who sends so much as a crumb in the direction of the Slytherin table will be docked twenty points. Any member of my House who does the same will have to reckon with *me* .”

Flitwick’s voice squeaked across the Hall. “I believe I’ve identified our problem.” The other teachers backed away as Flitwick placed the Hat atop the conjured stool, and then thrust his wand into the open rip and called out an unfamiliar spell. The rip opened wide, wider than when the Hat had sung. Peeves the Poltergeist tumbled out, squeezed Flitwick’s nose, and cackled, “GOT YOUR CONK!”

“*Peeves!*” McGonagall shouted. “What is the meaning of this?”

“Say ‘please’!” Peeves mocked.

McGonagall’s countenance went from red to purple. “Peeves, you... you bloody menace!” she howled; just as quickly, she hid her face with her hands.

“Even ickle firsties say ‘please’,” Peeves pouted.

Dumbledore turned toward the Slytherin table. “Good Baron, sir, would you be so kind as to join us for a moment?” The Bloody Baron began to glide silently and menacingly toward the centre of the Hall.

Peeves stuck out his tongue and vanished. A zooming sound rushed along the near side of the Hufflepuff table, sending goblets and plates flying one after the next and forcing many students beneath the table. The Baron flew swiftly between the Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw tables and passed through the rear wall of the Hall.

Dumbledore said something to McGonagall, who nodded and quickly made her way to the anteroom. He made the conjured stool vanish with a wave of his hand, and then cleared the five tables with a single flick of his wand. “I know that we can count on the splendid house-elves to

prepare some sort of alternate meal for us. While it may be simpler than our usual feast – perhaps a nice stew with assorted breads and cheeses – it is truly the company that matters this evening, and not the food that we shall eat.” He turned to the staff table, and added, “Thank you for restoring order, Professor Snape.”

Harry debated returning to the table, but instead followed Detheridge, Flitwick and Croaker to the anteroom, where they set the Sorting Hat down atop the nearest table and immediately began poking and prodding and subjecting it to all manner of magical inspection. McGonagall sat in the corner, facing in toward the wall. Violet, the Fat Lady’s friend, looked on from her frame with concern. Harry considered approaching, and then thought better of it.

“The enchantments are so complex... gentlemen, I’m afraid that we must stop for fear of doing irreparable damage,” Flitwick announced.

“Very tightly layered,” Croaker murmured.

“They would have to be,” Detheridge agreed. “I didn’t think it was possible to maintain an enchantment for a thousand years.”

“Yes, indeed!” Flitwick chirped. “They must be periodically restored in some fashion that... I wonder... the hat does typically interact with the Headmaster at the start of each sorting day... perhaps it draws upon the Headmaster’s magical energy?”

Detheridge slapped his wand down against the table in frustration. “None of this explains how that mad ghost could have influenced this thing!”

“Peeves isn’t a ghost, per se,” Flitwick noted. “Perhaps poltergeists affect magical flow differently than ghosts?”

“What if Peeves didn’t make the hat do anything?” Harry blurted out.

Flitwick lowered the hat, and Detheridge stared at Harry oddly. “That’s absurd, Mr. Potter,” Croaker snapped. “I realise I haven’t been hanging about Hogwarts for many a year, but if the Sorting Hat is anything, it is *reliable* .”

“Any number of things may have happened,” Flitwick said. “I suppose that we shall never know.” Harry let out a long sigh without intending it, which drew the Charms professor’s attention. “Speak your mind, Mr. Potter.”

“Why don’t you just ask it?” Harry groaned.

“Well, Mr. Potter... the hat sorts, the hat sings... it tells jokes on occasion... I honestly don’t know what it does with the Headmaster... I can’t say that it actually converses.” Flitwick shrugged. “Why not?” He held up the hat level to his eyes. “Excuse me? Er... Mr. Hat? We have a few questions, if you don’t mind?”

“*I have sung* ,” the hat said in a particularly morose way. At that, a muffled cacophony of singing

echoed through the door to the Great Hall.

“What in the Nine Hells...?” Detheridge exclaimed.

Flitwick explained. “The Headmaster is leading the students in the singing of the school song. It’s another of our little traditions.”

Detheridge’s eyes narrowed. “Song? It sounds like a hundred songs, all jumbled up!”

Flitwick laughed merrily. “Yes, indeed – *that* is the tradition, Marcus!”

Detheridge shook his head. “An odd school you have here, Flitwick.”

McGonagall spoke from the corner. “I imagine Albus wishes to introduce the new members of the staff. I’ll look after the Hat.”

“I’ll stay,” Harry said quickly.

Flitwick nudged Harry toward the door. “Don’t you think that your training relationship with Albus might take up a rather large part of his announcements?”

Harry moved to one side. “Maybe the students should be paying attention to him, then, rather than staring at me.”

“If he doesn’t want to go, then don’t force him, Filius,” McGonagall called out. “Albus will call for Harry if his presence is required.” Flitwick let out a small harrumph, and bustled through the door.

Croaker looked Harry up and down. “Rather impudent for an apprentice,” he said sourly before leaving the anteroom.

“I didn’t think asking the hat to explain itself was a bad idea; I still don’t think so,” Detheridge whispered in Harry’s ear before he followed Croaker out into the raucous din.

McGonagall sat facing the hearth. Harry didn’t understand why she was so devastated, but it was obvious in the way she had fled the Great Hall; in any case, her pain practically filled the air. He was surprised that the other professors hadn’t acknowledged it – *I suppose they were all focused on the Hat*, he guessed.

“Professor...” he began tentatively.

“Not now, Potter,” she said firmly without the slightest turn toward him.

He wasn’t about to press his luck. The Hat sat there on a small table, looking long overdue for a return visit to the haberdasher. He sidled up to it, stared at it for a while, then pulled up a chair, sat forward upon it, and stared some more.

“What were you playing at, Hat?” he murmured.

The Hat abruptly straightened as though it were standing at attention, and the rip opened slightly. It crooned in a low voice, not far above a whisper:

To the school, I gave a morsel

Of that which to me is known.

I could have been more blunt, ‘tis true;

Oh, how Ravenclaw would moan...

McGonagall exploded out of her chair in the same instant as the Hat completed its verse. “Oh, for pity’s sake! This is *not* a bordello!”

The Hat raised its voice and sniffed:

Glorify neither death nor life;

Give to both their rightful due.

Godric would laugh and shake his head -

His house is led by a shrew!

McGonagall turned a shade of puce that Harry had never seen on any human save his uncle. “A *shrew, am I?* Keep this up, and you’ll find me a particularly mad hatter!”

“It wasn’t Peeves, then... well, at least the mad part wasn’t Peeves,” Harry managed to say.

“No, it wasn’t! It was all from this mean-spirited, vulgar...” McGonagall stopped abruptly, and her angry blush began to fade. “Good heavens... it *wasn’t* Peeves.”

The Hat sang confidently:

A poltergeist is hard to hide

And even harder to sort.

I allowed Peeves to stay inside

And stage his Great Hall retort.

“He’s always wanted to come to one of the feasts, hasn’t he?” Harry blurted out. He picked up the Hat and held it at eye level. “That’s what you were doing, then? You were granting Peeves a wish?”

The Hat folded oddly, as though it was pursing its rip. It remained silent for a few long moments, before it sang out:

Put me on and we shall both see

If your sorting still rings true.

Are you still a bold Gryffindor?

Perhaps Slytherin for you?

McGonagall stilled Harry's arm as he raised the Hat high. "Do not place it upon your head, Mr. Potter. Not even Merlin could say what would happen, given its state."

The Hat did not sing; it spoke its response reverently. "I would light myself afire before I would do harm to anyone who serves the Light."

"Has the Hat ever *asked* someone to put it on, outside of the sorting?" Harry wondered aloud. He heard McGonagall's muffled voice demand that he wait for Dumbledore, as the Hat lowered over his ears.

The voice of the Hat wasn't heard so much as it was felt.

Well, well, I must say that I never expected to have you wear me again.

"I hadn't planned on it, either," Harry said aloud.

You are most difficult to read, and that was not the case five years ago... quite surprising, really. Are you an Occlumens, Mister Potter?

"Er... sort of," Harry tried to explain. "I didn't complete any sort of real training."

You indeed have something of Slytherin within you, as I saw when you were Sorted. Are you untrained in the ways of Occlumency, or were you improperly trained?

"Improperly trained," Harry answered quickly. "Are you enchanted to do Legilimency? Is that how the Sorting works?"

I weigh the qualities that I see within the first-years against a body of knowledge imparted by the Founders. The magic predates Legilimency as you understand it.

"Then how do you even know about it – Legilimency, I mean? How do you learn anything new, just sitting there?" Harry asked.

My, aren't we filled with questions this evening? I learn in the same way as you do, Mister Potter – I listen and I observe. Ask your fill of questions. I will answer if it befits my purposes.

Harry started with the question that he figured Dumbledore would most want answered. “Did you mean it? Did you mean the words in the song?”

I mean everything that I say or sing.

Harry tried to get the Hat to be clearer. “So the warning... it was rather to the point, wasn’t it? You intended that?”

I mean everything that I say or sing.

“And the rest of it... the, er, part that left everyone worked up? You meant all of it? It wasn’t Peeves having you on?” Harry pressed.

Shall I answer a third time, Mister Potter?

“No, no...” Harry fell silent, uncertain of what to ask.

Shall I assist you in opening your mind to me?

Harry sat bolt upright. “I’m sorry?”

You are most difficult to read, Mister Potter. I cannot weigh the contents of your thoughts against the knowledge of the Founders, and so I must judge based solely upon your words. I imagine it is akin to partaking in food without possessing a sense of taste. I would much prefer it if I could simply ascertain your thoughts.

“Wait! If you could teach me that, then... you could have taught me the rest of it!” Harry broke into laughter. “And I put up with Snape for a whole year... yes! Assist me, please!” McGonagall barked something at him, but he couldn’t make out the words; he supposed that it related to removing the Hat, so he wasn’t inclined to listen in the first place.

Very well. I shall have to determine the extent of your defences against mental invasion. Past Headmasters told me that this produces a small amount of pain.

Before Harry could say anything in return, his jaw clenched of its own accord and he lurched forward onto his knees. There was the feeling of a hand upon his shoulder and then firm but unsuccessful tugging on the Hat. When he recovered enough to think, he decided that while it wasn’t like the Cruciatus Curse, it was more than a small amount of pain.

What purpose do the walls of Hogwarts serve?

Harry was still reeling. “The walls... wha...?”

What purpose do the walls of Hogwarts serve?

“Hold up the building?” he mumbled.

True, but how do a castle's walls differ from the walls of a rude hut?

“Umm... they keep people out?” Harry offered.

Correct again. Do the walls keep people out by attacking them?

“The walls...?” He rubbed at his temples. “Walls don't attack; they, er, just sit there and hold up the whole works... they just keep people out.”

The walls of your mind attack; they do not defend. In so doing, they prevent you from mounting a true defence. You are using projective means – the art you call Legilimency – to prevent the same means from being used against you. To be improperly trained implies that you were trained at all; I see no evidence of training, only the ability to powerfully lash out. Before you can build walls that defend, you must remove the walls that attack. The Headmaster possesses the knowledge that you require.

“The Headmaster didn't want to –” Harry sighed and shook his head. “Never mind... thank you.”

You are somewhat more open now; I see flashes of your thoughts. I still stand by my original judgment, Mister Potter; had you come to Hogwarts in the time of the Founders, you would have been sorted to Slytherin. As for the young ladies at play in your mind...

Harry cut the Hat off. “Pardon me! Have you always been like this?”

Gryffindor had no patience for men unwilling to embrace their passions, nor for those unwilling to look at the past – warts and all. The knowledge and instructions of Gryffindor have risen to the fore in these dark hours. I listen and I observe. The signs are present; the hours will grow darker still before the dawning of new light. You are in the thick of it, of course, but you hardly need a Hat to tell you that. There is something in you that prevents you from following your passions and seeking your dreams, something that prevents you from embracing the path of Gryffindor... a prophecy...

“Stop! Get out of those thoughts!” Harry demanded.

Then stop I shall, but remember this – prophecies are best taken as uncertain guideposts, Ravenclaw said. Slytherin was more blunt. He thought that a prophecy scroll was best left on the side of an abandoned trail. Gryffindor and Hufflepuff would offer you more direct advice, Mister Potter, and I believe that their advice weighs best against your thoughts.

“What advice is that?” Harry asked.

Live.

Harry kept quiet, waiting for the Hat to finish its thought. After the best part of a minute, he snapped, “What... that's it? ‘Live’?”

Yes.

“Not a very practical bit of advice, that,” Harry snorted.

It is eminently practical. It is not in your nature to surrender your life to someone else’s words, yet you have done so. Stop it, Gryffindor would tell you. Live.

Harry thought of Ron. “A friend of mine, he’s been doing that... he’s trying to fit it all in, you know, while he still can...”

Where is the hope in that? That is not living, Mister Potter.

“Fine, then – ‘live’ it is,” Harry harrumphed.

A last piece of advice, then – and I hope it is sufficiently practical to meet with your approval. Three of the four Founders understood what I am about to tell you, and look at what they have wrought. Here is what they knew:

Beneath all the trappings, magic is about meaning what you say and not about saying what you mean.

I take my leave of you, Harry Potter. We shall not speak again.

There was an audible *pop!* as the Hat came loose from Harry’s head; the rip had disappeared, and the Hat had gone completely slack. McGonagall stood before him, while Dumbledore sat impassively in the chair she had occupied before.

McGonagall had the look of someone who had shouted until she was spent. “Of all the ill-advised, impudent, *dangerous* things you could have chosen to mark your return to this castle...”

“Your point is taken, Minerva,” Dumbledore said gently. “Based on your side of things, Harry, I surmise you had a fascinating conversation. An explanation, if you please?”

“The Hat asked me to put it on, so I did,” Harry said defensively. “Detheridge didn’t seem to think it was a bad idea.”

“*Professor* Detheridge said that he thought it was a good idea on your part to ask the Hat about its intentions; he said nothing about placing it upon your head,” McGonagall snapped. When Harry shot her a cross look, she added briskly, “It was a rather poor attempt at a whisper on his part.”

Dumbledore slowly rose from his chair and approached Harry. “How are you feeling? An extended exchange with the Hat can be disorienting, in my experience.”

“I’m fine,” Harry insisted.

“Was the Hat testing the limits of your Occlumency, Harry?” Dumbledore asked.

Harry was caught off guard. “Er... sort of, I guess. It couldn’t read my thoughts, but it was going to teach me something. It couldn’t teach me, though; it said I’d have to see you about what I

need.”

Dumbledore nodded thoughtfully. “And what is it that you need, in the Hat’s estimation?”

Harry clenched and unclenched his fists. “I told the Hat I hadn’t been completely trained. The Hat said I haven’t had training of any sort; it said my defences are all wrong. I wasted a year with *Snape* – a whole year!”

“I have already acknowledged that prevailing upon Professor Snape to provide your instruction was an error on my part,” Dumbledore said. “It was a grievous error, Harry. What else would you have me say?”

“That you’ve found another Potions Master to teach me, for a start?” Harry growled.

Dumbledore summoned a small, crooked smile. “As I told you, I have been unable to secure another Potions Master; therefore an alchemist will have to do. I shall teach you myself. In addition, it appears that the matter of Occlumency must be addressed sooner rather than later. May I be permitted to examine your defences?”

Harry hesitated, then gave an uncertain nod. He stood and steeled himself. Dumbledore frowned. “Harry, I encourage you to relax; we will not be conducting a duel. Did you acquire this posture from Severus?” Harry nodded again and Dumbledore’s frown deepened.

Harry’s sense of uncertainty grew. He turned to McGonagall. “Professor... if I do anything that seems odd – you know, out of sorts – I want you to stun me.”

“You have not felt Voldemort’s presence in your mind since the events at the Department of Mysteries – is that correct?” Dumbledore asked.

Harry nodded. “I don’t want to take a chance. I mean, you left me to Snape because you were worried that Voldemort might be able to get to you through me, right?”

“I am less concerned now, Harry, though it is wise to take precautions,” Dumbledore admitted. “Minerva, please do as he asked of you.” McGonagall hesitantly raised her wand.

“Let’s do this, then,” Harry said. He had to force himself to meet Dumbledore’s eyes – those eyes reminded him of so many things that didn’t need reminding.

“*Legilimens*,” Dumbledore said softly.

It was nothing like Snape’s hammer blows, nor like the Hat’s methodical assault. It was as though the Headmaster had become a cloud around which Harry couldn’t wrap his arms. Every time he felt Dumbledore’s presence, there was movement of a sort; after a few moments, it became clear that Dumbledore was entering from more than one place at a time. Harry felt the memory of his conversation with the Sorting Hat pull free, and reacted from someplace angry. He wielded his darkest memories like a sword tinged with blood. Harry could scarcely make out the shock on Dumbledore’s face through the haze of images that hung between them.

He heard Dumbledore say in a shaky voice, “*Finite incan ... tatum... fini... good heavens – oh, Harry, was it really so... no... leave him, Minerva...*” The anger dissipated, pushed aside by a flood of other memories that he couldn’t seem to stop – Quidditch matches and Common Room chess matches and secret passages and quiet library evenings and breaking prophecy orbs and slashing purple curses and Death Eaters dying and Hermione crying and the Bonnie flying and Heather smiling and a mind-blowing kiss and crushing rejection by Remus and meeting the Teller brothers and a mobile phone and *stop... stop... STOP!*

“*Expelliarmus!*” Harry gasped. Dumbledore reeled backward, and Harry rushed forward to help; somehow he managed to put himself behind the Headmaster in time to break his fall. Harry ended up on his back, with Dumbledore seated on his chest.

“Thank you... I trust... that you are... undamaged?” Dumbledore panted. Harry tried to answer, but he was too winded to manage it.

McGonagall was positively wide-eyed. “Potter... what did you just do? You were here and then you were there, but... but that’s not possible, not in this place – ”

Dumbledore cleared his throat. “Minerva, perhaps you could help me to my feet before beginning an interrogation?” With a sudden ‘Oh!’, she dashed over and extended a hand. Harry knew that McGonagall wasn’t in the fittest condition to be helping anyone up, and he unceremoniously pushed from beneath and behind until the Headmaster regained his feet. Dumbledore in turn helped Harry rise.

“Now... about what you just did, Mr. Potter –” McGonagall began.

“Harry’s movement across the room bears a resemblance to descriptions of the event at Miss Granger’s home,” Dumbledore interrupted. “We shall explore the phenomenon in due course; however, Harry and I have some pressing matters to which we must attend... immediately.”

McGonagall worried her lip for a moment, looked to Harry, and then said, “I still must speak to you about Miss Granger, Albus. A few minutes of your time would be appreciated, after you have concluded your business with Mr. Potter.”

“I understand your concerns, Minerva,” Dumbledore said, “and while I do not disregard them, I shall not react based upon them. Miss Granger will remain among us, and we shall adjust as necessary.”

“Miss Granger is presently unable to comport herself as a student,” McGonagall said tersely.

“Then Miss Granger shall comport herself as something other than a student, if that is required,” Dumbledore responded. “We have accepted responsibility for her, and we will fulfil that obligation. Lucia shall be here in three days; I am hopeful that her presence will provide a balancing influence. Are there other matters that we must discuss? I would like to retire for the evening after Harry and I have finished.”

McGonagall's eyes flashed. "No, Headmaster," she said, then promptly turned heel and went forth into the Great Hall.

"Walk with me," Dumbledore said. The request had the air of a master summoning his apprentice.

Harry responded in kind. "Yes, Headmaster."

Walking through the castle with Dumbledore was a peculiar experience. There were still a few older students about, though curfew was fast approaching. The Headmaster gave off a sense of being completely in control; Harry hadn't really sensed that before, and he was more than a little envious. Only two seventh-year Hufflepuffs who Harry didn't know managed to work up the courage to greet the Headmaster. *Maybe they're staying away because of me?* Harry wondered. When they reached the entrance to Dumbledore's chambers, the Headmaster gravely intoned, "Extendable Ears"; Harry had to fight off the urge to snigger.

As soon as the door closed – before they reached the office – Dumbledore posed a question. "Did you remain in the anteroom so that you could converse with the Hat, or did you remain there because you wished to avoid the Great Hall?"

Harry was caught off-guard. "Wha... why does it matter?" he stammered.

"One should never answer a question by posing another," Dumbledore said.

"Are... are you serious? You do it all the time," Harry observed.

Dumbledore arched an eyebrow. "Do I? Good heavens... I just did it, didn't I?" He broke into an easy laugh. "Gracious, a second time; I'll do my level best to avoid a third! Harry, you see... there are a few compensations that come with age. One of those is that it's more acceptable to be old and inappropriate than it is to be young and inappropriate. To answer a question with another question is generally considered rude. We shall both endeavour to avoid the practice, although I do reserve the right to repeated questioning as a method of instruction."

"Fine, then... the answer was both, I suppose," Harry offered. "I wasn't comfortable at the head table."

"Yes," Dumbledore said, stroking his beard, "I anticipated a certain amount of discomfort, but your unease was palpable. Describe for me what you were feeling, please?"

"Everyone was staring at me, and... and the walls were getting close. They were... look, I know this sounds foolish, but they were judging me. I could feel it..." Harry trailed off with a shudder.

"That is very interesting, and rather unlike you," Dumbledore took a seat behind his massive desk, and conjured a comfortable chair for Harry. "When Severus attempted forcible Legilimency upon you, at Grimmauld Place, you were obviously very angry. I am not saying that you lacked a reason for anger, but I must ask whether your anger felt different in any way. Was it deeper than you have known? Sharper, perhaps?"

“I don’t know... it seems like such a long time ago,” Harry said.

Dumbledore resumed stroking his beard. “Marcus mentioned that you seemed particularly attentive toward Minerva’s well being, after the episode with Peeves. He also mentioned that you seemed particularly wicked toward Mr. Malfoy, but we shall take that up another time perhaps?”

Harry hesitated, before he admitted, “I suppose I tried to comfort Professor McGonagall earlier, when we arrived at the castle.”

Dumbledore smiled. “Is that so? Does this relate to her episode with Miss Granger?”

“She was just so upset by it,” Harry explained. “I was probably out of bounds, but –”

“Demonstrating simple human kindness is never out of bounds, Harry,” Dumbledore said firmly. “The reason that I have pursued this line of enquiry is so that I can confirm my suspicions about what Severus has wrought. My test of your boundaries offered confirmation enough, I suppose. The task before us is to determine what is to be done about it.”

Harry’s voice rose. “I’m sorry... ‘done to me’? He wasn’t just a miserable excuse for a teacher – he did something to me?”

Dumbledore sighed. “If I am correct, Severus did precisely what I would not do. I have come to believe he intentionally set you on a course, Harry; he attempted to prepare you as a weapon.”

“*WHAT?* That... he... *he had no right!* ” Harry growled. Two of the whirring silver objects on Dumbledore’s side table abruptly broke into pieces. Dumbledore said nothing – his face betrayed nothing – but Harry slumped into his chair, ashamed by the outburst.

He closed his eyes and collected his thoughts, as he knew he should. Part of him felt even more violated by Snape than before. Snape hadn’t assaulted his mind simply because he was a miserable human being; he’d done it for a purpose, one that he hadn’t shared with Dumbledore. Dumbledore had hired Quirrell and Lockhart, had been fooled by Crouch Jr., had been outmanoeuvred by Fudge and Umbridge... what if Snape was a legitimate Death Eater? The rest of him felt rather differently; that part of Harry thought he understood why Snape might have been thinking, if Dumbledore’s belief was correct. That part of Harry thought –

“He should have just told me,” Harry said aloud.

“Explain yourself,” Dumbledore demanded.

Harry tried to look away from the Headmaster, but that left him staring at a row of intently focused portraits. He closed his eyes. “Snape was right, if that’s what he was doing. He could have told me; it would have saved a lot of trouble.”

“Severus was surely mistaken in his actions and in the beliefs behind them,” Dumbledore said, “but I would like to know why you believe he was correct.”

Harry opened his eyes to the Headmaster's intense gaze. He knew he was right, and he set his jaw. "I'm sixteen, and I'm still alive out of sheer dumb luck. Voldemort is... I don't know, he must be, what... sixty? Older than that?"

"Tom was born seventy years ago this winter; he was two classes behind Professor McGonagall," Dumbledore said.

"Fine, then – *seventy* . I doubt I could best McGonagall in a straight-ahead duel." Harry let out a hollow laugh. "Sprout could probably beat me. What can I possibly learn in two years that will let me defeat Voldemort?"

"I do not expect you to vanquish Voldemort in a duel," Dumbledore returned. "I still wish to know why you believe Severus was in the right."

"If Snape was going to make a weapon, I think he'd make a bomb," Harry said idly. "He'd make something that didn't need skill, because he wouldn't trust anyone else's skills."

Dumbledore cast his eyes downward. "That is a fair assessment of Severus, but... Harry, we have discussed this point on more than one occasion –"

"We haven't *discussed* anything!" Harry snapped. "You keep saying I shouldn't sacrifice myself to kill Voldemort. How else am I supposed to manage it, then? You were there at the Ministry, you saw..." His throat tightened at the memories – of Hermione falling and the brains tearing at Ron and Voldemort burning him from the inside out. "You saw what happened to me; you saw what Voldemort did. I was defenceless!"

"Based on eyewitness reports, you injured Voldemort rather severely," Dumbledore countered. "It is reasonable to conclude that he performed the *phasma transtuli* ritual because of damage to his reconstituted body. Your success came despite what Severus did, and not because of it."

"It didn't feel like success," Harry said. "I wanted to die, I truly did." Something tickled at the back of his mind. "*Phasma transtuli* ... that's what I saw him doing, the last time he was in my head. It's a healing spell, then?"

"It's very far from that," Dumbledore frowned. He slowly rose, and recovered a tome from a nearby shelf; it was so old that the edges of the pages were crumbling. He opened it to a place marked by a strip of green ribbon, ran the tip of his finger along a column of dense text, and then jabbed at a particular spot. "*Phasma transtuli*... this ritual has nothing whatsoever to do with healing, Harry. It appears to be a sort of transference ritual, a more complete one than he employed in your first year. Voldemort transferred his vital essence into another body; in doing so, he would completely suppress the mind within that body, but still be able to access its knowledge. It is as dark a ritual as one could imagine; the only reason that it is not Unforgivable is that it requires some level of consent on the part of the person who is to be subsumed. I have been able to find little more than that, Harry; it is an arcane magic that has not performed for many hundreds of years."

Harry nearly leapt from his chair. "That's why he sounds different!"

"Yes... you did mention that," Dumbledore acknowledged.

"His hands were different as well!" Harry went on excitedly. "I noticed it the first time, but in the pensieve it was even clearer. They were, I don't know... *soft* hands, very pink. They hadn't seen a lot of hard work, for certain."

"That could prove useful; thank you, Harry," Dumbledore said. "You have reviewed those events in a pensieve? Would you be willing to review them again, for the benefit of others?"

"Shacklebolt saw it," Harry admitted. "He said... well, he said a lot of things, actually. I'll do it for you, if you like. I don't know if I want anyone else to see it..."

"Reticence on your part is quite reasonable. We will find an appropriate time later this week. Now, I believe I was telling you that your success was in spite of what Severus did?" Dumbledore sat back slightly, clearly waiting for Harry to question the observation.

"I'm trying to guess what you want me to ask," Harry said honestly.

Dumbledore laughed heartily. "I am beginning to see that you will be the most straightforward of my apprentices! I have been fortunate to spend rather a lot of time with you and in your presence over the last few weeks, Harry, and I have observed a pattern in your behaviour." When Harry fidgeted in his chair, he added, "Do not be alarmed by that; I doubt that anyone but myself would possess all the knowledge required to discern the pattern. I would like to test the assumptions behind this pattern, however. I want you to look me in the eye, and answer my questions as I ask them. Is that acceptable?"

"You're not going to use Legilimency again, are you?" Harry asked.

"No... that experience should not be repeated in a single evening," Dumbledore answered.

Harry nodded in assent, and met the Headmaster's eyes. Dumbledore took a deep breath, and asked, "How do you feel about the Prophecy?"

Harry was caught off guard for a moment by the question, but then felt anger rise. "How do you think I feel? I don't have a life, and Voldemort wants to kill me!"

"How do you feel about all the people that Voldemort has killed?" Dumbledore asked him.

"Voldemort is a monster," Harry snapped. "How can he... I mean, it's... it's horrible! How can he look people in the eye and just snuff out their lives?" He shuddered at the futility and the sadness of it. "I don't know how he does it. I think about... you know, about what I did... and I feel like I should bathe, like I'll never be able to wash it off."

"Do you feel guilty about what you did at the Grangers' home?" Dumbledore asked.

“Yes... I mean, I don’t know,” Harry answered. “Why should I? They deserved what happened... wait... I mean...” He felt suddenly nauseous and lowered his head into his hands. “I don’t know what I think anymore.” He heard the rustling of robes, and Dumbledore’s hand came to rest upon his shoulder.

“I imagine that it’s very difficult for you to know where your own thoughts and feelings stop, and where those around you begin,” Dumbledore said. “It has likely been much more difficult since returning to Hogwarts.”

Harry buckled under a wave of emotion. He didn’t raise his head; he wasn’t about to show the Headmaster how weak he was, underneath it all. His voice came out as a ragged shout. “What’s wrong with me? *What did Snape do to me?* ”

“Severus opened you up to the world, after a fashion,” Dumbledore explained. “He most certainly did not teach you Occlumency. When I entered your mind earlier, you made no attempt – conscious or unconscious – at concealing your thoughts. When the intrusion reached a certain threshold, you simply lashed out. You tried to forcibly eject me from your mind, and you did it by practicing Legilimency.”

“That was all we ever practiced,” Harry said coldly. “He would attack me, and attack me, over and over, until I threw him off.”

Dumbledore let a flash of something escape his eyes. For an instant, Harry felt a rush of towering rage, and then it quickly faded. “Occlumency is an art of evasion, *not* of attack. Severus Snape is a master of that art; if he were not, he would not be alive today. In fact, he took to the discipline more rapidly than any wizard I have ever known. The most favourable explanation possible is that he was utterly incompetent in his efforts to instruct you, and I would require a good deal of convincing in order to accept that explanation. Surely he saw that you were displaying raw ability as a Legilimens; he should have known to stop at once and to consult me. One must *never* train as a Legilimens prior to achieving mastery of Occlumency. Good heavens, I have only just completed a remediation for that precise situation!”

Harry felt the rage again, and struggled to bite out a question. “Why Occlumency first?”

Dumbledore’s eyes widened, and then quickly closed as he launched into a series of slow breaths. “I am terribly sorry, Harry. I did not intend to demonstrate the answer to your question. Tell me, do you think it would be wise to set ablaze a tree in the midst of a forest if you did not first possess the means of extinguishing the fire?”

“Of course not,” Harry snapped impatiently.

“An Occlumens learns to organize his mind in such a way that certain knowledge or feelings can be completely isolated from intrusion. The knowledge is still present, but the intruder cannot locate it. Think of the concealment as a Disillusionment; the selected knowledge is made to appear like its surroundings, in a way,” Dumbledore explained. “Once these skills are mastered, then it is safe for a capable wizard to learn to project himself outside of those boundaries and into

the boundaries of others. Without those skills, a Legilimens would have no means of protecting himself from the thoughts and feelings around him. Do you understand?”

Harry began tentatively, “In the Great Hall... I wasn’t being judged; the walls weren’t closing in on me. That was... that was Professor Tonks, wasn’t it?”

Dumbledore nodded. “Andromeda is agoraphobic to a modest degree. As such, she was surely projecting her fears.”

“You were planting feelings just now, weren’t you?” Harry went on. “You were making me feel things.”

“I was strongly projecting selected feelings, yes,” Dumbledore told him. “I never attempted to enter your mind, however; your mind is continuously reaching out and receiving the thoughts and feelings around you.”

Harry began to take in the implications of what he was hearing, and his stomach lurched. “Would I take in just bad feelings – fear, anger and that sort... or would I notice good feelings as well?”

“At present, I imagine that it’s all there for the taking,” Dumbledore acknowledged. “You have probably been experiencing this to some degree since the springtime. I am truly sorry for that.”

“Then over the summer... oh, no...” Harry slumped heavily. *That’s why I felt the way I did with Hermione*, he thought. *I never felt that way about her before; I was picking up... oh, Merlin... was I was picking up her feelings? What am I supposed to do with that? And what about Heather? No wonder that kiss went wild! Neither one of us knew how to...*

He immediately popped up. “Heather!” he blurted out. “She has it all backward, as well!”

“Yes, that is the remediation to which I was referring,” Dumbledore said. “It was when conferring with Severus about Miss Magruder’s circumstances that I began to seriously question some of his comments about your training.”

“Is she going to be all right, then?” Harry demanded to know.

“I focussed upon teaching her how to avoid and how to terminate accidental Legilimency,” Dumbledore responded. “In the time available, addressing Occlumency was out of the question. I am not entirely certain whether she possesses the capability to learn both disciplines; her situation is truly singular.”

Harry pressed. “You didn’t answer my question, sir.”

“That is because I am not certain how to answer it,” Dumbledore admitted. “She is less at risk than immediately following your shared experience, and likely more susceptible than she was before the experience occurred. Most of her time is spent amongst Muggles, which is also to her benefit. Wizards and magical beings tend to project their emotions and thoughts more forcefully. Occlumency must be addressed beginning tomorrow, or you will come to find Hogwarts an

intolerable environment.”

“Is there anything else, Headmaster?” Harry asked politely. “I promised Hermione that I’d stop by the Common Room and see her, and it’s getting late.”

“Many points of discussion remain,” Dumbledore said. “For example, we have yet to decide what is to be done about Severus —”

“I’m sorry... did you say ‘we’?” Harry snorted.

“Yes, Harry, we have decisions to make,” Dumbledore returned earnestly. “It appears that he has committed a serious transgression. You have been wronged, and you are now considered an adult; as such, the determination of how to proceed falls to you. Because Severus is in my employ as a professor... and for other reasons, of course... it is reasonable that I assert an interest in the outcome of the matter.”

Harry stared at the Headmaster in shock for several long moments. His voice cracked when he at last spoke. “I need... I need to think on it overnight.”

Dumbledore gave a satisfied nod. “A wise first step, Harry. I also remain very interested in what the Hat had to say about the song that it sang, for one. If you would offer me a summary, I believe that other issues may be held for tomorrow.”

“Well, the Hat said that it meant everything it said or sang,” Harry reported. “It also said that Peeves was hard to sort, and that it decided to grant Peeves his greatest wish.”

Dumbledore’s eyes lit. “Oh! Peeves has asked to attend the Welcoming Feast for at least as many years as I have been a member of the staff. So that Hat implied that Peeves was not responsible for the rather off-colour lyrics?”

Harry shrugged. “It told me three times that it meant everything it said or sang.”

“The students and staff will be unlikely to take the Hat’s admonition seriously, given the rest,” Dumbledore observed. “Perhaps that is just as well, for the moment.”

“If that’s all...?” Harry said, rising from his seat.

Dumbledore held up one hand. “I am pleased that you are going to see Miss Granger, Harry. She has had a very difficult summer, and I have been either directly or indirectly responsible for most of her travails.”

Right in one, Harry thought. Still, he knew that Sirius had died because of many people’s mistakes – his own bad judgment, Dumbledore’s failures, Snape’s treachery, even Sirius’s own poor choices. He knew that he could have saved Hermione so much pain if he had made the correct first choice. “Look,” he admitted aloud, “I’m responsible for a fair bit myself. If I’d shut her out, if I hadn’t told her about the prophecy —”

Dumbledore cut him off. “I encouraged you to share it. I did so without verifying for myself that you were practicing proper Occlumency; I did so without insisting that Miss Granger receive training in same; and I ultimately caused greater harm through my efforts to assure secrecy than would have been the case if I had taken no action at all. That being said, the assignation of blame is to no one’s benefit at this point. Injuries have been committed, and the prophecy has most likely been given up. Instead I shall focus on my two greatest concerns of the day – the well-being of Miss Granger and of yourself.”

Harry didn’t want to be one of Dumbledore’s greatest concerns – that was how bad things began, in his experience. “I’m fine,” he said flatly. “Hermione isn’t fine – that’s obvious.”

Dumbledore summoned an impassive expression that Harry found irritating. “There are a number of confidences that I refuse to break with regard to Miss Granger,” he said. “It will be her choice as to whether she will divulge those confidences to you. I will share this much, however, as she was insistent that no secrets relating to this particular matter would be kept from you...” He paused for a few moments, and Harry waited anxiously; then he continued, “I have offered Miss Granger personal tuition and she has accepted. She will be assisting me with research. We will be studying the events of October 31, 1981, in an attempt to understand how Voldemort was disembodied and how it was that you survived the Killing Curse, Harry.”

Harry felt a coldness run through him. “Wh... why would she want...? Why would you ask her to do that?”

“I have sought a unifying explanation before, on several occasions,” Dumbledore answered. “Miss Granger is most intelligent, uniquely analytical, and intimately familiar with you. I am hopeful that she will see that which I have failed to see. She has her own reasons for choosing this path, and it is her place to share or to not share those reasons. I simply ask two things of you with regard to this enquiry, Harry. First, do not impede our efforts. We will share any findings with you – I promise you this and Miss Granger has insisted upon it. Second... Miss Granger requires your friendship, Harry, more than has ever been the case. Her need is desperate at the present time, though she may be unprepared to admit the true extend of that need. Therefore, I ask you to freely give it.”

Harry immediately said, “She’ll always have that; I’ll always be her friend.”

“You may find that it is no longer a simple matter to honour my request; she may even push you away. Even if that should prove to be the case, I still ask this of you. I have accepted responsibility for Miss Granger’s welfare, and I require your aid in order to meet that responsibility.” Dumbledore’s expression was quite serious, and Harry wasn’t sure what to make of it.

The Headmaster inclined his head in a way that demanded a response. “Of course,” Harry agreed.

“Splendid!” Dumbledore’s smile and twinkle returned. “We shall begin your training at nine o’clock tomorrow. I look forward to it. Off with you, then!”

The corridors were deserted now. Harry stopped and checked his watch in the flickering light of a

wall sconce – it was nearly midnight. He made for the entrance hall and the central stairs at a brisk pace.

“Stop! *Stop!* ” Filch called out from behind him.

Harry tensed; he had to remind himself that he was now free to go where he wished, when he wished. He summoned a posture that seemed right for an adult and a member of the staff. “What are you on about, Filch?” he returned.

Filch drew close and held up his lantern. “Oh... it’s *you* , Potter,” he said, his mouth set as though he’d bitten into spoiled fish. “The Headmaster stick you with rounds, did he?”

“No, I just left his office. I’m... on an errand for him,” Harry said.

Filch grunted in assent. “Don’t you be forgetting – you spot a student out of bounds, and it’s points and detention.”

The hair on the back of Harry’s neck rose. He looked down to see Mrs. Norris brushing lazily against his leg. He shook his leg slightly, but it didn’t deter the cat.

“Mrs. Norris!” Filch barked. The cat hissed, and resumed its brushing.

Harry shook his leg again, more firmly. “Erm... I really am on an errand... um... nice kitty...”

Filch reached down and picked up the cat, which fussed and squirmed in his arms. “What’s gotten into you?” he asked; his eyes narrowed, and he hissed at Harry, “Did you do something to her...?”

Harry held up his hands defensively. “*No!* Er... not a cat person, really... your guess is as good as mine... good night, Filch.” Filch growled and Harry walked away as fast as he could manage without breaking into a run.

There was no sign of anyone else about until he neared the entrance to the Gryffindor Common Room. He prepared to round a corner when he saw the flickering of a *lumos* charm; the reflected light grew brighter, a clear sign that someone was approaching. He flattened himself against the corridor wall, then drew his wand and conjured a mirror to peer around the corner. Two figures approached, one of them familiar. He lit his own wand, and their approach slowed.

Harry rounded the corner. “Hello, Cho,” he said.

Cho let out a held breath. “*Harry* ... thank Merlin it’s just you.”

Harry sniggered. “Yes, it’s just me,” he mocked.

Cho frowned. “I’ve been doing this for two years, and I can count on one hand the number of times I’ve come across someone else whose wand was alight.”

The tall boy next to Cho let out a deep, quiet laugh. “Scared of the shadows, Chang? As for me, I

figured it was Professor Snape.” He stuck out his hand. “Hello, Potter... Adrian Pucey.”

Harry’s eyes lit in recognition. “Hello, Pucey. Looks like you’re getting tall for a Chaser.”

Pucey looked bemused. “You recognise me... that’s unexpected.”

Harry grinned. “Of course – you’re on the Slytherin team and you’ve always played fairly; that’s memorable.” Pucey scowled, but it felt perfunctory. Harry went on, “Head Boy, then? Congratulations to you... are you Quidditch captain as well?”

“Snape hasn’t named a captain,” Pucey said. “I’ll see about that tomorrow.”

Cho smiled faintly. “It’s a shame, Harry – we’re rid of that cow Umbridge and her decrees, and your playing days are finished anyway.”

Harry wasn’t sure whether she was pleased or displeased; he responded vaguely. “Nothing will be the same this year.”

“See anyone mucking about, Potter? Anything lurking in the dark?” Pucey asked.

Harry shook his head. “Just Filch. I could have done without that... Mrs. Norris suddenly fancies me – can you imagine?” He shuddered, and Cho stifled a giggle.

Pucey yawned. “Almost done for the night... we should keep moving.”

“Yes, one more spin past the Astronomy Tower, I think,” Cho said. Pucey nodded without looking her way.

Harry felt an odd rush of something just then; he looked down just in time to see Cho brush against Pucey’s hand with her own. He quickly begged off, once again saying that he was on an errand for the Headmaster. Harry cancelled his *lumos* charm. The last flickers from Cho and Pucey’s wands disappeared; and he was left with the dim light from the wall sconces, and with the realisation that he’d just felt what Cho was feeling. He resolved that he would put everything he had into mastering Occlumency.

The Fat Lady was snoring. She stirred as Harry approached, and released two bellowing snores before her eyes opened. “Goodness... are you aware of the hour, Mr. Potter?”

“The Headmaster sent me to speak to Hermione Granger,” Harry told her.

She rolled her eyes, and said, “You hardly needed his blessing for that.” The entrance to the Common Room was revealed, and Harry stepped inside.

Hermione was not alone. It was almost as though he was walking in on a D.A. meeting. Dean and Seamus were playing what looked to be some kind of Muggle card game. Ron was playing chess with Parvati, of all people. Harry squinted at the board; it appeared that she was at least holding her own. Hermione sat by the fire, her back to the door. She was huddled over one of the low

tables along with Neville; surprisingly, Lavender Brown was beside them, along with Dennis Creevey. Ginny sat on the bottom of the steps to the girls' dormitories, quietly playing her violin for Katie Bell and Colin Creevey.

Ron looked up from the chessboard. "Harry's here," he said quietly, and stood to cross the Common Room. In short order, Harry found himself being warmly greeted by a crowd.

"What's all this?" Harry managed to ask amidst the crush.

"Gryffindors stick together," Dean said earnestly.

"You'll always be one of us, Harry," Katie added.

Ginny cut through the crowd. "Anyone who can truss up Malfoy like that *has* to be one of us," she said with a smirk.

When Harry's eyebrows began to rise, Ron snorted. "Come on, mate, who else could have done it but you? Besides, it was Hermione and it was Malfoy..."

"It was bloody brilliant, that's what it was," Seamus added quickly.

"It was an overreaction, Seamus, *that's* what it was," Harry said crossly. "Malfoy may be a rotten snake but he wasn't going to cast a slashing curse, not on the Express. If I'd stopped to think for a second, I wouldn't have done it." He consciously made himself relax, and added for everyone's benefit, "Besides, you had everything under control. If anything good came out of last year, it's that. When I came into the car and saw all of you together like that... look, that's how it's supposed to be."

"All right, then... nice to have you back, Harry. It's well past lights-out, everyone," Katie prompted. Most of the assembled Gryffindors began to shuffle toward their respective stairs.

Seamus stopped and faced Harry. "Me mam doesn't say who my friends are; that's for me to say... wanted you to know that."

"There's still a bed for you, Harry," Dean added. "'Course if we'd have tried to take over the space, Ron would've tossed us out the window."

Harry's throat tightened. "Thanks."

Ron said something to Lavender – who then disappeared up the stairs – and then took a seat on the sofa adjacent to Hermione. She had never left her seat, Harry realised.

Neville rose as Harry approached. As Harry reached him, Neville shook Harry's hand; it seemed oddly formal and was completely unexpected, and Harry awkwardly jammed his fingers in the process. "We would have taken care of her, you know," Neville whispered. "We'll be on the watch, all of us."

“I know,” Harry whispered back. “Thank you.” Neville nodded stiffly and made directly for the stairs. Harry let himself fall into the chair that Neville had vacated.

Hermione sat back heavily; her eyes never left the fire. “You can go now, Ron,” she said flatly.

Ron sighed and began to stand. “Seems that I’m done here.”

“I’d rather you stayed,” Harry said.

Hermione turned to face Harry. Her eyes were dark and without expression. “I asked you if you might come and see me tonight. It isn’t tonight anymore, it’s *tomorrow*. I need to talk with you, Harry... you and me... *us* .”

Harry almost reacted angrily, before he wondered how much of the feeling belonged to him. He bit back most of the anger. “Neither of us have enough friends to be pushing one away,” he insisted. “Ron should stay.”

Ron held up his hands. “For once, I’m not going to be the one starting a fight. If you need me, you know where I’ll be.”

Hermione waited until she heard Ron’s footfalls on the steps before she called out, “Ron? I’m sorry! I just... this is going to be hard enough explaining to Harry; I can’t imagine how you could possibly understand –” She stopped abruptly and crushed her face into her hands. “Oh, that came out so wrong! *Bugger!* ”

Ron gave a wide-eyed pleading look that for an instant reminded Harry of Ron in the tree house, framed by silent fireworks and the red flush of guilt, but Harry knew this was different. It was painfully obvious that Ron wanted to do the right thing, but had no idea what that might be. Harry waved him back to the sofa.

Ron hesitated, but then shook his head. “Hermione... I might surprise you, you know. I’m not as thick as you think I am,” he called back. “Good night, Harry.”

Hermione lowered her hands from her face. She wrapped her arms around her knees, and returned her gaze to the fire. The wall sconces seemed unusually dim to Harry. The firelight shimmered against the walls and the armchairs and the furnishings; the entire Common Room seemed haunted, he thought, including its other occupant.

He’d thought about what he might say to her, and what she might say to him, but it all began to evaporate as he sat there. As the evening had passed, he had reconsidered talking to her about her parents; if he would in fact be their Secret Keeper, then he reasoned that even Hermione shouldn’t know – not immediately, in any case. That had led him to worry himself about what Voldemort might have done to her, and to wonder whether there could possibly be some sort of lingering connection between the two. He wasn’t about to begin prying into those events; it would be up to Hermione to tell him, he had decided. He didn’t want to share all the details of what Snape had done to him; if she learned that he had been mirroring other people’s feelings – including hers –

then it would surely leave both of them feeling guilty.

He could barely hear her when she at last spoke. “Do you think I hurt him? I don’t want to hurt him, Harry.”

“He took it better than I’d have guessed,” Harry said. “He’s changed.”

Her voice remained low, but there was an edge to it. “We’ve changed... you, me ... but the rest of them up there... they’re dreaming about trips to Hogsmeade and having nightmares about revisions. They don’t know, Harry. They’ve read an article in the *Daily Prophet* and they think they know, they think they understand, but they don’t. Thank God they don’t.”

“Ron understands,” Harry returned.

“I suppose he does, to a point,” Hermione allowed after a long pause. “He’s been so nice, yesterday and today. I know I shouldn’t shut him out, Harry, but I just... I’m just angry.”

“You can be angry with me; it’s all right,” Harry offered.

She still wouldn’t look at him, wouldn’t look at anything but the flames, but she gave a small, wry smile. “I didn’t need permission, but thank you all the same.”

Since Dumbledore had explained to Harry about his constant Legilimency, the world seemed awash in feelings. The emotions he’d felt from Cho were nothing compared to the wash of feelings that were surely coming from Hermione. He sat in the quiet and breathed slowly, and let himself be buffeted by anger and pain and sadness and worry and fear. It was all jumbled together with something else warm and friendly and terribly familiar from earlier in the summer, and then he felt dizzy and awkward and the silence became uncomfortable. He started to speak, then quickly stopped himself and began to chuckle.

Hermione turned to face him, her brow furrowed, and he relaxed – her expression wasn’t cold or dark or angry. “What?” she said; it wasn’t snappish, nor was it a demand, but it was all so uniquely *her*.

“Gods... I was just about to ask how the rest of your summer went.” He snorted. “Even I’m not that thick.”

The corners of her mouth flickered. “I should hope not.”

Harry couldn’t stand another bout of silence. “I’ve been worried about you,” he blurted out.

Hermione rubbed at the back of her left hand. “Sometimes I haven’t known what to think, Harry... but I’ve been worried about you, as well.”

Harry looked down at his right hand. “Erm... Dumbledore told me about the runes. He thought you might still have them. I don’t know how it happened, I swear.” He ran his thumb across the three faint markings there. “I’m not sorry about it, though.”

“Do you understand what they mean? Did Dumbledore read them for you?” she asked.

“He told me about the new ones, yeah,” he said, and then he reached out and took her hand – the act left him nervous for a moment. He could see a hint of the runes on both of their hands illuminated by the fire, and his brow beetled. “Yours aren’t the same as mine... look.”

“Dumbledore told me about that,” she said, as she leaned in and peered at both their hands. “I’m surprised he didn’t tell you,” she added with an edge to her voice.

“It seems like it’s been a year since he told me,” Harry said. “It was the same night that we all went to see Luna.”

Hermione tugged her hand free. “I see.”

Harry tried to guess why she had suddenly gone cold. “I... I probably should have said something that night, straight away. There were so many things happening, I just didn’t think of it.”

“It’s all right. I wouldn’t have taken it in,” Hermione sighed. “I scarcely remember that night. It’s just that I thought Dumbledore was holding out on you, that’s all.”

Harry didn’t remember Hermione having a tolerance for silence. Now she seemed content to stare mutely into the fire, and he was baffled, and the quiet was excruciating. “Why did you want me to come here tonight?” he asked at last.

She looked up sharply from the fire, suddenly defiant. “Do I have to spell it out for you? Honestly! Why did you want to come, then?”

Harry took in a sharp breath; she was so up-and-down that it was leaving him dizzy. “Dumbledore said you shouldn’t answer a question with a question – it’s rude,” he shot back.

“I’m not Dumbledore, am I?” Hermione snapped. Harry was certain that her jaw tightened; it was a familiar response to Dumbledore for him, but he’d never expected to see it from her.

“No you’re not, thank Merlin,” he said quickly, and he felt a lessening of the tension in the room.

Still, there was an uncomfortable intensity in her eyes when she spoke. “I wanted to say... I suppose I wanted to say the same things as I wrote in my letter. I wanted to say them to you in person.”

“Your letter...” Harry trailed off.

Hermione’s eyes widened. “You... you did receive it, right? I sent it with... er... it was with another letter, and that one finally arrived so I assumed...” She worried her lip.

“It came,” Harry admitted nervously. He reached into his robes, and withdrew the unopened envelope. “The post owl showed up this morning; it tried to claw me to pieces, actually.”

Hermione abruptly sniggered. “The owl didn’t appreciate being banished, eh?”

Harry tried to explain himself. “I’m sorry I didn’t read it yet. First the owl tore up my arms, then Detheridge stopped by and we had to ride the train, and then there was everything with Malfoy, and then we arrived, and there was all the business with the Sorting Hat...”

Hermione rolled her eyes at that. “Ginny told me; she remembered most of the words. Did Peeves actually manage to possess the Hat?”

“No... or at least that’s what the Hat told me,” Harry said.

“The Hat *spoke* to you?” Hermione asked incredulously.

“It asked me to put it on, so I did,” answered Harry.

Hermione had the look in her eye that came with a new book or a new problem, and Harry happily grinned at the sight of it. He let her wheedle the details from him; he would have shared them, of course, but he enjoyed the asking and the speculating and the wide-eyed excitement. He began to realise just how much he had missed her company. Still, he felt nervousness, an apprehension in the midst of her exploration. He was sure it wasn’t coming from her; he felt that he could attribute it to himself with fair certainty.

“Harry... Harry?” He looked up into brown eyes unexpectedly close to his own. “Where did you go just now? Are you all right?” Hermione asked.

He swallowed roughly, took a deep breath, and decided that nothing good would come from keeping Dumbledore’s disclosure completely from her. “It’s about Occlumency. Dumbledore told me...” He stopped, unsure if he could say it, not wanting her to be angry or disappointed.

“What did he tell you? Harry...” Her eyes seemed to search him, and then widened a little. “Is it that terrible? If... if you don’t want to tell me, I’ll understand. Honestly, you don’t have to tell me everything. I mentioned that in the letter; I... I hope you read it later.”

The truth burst out of his mouth. “Snape didn’t teach me Occlumency. He didn’t even try.”

Hermione seemed to be thinking through her response even as she slowly spoke. “There was never a doubt that he was doing a poor job of teaching you... a pathetic job, really... but I don’t understand. He was surely attempting to teach you *something*?”

Harry felt anger, and it was his own. “Oh, he was teaching me something, all right. He taught me Legilimency. He taught me to lash out, and that’s all. He lied to me from the start, Hermione. If I could have talked to Dumbledore about it... but of course he wouldn’t have anything to do with me!”

“He taught you Legilimency...” she repeated, and then her face flushed red and Harry felt the anger mount. “Every text I’ve read about Occlumency last year said that Occlumency is taught before Legilimency! What was he thinking? Was he trying to drive you mad?”

“Dumbledore said he was turning me into a weapon,” Harry said. “The funny thing is, I would have gone along with it if he’d explained himself.”

“Of course! He was fashioning you to be a sort of doomsday...” Hermione gasped and grabbed his shoulders tightly. “Don’t you dare let them!” she snapped at him. “Do you hear me, Harry Potter? That’s... that’s quitting, that’s giving up! You can’t do that, Harry! You can beat him, you can kill him – you *have* to kill him – and that doesn’t mean he’ll be able to do the same!” She turned away to face the fire, even as her voice continued to rise. “You’ll *kill* him, and I’ll help you, and I’ll be there to see it, to see you win, to see that monster *suffer* ... for everything he’s done, he has to *suffer* , and you’ll do it, we’ll do it, I swear, Harry – there’ll be *no mercy* for him, no prison, no trial, no second chances, nothing, just *death* , just *DEAD* –”

Harry’s hands shook as she went on; all he could at last manage to do was to reach out from behind and envelop her, to pull her to him and away from whatever abyss she was staring into, to keep his best friend from falling. It was almost as though he could see her plunging from a tower. She didn’t turn, she didn’t latch onto him, she didn’t cry – she just stiffened in his arms and shook and seared the room with anger and despair. He wasn’t about to let go.

Her voice cracked and trembled. “I could see them, Harry – do you understand? I looked to the front of the carriage and I could *see* them!”

He sagged inside, but he still didn’t let go. “I’m sorry,” he said, “I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t you... don’t be sorry,” she sniffed. “You saved Mum and Dad, you saved Ron and Ginny and their family – don’t apologise for that.”

“I was trying to save you,” Harry said quietly.

Hermione went on as though he’d said nothing. “I wasn’t strong enough. I don’t even know if I kept the secret.” She pulled her hand free from his to wipe at her eyes. He kept his other arm around her waist. “That was the only thing I had to do, and I don’t even know if I managed it. I wasn’t strong enough, Harry. Why did you even bother to come tonight?”

“How many people do you know who have been attacked by Voldemort – not by Death Eaters, but Voldemort himself?” Harry asked.

“What point are you trying to make?” Hermione asked sullenly.

“How many?” Harry asked more forcefully.

“You and Ginny, I suppose,” she answered.

“Ginny doesn’t count,” Harry insisted. “It was just a piece of Tom Riddle in that diary; that’s not like the real thing, I can promise you. I know of you and me and Dumbledore, and that’s it... well, there’s Neville’s mum and dad, I suppose. Everyone else is *dead* , Hermione, so don’t tell me that you’re not strong.”

“I would be as well, if you hadn’t done... whatever you did. I still don’t understand it.” She pulled away so that she could face him; her eyes gave away her apprehension. “Harry... I won’t lie to you, I can’t... I was as afraid of you as I was of him, for a while at least.”

“I was deaf afterward,” Harry said offhandedly.

Hermione was confused. “You were... what?”

“I couldn’t hear anything, not until I went into the kitchen; Dobby healed me then. I was shouting because I couldn’t hear myself,” Harry explained.

Hermione faced the fire. “I remember you shouting... actually, most of what I remember came from watching it a second time. Voldemort was... he was inside me... and then Wormtail was choking me, and... and then you were there and Wormtail was off of me and I fell back and then I was with my dad and you were moving so *fast*, Harry... so fast... and there was smoke and steam and... *things* flying around... and... and then you were covered in blood and you were shouting and then I remember Ron standing by you and then you were gone and I was in my room. Honestly, the next thing I recall is meeting with Madam Bones.” She crossed her arms tightly, as though she was warding off the world.

“I don’t see anything wrong with being a bit afraid of me,” Harry allowed.

Hermione whirled about. “What are you talking about?”

“If you’re a bit afraid, maybe a bit worried, then you can keep me on the right lines,” Harry explained. “Perhaps it’s for the best?”

“Do you need that, Harry?” Hermione asked. “Do you need someone to keep you on the right lines?”

“You’ve always done that for me,” Harry said honestly.

Hermione seemed to relax at that. “I’m not afraid of you now, Harry,” she said. “I *am* worried for you, like it or not. That’s why I’m taking tuition from Dumbledore. We’re –”

“I know about the research,” Harry interjected.

Her eyes narrowed. “What else did he tell you?”

“Nothing at all – he was clear on that,” Harry insisted. “He did say that you insisted I know about the research, though.”

“I did,” she admitted.

Harry smiled. “Watching out for my interests, as well – something else you’ve always done for me... thank you.”

“You don’t mind, then?” She hesitated, and then added in a single breath, “I won’t do it if you mind. Do you want to be a part of it? It concerns you so directly – perhaps you should work with me?”

“What, on the research? No, thank you!” he said quickly. “First, I’m rubbish for something like that – don’t argue the point, right? – and second, the last thing I want to do is to study that. If you’re doing it, it’ll be done right and I’ll find out everything I need to know.”

Her eyes glistened in the firelight. “That means a great deal to me, Harry. I know I’ve let you down, but this... this is something I know how to do. If there’s something important to be found, I’ll find it – I promise you that. Honestly, I’m looking forward to it... it’s the only thing to which I’m looking forward.”

The anguish rolled off of her. He said quietly but insistently, “You haven’t let me down... and this can’t be the only thing that excites you. Surely there’s something else –”

Her answer was distant, as though she were lost to the fire. “Tomorrow I’m supposed to put on a student’s robe and a blouse and skirt and a House tie and follow a timetable along with everyone sleeping peacefully upstairs. I’m supposed to pretend that the world beyond these walls doesn’t exist. I’m supposed to be some sort of innocent child. How am I supposed to do that now?”

“I don’t know,” Harry sighed. “After all that’s happened, I think it’s best that I was dismissed.” He looked up the stairs. “I’m not one of them anymore, I know that. It sounds as though you feel the same. I imagine Ron feels a spot of it, as well.”

“I don’t know if I can pretend,” Hermione said. “That’s why I chose to give up my prefect appointment. Don’t misunderstand me... it’s not that I’ve given myself over to chaos. It’s just that an honorific is meaningless. I have better things to do with my time, much more important things.”

Harry almost brought up her argument with McGonagall, but caught himself. “Erm... have you told Dumbledore about this?” he asked instead.

“I’m sure that’s why he offered special tuition,” she pointed out.

“I think you should talk to him,” Harry suggested. “I’m not sure what he might do, and I’m not telling you to trust him completely – I certainly don’t, not anymore – but he really does seem to care about you.”

After a pause and a long sigh, she said, “He cares about you as well, very much. I’ll give it some thought.” She looked him in the eyes, and he was confused by what he felt; then she added, “There’s so much I want to say, that I want to tell you... I’m just so tired. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry; it’s late,” he insisted. “Are we... are we all right, Hermione?” She nodded and hugged him fiercely. It seemed strange to be hugged by her without being awash in her hair.

“Has Dumbledore given you a timetable?” Hermione asked without releasing him.

Harry shook his head. “I’m starting to think it’s going to be something of a lash-up. Um... if you copy yours for me, then at least I’ll know where to find you.”

“We’ll receive ours in the morning, of course,” she said. “If you come by the Great Hall during one of the meals, I can give a copy to you.”

The idea of entering the Great Hall to a crowd of students made his stomach clench, but he smiled and nodded anyway. “I’ll do that,” he promised.

She nodded and then let her head fall against his shoulder, which he didn’t expect in the slightest. He absently ran his hand up and down her back in a way he hoped was comforting. “Thank you for coming tonight,” she said.

“We’re friends; that’s what friends do, right?” he said in return.

“Best friends, Harry... best friends,” she said earnestly, and he nodded in agreement as they parted.

He left the Common Room as soon as she climbed up the stairs and out of sight. On his way to the main entry, he rummaged through his pockets for the Bonnie until he recalled that it sat in his wardrobe. There was movement here and there in the shadows as he walked toward Hogsmeade. *It’s probably a flock of minders*, he figured, but palmed his wand nonetheless.

He hadn’t even reached the gates before he decided that the path seemed much narrower in the darkness. He heard rustling close to his right, and fired a stunning charm into the brush without second thought. There was no sound of a body falling, only a blizzard of birds in all directions. He whispered for Moody, then Tonks and then Shackbolt, but only heard the fading rush of the birds and the chirping of insects in return.

Even after he reached his rooms, he couldn’t place for certain what had driven him to start singing; it might have been the pleasure of knowing that he still had his best friend after all that had happened, or it might have been a fraying of nerves. He had been prone to having songs run through his head for a while – another legacy of Sirius, thanks to his record collection. Harry hoped that the first words were accurate, as he let forth at the top of his lungs:

What would you think if I sang out of tune?

Would you stand up and walk out on me?

Lend me your ears and I’ll sing you a song,

And I’ll try not to sing out of key.

He nearly laughed at the thought that he was probably well out of key, and then at the image of Death Eaters in the woods cringing at every word. He ploughed on even though he knew that he’d

forgotten some of the words:

I get by with a little help from my friends,

I get by with a little help from my friends,

Going to try with a little help from my friends.

What do I do when my... blah-blah-blah-blah?

He couldn't hold back the laughter anymore, and the shadows didn't seem quite so daunting. "That's it!" he howled; "I'll kill him with my bloody singing!" When he finally caught his breath, he sang on:

Does it worry you to be alone?

How do I feel at the end of the day?

Are you sad because you're on your own?

NO! I get by with a little help from my friends.

Do you need anybody?

I need somebody to...er...

The gaslights of Hogsmeade emerged before him as he cleared the trees. There was lightness to his step as he strolled toward the Three Broomsticks, still singing. He caught a peculiar stare or two, and didn't care a whit:

I get by with a little help from my friends,

Yes I get by with a little help from my friends,

I get by with a little help... Yes I get with a little help...

I get by with a little help from my friends.

Madam Rosmerta was setting glassware behind the bar; at the sight of her, he quickly stopped and felt a flush rise to his cheeks. She smiled at him and said, "Don't let me stop you; you're spot on, Harry."

Acknowledgments:

Lennon, J. & McCartney, P. (1967). "With a little help from my friends", from *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. London: EMI Records.

Harry Potter and the Years of Rebellion

Other Knows Best

Chapter Thirty-three

OTHER KNOWS BEST

September 2

Harry's shout could have roused every sleeping wizard in Hogsmeade, and he wouldn't have cared – his watch read fifteen minutes to nine and he was supposed to be in Dumbledore's chambers at nine, but he'd been too thick to pick up an alarm clock, and his stomach was rumbling, and he sat there on the edge of the bed with his hair in disarray even by his normal standards, clad only in boxers. He knocked Hermione's letter – which he had read several times before falling asleep – onto the floor in his haste, and scrambled to the sink.

"My, you're a fright this morning," the mirror said.

"Sod off," Harry grumbled, and thrust his toothbrush into his mouth. Hermione had once told him with a straight face that he needed to spend half a minute on each tooth, and he'd actually done it once before he found out that she'd been having him on. As it was, there was barely time to rinse-and-spit, and then a scouring charm that felt like it stripped off his skin rather than cleansed it.

He donned a grey shirt, pulled on black trousers that tucked into black boots, and thrust his black student's cloak and robe into a black knapsack – and managed it all in less than two minutes. "Is your entire wardrobe monochromatic, young man?" the mirror asked as he struggled with his hair.

"Bloody mirrors," Harry muttered under his breath. He tossed aside his comb in surrender, checked that he had packed parchment and quills and ink, scooped up the Bonnie and dashed out the door for the stairs.

He nearly ran down Madam Rosmerta as he reached the landing. "Oh, dear!" she cried out. "No time for breakfast?"

"Have to meet Dumbledore at nine," he said quickly.

Rosmerta pointed to two platters set at the bar. "Take a scone at the very least, Harry. Good luck today!"

Harry thanked her and pocketed two scones. He stopped just beyond the front door and enlarged the Bonnie; it was second nature for him now, and he supposed that it looked to an observer as though the motorbike simply poured from his palm. He straddled the bike in one smooth motion and cranked the throttle once, savouring the growl. Eyes fell upon him and glanced over his shoulder; heads seemed to magically appear at windows and out of abruptly-opened doors.

An ancient wizard making for the Three Broomsticks stopped beside him, eyes widened. “Great Merlin’s ghost, it’s Sirius Black!” he wheezed; “When’d they let you out, boy?” Harry flinched and mumbled a vague pleasantry over the rumble of the bike, then turned hard and pulled away fast.

Another wizard scrambled out of the way and shook his fist as Harry passed. He was past Hogsmeade Station before he became conscious of the wind whipping his hair; it was too late to turn back for a helmet. *It’s not as though I’ll have a traffic accident here*, he figured.

The gates to Hogwarts opened as he approached; he didn’t recall them having been closed when he’d walked back the previous night. As he thought about it, Dumbledore had never said anything about the gates at all; somehow, Harry was recognised.

He picked up speed again. The roar of the Bonnie seemed terribly out of place, especially as the castle drew closer, and he smiled. He figured that the sound of a Muggle motor had never been heard on this path before, even if it was nothing more than a magical copy of the real thing. There was something satisfying about riding the Bonnie on the ground, roaring up the path to Hogwarts – something exciting and rebellious and his alone.

The empty Quidditch pitch called to him. He glanced at his watch, which read six minutes to nine, and told himself, *I can round it and still make the entrance in two minutes*. The roar of the Bonnie faded away as he took flight. He hadn’t gone flat out since the chase to catch Ginny, and the speed startled him. It was as fast as his Firebolt, but the ride was rough and the Bonnie was far more difficult to hold steady. He had to stand on the footpegs to snap around the hoops at the far end of the pitch, and even then came uncomfortably close to sideswiping the wall. Four minutes to nine, his watch read. He turned the throttle as far as it would turn and thundered toward the entrance to the castle.

Harry swooped over a low spot in the outer walls and streaked down into the courtyard; he had to let the Bonnie bounce and slide through a 180-degree turn in order to stop. He heard the muttering of the startled students before he actually saw them.

It’s a Muggle! Inconceivable!

Don’t be thick; the thing was flying.

Charming that bike’s worth a year in Azkaban, I’ll wager.

Harry dismounted and found himself face to face with a shuffling knot of Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs, fifth-years from the looks of them. He guessed that they were straggling to Hagrid’s

hut for Care of Magical Creatures. “Good morning,” he said casually, as though flying into the Hogwarts courtyard at a hundred miles an hour on a Triumph Bonneville was as perfectly ordinary as scones for breakfast.

“Merlin’s balls, it’s Harry Potter!” someone blurted from the back, which immediately provoked alternating fits of laughter and shushing.

“Good morning, Harry. Were you taking a morning constitutional?” a familiar sing-song voice called out. Luna stood well off to one side from the rest of the students.

“Shut it, Looney,” came a hiss.

Harry’s jaw clenched. He shrunk and pocketed the Bonnie, which brought forth gasps; then he summoned a broad smile and returned, “Hello, Luna. It’s great to see you again.” The second round of gasps from Luna’s year-mates was rather more pronounced.

“Thank you once again for allowing Daddy and me to stay with you,” Luna said. There were whispers and sharp mutters, and Harry could almost feel Luna’s fellow Ravenclaws calculating. *Prats!* he snarled inside, and quickly decided that he had a good reason for keeping the Headmaster waiting.

“It was my pleasure,” Harry said softly. Luna’s wide eyes flickered ever-so-slightly, which he took as a note of surprise. “Perhaps you’ll take another ride with me sometime?” he added.

“I’d like that,” Luna replied. “I enjoyed the last ride immensely, although the stroll afterward was even better.”

Harry gave her a warm and friendly embrace. She stiffened for an instant, and then yielded. Harry couldn’t feel the other Ravenclaws after that. A catty thought flitted through his mind: *Perhaps we’ve killed them?*

“You’re quite skilled at play-acting,” she whispered in his ear.

“Play-acting? No, I really am glad to see you,” he whispered in return. “Er... I need to talk with you soon... it’s about Hermione. I saw her last night.” Then he let Luna go and took a step back as though he was appraising her. “I’m late to see the Headmaster,” he added in a normal voice. “I’ll be sure to pass along your regards.” She nodded and smiled enigmatically.

Luna’s housemates stared in mute shock as Harry walked toward them on his way to the oaken doors. He stopped before them, knowing that Luna might not appreciate what he was about to do. “Luna stood with me and my other friends against a dozen Death Eaters,” he snapped. “My friends are loyal to me, and I’m loyal to them. If I find you’ve mistreated Luna, having Cho take away house points will be the least of your worries.” He stood firm and watched the implication soak in for an uncomfortably long moment, and then continued on his way. From the corner of his eye, he observed that Luna’s housemates still stood in shock while her Hufflepuff year-mates smiled as one.

Harry pushed quickly through the doors and very nearly ran into Dumbledore. He was so startled that he managed nothing more intelligible than “Oh!”

“Good morning, Harry,” Dumbledore greeted him. “I was watching for you from my window.” He looked Harry up and down. “Sirius’s mode of transportation always fascinated me; it seems to favour you.”

Harry’s cheeks flushed despite himself. “I should have come directly, but I just *had* to take a spin around the pitch... I know it was childish...”

“I know that you will miss Quidditch very much,” Dumbledore said. “I suspect that you would have arrived precisely as scheduled, were it not for the time required to address Miss Lovegood and her colleagues.”

Harry frowned. “I won’t let them treat her badly, not like last year.”

Dumbledore seemed to be quite surprised. “Miss Lovegood has been poorly treated by members of her own house? I was not aware of this.”

“I don’t think she ever told any of the professors, not even Flitwick,” Harry said. “She didn’t want a fuss.”

“She didn’t want a fuss, you say?” Dumbledore stroked his beard thoughtfully. “I see... then you acted in what you perceive to be Miss Lovegood’s best interests, even though she does not share your opinion.”

“They steal her things, they call her awful names, they lie to her about revising for exams – she’s done nothing to deserve that,” Harry protested.

“What if your action leads to unforeseen consequences, Harry? Perhaps Miss Lovegood’s colleagues will be emboldened to seek new and uglier ways to mistreat her? Would that lead you to reconsider your actions?” Dumbledore asked.

“Someone needed to talk to them. Someone had to tell them that what they’ve done before is wrong.” Harry crossed his arms tightly. “If I say nothing, nothing changes; so I said something.”

Dumbledore gave a wry smile, and showed a hint of the twinkle in his eye that Harry had come to genuinely dislike. “It is always tempting to make decisions on behalf of those for whom we care, but always dangerous. The future consequences are never completely clear in the best of circumstances. Sometimes we cannot remedy our errors, but only move forward.” He motioned toward the corridor that led past the ground-floor classrooms. “Shall we?”

They exited the corridor into the main entry hall and Dumbledore turned toward the stairs that led to the dungeons. Harry slowed his pace. “Are we... um... going down there to, you know, talk to him?”

“I believe that we both require some more information from our colleague, prior to passing

judgment,” Dumbledore returned. “I offer to handle the enquiry, unless you prefer otherwise.” Since Harry had no idea what information Dumbledore sought, he agreed.

As they descended, Dumbledore seemed lost in his thoughts. He doffed his hat and ran the brim through his hands as he walked. A smile formed on his lips. “Unspoken communication, Harry – it is critical to effective partnerships,” he said. “Many tasks in the magical world are carried out in pairs; Aurors generally work in pairs, as do Unspeakables in the field... curse-breakers as well... even the Four Founders formed two pairs. I wonder if we overlook the significance of partnership and teamwork at Hogwarts...?”

Before Harry could decide whether he should answer, Dumbledore went on, “Unspoken communication... yes, it can provide a valuable advantage. When Professor Croaker and myself – I imagine that you did not know the Professor has been a superior and a colleague of mine at various times? – when we were engaged in fieldwork, we had a system of unspoken cues in addition to simple familiarity. For example, if I was to rub the side of my nose thusly, Algernon knew that someone with hostile intent was attempting to flank him.” He tugged in a particular way on his beard. “If I was to pull on my beard just-so, then Algernon knew to secure a room – in other words, to securely seal the door, scatter Imperturbable Charms and create a silent space of appropriate dimensions. You surely see how these sorts of cues could be useful in an uncertain situation? Yes, I think that unspoken communication should be addressed in both the Defence classes and the Defence Club –”

“Defence Club? Is Detheridge going to run something like the D.A., then?” Harry asked.

Dumbledore straightened his hat and returned it to its normal perch. “No, Harry. You are going to lead the Defence Club, with able assistance of course. I believe that such a Club should conduct its meetings on a regular basis, and there will be times that you are unavailable.”

“Erm... I don’t think Hermione –” Harry began.

Dumbledore interrupted firmly. “Miss Granger has been charged with a more important task, one better suited to her current situation. No, I prefer that you work with Professor Detheridge’s teaching assistants. I will arrange a meeting with his assistants this afternoon. Ah... we have arrived.” They stood before the door to the Potions classroom.

Dumbledore knocked twice and then entered. The classroom was vacant, and the door to Snape’s office was ajar. “Severus? Do you have a moment?” Dumbledore called cheerily.

Snape’s voice echoed from the office. “I am engaged. I shall be with you shortly, Headmaster.”

“There is no need to ruin a potion,” Dumbledore said quietly. He ran the tip of his index finger along the top of one of the student desks, and his nose wrinkled; then he sniffed deeply.

“Fluxweed has a very distinctive scent when parboiled. It is primarily acrid, yet at the same time there is a hint of something floral.”

Harry sniffed the air as well. “Fluxweed? Why is he making Polyjuice Potion?” he muttered.

Dumbledore frowned. “Although fluxweed is used in several preparations, it is a rather esoteric ingredient. I am inclined to support your assumption. Professor Snape is expected to inform the Order of his, shall we say, unsavoury potion-making responsibilities... you pose an excellent question, Harry. I shall add it to my growing list.”

Snape emerged from his office. His outer robe was absent, replaced by a dragon-hide apron, and he was wiping his hands on what looked to be a tea towel. “My apologies, Headmaster – I...” His eyes swept to Dumbledore’s right and narrowed. “What is *he* doing here? Is this about his Potions training?”

“I do hope this will not come as a disappointment, Severus, but I have decided to offer Harry tuition in potions myself,” Dumbledore said.

Snape’s face twitched oddly; Harry suspected it was from the effort of keeping back a smile. “I am... not entirely disappointed, Headmaster...” He paused and shifted uncomfortably. “Without intending disrespect, may I ask if you are certain that you will be able to address all aspects that may be required? I will offer any assistance that you require, of course.”

“Of course, Severus; I am aware of your commitment to the betterment of our students,” Dumbledore said evenly. “I am certain that you would extend the same courtesies to my apprentice. Though I am not a Potions Master, but merely an alchemist, I feel that I can provide Harry with all the potions instruction that he shall require.”

Snape lowered his head. “You are not *merely* an alchemist, Headmaster. No insult was intended.”

“None was taken,” Dumbledore said. “I have a lesson plan in mind, Severus, and I shall need to obtain the associated materials. If it is not an imposition, I thought that perhaps you could provide initial supplies from your personal stores. In addition, I would prefer that you handle future procurements on my behalf; in that way, we shall be guaranteed highest-quality supplies.”

“Certainly, Headmaster,” Snape agreed.

Dumbledore moved toward Snape’s office. “Excellent! Now, I had in mind –”

Snape moved to one side, deterring Dumbledore’s progress. “I can outfit a small potions laboratory on your behalf, Headmaster,” he said. “Dungeon Five is not in use this term, and the conditions are favourable for potions of NEWT-level sensitivity. When did you intend to commence this... training?”

“I had hoped to offer a brief lesson this afternoon, one that should not necessitate a special environment,” Dumbledore returned. He resumed his trek toward the office. “I only require –”

“Headmaster, I have four different potions brewing at present, two of which are prone to instability. I would prefer that no one else enter my laboratory until tomorrow at the earliest,” Snape said, his tone authoritative and firm.

Dumbledore let out a long sigh. “Very well; would you please fetch the appropriate supplies, then?” He adjusted his hat and then tugged on his beard. “I shall require six Jobberknoll feathers...”

Snape’s face went slack. “*Six*, Headmaster? I doubt that I have six available –”

Dumbledore went on as though Snape had said nothing. “I shall also require a vial of Erumpent fluid, six grains of coracesia –”

“Sir! I must insist that you allow me to prepare Dungeon Five before you allow... are you certain that you want to put *coracesia* in Potter’s hands?” Snape sneered. “I will admit he hasn’t engaged in wanton cauldron-melting like Longbottom ...” Dumbledore tugged on his beard again, as Snape droned on. Harry realised that it was the same sort of tug as before – the same unspoken cue that the Headmaster had once shared with Croaker.

Dumbledore continued to list increasingly dangerous ingredients, Snape continued to grow paler, and Harry understood that he was supposed to secure the room while Snape was distracted. With a furtive flick of his wand, he sealed the door. Snape was so incensed that he didn’t seem to hear the faint squelching sound. With a few more flicks, the walls and ceiling and floor were all rendered Imperturbable. He flopped onto a bench as though bored, and Snape never gave him a second glance. Lying on his back, he moved his wand to-and-fro, and built a silent space that enclosed the entire classroom.

“Do any of your potions require attention in the next fifteen minutes, Severus?” Dumbledore asked.

“The Blood-Replenishing Potion must be stirred in less than ten minutes,” Snape answered. His eyes flickered slightly. “Do you require something of me other than potion ingredients, Headmaster?”

Dumbledore nodded. “Yes, I do.” He sniffed deeply. “Are you certain you have fifteen minutes to spare? I believe your fluxweed may be softening into an unusable state.”

Snape sniffed, “Certainly not; it will be more than thirty minutes...” His face tightened, and he took a long pause before he said, “I did not think that this particular request merited the attention of the Order. I am being made to accelerate the brewing process, and I assure you that the potion will work for no more than ten minutes. Whoever will be assigned to use it is doomed to failure.”

Dumbledore’s eyes flashed dangerously. “We had an understanding, Severus – an agreement that you would report all of your activities for Voldemort and his supporters. This was not limited to those activities that you may feel are important. Ten minutes is ample time for unspeakable acts to be committed – you know this all too well.”

Snape bowed his head. “I understand, Headmaster. I did not seek to overstep my bounds; the error is mine.”

“Yes, Severus, the error is yours,” Dumbledore agreed. He turned to Harry. “I have another minor question to ask of Professor Snape. I am sorry that we are encroaching on your lesson time... ah, of course! Harry, I would like you to go into Professor Snape’s office and, without sampling or any sort of direct contact, identify the four potions currently in process. If you succeed in identifying all four, I shall award ten points to the house of your choosing.”

Snape was horror-stricken. “Headmaster... I must protest! If he interacts with my work, not only might he reduce himself to ashes, but he might succeed in taking us with him!”

“Thank you for the warning, Severus,” Dumbledore said. “Harry, it seems that one of more of the potions possesses an explosive potential; do be mindful in your examination.” He waved toward Snape’s office door until Harry began to move toward it.

Snape drew himself up into the haughty posture that Harry expected of him. “Headmaster, as an accredited Potions Master I possess certain rights and privileges with regard to the sanctity of my work,” he sniffed. “I refuse to allow someone so thoroughly unqualified to enter my work area.”

Dumbledore’s eyes narrowed in a way that Harry had never before seen. A draft rushed through the room; the Headmaster’s hat fell to the floor and his hair rippled behind him. “Any privileges that you possess within these walls are based upon your tenure as a Professor, Severus, and the continuation of that tenure is at my pleasure,” he pronounced. “I believe we shall discuss the likelihood of continuation, among other things. *Sit* .”

Harry barely managed to move aside; he suddenly felt incredibly heavy. Snape slid backward into the chair behind his desk at the head of the classroom; his expression betrayed utter shock and fear. Once Snape was seated, he tugged and pulled and wriggled but might as well have been tied down.

“What is the meaning of this?” Snape demanded.

“*Have you betrayed the Order, Severus?*” Dumbledore roared. The student desks rattled in their places. Harry wasn’t certain whether the desks and benches rattled from the strength of Dumbledore’s voice or the sheer power radiating from him; he couldn’t help but be awestruck, as well as shocked by the turn of events, and very pleased to be someone other than Severus Snape.

Snape’s eyes grew wide before they grew angry. “*No!* How... how dare you! After all that I have done, all that I have given... *NO, I HAVE NOT!*”

Harry could feel the Headmaster’s fury roiling just beneath the surface. Dumbledore withdrew his wand and rolled it between his fingers. When he at last spoke, his tone was controlled but bitterly cold. “I am inclined to test that assertion. I have received approval to cast *Proditionis Aequiparabilis*. ”

Snape blanched, but responded with defiance. “You would invoke the Betrayer’s Curse upon me, Headmaster? From whom was permission sought – your Gryffindor protégés? I surmise as much; they would happily allow you to strike me with the Killing Curse,” he spat.

“This is not a matter of likes or dislikes; the matters at hand are the keeping and the breaking of oaths, of long-held personal promises,” Dumbledore returned. “I will know whether you have betrayed Harry to Voldemort. You will tell me or I will discern it myself.”

Snape tried to sit up straight, but it seemed that he was forced into a slouch. “This is about *Potter*? Do I not sit accused of betraying the Order?”

“There is no longer a distinction to be drawn, as you are well aware,” Dumbledore snapped. “There have been too many inconsistencies, too many half-truths, Severus. I can no longer tolerate obfuscation; resist if you wish. *Legilimens* .”

Snape writhed in the chair; he tried to turn his head, to avert his eyes, but he could not. The veins in his neck bulged, and he began to sweat profusely; Harry wondered whether he was seeing Snape as Snape had seen him the previous year.

“I... was... I was in the right!” Snape choked out. “Did... what... you asked... the boy... couldn’t use Occlumency... doesn’t... possess... the mind... had to make him... resist the... the Dark Lord... as you said... why not... make him... strike a... hammer blow...”

“You were completely wrong,” Dumbledore said quietly. “Harry is not a weapon to be wielded.”

“We... are all... weapons...” Snape managed.

Dumbledore seemed profoundly sad and disappointed; Harry could feel it and wondered if it was having any effect on Snape. “Severus... your actions were premised upon a distorted view of the connection between Harry and Voldemort. We can only hope that you did not succeed in dooming us all...” The Headmaster’s eyes fluttered and he staggered forward. Harry moved to his side, but he raised a hand to stop him. “Harry, please remove yourself to Professor Snape’s office. I still wish you to identify the potions in process – quickly, please.”

“Blood... Replenishing... P-Potion...” Snape said hoarsely.

“Thank you, Severus. The Blood Replenishing Potion will soon require stirring. Harry, be certain to follow the Professor’s notes with care,” Dumbledore said.

“*NO ... Potter... m-menace ...*” Snape spat. His head shook, and then he squeezed his eyes tightly shut. “Headmuh... Headmaster... no... don’t make me... I don’t want to see... *please ...*” His eyes snapped open again, pupils contracted in stark terror.

“Oh, no... Severus, did he actually require you to do those things...?” Dumbledore muttered, and then added forcefully, “Harry, act with haste!”

Harry scrambled into Snape’s office. There were four cauldrons brewing, each with a store of ingredients before it, all carefully organized and meticulously prepared. A set of notes on parchment was placed adjacent to each ingredient set; stirring and brewing steps were logged on each. He struggled to clear his head; the air was filled with fear and disappointment and anger and

the crackling of raw power, and it was a battle to push all that aside and focus upon his task.

He first identified the cauldron in which the Blood Replenishing Potion was brewing, and followed Snape's next steps exactly as they were described. Boomslang skin lay amongst the ingredients before the second cauldron, and the liquid gave off the odour that Dumbledore had identified as fluxweed. *That would be the Polyjuice Potion*, he recognised.

The liquid in the third cauldron was clear, and the only remaining ingredient was a single Jobberknoll feather. He leaned over the cauldron and sniffed; there was no discernable smell. There was a stray droplet on the edge of the cauldron. He threw caution to the wind and took up the droplet on the tip of a finger; his skin tingled for a moment. *Veritaserum*, he decided.

Only traces of the ingredients remained before the fourth cauldron. Harry read the notes several times, in hopes of seeing a familiar pattern in the clockwise and anticlockwise stirring and the addition of tincture of... *Forgetfulness Potion? Why on Earth would he be brewing that?* he wondered.

"I have it, Headmaster," Harry called out. "He's brewing Blood Replenishing Potion, Polyjuice Potion, Veritaserum, and Forgetfulness Potion."

Dumbledore released a long sigh. When Harry re-entered the classroom, the Headmaster was seated at a student desk, his face lowered into his hands; Snape was sprawled in the chair behind his own desk, dazed and shuddering. When Dumbledore at last spoke, his voice was muffled by his fingers. "I assume that Harry is correct, because it is abundantly clear that you have been partaking of Forgetfulness Potion. That is not the answer, Severus."

Snape coughed loudly. "Perhaps I was able to penetrate Potter's skull after all," he croaked. "Ten points to... to..."

"Slytherin," Harry said.

Snape remained slouched in his chair, but his eyes betrayed his surprise. "I... m-must have heard incorrectly."

"Ten points to Slytherin," Harry confirmed.

Snape's eyebrow quivered as it rose. "What on Earth for?"

A part of Harry wanted very much to smirk, but the rest of him couldn't deliver on it. Instead he snapped, "I figure Slytherin will need the points before the year is out, and... and because I would have gone along with it. Did you ever think about that? Did it ever occur to you that if you'd just told me what you were trying to do, I would have agreed?"

Snape gaped at him. He was silent for a long time, before he slowly whispered, "Foolish, foolish Gryffindor."

"I'd have gone along with it, if it would have gotten rid of Voldemort," Harry growled. "Who's

the fool here, Snape?”

Dumbledore raised his head. “I will not hear of this again, Harry. As for you, Severus... you have been found out; Voldemort knows. He assigned you the most reprehensible tasks – evil tasks – because he knew that you would perform them; he knew that you would not dare fail him, no matter the consequences. It appears that he was not able to breach your deepest secrets, but the Forgetfulness Potion has eroded your shields over time – as you surely knew it would. Did you truly believe that Voldemort would not sense this? You should have come to me; this could have ended weeks ago! Lives would have been saved – *innocent lives!*” The Headmaster rippled with power, and Harry understood how it was that he could be feared.

Snape bore himself up with obvious discomfort but without any note of complaint. “Shall I consider myself in custody, Headmaster?”

Dumbledore shook his head. “I am satisfied that you have not knowingly betrayed the Order. I am, however, profoundly dissatisfied with your conduct. As of now, you are forbade from responding to a summons, nor may you leave the wards of Hogwarts for any purpose until I am convinced that it is safe for you to do so. I shall confer with Harry as well as some of our colleagues from the Order. We shall meet with you no later than tomorrow evening.”

Snape struggled to his feet; his eyes were still glassy. “The third-years will be arriving in thirty minutes... I must...”

“You need not concern yourself,” Dumbledore said firmly. “I relieve you of instructional duties until further notice. You may use your office and private work area, if you wish. Your Floo access is suspended, as well.”

Snape began a weak protest. “But who will –”

Dumbledore stopped him. “As you pointed out, I am not merely an alchemist.” He turned to Harry. “I am afraid that my meagre attempts toward establishing a timetable have once again collapsed. I would appreciate your assistance in preparing the classroom and monitoring student activity. You will meet with Professor Detheridge’s assistants this afternoon, and there are two readings that you must complete today. We will meet over the evening meal to organise the remainder of the week.”

“Is there... anything that I may do, Headmaster; any task that I may perform?” Snape asked quietly.

“You may complete the potions in process, Severus,” Dumbledore answered. “Please see that the Blood-Replenishing Potion is delivered to Madam Pomfrey, and that the Veritaserum is delivered to my chambers. You shall complete and then destroy the Polyjuice Potion in my presence. I shall destroy the Forgetfulness Potion myself and remove the active tincture from your stores.” When Snape simply stood there, he added, “The balance of your attention this day and tomorrow should be devoted to thorough and sober reflection upon your choices.” The Headmaster watched impassively until Snape recognised the dismissal and slunk into his office.

Dumbledore sat against the edge of the teacher's desk and seemed to survey the classroom for a moment. "Third years... third years... what say you, Harry – shall we begin with the Draught of Peace?"

"Erm... that's covered in fifth year. Snape said it was tricky," Harry offered.

Dumbledore looked at him with faint surprise. "Is that so? In my day, the associated skills were of the third year, or the fourth year at worst. Well... no matter. I believe the Draught of Peace is very appropriate for today's lesson. Please obtain the proper supplies for twenty-five students from the potions stores, Harry. While you are readying the ingredients..." He rose up and strolled down the centre aisle, wrinkling his nose all the while. "This classroom could stand a proper scouring." With that, the Headmaster began directing various cleaning charms at the desks, the chairs, even the walls and floor.

When Harry returned with the ingredients for the impending class he found Dumbledore standing before the sidewall, staring at the stone with some intensity. "A rather dark and dismal room, wouldn't you say?" he seemed to ask the wall.

"I always figured it was for the ingredients or something," Harry admitted; "I supposed it had to be dark and cold."

Dumbledore laughed. "Stuff and nonsense!" he declared. "There are no ingredients used in the instructional setting that fail to thrive at normal indoor temperatures, or under lighting that falls within the normal spectrum. When I was a lad, a Ravenclaw held the Potions post and the classes were held in Ravenclaw tower. No, Harry, this classroom is a reflection of the Professor's personal preferences and nothing more." He stepped back from the wall until he nearly toppled a student desk. "Now it is true that certain categories of ambient magic can impact adversely upon the brewing of a variety of potions. Enchanted windows do not emanate that sort of magical energy." The Headmaster gave his wand a terribly complicated wave and muttered something that didn't sound to Harry like it came from any language he had ever heard, let alone any incantation. A very large portion of the sidewall brightened and then shimmered. When the shimmering stopped, it appeared as though the classroom had been transported up into one of the towers; a full set of windows and French doors opened onto a balcony that overlooked the grounds.

Harry attempted to touch the handles of the doors, and found that they were simply part of the enchantment. "Brilliant!" he said with a grin.

"It is more to my taste, at any rate. We shall see if the students share your assessment," Dumbledore said. With that, Harry set the morning's raw ingredients at the worktables while the Headmaster rapidly jotted teaching notes in the air.

Over the next two periods, Harry at last had an opportunity to weigh Dumbledore as a teacher. There couldn't have been a greater contrast to Snape, he decided. The Headmaster was calm, patient, brilliant, and above all else, fair-minded. Even the Slytherin third-years whom he overheard while leaving the classroom spoke highly of the session.

Harry followed the students up the stairs and into the Great Hall, where the midday meal was in full swing. He automatically took a seat at the Gryffindor table. Several younger students who he didn't recognise cast strange looks toward him.

“How goes the battle, Harry?” Dean asked brightly.

Seamus snorted. “Whatever you're doing, it has to be better than Transfiguration. That class is going to be a thorn in my –”

Katie Bell, who had taken a seat opposite Harry, cut off Seamus with a wave. She subtly inclined her head toward the staff table. McGonagall was delivering a stern stare. Seamus cringed at first; he was slow to realise that the look was meant for Harry. Marchbanks and Croaker were both frowning slightly and Flitwick appeared very interested in what was to come next. McGonagall turned to face an empty seat to her left, and then returned her eyes to Harry.

Harry stood just as Hermione sat. Her wan smile quickly faded in confusion. Harry gave a slight shrug. He looked briefly to McGonagall, muttered something vaguely apologetic to his former housemates, and then made for the anteroom as fast as he could manage without appearing to run away.

He closed the doors behind him and sat there alone for a while. It was a quiet room, and he could avoid the students' stares. With a quiet *pop!* a house elf appeared before him. “Does the Headmaster's esteemed apprentice wish to eat?” the house elf asked, nearly cowering before him.

Harry sighed. “I just can't eat out there. I don't belong at the staff table and I guess I can't sit with Gryffindor now... I'm glad I'm here, but I don't belong here. Does that make any sense?”

The house-elf's ears quivered. “If the Headmaster's esteemed apprentice is saying it, then... then it must make sense.”

Harry laughed. “I wouldn't place a wager on that! Look... my name is Harry. I'm not an esteemed anything.”

The house-elf gaped at him with huge and confused eyes. “Begging pardon from the Headmaster's esteemed apprentice, but the esteemed apprentice is not telling the truth! The house-elves, we know who the esteemed apprentice is!”

“What's your name?” Harry asked.

The house-elf twitched. “The Headmaster's esteemed apprentice asks this lowly being's name?” When Harry nodded, the house-elf squeaked, “Spat... the house-elf's name is Spat.”

“Well, thank you for offering me a meal, Spat. I'm not very hungry...” Harry chuckled and added in a conspiratorial whisper, “I'd take a butterbeer, if you can give me one... but only if you'll call me by my name.”

Spat nearly tore his ears from his head. “C-call you... this lowly being could not... could

never...”

Harry frowned, and said firmly, “Please stop calling yourself a lowly being, Spat. My name is Harry. I suspect you can say it just fine.” He didn’t want to cause the poor creature distress, but he wasn’t interested in being treated as anyone’s master.

“This lowly... Spat will bring H-H...” The house-elf struggled mightily, and finally squeezed its eyes shut. “Spat will bring butterbeer to Master Harry straight away,” he squeaked in a single breath and promptly disappeared.

The door opened with a prolonged creak, and Hermione peered inside. She looked to the left and then to the right before she entered the room. “I wasn’t sure if I was allowed...” she began.

“Consider yourself allowed,” Harry said quickly, and gestured to the adjacent armchair.

Hermione sat down heavily. “I was concerned,” she said. “The look on your face out there... it’s difficult for you, isn’t it: being here but not being a part of the house?”

“I don’t know what I’m supposed to do,” Harry admitted. “I was going to sit by you, but I thought bloody McGonagall was going to have my head over it. Croaker was giving me the eye, besides.”

“You shouldn’t have to be alone,” Hermione said flatly. “I think it’s poor planning on the Headmaster’s part.”

Spat reappeared, with a butterbeer on a small tray. “Spat returns with butterbeer for Master... *EEK!*” The house-elf’s arm shook and he nearly dropped the tray. He swiftly handed Harry the butterbeer and slowly backed away.

Harry looked around anxiously, his wand drawn. “Spat? What is it... what do you see?”

Spat shuddered and shook his head. “*She-Who-Knits!* Spat mustn’t talk to She-Who-Knits, it’s not seemly...” He wagged his finger at Hermione. “No hats, miss, if you please... *no hats!*” he squeaked and then disappeared.

Hermione sat quite still, her eyes wide. Harry cleared his throat, and spoke with no idea of what to say. “Hermione... he just doesn’t, erm, appreciate —”

“They... they hate me...” Hermione said haltingly.

Harry didn’t know what to say. “I don’t know that they hate you, exactly,” he bumbled. “I mean, it’s only one house-elf; perhaps...” He trailed off as Hermione’s cheeks flushed.

“They have a name for me! I can’t believe they call me... they call me...” Hermione’s lip quivered. “‘She-Who-Knits’? For goodness’ sake, they... they equate me to V-Vol...” Her breathing quickened and threatened to speed out of control.

“*No!* I’m sure they don’t, not really!” Harry insisted. He scooted his chair along the floor until

he was near enough to rest his hand on her back. “It’s just... I think it’s right to want them to be free. I think it’s wrong to treat anyone like a slave. I just don’t think it’s as simple as you wanted it to be.”

Hermione crouched forward and buried her head in her hands. “I know that. I don’t know what I was thinking last year at times. I think it was Umbridge and... and everything else, you know?” She let out a strangely punctuated sigh, and added, “It’s not as though I could free a house-elf bound to Hogwarts; only Professor Dumbledore could do that.”

“Even so, they weren’t happy about the hats,” Harry acknowledged.

Hermione sat up so fast that Harry’s arm was flung back. “You knew!” she accused. “I don’t believe it! You knew they called me –”

Harry began to babble. “No! I mean... erm... we didn’t really know anything – that is, uh, Ron and me, we knew that none of the house-elves but Dobby would come into Gryffindor Tower –”

“I spent all that time making a fool of myself! *Why didn’t you tell me?*” Hermione snapped.

“*You had something to believe in and I wasn’t going to be the one to take it away, right?*” Harry shot back without a moment’s thought. Hermione immediately shrank back, and Harry’s eyes slammed shut. He took long breaths and tried to sort Hermione’s fear from his own irritation. He felt her hand cover his.

She sniffed loudly, and he vowed not to open his eyes and see her cry. “I’m sorry... I’m very sorry,” she said. “You were trying to be... I should have given you the benefit of the doubt, but... considering last year...”

“I was hard to be around last year, I know,” Harry sighed. “I don’t want to be like that anymore. Sometimes I feel so out of control, you know, and – what?” He was sure that he had felt her flinch.

“It’s nothing.” She continued to sniff, but her voice took on a note of determination. It sounded like the Hermione he knew. “You have to try as hard as you can, Harry. It’s very important – you have to remain in control. I’ll help you any way I can, I promise, but you *have* to be in control.”

“I know that,” he said. “I know what happens when I’m not in control. You could have been killed on account of that dream. You’ve every right to be concerned.”

Hermione left her hand rest lightly on the collar of his robes; she stood close enough that he could feel her breath. “It’s not that. You’re... you’re a good man, Harry, and you have to stay that way. You can’t... *mustn’t* let yourself be dragged down by V-Voldemort,” she said earnestly. It was difficult for her to say Voldemort’s name now – that much was clear – but she kept at it and Harry was quietly proud.

“I won’t be like him, not ever,” he assured her.

Hermione pressed on. “There are so many great things you can accomplish, Harry – I know you can. You have a lot of influence, and that’s only going to increase now. Goodness, even the goblins –”

Harry’s eyes snapped open. “Goblins... what about the goblins?”

Hermione was suddenly very excited. “Oh, yes! I can’t believe that I... well, you see, I went to Gringotts to exchange some pounds for Galleons... honestly, I went because somehow I received a Gringotts key... *oh!* I didn’t mention the key, either – that was passing strange, I can tell you – anyway, a Gringotts key turns up in my hand yesterday morning –”

“Goblins, money, a key... I’m struggling to keep up!” Harry laughed.

Hermione lowered her head and grinned. “Sorry – I was all over the place, wasn’t I? Perhaps I should begin with the key?”

“Is that the beginning? You might want to start at the beginning,” Harry said with a smirk.

“Prat,” Hermione said; she smacked him on the shoulder, but she had a smile on her face. “I woke up yesterday morning and I was clutching a Gringotts key. It wasn’t mine of course, as I don’t have a vault. Mr. Weasley and Bill escorted me to Gringotts so that I could visit the moneychanger but I mentioned the key while I was there. They escorted me to the back rooms in a trice; at first, I thought that I was in trouble. I met with a goblin called Fliptrask – he mentioned that he was in charge of your trust –”

Harry nodded. “Fliptrask was the goblin who had me sign Sirius’s will.”

“Harry, the long and short of it is that the key was a copy of the key to your vault – a precise copy. They had no idea how it came to be, let alone how I came to have it,” Hermione explained.

“You found this key yesterday morning, before you caught the Express,” Harry confirmed.

Hermione worried her lip and then looked dead centre into his eyes. “Did you pay me a visit, Harry?” she asked suspiciously.

“No!” Harry insisted. “I don’t even have my vault key – Ted Tonks has it in safekeeping. I don’t know of any second key, either.” He thought for a moment, and asked nervously, “Um... when did you go to sleep that night?”

Hermione’s face tightened. “Mrs. Weasley received her howler that afternoon. I turned in rather early.”

Harry grinned. “I can imagine you didn’t want to come out of your room after that.”

“She was almost gracious about it, in the end. I hadn’t expected that,” Hermione said. Her brow furrowed and she asked, “Why did you want to know when I went to sleep?”

Harry's cheeks flushed. He certainly didn't want to bring up the disastrous dinner with her parents; for that matter, he didn't want to bring up her parents at all. Hermione rolled her eyes at him and said, "You're usually better than this at keeping secrets."

His resolve stiffened, and he sought a way to reveal his growing suspicion without giving away too much. "Remember the book and the rose? I wonder if it was something like that?"

Hermione hesitated, but then shook her head. "They didn't last for more than a few seconds. This key was solid metal, and it must have lasted for hours."

"It was smaller," Harry pointed out.

"Yes, but the key was far denser," Hermione countered.

"It was just a thought," Harry conceded.

Hermione let out a slow breath. "It's as good a thought as any, I suppose. That book appearing in our front room violated a dozen basic rules of magic... but then again..." She reached out and patted him on the knee, which startled him. "If there's one thing I can always count on with you, Harry, it's that you'll constantly force me to rethink the rules."

Harry fidgeted. "I'm sorry?"

"I can't figure why you would cause a key to appear in my hand," she went on, "or why my name is listed on your vault. Erm... that was rather a shock, by the way."

Harry couldn't bring himself to move; he had to remind himself to breathe. Hermione answered his unspoken question. "From that first telephone call until you came for dinner, strange things happened whenever you were upset. You were very upset on the telephone, Harry. It stands to reason that you did it; I don't think you set out to scare us silly."

"I... I don't know for certain, but... yeah, I probably did," Harry acknowledged.

Hermione rubbed at the runes on her hand. "You do have a knack for long-distance magic," she murmured.

Harry tried to change the subject. "So... about the goblins...?"

"Why did you send me a key?" Hermione blurted out. "I mean, you don't have to tell me if you don't want to say, but I'd like to know why, because it must have taken a very strong emotion and I worry about what's been happening to you and what else might happen to you and –" She seemed to realise that she was prattling on and quickly stopped herself.

Harry stared into the fire at the far end of the anteroom. He told her the truth, just not the whole truth. "I was... thinking about Sirius's money that night," he said quietly, "about how it's blood money and how I don't want it, and how I think it would be brilliant if you had it. It'd serve the old Blacks right. You'd know what to do with the money; you'd do something good, I'm sure of it

– great, even.”

A wash of different emotions played across Hermione’s face, and Harry felt their echoes in his mind. He couldn’t sort any of it out save a deep sadness. For a moment he thought of holding her, and wished he knew whether holding her was what he wanted to do or if it was just a matter of reflecting her thoughts and feelings, or if it was something else, something darker. The more he circled through the possibilities, the more confused he became.

“I think you should keep the money, Harry,” she said at long last. “It might be needed before all of this ends. After you kill V-Voldemort, then give it all away if that’s what you want. You can see it put to good use; you don’t need me to assure that.”

“Maybe we can do it together?” Harry offered.

Hermione nodded hesitantly. “I’d like that.”

Harry didn’t remember having so many awkward pauses before, when the two of them would talk. “Now... about the goblins...?” he asked with mock impatience.

Her eyes suddenly widened. “The goblins - yes! You should contact this Fliptrask as soon as possible. He told me to pass along an invitation to their hunt!”

Harry immediately thought of the graphorn head that hung in Fliptrask’s office. “Erm... he wants to invite me to a *goblin hunt* ? That isn’t done, is it?” he asked.

“There’s very little documented about the goblin hunt, let alone any mentions of wizards being invited,” Hermione said excitedly. “It has to be important, don’t you think?”

Harry mulled that over. He suspected that it was mostly to do with the Potter Trust, but nodded in agreement. “I’ll contact him, then,” he said.

Hermione started as if to say something else, but her eye caught her watch. “I see I’m late for Potions,” she said unhappily.

Harry sat back comfortably in his chair and tried not to smirk. “No worries. Dumbledore’s teaching Potions, today and tomorrow at any rate.”

“The Headmaster’s teaching? What happened... was Professor Snape, you know, called...?” Hermione’s expression went from confusion to concern and on toward doubt. “You’re smiling, Harry. What have you done?” she added suspiciously.

Harry raised his hands. “I didn’t do anything. Snape managed *this* on his own,” he said.

“O...kay...” Hermione’s brow furrowed. “You’re not going to tell me, are you?”

Harry allowed himself to smile broadly. “I imagine you’ll figure it out on your own,” he said. She reached for her book-filled knapsack and made her way to the door; she cast curious looks

back at him several times, but he simply maintained his smile. For a moment he was certain that she stuck her tongue out at him as she passed into the Great Hall, but decided that it was merely a trick of the light.

The door to the Defence classroom was ajar. Harry didn't think that Detheridge would ambush him, but he figured that one should be cautious with any Defence professor hired by Dumbledore. *Besides, I don't know anything about these assistants – not even how many there are*, he thought.

Detheridge was standing on the stairs that spiralled up to his office. There was an easel before him, upon which sat a large and rather brightly coloured canvas; he held a brush in one hand and a tray of some kind in the other.

“Good afternoon,” he said. “Running ahead of schedule, I see?”

“Dumbledore's day is a bit of a mess –” Harry began.

Detheridge snorted. “Yes, yes – Snape is, uh, indisposed... of course, I shouldn't be one to talk.”

“I can return at three,” Harry offered.

“No reason for that,” Detheridge said. “My assistants should be here any minute. I have to say that Albus has been nothing if not generous. I certainly never expected he'd grant me *two* fully qualified wizards, not to mention... ah! Here they are!” He looked past Harry's shoulder.

Harry turned to face the open door behind him, caught a flash of dark robes and promptly met a fist. He crashed into the nearest student desk before he knew what had hit him. The owner of the fist grabbed him by the lapels and dragged him to his feet.

“Wotcher, *Harry*,” Tonks spat.

“What do you think you're doing?” a familiar voice rang out. Harry's glasses were askew; he couldn't make out anything save Tonks's crimson face. As he burst into action, it occurred to him that the voice belonged to Bill Weasley.

Harry brought his arms up and shoved Tonks backward as hard as he could; she stumbled into Bill. Harry pushed his glasses into place and barked, “*Accio wands!*” Two wands flew out of Tonks's robes, another two came from Bill, and a fifth wand struck Harry between the shoulder blades. He moved automatically into the stance that Dudley had taught him, and swung swiftly at Tonks. The first blow connected; the second was just off, as she moved aside.

Tonks wiped a trickle of blood from the corner of her mouth. “You think you can take me on? Let's play, little boy,” she sneered and raised her arms.

“Damn it, Tonks!” Bill snapped. He moved between Harry and Tonks, and she attempted to push him aside.

“He isn't stupid – he knows what he needs to say,” Tonks snarled. She tried to burn a hole through

Harry with her eyes. “I was too surprised to say what I thought that day, Harry. You know what I would have said, when you tried to lay all that guilt on me? I would have said that he came there to protect you. Sirius is dead because of *you* . Don’t *ever* try to blame me for it again!”

Bill advanced on Tonks and grabbed her by the arms. “If I’d known this was to be an ambush, I’d never have come!” he shouted.

“Get out of my way, Bill,” Tonks said.

“If she wants a fight, then we’ll fight,” Harry returned.

“This is ridiculous!” Bill snapped at Tonks. “You spent an entire day last week talking this through with your mum – we were over it for the better part of a day on it, besides – and here you are, nursing a grudge like... like... like some Slytherin school-girl –”

Tonks’s head ploughed forward into Bill’s brow. Bill let go of her like she was on fire, and grabbed at his forehead. “Merlin’s balls! What the bloody hell was that for?”

“A Slytherin school-girl? A *Slytherin* school-girl?” Tonks spat.

Bill turned his head, winced, and turned it back again. “Let me understand this... he insults your family and gets a punch –”

“*Two punches* , including the last time” Harry growled, “and she knocked loose a tooth that time.”

“... while I merely tell the truth, and you try to crack my skull?” Bill went on.

Tonks crossed her arms. “Calling me a Slytherin *is* a family insult,” she said coldly.

The tips of Bill’s ears turned a familiar shade of red. “Who’s sixteen here, you or Harry? I’m having a devil of a time deciding!”

Detheridge still stood at the top of the stairs. His voice was calm, almost quiet. “Is this finished yet, or should I send out for coffee and doughnuts?”

Tonks stood very straight and put her hands behind her back. “P-professor Detheridge, I didn’t see you there... uh... I understood that we were meeting with... er...”

Detheridge slowly descended; something about the way he moved reminded Harry of Crookshanks. “It seems I’m free today rather than tomorrow, Auror Tonks; I have a knack for mixing up my daily schedules. It’s best that I was here, don’t you agree?”

“Professor, I can explain –” Harry began.

“She moves in tandem with her dominant hand,” Detheridge said casually. “Next time, aim to the left with the second punch.” He motioned toward the student desks and added, “Sit, please.” Despite the even tone it was not a request, but an unmitigable command. Bill and Tonks found

seats as quickly as did Harry.

Bill shifted uncomfortably on the bench; he was too tall for it, and his knees rose nearly as high as the tabletops. “Er... Professor Detheridge –” he began.

“Next time, Mr. Weasley, protect your head.” Detheridge’s brief smile faded. “Mr. Potter, I don’t want to know what you said to Auror Tonks that earned you a fist to the jaw. I’m guessing it warrants an apology?”

Harry looked away uncomfortably. “I’m... not proud of what I did, Professor.”

“You meant to be cruel; you struck where you knew it would hurt,” Bill scolded him. “I know Tonks was being stubborn –”

“I was responsible for protection,” Tonks said through gritted teeth.

“*Dumbledore* made you responsible for that; I didn’t ask for any of it,” Harry snapped. “I shouldn’t have said what I did, but I told *you* to leave my property and you wouldn’t go!”

Tonks sighed. “I was there because I *wanted* to be there, you twit. *Dumbledore* asked, sure, but it was what I wanted to do. You see, for some odd reason I do care about you. Never considered that, did you?” She wrung her hands nervously.

Harry had certainly not considered that, and somehow it felt true. “*Dumbledore*’s always in charge. The Order’s all about *Dumbledore*...” he began to protest, but he froze when he realised what he’d said aloud.

“I am aware of the Order, Mr. Potter,” Detheridge said quietly.

“It’s not all about *Dumbledore*; it’s about ridding ourselves of Voldemort,” Bill insisted. “*Dumbledore* makes mistakes; pulling everyone away was the most childish –”

Tonks interrupted, “I wanted to be there, Harry. I should have been there for Sirius but I wasn’t; of course he had to go and do something brave and *stupid*. I was supposed to protect Hermione and her parents, and I didn’t – *I couldn’t*... so I wanted to make up for it and be there for you. I wanted to do something right for once. We were getting on well enough, and then you just tried to toss me aside, and *then* you just *had* to say...” She trailed off; her eyes were dry and clear but her jaw quivered slightly.

Harry wished that the floor would split open and swallow him up, but it seemed unlikely. Instead he cleared his throat, closed his eyes and said, “You didn’t hurt Sirius, you didn’t kill him; I know that. I just wanted you to go and you wouldn’t listen. I *am* sorry for what I said, Tonks.”

“You didn’t kill him either,” Tonks said sadly, “Peter sodding Pettigrew did, fifteen years ago. Bellatrix, she just finished the deed. The rest of us... maybe we helped him along. Me, you, *Dumbledore*, Remus... it feels like it could have ended well if any of us had done just one thing differently – just one. But, no – everything turned to shite.”

“This is about your godfather, Harry?” Detheridge asked.

“Tonks is his cousin, as well,” Harry said.

Detheridge sighed. “No one your age should have to deal with these sorts of things.” He looked to Tonks and Bill. “No one *your* age should have to deal with this, either, but here we sit with a war just around the corner. It’s up to us to give the students of this school a fighting chance to survive it.” Harry joined Bill and Tonks in a solemn nod, and Detheridge went on, “Good – we understand each other. Now... if there are going to be any more fistfights, this is the time for it.” He stood up. “Last opportunity, folks... going once... going twice...” Tonks stared resolutely at the floor.

Detheridge ambled to one of the cabinets that lined the side of the classroom. He withdrew a slender sword and casually tossed it toward Bill. Bill easily caught it by the hilt and gave it a practiced swish. “I know these well – practiced regularly with them,” Bill said. “They’ll be too light and a bit short for most of the older boys, but I can charm them.”

“Everyone should learn the basic elements of swordsmanship,” Detheridge said. “Flitwick raves about you, Mr. Weasley. Show me.” He raised a matching sword and immediately set after Bill. Detheridge moved as though he knew how to fight with a sword, but Bill disarmed him twice in less than three minutes.

Detheridge leaned against a student desk, panting. “You’re very... very ... good. Do you compete? You’re easily... at the... elite level.”

“By the time I was able to enter myself in competitions, I already had an offer from Gringotts.” Bill still wore his easy smile, but Harry thought that it didn’t match the tone of his voice.

“You mean that was without regular practice?” Detheridge laughed. “Are you experienced with any other weapons?”

“A few,” Bill admitted. “Staff, mace, and a few Muggle things as well – one of them spits out tiny lead balls kept in a capsule –”

Detheridge’s eyes widened. “Uh... I think we’ll stay clear of shotguns.”

“ – a bullwhip, a switching blade –” Bill went on.

“Switchblade, you mean,” Detheridge corrected him.

“ – and a right nasty piece of business called a brass knuckle,” Bill finished.

“You know how to fight like an ordinary person, then,” Detheridge observed. “Good – that’ll be useful.”

“I learned how to box earlier this summer,” Harry offered. “My cousin’s a boxer; he’s won some big contests.”

Detheridge nodded. “Your stance was obvious. That may also be useful. Auror Tonks, do you have any experience with physical combat?”

“No more than we cover in training,” Tonks admitted. “I fall back on other abilities, Professor. I’m a Metamorphmagus.”

“Albus mentioned that,” Detheridge said. “You move more gracefully than I expected.”

Tonks snorted. “You haven’t been ‘round me long enough! Dance helped a fair bit, but I’m still a wreck after I alter my arms or legs.”

“You dance?” Detheridge asked.

“It’s part of Auror training, Professor,” Tonks said.

“You’re kidding! They teach you *dancing*?” Detheridge asked in disbelief.

“I don’t know what they do in America, but here in England we work in twos. Dancing teaches an Auror to be aware of her body and her movements, and the movements of her partner as well,” Tonks explained. “I found it quite useful. Dumbledore asked me to teach Harry, before... um... well...”

Detheridge picked at his lower lip, seemingly in thought. “Dancing... certainly wouldn’t have thought of that... you’d think I’d have remembered...” He looked up, almost as if he was surprised to see anyone else before him. “Do you believe this would be useful on a broader scale?”

“I hadn’t thought about it,” Tonks admitted.

Detheridge walked away from them, toward the stairs that led to his office. “I’d like the three of you to prepare a report detailing your recommendations for this year’s curriculum. Be sure to note what belongs in the courses proper, and what should be left to the club. I expect to receive the report by noontime tomorrow. That’s all I have.” He took up his brush and his tray and stood before the half-painted canvas atop the stairs, as though no one else was present.

Bill looked to Harry and then to Tonks, shrugged, and moved into the corridor. Tonks was the last one out of the room, and she closed the door. “What in the name of all that’s cursed...?” she exclaimed. “Is he fishing for recommendations, or are we expected to plan the year for him?”

“I haven’t the faintest idea,” Bill said. “We should assume that we’re planning the year, don’t you think? We’d best get to work on it... has Dumbledore given you rooms, Harry?”

“I took rooms in Hogsmeade,” Harry said. “We can probably use the room just off the Great Hall, or the staff room if it’s empty.”

“Is that the one with the bloody gargoyles?” Tonks asked. “I was walking with Mum earlier, and I swear one of them tried to lick me as we passed.” She shuddered. “The other room sounds

smashing to me.”

Harry led the way. After a few steps, Bill fell back several paces and Harry found himself walking beside Tonks.

“I’m sorry I knocked out your tooth,” she said abruptly.

“You didn’t knock it out,” Harry grumbled. “It was loose; Dobby fixed it.”

“Dobby, eh...?” Tonks went silent again, until they neared the entrance to the Great Hall.

“How’s Hermione faring?” she asked.

“I’m not really sure,” Harry answered.

Tonks worried her lip. “Being with Hermione this summer was like having a sister, Harry; I miss that. I should go and see her – we had a bit of a row at the Leaky Cauldron – but... I didn’t do my job. I was supposed to protect her. Maybe I should let well enough alone?”

“She doesn’t think she belongs here anymore; she’s lonely. She’d be happy if you called on her,” Harry offered.

Tonks stopped walking. “Are we all right, Harry?” She seemed so expectant; Harry felt like he could crush her with the wrong words, and that was something he’d never imagined of Tonks.

He opened the massive door. “Sure, Tonks; we’re all right.”

At a certain level, Harry had understood that Tonks would be knowledgeable – she *had* to be, of course. Her expertise was more specialised than he had expected but ran quite deep. Bill, on the other hand, seemed to know a bit about everything; he also had a sense of how to pass along what he knew. Bill had gone out of his way to compliment Harry’s skills and ideas, going so far as to say that he could now appreciate why Harry had been so successful with the D.A. members of the year prior. He seemed genuine enough, but Harry couldn’t escape the sense that Bill was flattering him a little.

Harry in fact felt rather like an idiot upon leaving the planning session, or hopelessly inexperienced at the very least. He quickly lost himself in thought, eyes fixed to the floor and mind grasping for readings from the Black library that likely weren’t remembered in the first instance. He lurched into a slender mass of sky blue cloth and fell flat.

Dumbledore smiled down at him. “I believe the accepted maxim is to look down before looking up. Perhaps you would be better served by the inverse?” The Headmaster extended a hand; Harry mumbled an apology as he rose that was dismissed with a wave. “Nonsense, Harry; your timing is impeccable. Come along, would you?” He motioned to the ascending stairs.

Harry followed without a word, still stung by his incompetence in the face of Bill and Tonks and now embarrassed for having tumbled into Dumbledore. He barely heard Dumbledore call out the

name of some sugary confection or another and continued to trail behind. He looked up before looking down just as he reached the entrance to the Headmaster's office and instantly wished that he hadn't done so.

Mad-Eye Moody sat heavily opposite Dumbledore's great desk. Shacklebolt was speaking in quiet but determined tones to Mr. Weasley, just to one side of a bank of whirring silver objects that Harry had shattered in June. Remus Lupin stood closest to him, and it was clear to Harry that his erstwhile protector and teacher was just as uncomfortable as he. Dumbledore ushered them forward to newly conjured chairs before either Lupin or Harry could speak.

"Gentlemen, I regret the need for this additional unpleasantness," the Headmaster said gravely. "It is all too reminiscent of times past, is it not?"

Moody's eye picked up speed; he asked coldly, "Did you cast the Curse on him, Albus?" He was met with muttering from Lupin and Mr. Weasley; Shacklebolt crossed his arms and appeared rather smug.

"That was not something lightly entertained," Dumbledore said sternly. "In any case, it was not required; Severus did not engage in knowing betrayal. He has, however, exercised abominable judgment – on this point we doubtless agree."

"Judgment? You still give him credit for any sort of judgment?" Shacklebolt boomed.

"Once a traitor, always a traitor," Moody muttered.

"Albus has repeatedly said that Snape is not a traitor," Mr. Weasley interjected. "Merlin knows I don't care for the man, not at all; nonetheless..."

Lupin gave a slight sigh before he spoke. "You never choose your words casually, Albus. He has engaged in unknowing betrayal, then?"

The room was full of loathing, and Harry felt himself fill with it. Most was directed to Snape, of course, but he already knew how Lupin felt – he *knew*. It had hurt and he had lashed out. Now he was merely angry; it was uncomfortable to be in the same room with the man. "Better than knowing betrayal, Remus," he seethed.

Lupin sagged. "Go on, Harry. Do your worst."

Shacklebolt balled his fists. "You can't be serious... are you trying to play the victim? It certainly looks as though an oath no longer means a tinker's damn to you; perhaps you found a way to avoid taking one?" Lupin reddened but said nothing.

"You've declined a mission and you've missed shifts," Moody barked. "What's wrong, Remus – does that woman have her claws in you?" Mr. Weasley hissed and even Shacklebolt winced. Moody's expression went blank and his eye stopped moving entirely. "That's not what I meant, of course," he added quietly.

Mr. Weasley broke the cold silence. “Let’s stick to the knitting, shall we? Snape didn’t set out to betray us. I accept that he has broken his personal promises to you, Albus; whether those constituted an oath is something for Snape and yourself to consider. We need to come to agreement as to whether he has broken his oath to the Order.”

“I’ve made my opinion clear,” Shacklebolt glowered. Moody took in a breath as if to speak, but stopped himself.

Dumbledore steepled his hands before his face, lost in thought. No one spoke, though it seemed to Harry that all were tempted. “Harry, I’d like to hear your opinion on this matter,” the Headmaster said at length.

Harry could feel the loathing again. He knew that it wasn’t directed at him but it was confusing. The rush of other people’s emotions and thoughts was harder to bear now that he knew what was happening. “Part of me wants to tear Snape apart,” he blurted out angrily. He glared at Dumbledore, then went on, “Part of me says *you’re* to blame. I didn’t want him to teach me, and I know he didn’t want to do it; you forced both of us. I figure that he wanted to hurt me, to make me miserable; he’s done that since the first day I came to Hogwarts. That doesn’t mean I want to see him killed.”

“Killed? No one was suggesting –” Shacklebolt began.

Harry cut him off. “If you turn him out, he’s as good as dead. Isn’t that right, Headmaster?”

“Most likely, yes,” Dumbledore admitted.

“So he’s above punishment, then?” Moody growled. “What do you want of us, Albus? Do you want to fit him with a dunce cap and sit him in the corner? We went over this when we approved the Betrayer’s Curse –”

“He has been punished beyond even your imaginings, Alastor,” Dumbledore said quietly. Harry thought about the horrible tasks that Dumbledore had mentioned in the dungeons – horrible enough to drive Snape to Forgetfulness Potions – and shuddered inside.

“And now we know that there was no betrayal,” Mr. Weasley reminded. “It may be appropriate to remove Snape from the Order, but what would we do with him? We can’t let him loose, of course.”

“He wouldn’t simply be killed; worse, he’d be taken in and tortured until he revealed every last thing he knows,” Shacklebolt agreed. “I doubt he’d talk; the man does have a perverse sense of pride about him. Still, we can’t take the chance.”

“I think Harry should decide what’s to be done,” Lupin said.

Harry erupted. “Oh, *now* Harry should decide! I guess it’s all right when you don’t want a decision on your head, eh?”

Lupin stiffened. “This is different, and you know it. Don’t be childish.”

“Then don’t be two-faced,” Harry sneered. “Don’t tell me to decide about Snape when you won’t let me decide who I want to see. Don’t tell me to live my life and enjoy myself when you just want a sodding weapon.” His voice rose; part of him was vaguely aware that Shacklebolt was backing away, but he didn’t care. “Don’t tell me you owe my parents and then just walk away! *Who’s the betrayer here?* You couldn’t even look at me! You blamed me for all of them – for Sirius, for Cedric, for... for Dad and M-Mum...”

“No!” Lupin gasped. “I would never... I never said that – I didn’t! You were a *baby*, for Merlin’s sake!” He reached toward Harry. “How could you think – ?”

“*Don’t touch me!*” Harry roared.

Lupin kept coming. “Is this why you lit into me, Harry?” he asked.

Harry’s hands shook, and he began to sweat. He recognised the feeling now, and it frightened him. “Stop! I’ll hurt you!” he shouted.

“You will not,” Dumbledore said firmly as he moved briskly past Lupin and approached Harry.

“I can’t control it!” Harry insisted.

“You will learn, Harry,” Dumbledore calmly assured him. Harry squeezed his eyes shut and ground his teeth; he willed away the heat, but it seemed unwilling to obey.

“Is this Snape’s doing?” Shacklebolt demanded.

“I sense that it is unrelated to Legilimency,” Dumbledore observed. “I do wonder, however, what Severus may have unleashed.”

Lupin melted into a chair. “I didn’t say that,” he mumbled, “I couldn’t have said that... I couldn’t have... Harry, I...”

Harry wiped sweat from his brow; the room was cooling at last. “You didn’t say anything; you didn’t *need* to say anything,” he growled through gritted teeth.

“I couldn’t even *think* that!” Lupin insisted.

“To the contrary, Remus,” Dumbledore said, “that is precisely what you did.” Harry gasped and Lupin let out a low moan. The rest went very quiet.

Dumbledore let one of his hands come to rest on Harry’s shoulder. “Have you ever had a thought, Harry, that you had absolutely no intention of acting upon – a completely irrational thought, like pushing a friend from a high place – something that your conscious mind instantly rejected? I daresay that you have; this is a normal part of our internal dialogue, Harry. Do you understand what has happened?”

Harry slowly began to see where the Headmaster's thoughts were leading. "You're saying that I can't tell the difference," he said slowly.

"Occlumency does not just form a barrier; it also serves as a filter, if you will," Dumbledore explained. "Once you have achieved mastery, you will be able to feel patterns in emotions and thoughts, and discard extraneous information. This aspect of Occlumency is absolutely necessary in order for Legilimency to be useful – or safe, for that matter."

"So... just because I pick up on a feeling from someone doesn't mean anything... it might be a real feeling, or it might be rubbish?" Harry confirmed; his stomach began to ache.

Dumbledore sighed. "You were not progressing with Occlumency last year; Severus said as much, and I observed the same. It did not occur to me that I should test your Legilimency skills. Tom's attempted possession showed that you had developed the ability to resist. Severus explained this away as a consequence of his teaching approach, and I accepted his word. That was a grave mistake."

Lupin was ashen. "The idea that I thought... at any level... Harry, I swear to you that I don't hold you responsible for what happened to James and Lily," he said distantly. "I don't know what I can offer, beyond my deepest apology."

Harry heard him, but he was mired in the implications of what Dumbledore had just said. This was even worse than simply reflecting the feelings of others, he realised; there was no way of knowing what had been real and what had been meaningless. His anger could have been his own, or a reflection of someone else's feelings, or it could have come from silent suppressed rage all around him. He might have liked Hermione as something other than just a friend, or perhaps he had picked it up from her thoughts and feelings, or perhaps it was just the reflection of a fleeting thought on her part – perhaps she'd never actually felt anything at all? If that was the case, then he had merely felt an echo of nothing; it didn't seem that way to him, but he didn't know. Heather was even more complicated; she had been exercising the same uncontrolled Legilimency as he had, more or less. *Maybe Shona was right*, he thought, *maybe it was just an out-of-control bit of magic?* It didn't seem that way to him as he thought about her, but how was he supposed to know? "How am I supposed to trust anything?" he said aloud.

"I'm sorry," Lupin said sadly.

The anger came back. "You wanted to be there for me, and then you didn't. You were going to do whatever it took, right? As soon as something better came along, off you went! It's like there are two of you, Remus. How am I supposed to know which one is real?" Harry seethed. "Being sorry isn't good enough."

"What must I say, then?" Lupin asked.

"I don't care what you say, not anymore. What are you going to *do*?" Harry asked in return. "I want you to be the person who I thought you were. If that's not what you want, then I guess this is where it ends."

No one seemed to know what to say after that, including Harry. After a pause so lengthy that even Fawkes seemed to fidget, Dumbledore offered, “Perhaps you would prefer to meet in the morning with regard to your timetable, Harry?”

Harry nodded silently and walked briskly to the spiralling stairs. Lupin called after him, “Harry... I *am* sorry.”

“More words,” Harry choked out, and he quickened his pace. He pushed through students massing toward the Great Hall, firmly enough to cause some grumbling. He fiddled for the Bonnie in the pockets of his robe even as he burst through the door that led to the courtyard. He took an angry step forward, and his other foot met uneven soil. His glasses crumpled when his face struck the ground.

He stood, even angrier, and cast an awkward repair charm. It wasn’t until he had replaced his glasses that he noticed that he was surrounded by trees. He was on the path to Hogsmeade. *I’ll be switched – I popped through the wards*, he realised. His first thought was that Hermione would be shocked. His second thought was that no one must know.

September 4

Dumbledore had promised that Harry would learn Occlumency from someone other than himself, and he continued to insist that this would be the case. Apparently, Harry’s instructor had not yet arrived; he presumed that it would be this Covelli woman – the one who had apparently cared for Hermione in August. In the meantime, the Headmaster had laden him with books and sent him off to read; he said that Occlumency would come first, with Potions to follow after Harry had achieved some level of mastery.

Harry had begun to assist Detheridge with the Defence classes for first through third years, and had come to the conclusion that the young students were more frightened of him than of their professor. It was awkward, but Detheridge had made the best of it. He liked the new Defence professor, even though part of him insisted that it was dangerous to do so. In Detheridge’s case, Harry refused to listen – it was only echoes of Quirrell and Lockhart and the false Moody that made him suspicious, not anything that Detheridge had done or said.

Croaker, on the other hand, was surely dangerous. He had developed a tutorial in ancient runes for Harry, one that seemed as steep and treacherous as an icy cliffside. It was also very focused, and Harry couldn’t help but decide that he was being led toward a specific destination. If Croaker had selected the destination, then Harry didn’t care to reach it. As a teacher, Croaker seemed harsh but fair – not a new Snape, at any rate.

Snape. Harry could scarcely think the name without anger. It was because of Snape that Harry could no longer walk down the corridors without being flooded with emotions and thoughts not his own. It was because of Snape that Harry didn’t know where he stood with anyone – certainly not Dumbledore, nor Remus, nor Hermione, nor Heather. Being allowed to remain within the walls of Hogwarts was too good for the horrible git, Harry thought, but the alternative was most likely death – and that only after everything Snape knew had been forcibly extracted. Snape had been

suspended from the Order but Harry wondered what that actually meant; it wasn't the same as being tossed out, apparently. Shacklebolt had told him that Mr. Weasley had absolutely insisted Snape lose his teaching privileges, but that would leave Snape rather exposed. Remus had devised a solution, however. Harry had balked at first; it was Shacklebolt that had talked him into agreement.

Harry leaned hard against the ropes that bounded the side of the footbridge. He preferred to look to Hogsmeade in the distance than face Shacklebolt.

"You know Dumbledore's right on this, Harry," Shacklebolt went on. "Too many of Fudge's cronies have ties to the families of Death Eaters. For that matter, Snape has made his own enemies. Without his professorship, he's vulnerable to eviction. We've enough trouble with the Board of Governors..."

"Don't remind me," Harry fumed. The Board was frothing about Dumbledore's circumvention of their order; Harry was at the fore of the next Board meeting's agenda, he had learned.

"Remus's idea has merit," Shacklebolt said. "I know that you wish otherwise. Still, you should consider the advantages."

"Snape can't sell out the Order. That's the only advantage I see," Harry said angrily. He settled a bit, and added, "That's enough reason to do this, I suppose."

Shacklebolt's mouth twitched as though he was keeping a smile at bay. "Has it occurred to you that Snape would be employed by you? In fact, his life would be in your hands. The only thing keeping him alive would be a research sinecure provided by James Potter's son... Sirius Black's godson..." The smile broke through. "Wouldn't that be rich?"

Harry sniggered first, then broke into a full-throated laugh. "Oh, that's brilliant!" he managed. Snape would owe him; it was practically a wizard's debt, in fact. Suddenly Remus's plan looked much, much better.

After a while, Shacklebolt turned serious. "There are some in the Order who would happily bleed you dry, Harry; they know that you could single-handedly finance a war. Remus didn't want to propose this for that reason, nor did I."

"I can always say 'no'," Harry pointed out. "This time, I'll say 'yes'."

"I thought it was important that you know this," Shacklebolt said gruffly. "Remus was looking out for your best interests, truly."

Harry gripped the ropes tightly. "Give it a rest, please?" he asked.

Shacklebolt nodded and strolled away. Harry watched the gaslights in Hogsmeade flicker to life, and then headed toward the castle to contact Ted Tonks.

Dumbledore had insisted that Snape should not be told that Harry had financed his safety, only

that the Order had found a benefactor to pay for a research stipend. The appointment appeared to be under the aegis of the International Confederation of Wizards. Harry expected that Snape knew the source of the funds; the man was horrible, but Harry didn't think that he was stupid. Harry hadn't disagreed with the Headmaster, but he hadn't bothered to agree either. He had decided to hold back the fact like a spare wand, and level it against Snape when the time was right. A voice in Harry's head warned him that he was treading onto Slytherin ground, but that only seemed fair where Snape was concerned.

After his second lesson with Croaker had concluded, Harry had headed for the library. Among the many surprises that had awaited him upon joining the staff, he had discovered that the teachers had a reading room of their own. Located just to one side of Madam Pince's station, a portrait concealed it as well as a *Confundus* charm tailored to leave the staff unaffected. He began reading the Occlumency materials and slogging away at Croaker's assignment. "You will write three feet that convince me you have mastered the third year materials, before I will devote another second to your instruction, Potter," Croaker had pronounced at the end of the lesson.

He didn't set aside his work until his stomach began to grumble, and was very surprised to see that it was nearly nine o'clock. Madam Pince gave a start when Harry came through the portrait.

"Mr. Potter, have you been reading all this time?" she asked.

Harry nodded. "I lost track of the time, actually," he admitted.

"If I'd known, I would have notified you when it was time for the evening meal," Madam Pince said. Then she nearly beamed at him. "Goodness, is it possible that Headmaster Dumbledore will make a scholar of you yet? Perhaps Miss Granger has rubbed off on you?"

"I can study when I need to study," Harry insisted.

"True enough, Mr. Potter," Madam Pince admitted. "In future, I shall make more careful note of your study practices. If there is anything I can do for you, any assistance that I can provide... the Headmaster has made it clear that you are to have access to all materials, of course."

"Thank you, Madam Pince. I appreciate that," Harry said.

Madam Pince gave a formal nod. "On your way out, could you inform Miss Granger that I am preparing to close for the evening? She is at the rear."

"Her usual table?" Harry asked with a grin.

Madam Pince appeared suddenly unsettled. "Further back, I'm afraid," she said cryptically and returned to her work.

Harry strolled to the back of the library. The study tables were virtually empty; it was only the third day of classes, after all. As Madam Pince had said, Hermione's customary table was vacant. A familiar Ravenclaw sat at the table adjacent, poring over several open books. Anthony

Goldstein glanced upward, and waved in recognition.

“ ‘Evening, Harry,” he said. “Are you looking for Hermione?”

“Madam Pince asked if I would roust her – I suppose that goes for you,” Harry replied. Anthony carefully closed one book after the other. He lowered a handful into his bag, and then gave his wand a complex wave; the remaining books flew smoothly into various places along the shelves.

“She’s back there,” Anthony said, gesturing toward the gate that marked the entrance to the Restricted Section. “She was there last evening, too. Harry... it’s clear she’s not well. It’s about what happened this summer, then?”

“It’s not my place to say,” Harry said evenly.

Anthony broke the awkward silence. “Will you be running the, erm, Association this term?”

“We’re having an official Defence Club,” Harry told him. “Three of us will be running it – Ron Weasley’s brother Bill and an Auror named Tonks are assisting Detheridge this year.”

Anthony whistled. “An Auror, eh? That must mean we’re taking the threat seriously; it’s long past time for that.” He lowered his voice and added, “It’s time for some offence, you know. Will you be addressing that?”

Harry was surprised. Anthony had seemed capable but quiet over the previous year. There was a glint in the Ravenclaw boy’s eye and his posture was ready; the glint in his eye matched the feelings that he emanated. He’d also been the first to confront Malfoy on the train, Harry recalled.

“I’m not sure we’ll be allowed,” Harry admitted. “Besides, offence has to be planned.” His throat tightened slightly. “I’ve learned the price of running into danger without a plan.”

“Lovegood was truly in the thick of things?” Anthony asked him.

“Luna is very brave and very powerful – best that you don’t lose sight of that,” Harry returned.

Anthony grinned. “You scared most of the fifth-years out of their knickers, you know? Between that and Chang’s little Educational Decree...” He rolled his eyes.

Harry snorted. “Comparing Cho to Umbridge? Bit harsh, isn’t it?”

“Chang wouldn’t have been my choice for Head,” Anthony observed. “She’s full of herself and she holds grudges...” He straightened up and quickly added, “No offence meant, Harry, you know... I mean, I know you and she were... um...”

“And now we’re not,” Harry said firmly.

Anthony quickly responded, “I know that; it’s like there’s a Sticking Charm on her and this Pucey

fellow from the Snakes... what do you think of him, by the way? He's not one of Malfoy's crowd, is he?"

"I don't think he is," Harry answered. "He's always seemed as though he plays fair, you know – on the pitch at least."

"You've fallen in with Hermione at last, then?" Anthony asked casually.

Harry's breath hitched. "I'm sorry?"

"Um... you were at her house – it was in the Prophet when, you know – so I guess I figured... erm... everyone sort of figured that, well..." Anthony tugged at his collar as though it was too tight.

"She's my best friend," Harry said.

Anthony pressed. "Er... that's all?"

"That's quite a lot, I think. Why?" Harry said, trying not to be snappish.

"If that's true, I think most of my mates would be happy to hear it," Anthony admitted, "or at least they would have been."

Harry allowed himself to snap just a little. "Er... most of your mates would *what?*"

Anthony shook his head. "I know you had a lot to handle last year, but I would have thought you'd notice... um... the thing is, Hermione probably ranked second to Padma Patil as a desirable partner for Ravenclaw men. If they hadn't assumed she was spoken for and hadn't worried that you or Weasley might hex them into the next decade, I'd say that most of my housemates fifth year onward would have chatted her up last year." He sighed. "This year... I think everyone's confused by her. Chang won't confirm whether she gave up her prefectship or had it taken, which surely means that she gave it up. She even looks different..."

"Would *you* have asked her to Hogsmeade?" Harry blurted out.

Anthony smiled faintly. "I don't think so. I'd never have measured up – that seemed quite clear to me from the first." He added very seriously, "I'll say this much, Harry... I developed tremendous respect for her last year – for the both of you, in fact. When Weasley approached us on the Express, we didn't hesitate to help her. Come to think of it... Weasley's changed quite a lot. I swear he was taking notes in Charms – there's a first time for everything, I suppose."

"Look... I appreciate that you're all looking after her," Harry offered.

"We are, I promise you," Anthony assured him. "Do me a favour, then – give serious thought to what I said about offence. It's time, Harry; it's well past time..." The same glint returned to his eyes; something had happened over the summer, Harry knew, and he wondered what it had been.

The wall sconces throughout the library flashed three times. “Time for you to clear off,” Harry said. “I’ll look in on Hermione.”

Anthony slung his bag over one shoulder. “Oh! I nearly forgot to thank you for my O in Defence. I won’t deceive myself – I’d never have managed it without what you and Hermione and Weasley did. I know I’m not alone in that, by the way. You saved my life, actually.” He gave a half wave and made for the doors.

“Glad we were of help,” Harry said quietly.

He didn’t care for the Restricted Section. Everything about it was darker than the rest of the library, from the flickering light that came from too few sconces to the deep grain of the wooden shelves to the thick tomes that sat upon them. There were only two worktables in the entire section, as there was surely no need for more. Hermione had fallen asleep atop an open book. There were at least two dozen other books stacked atop the table, along with an assortment of scrolls. She had written several feet of notes in small, tidy script; the parchment rolled off the far side of the table and nearly reached the floor. Harry’s eyes ran across the spines of the books, and his discomfort grew.

To one side sat *Curses That Kill: Forgivable Combat Tactics* ; to the other *Infamous Wizarding Assassinations* lay open. Some of the titles meant nothing to Harry, but left him uneasy: there was *The Energetics of Will* and *Arithmancy for Predictive Analysis of Thaumaturgical Events* and a crumbling ancient tome called *The Physical Properties of Magick* . One of the scrolls lay open; it was littered with what Harry knew to be arithmancy formulae, although he couldn’t begin to comprehend them. One book looked as though it was bound using boil-covered skin, and Harry had no interest in touching it to confirm his observation, nor of knowing what sort of animal had given up its skin; according to the raised reddish lettering it was *The Grimoire of the Most Ancient House of Lipscomb* .

He glanced across Hermione’s notes despite himself; they too were littered with incomprehensible formulae and charts. From the words scribbled throughout it looked as if she was studying something related to the interaction of different types of spells – or at least he thought that might be the case. He assumed that it had something to do with her research for Dumbledore; it was too complex and seemed too dark for a mere N.E.W.T. level assignment.

As he moved forward to rouse Hermione, he heard Madam Pince’s voice. “Welcome back to Hogwarts, Lucia,” the librarian called out warmly.

The unfamiliar voice that responded was clear and lightly accented. “You have me at a disadvantage... good heavens! Irma Albright?”

“It’s been Irma Pince for nigh on forty-five years,” Madam Pince said.

“No! Not Calvin Pince?” the unfamiliar voice shot back.

“Indeed!” Madam Pince laughed. “Sweet Merlin, Lucia, I can’t believe it’s been fifty years. It

was a great shock when the Headmaster informed us that you would be returning. So... how does it feel, being back at Hogwarts?"

"It is... not somewhere I expected to see again." The unfamiliar voice was strained, then halted before adding, "I understand that Hermione Granger is here presently?"

"She is in the Restricted Section," Madam Pince said with clear disapproval. "Harry Potter went back to send her out; I'm preparing to close the doors."

"Mr. Potter, you say? The Restricted Section... I am unsurprised," the other voice sighed. "The library is organized as it was before, no?"

"Yes, the castle hasn't seen fit to reshape the library," Madam Pince said.

"I shall fetch her. It is a pleasure to see you, Irma; we shall become reacquainted over tea and cappuccino very soon, I hope," the unknown witch called out. Harry could hear light footsteps closing in. He stood his ground, but left Hermione to her sleep.

The woman who entered the Restricted Section was dressed unlike anyone Harry had ever seen inside Hogwarts. She wore a cream-coloured garment that fell somewhere between a robe and a cloak, over a tailored Muggle suit. He couldn't recall seeing a grown witch other than Rita Skeeter wearing high heeled shoes; this woman's heels were easily three inches high. She had dark hair finely streaked with grey that fell almost to her shoulders. Her eyes were warm but her expression was not. "Good evening," she said. "You are Mr. Harry Potter."

"I am," he returned. "You're Professor Covelli, aren't you?"

"Yes," Covelli said. She advanced toward the worktable rather than toward Harry, and turned her attention to the books upon it. "Has Hermione been working late into the evenings?"

"Another student told me that she was here until closing last evening, and she's here now," Harry said. "I haven't spoken with her for two days."

Covelli used the edge of Hermione's parchment to turn one of the books over. "Do you approve of her choice in readings, Mr. Potter?"

"Erm... I don't have the slightest idea what most of them are for, but... it all seems awfully dark," Harry offered.

"Yes, quite dark," Covelli said. "Were you about to wake her?"

Harry shook his head. "I'm sure she'd rather see you than me," he offered.

"I doubt that," Covelli said in return. Harry stepped away from the table, making his intentions clear. Covelli nodded and added, "We shall see each other in the coming days. Good evening, Mr. Potter."

As he left, Harry stopped to look back into the Restricted Section. Professor Covelli leaned over Hermione, with one hand against the table and the other smoothing Hermione's hair. "Wake up, *uccellina*," Covelli said softly. "It is time to wake so that you can go to sleep again."

Hermione lifted her head and Covelli pulled back. "Wha... D-Doctor Covelli?"

"Hello, Hermione," Covelli said calmly.

Hermione burst out of her chair. "You're here! I'm so pleased you're here! I've been... I've been waiting..." She enveloped Covelli in a hug of the kind with which Harry was very familiar, and the new professor seemed surprised for a moment. Abruptly, Hermione's shoulders began to heave and she burst into sobbing. For her part, Covelli said nothing; she simply ran one of her hands slowly up and down Hermione's back. It looked like something that Harry imagined of a parent. He stood there and watched until he satisfied himself that Covelli was helping and not hurting; then he forced himself to stop watching and continued on his way.

September 8

Harry rose to start another CD, but stopped upon checking his watch – it was nearly four o'clock. Arranging to see Heather had been a nightmare, and he wasn't about to miss the appointed time. His laptop computer was open atop the counter, still displaying her electronic mail message:

DATE: 08 September 1996 01:07:55 GMT

TO: 60791.55555@compuserve.com

FROM: 80908.55555@compuserve.com

RE: Sunday plans

I'll be at MacEvil's tent city for a good part of the day. We're putting last touches on a track, then there are photos at two [complete misery], and then the orchestra comes in at seven for a first run-through. I can fit in an hour or two at four. Meet by the northern stack on the beach; I'll call if I have to put you off.

HM

Her message was just as abrupt as each of the calls on the mobile had been. He'd spoken with her every night since his trip to Teller Brothers, but she always seemed to be headed somewhere or another – at all hours – and she always made it a point to tell him how busy she was. *Guess she doesn't care whether I might need to put her off*, Harry thought; *maybe it's for the best if she doesn't have time for me*. For his part, he had scheduled a meeting with Fliptrask at Gringotts for half past six. He figured that it wouldn't take more than an hour to know whether anything he might have felt for Heather was real. As for whether they were still nosing around each other solely because Remus forbade it, he figured he'd know that in mere minutes. Heather had been the one to bring up that possibility, very shortly after Harry had called her for the first time; Harry

certainly couldn't reject the idea, not yet.

The day had turned out glorious after an inauspicious start. *It's probably still gloomy in Hogsmeade*, he guessed. Presumably the minders thought he was holed up in his rooms; he'd told Madam Rosmerta as much, and he'd popped directly from his empty bedroom to St. Ebb – by way of a steeple that had crossed his path. He rubbed his sore elbow at the thought, as he slowly strolled down the switchback. There didn't seem to be any activity in the area of the tower, but he carried his Invisibility Cloak in a knapsack just in case it was needed.

Heather was walking Harry's beach. She was wearing a dress; it was like blue liquid that fell to a scoop in the front and a plunge in the back. She was barefoot and she charted her course in a straight line, not caring whether or not the surf might cross it. She looked furious, and Harry couldn't take his eyes off of her. She saw him and stopped and took a slow deep breath. He watched the rise and the fall and she smiled a little.

"Bad day?" he called out.

"Horrid!" she returned loudly over the crashing of the surf. "It's amazing I can still see, after all the bloody flashes!"

He was shocked by how different she looked as he drew closer. She was wearing quite a lot of makeup; it wasn't completely awful, but it seemed very out of place. Her hair was sprayed and teased and curled into something that he knew it wasn't. "You look... nice," he offered.

She let out a humourless laugh. "I look like a whore, Harry, but that's the general idea. Let's see...." Her fingers counted off as she went on, "I've gone from musical prodigy to the girl with the pretty voice, to the bad-girl 'woman-child', and now to *this*. I *hate* this part of it; I've managed to push some of it off until now, but it's become a trading game with Vox. I get more creative control, and they get to market my... um... assets."

Harry didn't like what he was hearing; it didn't sound right to him. He changed the subject, hoping to take his mind off of her assets. "Other than having to take these, er, pictures... how are things coming along, then?" he asked.

Heather rolled her eyes, and began excitedly, "Well, everything started out disastrously on Monday – I mean, Kirley was *really* throwing me off – but then I had this idea, you see; instead of..." The anger seemed to bleed out of her as she went on. Harry slipped off his shoes and socks, and they walked on as she continued to talk. From time to time he added something or asked a short question, but mostly he just let her ramble. His eyes glanced to his watch, and it dawned on him that he had gone thirty minutes without thinking about Voldemort or Hogwarts or Dumbledore or anything of real consequence. He still liked the sound of Heather's voice very much.

"...and he really has turned out to be a good fellow, after all..." Heather stopped abruptly. "Okay, that's it," she said. "I can really go on, once I've started." She scratched at her cheek.

“It’s all right,” Harry said. “Something the matter?”

“Just this makeup; they absolutely cake it on for the camera,” Heather fumed. “It was bad enough listening to that cow lecture me on skin care –”

“I can remove it, if you like” Harry offered.

Heather stiffened. “I... I suppose you can do that, can’t you?” she said. After a long hesitation, she nodded.

Harry took out his wand, and barely whispered the *Delavo* charm that Detheridge had used to clean away bloodstains. He didn’t know why that charm had occurred to him; it just seemed the proper choice. The makeup slowly disappeared from Heather’s face as he moved the tip of his wand from place to place. He was especially careful around her eyes, not wanting to hurt her in any way.

When he lowered his wand, Heather raised her hands to her face. “It’s all gone – just like m-magic,” she laughed nervously.

Harry could feel fear. “This isn’t going to work, is it?” he said; it was more of a statement than a question.

“Do you think that’s all it was at the club?” she blurted out. “Was it just... you know... magic?”

Harry sighed. “Is that what Remus told you?”

“Shona said it.” Heather’s jaw tightened. “I’m not speaking with the wolfman. That’s her business, not mine.”

“Shona told me the same,” Harry said.

Heather’s eyes grew wide. “You talked to her? When did this happen?”

“It’s been a couple of weeks now,” Harry answered. “She wanted to talk to me about patching things up with Remus.”

“Did she say anything else?” Heather pressed.

“Well, she said she liked me –” Harry began.

“She said that? I’m... I’m surprised,” Heather cut in.

Harry frowned. “She also said that we’re bad for each other, because I’m dangerous and you’re... um...” He trailed off quickly.

Heather flushed. “Because I’m what? No, wait, I’ll make a guess at it... I don’t know what I want, I don’t care about anyone but myself...” Her voice rose powerfully. “... or was it that I’m a

tart who won't stay with a man for more than a week at a time? Am I on the mark?"

"Er... that'll do..." Harry managed.

Heather let forth a withering stream of cursing that she had surely picked up the kitchen with Shona. He was feeling stirred up as well, so he interjected, "Oh, and she threatened my life, besides."

Heather stopped as if the air had been let out of her. "I'm sorry?" she gasped.

"Uh-huh, she said that if I got you crossed up in my business, it was her I should fear," Harry said. He couldn't help a small grin – Shona had a loud bark, but he really didn't fear her bite.

Heather slowly shook her head. "She's always direct, isn't she?" She turned and began to walk back down the beach. Her hand reached for his, and their fingers casually intertwined.

"That she is," Harry said. His mouth was very dry, which seemed odd in the presence of so much water.

"I suppose you want to know the truth of it," she said slowly. Before he could say anything, she went on, "I'm not one to let people in – I know that... um... you probably know it, too. That doesn't mean I don't care about anyone."

"I didn't say I agreed with her," Harry offered.

"I'm quick to make a choice, right?" Heather said. "Most of the time, I think I feel something for a fellow and then I spend a bit of time, and then I know that he's not right. He clubs too much or he's on the prowl or he's hiding something. I always knew eventually... it's hard to stick it out, when you always know." She looked at him for a moment, and her eyes seemed enormous. "It's even worse now – it happens all the time," she added, and then quickly looked away.

"I didn't mean for that – " Harry started.

"I know you didn't, but there it is," Heather snapped. "It's like the din in a crowd. I can almost hear it, and I can... you know... *feel* it. When someone's angry or sad, it's like... it's like being struck by a wave." She waved her hands at the sea. "Then another jumped-up twit comes along, and there's another wave, and I can't get out from underneath it, and... how can you stand it? Is it like that for you?"

"More or less; it's worse since Dumbledore explained what was happening, actually," Harry said. "He says this has been happening to me since the spring, and I just didn't know it. People would get angry and I'd get angry. I guess I wasn't around very many happy people, not until I came here. He says it's easier away from wizards – "

"It could be worse?" Heather shrieked. "It's like bloody voices in my head already! Worse? He was serious, then, when he said it could eventually... wasn't he? He... he meant it... Well, I'm never going back to that mad place - I don't care how bad this gets, I'm *not* going back there!"

“‘Mad place’? What place is that? Where did they take you?” Harry asked.

Heather erupted. “To that... that... *castle!* It was *terrible* – dark, drafty... there were ghosts – *real* ghosts, for God’s sake – and a big thing in the lake and creaking noises everywhere and... and... taking my meals with a three-foot-tall pointy-eared thing was the most normal thing in the whole bloody place!”

Harry sagged inside. “Heather... that was Hogwarts. That was where I’ve gone to school; it’s where I’m an apprentice now.”

“*That* was your school?” Heather howled. “No one ever said anything about that! I thought it was a prison!”

“It’s not a prison... it was my home, at least for a while,” Harry said dangerously. “You know what was a prison? The Dursleys’ house, the place I grew up and spent my summers until now – *that* was a prison!”

Heather backed away from him. “*I’m sorry*, all right? It just felt *wrong*! It was like... it was like having the whole world pressing in on me... and then the *ghosts*! I mean, that’s what Dumbledore said they were... I could see them sometimes, when the light was right... I could hear them, all right, wondering what somebody like me was doing there. The one with... you probably know, then – the one with the b-blood all over – it kept following me, closer and closer. Dumbledore, he told it to stop but it just kept on. The last three days, I didn’t leave my room!”

Harry tried to understand, but he felt stung – she hated Hogwarts, and he couldn’t imagine why the castle had been so horrible for her. The castle repelled Muggles, of course, but he didn’t think that it did the same to Squibs; Filch was there, after all. *And what was the Bloody Baron doing?* he wondered. It was true that Hogwarts no longer felt like his home, but he couldn’t imagine that a place that he liked so much would be so repellent to anyone that he cared for.

“This really isn’t going to work,” he murmured.

“Then why did you come? Why do you think I’m here?” Heather demanded. She grabbed him roughly by the arm; he reacted out of instinct and reared out of her grasp.

“I don’t know!” Harry snapped. “I just wanted to know...”

“You feel it too, then,” Heather said.

Harry wiped the sweat from his free hand against his trousers. “Feel what?” he asked without meeting her eyes.

“Is it magic or is it real? Tell me,” she said.

“I... erm...” *I wish I knew*, he thought.

“*Tell me!*” she demanded. “I *must* be going mad with it! Everything – and I do mean *everything*

– says that I should run like hell, Harry. I should run like Shona did, and never look back!”

Harry ran out of patience. “*Then run! Be done with it!* You could have said that on the telephone and saved us both the trouble!”

“*I don’t want to run!*” Heather shouted.

“*Then tell me what in the bloody hell you want, because I can’t figure it out!*” Harry roared.

“Oh, sod it! *This! I want this!*” Heather growled. Before Harry could react, she thrust one hand into his hair, wrapped the other arm around him and crushed her mouth against his. He was bewildered for a few moments and struggled to free himself, before he realised what was happening; then he gave in to it.

She tasted salty, he thought vaguely, though perhaps it was just the nearness of the sea. They were pressed together and he decided that this was amazing in and of itself. Her hands roamed through his hair and up and down his back and he found himself doing somewhat the same, which led to the recognition that she was wearing very little other than the blue dress. It was all very different than in the club – that kiss *had* been magic, undeniably, where this one was overwhelmingly physical.

Heather broke off and took a step backward, heaving for air. She stared at him for a long moment, and he remembered just how bright her eyes were. “I... um... er...” She stopped stammering and fanned herself with her hands, and then started laughing.

“What?” Harry said, feeling a bit defensive.

“That’s... why I couldn’t... run away,” Heather panted.

Harry slowly found himself grinning. “Oh...”

Heather smiled and gripped Harry’s hands. “Um... wow...”

Harry wasn’t sure what to do next. The whole thing had an air of madness to it. She was afraid of everything around him but didn’t seem to be afraid of him, and that was completely upside down as far as he was concerned. He also knew that his knees had nearly buckled, and he felt a powerful urge for more of the same. He knew it was a mistake, and he kissed her anyway. Her eyes caught his for an instant as he advanced, and then she slammed them shut. Her hands were everywhere, and he became very aware of the feel of her bare back.

She broke off again, but held him close; they were both panting this time. “I’ll never be able to kiss with my eyes open again, thanks to you,” she whispered in his ear. She raised her left arm high, without letting go. “Blast! They’ll be looking for me.” She gave him a quick peck on the lips, and asked, “When can you see me again?”

Harry tried to gather his wits about him. It was definitely madness, all of it. “I... I don’t know... um... I’ll be at your concert on the 21st, you know... er... terribly busy, the both of us... uh... are

you sure about this?"

She stepped back, smoothed her dress and chewed on her lower lip in a way that made him draw in a sharp breath. "I don't even know what 'this' is... I just know that I want to see you. Find a time, Harry. Call me!" She walked away from him slowly; she kept turning to look at him, grinning. After thirty paces or so, she started walking backward. She fanned herself again and laughed – it was a near-giggle. He stood there and watched her walk and laugh and skip until she disappeared beyond the northern stack. It was then that he breathed again.

"What was *that*?" he murmured to himself, and sank to the sand. He watched the surf roll in and let his breathing fall into time and remembered the feel of Heather's dress and the taste of her lips. It was a mistake, he was sure of it.

He heard the sound of footsteps. *Has she come back?* he wondered excitedly as he turned.

"Hallo, Harry!" Mr. Weasley said warmly. He was clad in light coloured Bermudas and a garish jumper that upon closer inspection bore the Weasley Wizard Wheezes mark, and he held a butterbeer in each hand. Harry tried to speak but only managed a squeak and a burble as his stomach fell to his shoes.

Mr. Weasley handed him one of the butterbeers and took a seat on the sand. "It's a beautiful place, Harry. Molly and I can't thank you enough, you know."

"Uh-huh... beautiful... just cracking..." Harry managed.

"Harry..." Mr. Weasley began.

Harry struggled for words. "How long... erm... how long have you...?"

"I didn't expect to see your hand on the clock move to 'Home' this morning," Mr. Weasley said. "Then it jumped to 'In Transit' for the longest time, and then back to 'Home'. Yes, I was quite surprised."

Harry cursed himself inside. *The clock... shite!* He looked around nervously; there was no sign of Mrs. Weasley. "Where is...?"

"One of the advantages of being head of the house is a certain measure of control over the family clock," Mr. Weasley said off-handedly. "You're at Hogwarts presently. Molly is fussing with the gardens, and I'm out for a stroll."

"Oh," Harry said. He stared determinedly at the advancing surf.

"This is your beach, Harry; it's your home. We're boarders, and it's not our business whether and when you come and go," Mr. Weasley said. When Harry began to fidget, he smiled and added, "It's not Molly's business, either. You've become like a son to us but truth be told, you're not our son." He paused and seemed to take in the sand and the surf for a time, and then added quietly, "You're not a child anymore; sometimes I wonder if you ever were?" He sipped at his butterbeer,

and went on, “I assume that Albus and the others think you’re in Hogsmeade?” When Harry said nothing, he went on, “I’m impressed that you made your way past Moody and his crew. It’s not the safest thing you could have done, however.”

Harry waited for the criticism to begin, but it didn’t come; Mr. Weasley simply sipped on his butterbeer and sat there companionably. “I’m never alone,” Harry said at last. “Someone’s always watching.”

“I imagine that’s frustrating,” Mr. Weasley admitted. “In fact, I suspect it would have driven me half-mad at your age.”

Harry waited again. *It’s for your own good ...* he was certain that the words would come, but they never did. “I thought we were alone,” he blurted out.

“I had no intention of intruding,” Mr. Weasley said.

“I suppose you’re going to tell Remus,” Harry fumed.

Mr. Weasley set his butterbeer down, stood, and brushed the sand from his Bermudas. “No,” he said.

Harry’s brow beetled. “No?”

Mr. Weasley scooped up his bottle. “Fine afternoon for a walk, don’t you think?” he said. Harry stood and followed.

Both were silent until they reached the northern stack. From nowhere, Mr. Weasley said, “She’s a lovely girl, Harry.”

“Yes... no doubt about that,” Harry said.

“Do you honestly want to introduce something this complicated into your life?” Mr. Weasley asked.

“I don’t know,” Harry admitted after a long pause.

“That’s a fair answer,” Mr. Weasley said. “Best you figure that out before proceeding too far, eh?”

Harry nodded, and said, “Fine.” *When does the other shoe drop?* he wondered; *When is he going to light into me?*

“No matter what you decide...I want you to be sensible, Harry,” Mr. Weasley said slowly. “You, uh, know how to be sensible in these matters... right?”

Harry flushed instantly. “Erm... by ‘sensible’, do you mean...?”

“I don’t think I’m being unreasonable,” Mr. Weasley returned. “She’s lovely and she obviously fancies you, and you were showing rather a lot of interest... ahem... in any event... I’d rather you come to me about this sort of thing than fail to be sensible.”

“*Mr. Weasley!* ” Harry groaned

Mr. Weasley held his hands up. “All right, then – I’m finished. Let me know if I need to disable your hand on the family clock, would you? Be sure that you stop by the tower some time, as well. I know Molly would love to see you.” He took Harry’s empty bottle with him and walked away.

Harry was reeling; he didn’t even manage to call after Mr. Weasley. He walked up and down the beach, and then began to run. The running would clear his head, he hoped, or lead to some kind of new understanding – some sort of realisation, some answer that he could embrace. He was willing to settle for making sense of the afternoon. He accomplished none of it.

September 9

Harry now loathed entering the Great Hall; after a week, he still caught a hundred stares each time that he passed through the doors. It wasn’t as though he was especially noticeable, he figured, wrapped in a plain student’s cloak and dressed in greys and blacks. He approached the Gryffindor table, in hopes of entering and leaving quickly.

Ron was sitting rather close to Lavender Brown, all the while trying to carry on a conversation with Katie Bell – Quidditch, surely – and at the same time to down half the table’s repast on his own. He had a mad grin on his face; one arm waved wildly as he talked while the other skilfully manoeuvred scones and bangers and whatever else it could locate. Ginny was almost as animated, and Harry was surprised to see Seamus Finnigan leaning in on the conversation as well. Seamus was apparently using food to demonstrate a play, which looked to be messy business. A bit of marmalade flew onto Hermione’s open book and she shot a death glare at Seamus and Ron. The glare was replaced by a smile as Harry came into view, and it occurred to him that he missed seeing Hermione and Ron in the mornings.

“Quiet down! The enemy’s approaching!” Ginny said with a smirk.

Ron let out a barking laugh. “Oi, Harry! Hope you have the proper password – otherwise these Gryffindor girls will eat you alive!”

Harry grinned. “A bit full of yourself, Ron?”

Seamus gave a mock-bow. “That’s a proper password, eh?” he said, and slid to one side. Harry declined a seat, and forced his eyes to stay on his old housemates rather than risk a glance at the staff table.

“So, is Dumbledore working you seven days a week?” Ron asked.

“We don’t have a fixed timetable, not yet at least,” Harry said. “I suppose it’ll be five or six days

a week; even Dumbledore likes his free time, right?”

“I see,” Ron said off-handedly. “Guess I figured you’d drop in yesterday... you know, maybe help me organise for the Quidditch tryouts? It was a brilliant afternoon for flying, besides.”

“There was a meeting to attend,” Harry said.

Hermione looked up from her book and he gave her a knowing look. “With Fliptrask?” she asked.

Harry nodded and fished an envelope from within his robes. “He sent this along for you.”

Lavender’s brow beetled. “Fliptrask the goblin sent something for *you* ? No offence intended, Hermione, but... I can see why Harry would be of interest, of course...”

“They’re interested in my performance on the OWLs for some reason,” Hermione said off-handedly; Harry knew that she was seething underneath.

“Why is it that you know Fliptrask?” Harry asked Lavender.

“Well, I wouldn’t say that I *know* him, not exactly,” Lavender bubbled. “Usually his associates come to the manor, but he’s visited Dad at least once that I remember. He’s responsible for the Blake family holdings, you see.”

“Um... Blake family? Wouldn’t it be the Brown family?” Harry said.

Lavender snorted at him. “Come on, Harry, you’re head of the Black family now and your name isn’t Black. Neville’s heir to... oi, Neville! Where’d your estate come from, anyway? Richards, is it?”

Neville, who sat several places down the table. “Castor on the Longbottom side,” he said, then added, “and I’m Inheritor of the House of Collier, through Gran’s grandmother – no boys for two generations.”

“Thought I recognised the seal on that envelope,” Ron said.

“Do you know what it is?” Hermione asked Harry.

“An invitation, I expect.” Harry answered.

“What? *I’m* invited, as well?” Hermione gasped.

Ron put down his fork. “Invited to what? Gringotts invited you to something?”

Harry began, “Hermione’s invited on her own and I’m to bring a friend as well...” He smiled at Ron. “Think you can keep from being a right plonker for a few hours next Sunday?”

“Very nice, Harry,” Ron pouted. “I’ll have you know that I have this sidekick business pat, thank

you very much!” Lavender laughed and clung to Ron’s arm.

“That’s a ‘yes’, then? Dumbledore wants to see Hermione and me at half past eleven; if you’re in, then you’ll need to be there as well,” Harry said.

“Of course I’m in,” Ron said; then he tightened up, and asked hesitantly, “Er... do you think I have the right sort of clothes, or whatever else – ?”

“You’ll be fine; I wouldn’t worry over it,” Harry assured him. “Half past eleven, then.”

Hermione tucked away the envelope and slung her rucksack over a shoulder. “I’m off to Ancient Runes,” she said flatly.

“I’ll walk with you,” Harry offered. He gave Ron a half-wave and moved quickly to catch up.

As soon as they exited the Great Hall, Hermione groaned loudly. “How can he tolerate that... that... *cow*? ”

Harry took a half step back in confusion. “Who... what, you mean Lavender? I could tell you were out of sorts at the table, but –”

“It’s like she’s cast a permanent Sticking Charm, for goodness’ sake!” Hermione grimaced.

Harry offered, “Maybe that’s what he wants... maybe he wasn’t leading her on, at the party – ?”

Hermione ploughed on. “You should see them in the Common Room; it’s disgusting!” She reached up as though she was twirling long hair at the ends, assumed a perfectly vapid expression, and went on in a screechy high-pitch, “*Oh, Ron, you’re so funny! Tell me about all of your adventures with Harry and... oh, you know... what’s her name...*” Her voice fell to its usual tone, and she added scathingly, “Apparently five years in the same dormitory hasn’t familiarised her with my *name* . She’s cast too many beauty charms on herself, if you ask me... stupid bloody bint...”

“Hermione!” Harry snapped.

“He can do better than her, much better,” Hermione insisted. “The only reason she’s draped all over him is because she’s noticed that other girls are interested. I should revise my description – she’s not a cow; she’s a *leech* .”

“She can’t be that awful – I think I’d have noticed,” Harry insisted.

“You haven’t had to live with her,” Hermione grumbled.

“True, but I don’t recall you being quite so furious with her before,” Harry pointed out. The rest slipped out before he thought it through. “Besides, I thought you turned Ron down. Why are you making such a fuss?”

Hermione glared at him. “Because she’ll go from crushing on him to nasty gossiping in the blink of an eye,” she snarled. “He can do better than her – it’s practically staring him right in his thick face.” She glanced at her watch and added coldly, “Professor Croaker’s not kind to latecomers. I’ll see you at half past eleven, I suppose – oh, and thank you so much for bothering to tell *me* about the meeting.” With that, she stomped off without so much as a goodbye or even a glance his way.

Harry proceeded to drift through his Defence tutorial. Detheridge told him that the theme for the day was to take advantage of an opponent’s obvious weaknesses. Harry held his tongue and managed to drop a steel ball atop Detheridge’s head. Detheridge wasn’t as forgiving as Shackbolt. After a brief stop with Madam Pomfrey, Harry made his way to Dumbledore’s chambers.

Ron arrived shortly before half past eleven. Harry contemplated bringing up Hermione’s growing dislike of Lavender, but settled on glancing at his watch every few seconds instead. After five minutes, he grumbled, “Where do you suppose she is?”

Ron rolled his eyes. “The library, of course. Send her an envelope, and she’ll go off and study the sort of parchment it’s made from.”

“I guess she’s on her own,” Harry said. “*Cadbury Cremes*.” The single gargoyle slid aside to reveal the stairs that led to Dumbledore’s study. Just as they mounted the stairs and the gargoyle began to move behind them, Harry heard a squeak and then the bustle of a sack full of books. Hermione stopped just inside the stairwell to catch her breath. As soon as she did so, her hands flew to her hips. “Thought you’d just leave me standing there, did you?” she snapped. “Well... you’re not the only one who knows the password, Harry.”

“What did you do to her?” Ron whispered to Harry. Harry suppressed the impulse to wrap his hands around Ron’s neck; he merely shrugged and continued to climb the winding stairs.

Dumbledore looked up from papers on his desk as they entered. “Ah, Harry... and Mr. Weasley? This is an unexpected pleasure... and where is Miss Granger?”

“I apologise for being late,” Hermione said from behind them. “Professor Croaker refused to allow me to leave prior to half past eleven.”

“Is that so? I shall have to speak to Algernon... he is orderly by nature; perhaps he expected a written request of me?” Dumbledore stroked his beard thoughtfully. “He does seem to demonstrate a certain disdain for you, however, and I am at a loss as to why that may be.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Hermione said flatly. “You needed to see us, Headmaster?”

“Yes, be seated please.” Dumbledore conjured three chairs with a tiny wave of his hand.

Ron became very still. “W-where is your wand, P-Professor?”

“My wand? Oh, yes... my wand... I am certain that I left it here somewhere...” Dumbledore

began to pick through the papers before him. “It is rather inconvenient to always need one’s wand at the ready, is it not?”

“Honestly, Ron! You’ve seen the Headmaster perform wandless magic before; you simply weren’t paying attention,” Hermione chided.

Dumbledore produced his wand from beneath a book. “It is not a skill that I take pains to advertise. I should not be surprised that you have remained undiverted, of course.”

Hermione pulled out her envelope. “It seems that I’ve been invited to the hunt along with Harry.”

Dumbledore’s eyes twinkled, which immediately set Harry on edge. “Yes, it appears that the goblin community has taken an interest in you, Miss Granger. Let me pre-empt you by noting that this interest is in part due to your association with Harry, but only in part. To say that your performance on the OWL examinations was noteworthy is a profound understatement. Gringotts would consider it rather a coup to secure your services when you go out into the world.”

Ron’s face paled. “Hunt? Did you say ‘hunt’? This is about a *goblin* hunt?”

“That’s right,” Harry said. “I’ve been asked to bring a friend – so here you are.”

“A goblin hunt? Do you have any idea what goblins hunt?” Ron groaned.

“No,” Harry answered. “Do you?”

Ron fidgeted considerably before he returned, “Er... not exactly, but that’s not the point! Do you actually *want* to go hunting for some sort of monster and kill it with a sword?”

Dumbledore broke into a crooked smile. “I believe Harry has already accomplished that feat,” he pointed out.

“Look, mate, you don’t have to go,” Harry offered.

Ron shook his head. “Oh, no, I’m going! Someone has to look after the two of you, after all!”

“Headmaster, you’re not going to attempt to persuade Harry that he should take you or a member of the Order?” Hermione asked; she sounded rather suspicious, Harry thought.

“I have already made my attempt at persuasion, Miss Granger. Harry rightly pointed out that the goblins requested a friend accompany him. Since you were separately invited, Harry immediately brought up young Mr. Weasley here,” Dumbledore said. “As much as I might prefer that Harry take along Mr. Weasley’s brother William, I shall accede to his wishes.”

Hermione stood, which surprised Harry. “If that is all, Headmaster...?”

Dumbledore waved her back into her seat. “I have set a time for the three of you to meet with Professor Covelli, for a review of what is known about the goblin hunt and contemporary goblin

culture. Regrettably that comes to little. You will be witnessing something very rarely observed by wizards; I am somewhat envious. On Sunday, Gringotts has arranged for you to be collected from here. I have informed Mr. Fliptrask of my preference that you be returned to Hogsmeade no later than nine in the evening. However, this event will transpire in the manner that the goblins see fit. If the hour grows sufficiently late, you will be excused from your Monday class meetings and other commitments. Do you have any questions of me?"

"Which member of faculty will accompany us?" Hermione asked.

"Mr. Potter will accompany you," Dumbledore said. "Three wizards have been invited and only three shall attend. It is possible that Professor Flitwick will be in attendance; he is occasionally invited to goblin ceremonies. At any rate, I will not risk provocation - not in a matter as unique as this. I cannot impress upon you sufficiently the gravity of this invitation. The three of you will be representing the wizarding community of the United Kingdom at an event that is believed to lie at the very heart of goblin culture."

"We won't let you down, Professor Dumbledore," Ron insisted; Harry could sense raging doubts, and he fought back a grin.

Dumbledore smiled broadly. "I should hope not, Mr. Weasley! You see, I have no intention of sharing this bit of news with Minister Fudge until after the fact, and I should very much prefer it if there is nothing of a disastrous nature to report. As it stands, Cornelius will expire of apoplexy should he find out that the goblins expressly forbade his attendance."

"We're to keep this quiet, then," Harry confirmed.

"That really would be for the best," Dumbledore agreed.

Ron began to ask, "So I shouldn't tell...?"

"No, you shouldn't!" Hermione snapped. She turned to Dumbledore. "May I be excused now, Professor?"

"If you wish, Miss Granger," Dumbledore said slowly. "Something between the three of you appears to require resolution; I do suggest that it be resolved prior to Sunday." Hermione nodded curtly and walked quickly to the stairs.

Ron threw up his hands. "What did I do to her?" he asked Harry.

Harry glared over the top of his glasses at Ron. "You can't be that thick; please tell me that you're not," he said coldly; without waiting for a response, he headed off after Hermione. Behind him, Dumbledore advised Ron, "I recommend that you pursue your friends with all haste... and with alacrity if you can summon it, Mr. Weasley."

Ron caught Harry before they reached the last stair. "Fine, then," he snapped, "consider me thick. I swear, every time that Lavender's name comes up, she... *oh*."

“And the torch is lit at last,” Harry grumbled.

“Don’t get shirty with me!” Ron protested.

Hermione was standing in the corridor just beyond the gargoyle. Her expression lightened for an instant as she saw Harry, and turned positively icy as Ron followed him into view. She headed off as quickly as Harry thought possible without running. Harry quickened his pace to keep up, and Ron loped alongside.

“Hermione! Hermione, wait!” Ron called out.

“I’ve had *enough* , Ron,” Hermione snapped back without slowing.

Ron used his long legs to their advantage; in a score of steps, he overtook her. “I’m the one who gets accused of being a stubborn mule but you take the prize!” he growled. “You make up your mind about things, and that’s the end of it – no questions, no chance to tell you what I think, nothing!”

“I thought you were *finally* growing up...” Hermione began.

Harry caught up and firmly planted himself between his two friends. His voice was low and as dangerous as he could make it. “This is the one thing I haven’t missed a bit: watching the two of you go at it like cat and dog,” he said. “We’re not doing this in a corridor. The Common Room or the other place – choose one.”

“The *other place* , then,” Hermione said fiercely.

“Fine – I’d rather that the midgets weren’t hanging about,” Ron agreed.

This time it was Harry who scrambled forward; he forced Hermione and Ron to keep up with him. By the time they followed him up five flights to the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy both were a bit bedraggled, which suited Harry fine.

“Cripes, Harry, the castle’s not under attack!” Ron complained as Harry paced back and forth and ignored him. The door to the Room of Requirement appeared, and Harry flung it open.

Hermione peered in. “What is this place?” she asked.

Ron laughed uneasily. “Not what I would have expected, mate,” he said. “I was ready for, you know, a dungeon or something.”

Harry passed through the door and into a fair duplicate of the bothy. “I was thinking of a place where I’d want to be, where I’d want my two best friends to be,” he said quietly. “I guess this is it.”

“This is Harry’s place,” Ron explained to Hermione.

Hermione looked around appraisingly. The door closed after they all entered; she turned and looked out the front windows to the cliff's edge and the sea beyond. "What sort of place? This isn't your rooms in Hogsmeade."

"It's where I was living in August," Harry said.

She wandered past the shelves laden with record albums. "These are all rather old; they're along the lines of what my Mum and Dad would listen to... did they come from Sirius?"

Harry nodded. "The CDs are mine."

Ron flopped down on the settee and put his feet on the small table before it. Hermione started to scold him, but stopped herself.

"It has to stop," Harry said. "There's too much to be going on about, without the two of you fighting."

"Now, look here," Ron started. "Last year, you were –"

Harry felt his hands begin to shake; he squeezed them tight. "Last year," he cut in, "I was a horse's arse, you were a foul braggart, and Hermione was a hovering know-it-all – even though she *was* right most of the time; if I'd had the good sense to listen, a lot of things would be different. That was last year. It's time to talk about this year, Ron. None of us are the same now; nothing's the same anymore, can't you see that?"

"I think I'd rather do last year over," Ron grumbled.

"We're not children anymore," Harry said. "If I had any doubts about that, Dumbledore killed them in June."

Hermione had returned to the front windows and leant against the sill. "When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things," she said quietly.

Ron bit his lip for a moment, and then blurted out, "I don't think you've become a man, exactly."

"It's a quotation, for goodness' sake," Hermione groaned. She slowly moved to one of the armchairs, let herself sink into it, and looked pointedly at Ron. "I've been half the problem, Ron; I know that. It's just that you... you... you *infuriate* me sometimes!" Ron sat up sharply, but said nothing. Hermione went on, "You could have done so much better; you could have been so much better! Instead, you just slid through life. With Harry, I've always been able to help somehow. With you... honestly, you wanted me to do your work – and you didn't need that! You're not stupid, Ron! You could do so much better than Lavender Brown." Harry could tell that it took a lot for Hermione to keep from spitting Lavender's name. She was trying, and he hoped that Ron could respond in kind.

"You need to stop treating Lavender like this, if you really want to be a friend," Ron warned her.

“It has to stop. She hasn’t asked me to tell you off or stop talking to you. One of these days she will, if you keep it up. She’s not stupid either!”

“She doesn’t love you, Ron,” Hermione said.

Ron laughed. “I don’t love her, either! She’s nice and funny and she makes me feel good, and she doesn’t expect anything that she isn’t going to get from me. I like her to pieces, right?”

“Ron... you can do better than that,” Hermione sighed. “It’s right there in front of you.”

“No, I can’t!” Ron insisted. “Harry, help me out here?”

“Harry, will you explain to him what he’s missing?” Hermione pleaded.

“Me? You want... you want *me* to explain... are you joking?” Harry spluttered. “I’ve been out with two girls; had... what... three kisses? Four? I think someone has to explain it to me!”

“See?” Ron exclaimed.

Harry rounded on Ron. “And *you* ! If this is about what those ruddy brains showed you...”

Ron’s eyes widened. “I thought you believed me!”

“I believe what you saw,” Harry returned. “Are you really going to live your life based on it?”

“Oh, don’t even...” Ron fumed. “Everything you’ve done since the end of last year has been about that stupid prophecy –”

“Not everything,” Harry said. “When I was in St. Ebb –”

“You were doing exactly what I’m doing,” Ron finished for him. “Don’t tell me you had any kind of big plans? You thought she was a Muggle, right? You know it wasn’t anything more than a bit of summer fun.”

“Well, she’s *not* a Muggle, is she?” Harry snapped.

“Fair enough, but...” Ron stopped and his eyes widened. “You’re not still... oh, you *are* !” He laughed loudly. “Forget about the goblin hunt, mate – Lupin’s going to hunt *you* down!”

“You’re still seeing Professor Lupin’s daughter?” Hermione asked.

Harry’s jaw tightened. “No, I’m not.” His eyes fixed on Hermione as he added, “And how would you know about that, anyway?”

Hermione cast her eyes downward. “You weren’t alone there, you know? Ginny was around...”

“Ginny was just saying this morning how she’s hardly seen you, that you’re off to the library even

more than usual,” Ron said.

“It was probably Tonks – she’s talkative,” Harry concluded. “Go on, then – let me have it for not telling you everything about the summer.”

Hermione was obviously stung. “You know that I haven’t told you everything, either. I meant what I said, Harry; I meant what I wrote to you. Tell me what you want to tell me, and I have to trust that it’ll be enough.”

“You disapprove,” Harry said.

“Does it matter?” Hermione asked.

“Of course it does,” Harry assured her.

“I honestly don’t know enough to say,” Hermione said. Harry thought that she was telling the truth, but it was obvious that she was distressed – he could see it in the set of her eyes and the tiny pout of her lower lip.

“Well, I do,” Ron said, “and I think it’s a mistake. Nothing good will come from this.”

“Basing this on your date, are you?” Harry growled.

Ron sighed. “I thought you were tired of fighting. So why mess about with this? You’re going to lie to everybody and be cut off from Lupin forever for Heather? Hope she’s worth it, mate.”

“We’re not dating,” Harry said.

Ron threw up his hands. “It’s not my business.”

“I just want you to be happy,” Hermione said. She added quickly to Ron, “I don’t want to fight with you, I swear. I want you to be happy as well. If Lavender makes you happy, then... er... then I’m happy for you. Everybody’s happy, see?” She stood abruptly. “I have to go; I’ve already been late for Defence twice, and I don’t want to antagonise Professor Detheridge.”

“Are... are you sure everybody’s happy?” Harry asked.

Hermione stopped at the door and put on a smile that seemed forced. She glanced around the room once more. “I can see why you like this place – it feels right, somehow. Be seeing you,” she said as she slipped out into the corridor.

Ron stood next. “It does feel right, doesn’t it? I... uh... don’t suppose you could find some time to play a bit of chess? It’s hard to find people willing to let me beat them senseless.”

Harry shook his head but grinned. “I suppose it’s not right for me to leave other Gryffindors to that fate. You want to play here?”

Ron nodded. “I figure you don’t want to hang about the Common Room anymore. I’ve been staying clear of it myself except to meet up with Lavender.”

“Are you happy, Ron?” Harry asked abruptly.

Ron shrugged. “I like being with Lavender. Maybe I’ll like being with somebody else next month – I don’t know. I’m happy enough.” His brow furrowed a bit. “Who do you suppose Hermione was going on about? Right there in front of me, she says.”

“Do you, um, think maybe she means herself?” Harry wondered aloud.

“Not a chance,” Ron said. “Look, she was my chance to do better – I wouldn’t ever tell her that because she’d get in a huff about it. You know what? It wouldn’t have been fair, anyway. You heard her – she wants *love* straight out of the gates.”

“That’s awfully grown up coming from you, mate,” Harry said.

“What’d she say... time to put away childish things, or something?” Ron nodded. “I reckon she’s right about that. Like you said, she’s right most of the time.”

Harry followed Ron out of the room, and the door disappeared. “She just seems so unhappy; she completely avoided answering my question about that,” Harry sighed. “I wish I knew how to cheer her up. I mean, she has every right to be in a bad way, with everything that’s happened. I just don’t like to see her this way.” He looked to Ron. “What do you think I should do?”

“Make her happy, of course,” Ron said.

Harry rolled his eyes. “*That’s* brilliant. And just how am I supposed to manage it?”

Ron laughed at him. “You’re kidding... right?”

“Come on, it’s your big idea,” Harry pressed.

Ron shook his head. As he headed off to class, he called over his shoulder, “Don’t ask me. I’m the thick one, remember?”

Harry Potter and the Years of Rebellion

Birds Of A Feather

Chapter Thirty-four

BIRDS OF A FEATHER

September 14

Harry sat stock still, cross-legged, as he had for – minutes? Hours? Days? This odd training from Professor Covelli wasn't as mad as Divination; it even made sense in a way, and that was more than he could say about Snape's efforts in the year prior. Still... he could do as she asked of him, and he could hear and comprehend her explanations, but in the end he doubted that it made any sort of difference.

Covelli signalled him to end his meditation. "How do you feel?" she asked.

He blurted out the first thing that came to his mind. "Lighter."

Covelli crooked an eyebrow. "Is that so? Explain, please?"

Harry shrugged. "I don't know; it's just the first thing that came to mind."

"Rested, perhaps?" Covelli probed.

"I suppose so, yes," Harry agreed. Covelli concealed her feelings well, almost as good as Dumbledore, but he was sure he caught a flicker of doubt – something in the flecks of colour in her eyes, it seemed.

"Does this still seem as ridiculous to you as seeking the meaning of life by staring into the remains of poorly steeped tea?" Covelli asked.

Harry almost laughed, but he had no intention of letting down his guard. Covelli had studied with Dumbledore; she was just as manipulative, Harry was certain. In fact she was better at it, he had decided after their first meeting. She sought to know his likes and dislikes, appealed to his sense of humour, and tried to understand him in order to lead him by using what she understood – all the while saying next to nothing about herself. She had made no attempt at Legilimency during the course of their first three meetings, and none thus far during the fourth. He wasn't sure what he would do when she did, as she surely would. Covelli was very close to Hermione, obviously,

which further discomfited him. Harry's thoughts about Hermione were normally off-limits, as far as he was concerned, and even more so in this case.

"What's next, then?" Harry asked.

Covelli searched his face impassively. "This work is not about tasks or lists, Mr. Potter. This work addresses the reorganization and integration of the mind."

Harry was confused. "I thought it was about clearing my mind," he protested.

Covelli slowly shook her head. "That is only a first step. If you were going to rely on clearing of the mind as a defence, then your mind would have to remain constantly clear. This is not likely given your age and the nature of your life. Any organising principle – any defence – must be constantly present."

"Snape wanted me to clear my mind - get rid of emotions, he said," Harry explained.

Covelli frowned. "He was describing his own organising principle, Mr. Potter – a principle suitable for life in darkness. This *Snape* ... he could have destroyed you. He was not competent to teach this subject."

"He's not competent to teach *any* subject," Harry grumbled, "but at least that much has been changed."

Covelli let out a weak laugh. "Yet this man was assigned to teach for many years. You see... Dumbledore, he is not an effective judge of character."

"He hasn't been when it comes to hiring teachers," Harry said evenly.

Covelli very nearly smirked; Harry felt it coming on but it didn't quite materialise. "Should I feel injured by that observation?" she asked with a hint of teasing in her voice.

Harry kept his tone as even as before. "Only if you're another one of Dumbledore's mistakes," he said.

"Oh yes, I am *certainly* one of Dumbledore's mistakes," Covelli returned, "but that is not the matter at hand. Here is our situation as I see it: you must learn Occlumency if you wish to retain both your sanity and independence, and I must be the one to teach it to you. This will not work without some small measure of trust. Trust requires openness and honesty. I am not sure if you are prepared for honesty as I measure it, Mr. Potter."

She's certainly as odd as Dumbledore's usual fare, Harry thought. "If that's what it takes to be done with this subject, then yes I am," he said.

"Very well. You frighten me," she said simply.

Harry sat there in shock. "W-why?" he managed at last.

“Everything I’ve been able to glean from others suggests that there’s very little difference between your upbringing and that of Tom Riddle,” she said. “For Dumbledore to live through the last fifty years and still commit you to that experience... of all the incomprehensible things that he has done, all the unconscionable things... this is unforgivable, to my mind.”

Harry certainly hadn’t expected anything so scathing – ‘unforgivable’ was a stronger term than he was willing to apply to the Headmaster, even if he still didn’t entirely trust the man. “Erm... well, he had reasons for putting me where he did,” Harry offered. “He could have been more involved, though; it was worse than it had to be, I think.”

Covelli seemed to think on this. “You were with your mother’s relations... blood protection, yes?” she confirmed.

Harry nodded. “Petunia is my Mum’s sister,” he said. “My Mum, she... did *something*, I guess; it kept Voldemort from killing me, and –”

Covelli’s eyes narrowed. “But Dumbledore sealed the blood protection, yes?”

Harry’s eyes followed suit. “He did mention a charm.”

“Then *he* made the choices,” Covelli concluded. “Dumbledore does nothing without a plan in mind. The plan may be flawed – badly flawed, they often are – but the plan is always in place.”

Harry decided to go along for the moment. “And this big plan of his was... what? Keep Potter from getting a big head?” he asked. “Dumbledore already admitted that much.”

“That is a consequence of his plan, surely not the plan itself,” Covelli said. Her voice lowered; Harry thought that the room seemed to darken as she went on, “Dumbledore seems happy for you to walk the same road as Tom Riddle walked. He needed a mythic hero in the event that the dragon rose again. Mythic heroes are dangerous, Mr. Potter. Sometimes this mythic hero discharges his responsibilities and then becomes as much a horror as his nemesis. How convenient for Dumbledore that your role was sealed by prophecy, no?”

“You know about the prophecy?” Harry shouted. He instantly drew his wand and trained it on Covelli’s forehead.

Covelli didn’t follow suit; she even failed to flinch. “Dumbledore, he had reason to reveal it,” she said calmly. “I am to teach you the art of Occlumency; do you not think it likely that I would eventually access this prophecy in the course of instruction?”

Harry pulled back but kept his wand’s aim true. “You will answer my questions,” he said angrily. “When I’m finished asking them, I’ll decide whether I trust you. If I trust you, we’ll continue. If not, we’re finished.”

“I agree; as I said, sufficient trust is needed. I will answer what can be answered,” Covelli told him, “but some things are protected under oaths, magical and otherwise.”

“When were you Dumbledore’s apprentice?” Harry demanded.

“From June of 1943 until the latter part of 1945,” Covelli answered. “By the coming of the winter, he no longer considered me his apprentice.”

Harry thought about the dates for a moment. “That’s why you called him Tom Riddle,” he said. “You knew Riddle, didn’t you?”

“I did,” Covelli said.

“Why did you leave?” Harry asked.

“Clarify your question, Mr. Potter,” Covelli instructed him. “Do you wish to know why I left the apprenticeship, or why I left the magical world?”

“You... you left the magical world? But Hermione was with you, so you had to know... and you’re here, and Dumbledore told you the prophecy...?” Harry tried to understand, but he was left with more questions than when he had begun the questioning.

“I have not lived in the magical world, not as it is defined by most, since the end of 1945,” Covelli explained. “I retained some connections over the years – your Professor McGonagall is one, Madam Bones from your Ministry is another. My second husband was a wizard, but he too chose to live largely outside the bounds of this world.”

“What are you to Hermione?” Harry asked. “She seems to take to you almost like her Mum. The only reason I’m giving you a chance is that I trust her.”

“It’s not appropriate for me to answer that,” Covelli said.

Harry took a different direction. “All right... you spent fifty years with the Muggles... what sort of work did you do?”

Covelli smiled. “I am a physician, Mr. Potter. I hold a medical doctorate as well as a doctor of philosophy degree.”

“You took care of Hermione, then, after... er... after everything that happened to her...” Harry trailed off.

“If you wish to know anything about my relationship with Hermione, you must enquire with her,” Covelli said. “I do know what transpired at the Grangers’ home, of course. May I ask, have *you* received care as a result of those events?”

Harry frowned. “I’m fine,” he said, “I did what had to be done.”

“Based upon our time together thus far, I believe that you are anything but fine,” Covelli returned, “but we are not here to address my professional curiosity. Dumbledore wishes me to see if you are able to occlude specific thoughts. He was no clearer than that, of course. I expect this regards the

keeping of a secret of some sort. Tell me, do you feel prepared to defend yourself against mental probing?”

“Am I supposed to keep you out, or misdirect you?” Harry asked.

“You need to repel me for a period of thirty minutes,” Covelli said. “Dumbledore did explain the results of your failed instruction. I had hoped to assist you in finding your organising principle before conducting a probe. However Dumbledore, he tells me that the need is immediate, yes?”

Harry tried not to show his nervousness. Thirty minutes sounded like forever, he thought. Still, he needed to know if he could do it; he owed that to the Grangers. “You’re right about a secret. It’s important that I’m able to keep it – *very* important.”

Covelli pursed her lips. “I am quite unaccustomed to doing this in a formal way, after so many years...” She went silent and then seemed to look right through Harry, and he steeled himself for the invasion to come.

He heard no incantation; the first indication that she had done anything at all was a sudden strong pressure at his temples. Something tried to slip into his head; the sensation was very different than either Snape’s hammering attacks or Dumbledore’s gentle breeze. His heart raced and he was aware that instinct was taking over. He saw flashes of memory, too brief and fragmented for him to make out. Suddenly he saw something familiar – it was embarrassing and painful and assuredly none of Covelli’s business. She took an interest in the image of the cupboard and began to follow the thread.

“*No!*” he shouted; it sounded as if it was coming from someone else’s mouth. He pushed hard at the pressure, and fell headlong into Covelli’s eyes.

The manor house was a shambles, barely held together by tattered vestiges of magic. The foul creature ran from her down corridors and through the remains of two ballrooms; she followed relentlessly.

“Anything! I will give anything! Wealth beyond imagining! Power... it’s power you want, isn’t it?” it pleaded. Its formal robes and cloak were as tattered as the sagging house around them. Its eyes pleaded with her, as though she should allow it a name. She refused; the bastard was no longer worthy of a name – she didn’t believe that it deserved to be considered human.

“Y-your family and mine, we have been allied for a dozen generations! They will never forgive you!” it cried out.

Her eyes narrowed and trained on his. “You killed my brother, you and your filth,” she said coldly. “Alliances no longer matter; the rest of my family no longer matters. Where is Bormann?”

“I... I don’t know!” it insisted.

“Where is Bormann?” she repeated.

“I couldn’t possibly tell you! He... he’s mad! He’ll kill me!” it whined.

“What do you think I’m going to do to you?” she asked.

Its eyes went wide and its jaw went slack. “No... NO!”

“Then you will tell me... where – is – Bormann?” she asked once more.

“I mustn’t... you can’t make me...” it whimpered.

“Oh, but I can,” she hissed. It raised its hands to its head and screamed.

“Where is he?” she demanded.

“He... I... I CAN’T...” it stammered. She felt the memory block – it was like a wall that stood in her path – but it was no matter. The power filled her now; it came at first with the sense of shock, like being doused with cold water, but then it was like becoming a goddess. She idly wondered if all the ancient alchemists had misunderstood the transitory nature of the Darkening as she systematically dismantled the wall that stood between her and Otto Bormann’s whereabouts. She would find him, and wherever Bormann was, Riddle would be as well.

Blood began to trickle from its ears. She increased the pressure; she could feel the wall cracking as the mind under her control fell to pieces. The answer was just on the other side – and then she would have her revenge...

“STOP!” an all-too-familiar voice commanded.

“I’ll be with you in a moment,” she sneered in a voice entirely unlike her own.

“You must end this NOW!” Dumbledore demanded.

“STOP!” Covelli called out. “EXPELLIARMUS!” A burst of raw power struck Harry; his arm snapped back painfully and his wand burned in his hand.

“Y-you were going to find Riddle and kill him, and Dumbledore stopped you!” he blurted out. “That’s what happened, isn’t it?”

Covelli was shaking. “Did you feel it?” she managed to say.

Harry pressed on. “Did Riddle kill your brother?” he asked.

“Did you feel it?” she asked forcefully. “Did you feel the power, Mr. Potter?”

Harry reluctantly nodded. He had felt it just as if it had filled him up. Covelli drew close; she said

in an icy whisper, “Neither of us is ever to feel that power again – is that understood?”

Harry nodded again, much more quickly. “I didn’t set out to pry. It’s just that you were seeing... um...”

“Your mind is composed of walls set around fears,” Covelli said hoarsely. “The walls are enough to meet Dumbledore’s requirement, but they will not be enough in the face of darkness. Go.”

“Um... you’ll tell him that I was good enough, then?” Harry asked.

“Go,” she whispered.

There was finality in her voice, so he asked, “Are we... are we meeting here on Tuesday, then?”

Her voice was barely audible. “That will be for you to decide.”

“Are you sure that I should leave? Will you be all right?” he asked.

After a lengthy silence she offered a wan smile that surprised him. “Thank you for asking, Mr. Potter. Perhaps I will be all right, indeed,” she said softly; Harry thought she sounded almost surprised at the idea.

He wandered along the corridors and wondered how much that Hermione knew about Covelli’s past. He wasn’t sure what he knew, of course; he only knew what he had seen, and that she was afraid of whatever sort of power that she had long ago invoked. He figured that Hermione was in the library, which led him to think about his friend’s book-filled table in the Restricted Section and Covelli’s odd reaction to the books. His wanderings took him to the library, but the seventh-year Ravenclaw who manned the desk claimed not to have seen Hermione all morning.

Something that he overheard from a passing gaggle of young Gryffindor girls led him toward the lakeside. It was a surprisingly warm and sunny day by September standards. Scores of students littered the grassy hill that ran down to the rocky shore. He caught a few waves and a few stares as he made his way down toward the Lake.

Hermione was sitting atop one of the larger flat rocks that flirted with the water. She was dressed very much like she had been at the Burrow, the night when Dumbledore had undone him and when Ron had started to come undone and when Hermione had been the one to stand with him. Her denims were rolled up almost to the knee; she had cast her shoes and stockings aside and her toes dangled in the cold water. It was perfectly ordinary attire for an English teenager on a free day; amidst the Muggle-borns who had come unprepared for the heat and the purebloods whose shed robes revealed jerkins or high-waisted dresses, it was almost startling.

That Hermione sat there happily conversing with Luna Lovegood was even more startling, especially when Luna was so obviously being herself. She wore her uniform shirt and tie, but had replaced the skirt with bermudas, and had traded the usual Mary Janes for the heavy boots that she had favoured during the summer. Her hat had a wide brim that snapped tight to one side. It was

rather masculine and had the finished look of something Muggle-made; it was the sort of hat that one would wear fishing off of St. Ebb, Harry thought, or whilst on safari, or anywhere but Hogwarts. As he drew closer, he could see the scar that emerged from her collar and stopped just below her right ear.

Luna spotted him when he was within twenty paces. She stood up and waved her arms wildly and shouted, “Over here!” as though he stood atop the castle ramparts. Hermione covered her mouth to stifle a laugh.

Harry grimaced and then gasped as Luna slipped off the rock, dashed forward, and drew him into a clumsy hug. “Hullo, Harry!” she exclaimed. “Do you like my hat?”

“Um... sure, Luna... it’s... er... smashing?” Harry stammered.

She drew close to his ear and whispered, “It’s from *Canada* .” Then she pulled back and smiled at him as though she had just shared something world-changing.

“Okay,” he said nervously, as dozens of Ravenclaw eyes fell upon him from the hillside.

For her part, Hermione simply grinned at him. “Sit with us,” she called out. He hopped atop the rock and sat beside Hermione, and Luna took a seat beside him.

“I thought you were with Doctor Covelli,” Hermione said.

Harry shook his head. “No, we just... wait! How did you know that?”

“You told me that you were meeting with her today, and she told me that she was unavailable this morning,” Hermione said. “It wasn’t difficult to connect the two. How was the meeting?”

“Different than the first three meetings,” Harry answered.

“The first three...? You’ve met four times? Is she training you?” Hermione asked.

“I haven’t decided yet,” Harry returned.

Hermione looked puzzled and concerned all at once. “What’s happened?” she asked.

Harry answered the question with another question, despite Dumbledore’s admonishment to the contrary. “How much do you know about Covelli’s past?”

“Enough, I think,” Hermione said. “Why?”

“Something came up, something very strange,” Harry said.

“Do you like bird watching?” Luna asked Harry abruptly. Hermione didn’t manage to keep from sniggering.

“Erm... what sort of birds do you mean?” Harry asked, and Hermione broke into full-throated laughter.

“There are so many different kinds,” Luna went on. “They’re everywhere, birds – fast ones, slow ones, big ones, small ones, all different colours. Yes, birds are watching right now, from everywhere.”

Hermione stopped laughing, and began to replace her stockings. “Thank you, Luna. Do you still need a hand with your Arithmancy later?”

“I would prefer the contribution of your intellect and expertise, but if your hand is all you have to offer, then I accept,” Luna answered. “Four o’clock would be suitable.”

“I’ll meet you in the Library, then,” Hermione said as she laced up her trainers. She gave Harry a look, and he stood.

Luna tugged at Harry’s sleeve. “Lest I forget, Harry, I want to thank you for meaning well on the first day of classes. I hope you know that overstepping one’s bounds increases the chance of a nargle infestation in one’s knickers?” Her eyebrows wiggled strangely.

Hermione’s eyes widened. “Luna!”

Luna laughed too loudly. “That wasn’t true, of course. *Nargles in knickers!* They wouldn’t fare well, of course!”

Ron called from the hillside, “Oi, Harry!” and Harry offered silent thanks to any deity who was watching over him.

Harry leaned toward Luna as soon as she stood. “I’m sorry, Luna,” he said quietly. “I should have warned you before I said anything.”

Luna smiled at him earnestly. “There’s no need to be sorry, Harry – be considerate. Consideration tends to attract birds of all kinds, you know.”

Ron quickly made his way down. “I thought you’d be under lock and key all day, mate!” he said excitedly as he approached.

Luna abruptly extended her hand, and wouldn’t budge until Ron shook it profusely. “Hello, Ronald; it’s a *lovely* day, wouldn’t you agree?” she sang out.

“Er... hello, Luna,” he said gruffly without entirely meeting her eye. “Nice hat.”

“Do you really like it? It’s from *Canada* . I can get you a matching one, if you like,” she whispered forcefully.

Ron managed a horror-tinged smile. “Uh... that’s not really... what I mean is, you don’t need to... er...”

“Don’t worry, Ronald,” she sighed. “I’ll save it until Christmas time, or until the first of March. I won’t even write my name on the wrapping – it can be our secret.”

Something changed in Ron’s expression, even as his smile faded. “It’s not like that... it’s just... it must be an expensive hat. You can’t be spending a sack of Galleons; that wouldn’t be right.”

“Money is meaningless unless put to good purpose,” Luna said. She took off her hat, unsnapped the brim and deposited it on Ron’s head. “Eight-and-a-quarter, I believe; there should be room for your head to breathe,” she decided. Ron stood in mute shock.

Hermione sniggered. “Um... I think it would look good on you if it fit properly,” she said.

“Harry...?” Ron began, with not a little pleading in his voice.

Harry shrugged. “You do look like a silly arse, but it’s nothing to do with the hat,” he smirked.

Ron growled at Harry; he whipped off the hat, but handed it gently to Luna. “Really, Luna, something like this would be too much,” he insisted. “We hardly know each other, right?”

Luna returned the hat to her head, the brim still down. “It would keep the sun from burning the back of your neck and your nose. You have darker freckles there, you know.”

“Oh?” Ron said, and absently rubbed his nose.

Luna looked up at him, squinting in the sun. “You do have a big head, as well,” she said.

“I’ve been telling him that for years,” Harry quipped.

“That tears it!” Ron boomed. Harry laughed and scampered up the hill as Ron gave chase. Over his shoulder, he saw Hermione glance pointedly at the castle and nodded in return. Ron lunged forward at the crest of the hill, and managed to catch Harry’s ankle. They both crashed to the grass, and proceeded to wrestle around like a couple of first-years. Harry knew that Ron wasn’t serious about it, and they each pinned the other a couple of times before Harry wriggled free.

Ron brushed grass from his hair and then crossed his arms with mock sternness. “We need to settle this like men, Potter – in the air, of course,” he blustered.

“I have one thing to take care of, and then –” Harry began.

Ron cut him off. “That’s the theme for the year, isn’t it?” he huffed.

Harry sighed. “Look, mate...”

“I know you’re madly busy,” Ron admitted. “It’s just frustrating. Neville and Seamus and Dean... they’re good fellows; it’s not the same though.”

“You’re my closest friend, Ron – my first friend, right?” Harry said. “I know it isn’t the same. I’ll

make a better effort. We fly at four this afternoon.”

“Excellent,” Ron said; he sounded very relieved. “Be sure you bring your Nimbus, not that bloody bike! Are you sure about four, though? Will you be done with her by then?”

Harry was puzzled. “What?”

Ron let forth a barking laugh. “Merlin! Do you think that I’m blind? I saw the look she shot you – it’s the look that says ‘meet me in the library so we can save the world’. Are you sure you’ll be finished by four?”

Harry frowned. “It’s not like that. I was meeting with Covelli earlier and something strange happened. I’m hoping Hermione can make sense of it.”

“Something strange, you say?” Ron’s brow furrowed. “Well, I hope it’s nothing serious. I could get to like Covelli, if the Slytherins don’t hex her back to Italy.”

“What’s this about the Slytherins?” Harry asked.

“First day, she tossed her copies of the texts on the floor and cast *Incendio* on them,” Ron explained. “She said to everyone that V-V-Voldemort is a half-blood, and she said Bagshot and everybody else who’s written magical history in England are zena... zenic... um... zenta...”

“Xenophobes,” Hermione said from behind them. “You really *are* awake in History class now, aren’t you?”

“Who can sleep? It’s like a duelling ring in there!” Ron laughed. “I mean the only Slytherins who aren’t ready to curse her are Zabini and Davis; Daphne Greengrass looks like she wants to burn a hole in Covelli with her eyes, for Merlin’s sake!”

“Yes, she does,” Hermione said heavily.

Ron turned to Hermione. “I was just telling Harry that I knew you were off to swap secrets or whatever. He’s to be on the pitch and ready to fly at four this afternoon, right? I don’t care if you discover the Chamber of, um, Stuff That’ll Turn Lord Thingy Into Pudding – he’s free by four, right?”

There was a sudden gleam in Hermione’s eye. “Into pudding? There must be something in the Restricted Section on that!”

Ron gaped at her until the corners of her mouth twitched. “You’ve been around us too long,” he laughed.

“Look, Ron, I don’t have anything to say that you can’t hear. If you want to stick with us, it’s fine by me,” Harry offered.

“Nah, that’s even worse! If there are no life-or-death secrets... well, where’s the fun in that?” Ron

looked around the grounds at the scattered groups of students sunning and playing and carrying on. “Besides, I have work to do. As a Prefect, I have a certain responsibility to the rest of the students...” His eyes locked on a passing Hufflepuff in an unexpectedly brief sundress.

“I don’t seem to recall *that* responsibility in the Prefect’s Handbook,” Hermione chided.

Ron wagged a finger at her. “You’ve obviously stopped keeping up – revised version, you know?” He gave a dueller’s bow, and headed off to the sundress-wearing witch and a knot of her friends. “Hello, ladies...” he began in an unnaturally low voice, and Harry winced.

Hermione shook her head. “Thick as a shepherd’s pie, that one,” she said. “Shall we?” She began to walk in the general direction of the castle, and added, “It’s strange to see everyone so... I don’t know... casual? Relaxed?”

Harry nodded in agreement. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen it quite like this. There are three houses mixing freely, at least.”

Hermione let her eyes sweep the grounds. “I see a few Slytherins... not many, though.”

“So... when did you and Luna become so friendly?” Harry asked casually.

Hermione tugged her hand free. “The thing is...” She cleared her throat, and Harry knew that wasn’t a good thing. “Luna and I were in contact for a good part of August.”

Harry stopped walking. “What? How is that possible?”

“Doctor Covelli gave me a set of Repeating Journals,” Hermione explained. “She thought I needed to be in contact with someone my own age, someone who might understand how...” She let out a frustrated huff. “Look, I chose Luna, all right? I’m glad I did. She’s very different than I expected. Luna’s passing strange sometimes, but she’s very bright and very perceptive. She helped me, Harry – quite a lot.”

“When she was in St. Ebb, she was in contact with you?” Harry asked.

Hermione lowered her eyes. “Yes.”

Harry bit back his first impulse to shout. *At least she’s ashamed*, he thought angrily. “No wonder you felt guilty about shutting me out!” he snapped. “It wasn’t a one-time decision, apparently.”

“It couldn’t be you,” she said. “I couldn’t talk to you then. I’m sorry, but that’s the truth.”

He supposed it was because he’d nearly gotten her killed, not once but twice – several times, in truth. He supposed that was the reason, but he wanted to know for certain. When he gave voice to the wanting, there was anger in it mixed with sadness and regret and perhaps a spot of fear. “*Why?*”

Hermione stood there before him, rigid and terror-stricken. At first, he thought that he might have

asked it too loudly except that he'd not drawn the attention that shouting would have commanded. "Never mind – you don't have to answer that," he added quickly.

"You deserve to know," she forced out. "Not here, though."

"You're right," Harry said. He didn't want to play this out in front of the entire school. He grasped her fingers lightly, just enough to tug her in a different direction; she followed and he let go.

When it was clear that they were headed somewhere other than the castle, the lake or the pitch, Hermione asked, "Where are we going?"

"Somewhere more private," Harry answered.

"There's nothing in this direction other than Hagrid's hut and the path to Hogsmeade," Hermione protested.

Harry nodded. "That's right."

Hermione's lips thinned. "It wouldn't be right to use Hagrid's hut without first asking."

"That's why we're not going there," Harry said; he increased their pace.

Hermione struggled against his grip. "Harry, this is *not* a Hogsmeade day!"

Harry let loose her hand. "Do you agree that I'm part of the castle staff?" he asked.

Hermione's brow wrinkled. "As the Headmaster's apprentice, you have a lot of privileges... you're providing some instruction... yes, I suppose you're a member of staff."

"There's a Staff Handbook. I can accompany students to Hogsmeade at my discretion – can you believe it?" Harry explained.

Hermione gaped at him. "To *Hogsmeade* ? But... when you couldn't convince your aunt and uncle to sign a permission... do you mean to say that Professor McGonagall could have let you go?"

"No, she would had to have taken me there. Can you imagine a day out in Hogsmeade with McGonagall?" Harry shuddered. "I'd have taken the passage to Honeydukes even if I'd known."

"I've never heard this mentioned, Harry, not once," Hermione said slowly. "Perhaps the professors are concerned about favouritism? Surely there are limitations...?"

Harry shrugged. "Maybe they want to avoid hundreds of requests? As for limits, the only one I found is that underage students have to be returned by curfew. Well, Dumbledore can overrule a decision, of course; he can overrule just about everything if he wants."

"Are you sure this applies to you?" Hermione asked nervously.

“McGonagall gave me the Handbook,” Harry answered. “No one has mentioned any exceptions, not even Dumbledore.”

Hermione looked into the distance, where the grounds came to an end. “If you’re certain...”

“I am,” Harry said.

“The Three Broomsticks, then?” Hermione asked him.

“Above the Three Broomsticks, actually; that’s where I rented rooms,” Harry answered.

Hermione grew very quiet; she said nothing as they passed through the small pedestrian gate and began to round the lake. When the train station came into view, she asked, “Has it been lonely?”

“What, rooming in Hogsmeade?” Harry considered that for a few moments, and then answered, “A little, I suppose. I haven’t thought much about it. If I hadn’t stayed alone so much in August, I think the nights would be strange. Besides, I’m not the only lodger; Detheridge has the rooms below.”

“Professor Detheridge doesn’t live in the castle? That’s curious,” Hermione said.

“Not everyone lives in the castle, at least not all the time,” Harry told her. “Madam Pince lives somewhere in Hogsmeade. Vector regularly leaves on the weekends. I think Madam Marchbanks is commuting, and I’m not sure that Croaker stays at Hogwarts either. I know Mrs. Tonks returns to London most evenings.”

Hermione seemed quite surprised. “All of them seem to be at hand whenever needed,” she said. “I wonder how they manage it all?”

“Hogwarts looks a bit different from the staff room,” Harry said.

“Better? Worse?” Hermione asked.

“Different,” Harry decided. “Did you know that Flitwick’s wife died the year before we came to Hogwarts? She used to live in the castle with him. Sprout’s married as well; I haven’t met her husband yet.”

“It stands to reason that they have lives beyond teaching, of course,” Hermione said, but she sounded a touch uncertain.

“Dumbledore and McGonagall don’t, not so far as I can tell. Snape didn’t, but that’s not surprising,” Harry said. “Can you picture Snape off to the pub with his mates?”

“I’m not certain I can picture any of the professors off to the pub with friends,” Hermione admitted. “Even seeing them in the Three Broomsticks on Hogsmeade days was passing strange.”

“I wonder if any of them will be there today?” Harry thought aloud. He rifled through his pockets.

“Are you missing something?” Hermione asked.

“No... no... here it is,” Harry said. He withdrew a folded square of iridescent fabric. Detheridge had told him where to purchase one of the Any-Colour Expand-O-Robes that he’d worn on the Hogwarts Express; Harry thought it was one of the most dead useful things he’d yet acquired. “Black is as good as anything.” He held the square by one corner and shook vigorously. Hermione’s brows climbed as the square blossomed into a basic black robe. He slipped it over her shoulders, and added, “You’d stand out a bit in denims and that shirt.”

“I’d not thought of that; thank you, Harry,” Hermione said as she tugged her arms into the sleeves, and then proceeded to enquire about everything that Harry had learned about the charms on the robe.

She stopped talking and became noticeably uneasy as they entered the Three Broomsticks. The public room was busy. Harry scanned the room for Moody or other Order members. McGonagall was seated at a table with Vector and another witch he didn’t recognise; they were rather close to the door that led to the stairs. He hesitated for a moment, but it wasn’t as though he or Hermione were doing anything against the rules. Hermione didn’t move as he made for the door, so he reached back and took her hand again.

McGonagall caught his eye as they approached and nodded. “Good morning, Mr. Potter... or afternoon, rather. Have you completed your readings for our next session?”

“I’m ahead by one reading, actually,” Harry returned; McGonagall’s lips quirked into a small smile.

“*Miss Granger!*” Vector exclaimed. “What are you doing in Hogsmeade? You are completely out of bounds!”

“She’s with me,” Harry said brashly. “She’ll be returned to the castle long before curfew.”

Vector stammered, “But... but... Miss Granger, as much as I... that is to say, I realise that you... Minerva, what will you do about this?”

McGonagall gave Harry an appraising look, and said, “It seems that you’ve taken the time to read the Staff Handbook.” Realisation dawned on Vector’s face. McGonagall’s lips thinned considerably, and she added, “I offer you this advice, Mr. Potter: be circumspect in the use of this privilege.”

“Indeed!” Vector said quickly. “There are those who will surely view such matters in the poorest possible light.” She turned to Hermione. “It is not solely a matter of Mr. Potter’s rights and privileges as a member of staff, you see; some will instantly assume that you are taking inappropriate liberties. This is the sort of thing that will easily ignite jealousy amongst your community of peers.”

“Thank you for your concern, Professor,” Hermione said evenly.

McGonagall audibly sighed and returned her gaze to Harry. “Mr. Potter... Harry... I am aware that the Headmaster does not wish you to lead a solitary existence for the remainder of your studies, and I share his concerns. I also understand why you may feel that life in the castle is now awkward, but perhaps you should reconsider the matter of your rooms. Professor Snape took his position at the age of twenty-one, and thus a fair number of the students had been schoolmates of his; it was a most difficult adjustment for him, as I recall...”

Harry squeezed his fists tightly. “It’s *Mister* Snape now, Professor, and I’ll ask you to never compare me to him again,” he said coldly.

There was an awkward silence, at last broken by McGonagall. “You are here now, so you may as well continue with your recreation. The Headmaster tells me that the both of you and Mr. Weasley will be otherwise occupied tomorrow, and perhaps Monday as well. I expect that you’ll find time this evening to address your studies, Miss Granger? ”

Hermione went rigid. “I’m addressing my studies, Professor,” she said flatly.

McGonagall’s expression softened, much to Harry’s surprise. “Your work thus far has been merely acceptable, which is far beneath you,” she said.

Vector appeared surprised. “Is that so? Miss Granger, if your arithmancy special project is taking away from other studies, then perhaps a less aggressive plan is in order?”

“No thank you, Professor,” Hermione said. “I’m only concerned with my eventual NEWT scores now; as I understand it, acceptable performance will qualify me to sit the examinations?”

McGonagall’s face fell; Vector appeared to be in shock. Not knowing what to do, Harry said quickly, “Have a pleasant afternoon, Professors. If you’ll excuse us...?”

McGonagall’s curt nod of acknowledgement turned to stone when she realised that they were heading not to an empty table but to the stairs. She called after them, but Harry couldn’t make it all out over the din – it was something to do with keeping doors open. Harry expected that Hermione would grind to a halt, or at least blush; she merely rolled her eyes. He couldn’t decide whether she no longer cared what McGonagall thought, or was so focused on something else that the comments weren’t registering; he thought that he sensed a bit of both.

“What in Merlin’s name was that?” Harry asked as soon as they were well past the public room.

Hermione shrugged. “I’ve revised my priorities. Professor McGonagall isn’t ready to accept that.” Harry tried not to goggle at her; she seemed comfortable with whatever choices she had made, and he forced himself to let the issue drop.

She watched with undisguised fascination as he took his wand and permitted their entry through the wards cast on his rooms. The fascination quickly fell aside. Well before Harry offered her a seat and she instead made for the window, arms crossed, her unease was palpable. He couldn’t recall being so absolutely certain that he was feeling someone else’s feelings. There was

something so like Hermione about the feelings coursing through him that he couldn't deny it, even though he couldn't say what that something was. He didn't like knowing that she was afraid, that much was certain.

"Did you create those wards yourself, Harry?" Hermione asked. "They're very impressive." *It's fear, raw knee-knocking fear. Something else, too, but it doesn't have a name, it's unfamiliar.*

"Bill Weasley's teaching me," Harry answered. "Wards aren't so complicated, once someone explains them. Well... Bill's brilliant, not to mention being very patient."

"He was a Head Boy, after all. Besides, nothing's ever stopped you when you're interested in the subject at hand," Hermione said. *Another wave of fear, weaker this time – different, at least. Nervousness? Why won't she look at me?*

"I meant what I said, you know," Harry told her through gritted teeth. "You don't have to tell me anything if you don't want."

"I do, Harry; I do have to tell you," she returned without facing him. *Stomach rolling! Room spinning!* It seemed so intense; everything had been sharper and more uncomfortable since Dumbledore had explained what Snape had done, but this was the worst by far. He sat on the sofa, closed his eyes, and tried the simplest of Professor Covelli's meditation exercises; the rolling began to subside.

Hermione was nearer now; she was concerned, and so was her voice. "Harry? Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," he said absently. "I don't like it when you're so frightened. You don't need to spew up over telling me something, you know." The sofa cushions shifted under him; clearly she had sat down. He returned to his exercise, because she was silent.

"How did you know that I felt nauseous?" she asked quietly. "Were you guessing, or... did you just use Legilimency?"

Harry's stomach settled, but his head was throbbing. "I didn't *use* anything; I told you what Snape did to me," he snapped. "He left me open to everything. It's been worse since Dumbledore figured it out, for some reason."

When Hermione began to speak, it was slow and measured as though she was thinking aloud. "You've been picking up everything around you, because he never really taught you how to shut it out. You've been angrier when everyone else is angry, sadder when everyone else is sad... how long, Harry? How long has this been happening?"

He rubbed at his temples. "Dumbledore figures it's been since the spring, since Snape was supposed to be teaching me." Covelli's exercise seemed to be working, which was not something he'd expected.

"I see," Hermione said. He opened his eyes in time to see a flash of something profoundly painful

in her eyes; he broke eye contact as quickly as he could, for fear that he might chase the pain to its source. When he glanced up again, she looked as though she'd felt nothing at all.

Harry ventured, "Hermione, I want to help you, but –"

"Help me with what, exactly?" she cut him off cheerfully. "I'll be fine, given time – honestly. I'm just sorry you had to deal with this for so long. I wish I'd known straight away; things would –"

"Please don't say things would be different. Everyone wishes things were different," Harry interrupted.

"Yes, well... you did something to shake it off just now. Has Doctor Covelli taught you something that will help?" Hermione asked.

Harry frowned. "She's been teaching me different exercises – meditations, she says. I suppose it did help just now," he admitted begrudgingly. "Hermione, do you really trust her? Should I trust her?"

Hermione hesitated for quite a long time. He could feel conflict in her, though the feeling was not nearly as intense as before he'd done the exercise. He stilled himself and the feeling faded further. At length, she bore herself up in the way that he had associated with her since the first day on the Express. "Doctor Covelli saved my life, Harry, and I mean that in the literal sense," she said. "I trust her, but... I'm not going to tell you whether or not you should do the same. Even if she's trustworthy, she may not be the proper sort of instructor for you; that's something you have to decide. What happened this morning, then?"

"I saw things," Harry said, "things from her past."

Hermione's brow rose. "You were inside her mind?" Her curiosity was definitely piqued, but he suspected she wasn't going to ask him outright for details.

"She left the wizarding world for fifty years," Harry said. "Do you know why she left?"

Hermione chewed on her lower lip for a moment. "She was Professor Dumbledore's apprentice in the last years of the war with Grindelwald, and she left at about the time that the war ended. I assumed that it had something to do with the war. She's a pureblooded witch, and whatever happened was enough to drive her into the muggle world; honestly, I didn't want to ask after it. Is that what you saw? Did you see the reason that she left?"

"Part of it, I think," Harry said.

"It doesn't matter," Hermione said firmly. "I trust her, Harry, but you have to make the proper decision for yourself."

"She's afraid of me; she's afraid that I'll end up like Voldemort," Harry blurted out. "How am I supposed to trust her when she doesn't trust me?"

“She... she said that?” Hermione gasped. “She actually told you that?”

“She thinks Dumbledore has set me up to be some kind of hero... a mythic hero, I think she said,” Harry explained. “She said that Dumbledore had me raised to be like Tom Riddle, and he was barking mad for doing it; apparently these heroes of hers end up turning dark.”

Hermione looked composed again, but something about her felt terribly shaken. “R-riddle was a student when Doctor Covelli was an apprentice,” she said. “The things you saw, Harry... were they about Tom Riddle?”

Harry nodded hesitantly. “She was looking for him. She wanted to kill him. Dumbledore stopped her.”

Hermione sagged. Harry drew closer, but she gave an agitated wave. “I made her relive it; how could she not? She came back here because of me... actually, Professor Dumbledore coerced her but he used me to do it... and for him to ask her to practice Occlumency and Legilimency with you... how could he do that to her?” She buried her head in her hands. “She must be miserable! This is her thanks for helping me?”

“She could have said ‘no’,” Harry pointed out, “but she didn’t do that. You can’t blame yourself for her choices.”

Hermione let out a hollow laugh from behind her hands. “Of all people, Harry, you should be the very last to tell me that.”

“Fine, I deserve that,” Harry said. He tentatively brought his hand to rest on her shoulder. “I *am* glad that she helped you, for whatever reason she did it.”

Hermione’s shoulders heaved a few times. She slowly lowered her hands; her eyes were red-rimmed. “You’d never turn dark, Harry. He tried to make me think it, but you’d *never* – ” She stopped instantly, her eyes wide.

Harry’s mouth went dry and a surge of anger went through him. Unlike most of the other times, it felt as though the surge passed through him and receded into the distance. “Voldemort tried to make you think that I’d turn dark?” he asked as calmly as he could manage. “Is that why you didn’t want me to know where you were?”

Hermione flinched and Harry’s stomach rolled at that. “Harry, *please* don’t be angry with me... I never gave into him, I swear!” she insisted. “It was so hard... it was as though he reached into every single thought, every memory, and tried to poison them all. Even afterward... have you ever stared at the sun? He left an afterimage, just like the sun leaves. If it wasn’t for Doctor Covelli, I don’t know if it ever would have faded...”

He ran his hand in slow circles around the back of her shoulder. “I’m not angry with you, Hermione – don’t think that. I had no idea... it only lasted a few seconds; I thought he was just looking for the prophecy. That would have been awful enough.”

There was a tremor in Hermione's voice. "It wasn't just seconds - it went on forever... he was everywhere; I couldn't get away. He's still there in my dreams – the afterimage, I mean. Doctor Covelli showed me a way to take control and it's effective, but I still have to send the thought of him away every night. I don't know how you survived last year, Harry; I honestly don't know."

"I wish you didn't understand," Harry said.

Hermione sighed. "It's like seeing the Thestrals. These aren't the sorts of things I'd like to have in common with you, but here we are."

"If you'd like to go away with your parents for a while, I think everyone would support you," Harry said gently.

Hermione sat up sharply. "What?"

"I don't mean that you'd go away forever," Harry added quickly. "I just think that if you need more time, people would understand. I'd understand."

Her eyes were slightly narrowed. "How do you know that my parents went away?"

"Er... you mentioned it that first night," Harry said quickly.

Her eyes narrowed a bit more. "Harry...?"

"I'm helping Dumbledore with the arrangements... that's all I should say," Harry allowed.

She continued to eye him curiously, but said, "I agree; don't say anything more."

Harry took a moment and composed himself. He took his hand away from her shoulder, but she followed it by budging closer to him. He took another moment to settle himself, and then said, "I'm concerned about you, right? I can't be there for you now, not like before. I'm trying, but Dumbledore's set something like full NEWT tuition at double speed, and Detheridge is a struggle – a good struggle, I think – and Flitwick's working me over, and then McGonagall's added –"

She sought out his hand and grasped it tightly. "I was afraid that I wouldn't see you at all, so I'm hardly disappointed. You've come each time that I've asked. We've both been quite busy, actually."

"McGonagall made it sound like you haven't been busy. You didn't actually pull an Acceptable on a scroll..." Harry's eyebrows climbed. "You did! Hermione... are you sure that you're...?"

"The research is consuming a good deal of time, Harry," Hermione explained. "This project with Vector requires as much work as any three NEWT classes. Even with the minimum number of NEWT courses, it's been a struggle at times."

Harry was stunned. "Hermione Granger is taking the *minimum* number of courses? Are you taking the mickey out of me?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. “It’s not as though I’m putting my feet up and knitting all day! I’ll be qualified to sit for either six or seven NEWTS when the time comes, I promise you,” she insisted. “This project is terribly important, and I’ve already learned so much. Professor Dumbledore has a theory about the nature of the Unforgivables, and I think that I’ve found secondary evidence to support it. If the theory’s valid, then we may arrive at an answer to our principal question by the springtime.”

Harry leaned back to think through all that she had said. Hermione hadn’t released his hands yet, and he didn’t mind; that particular startling recognition led to a series of awkward and distracting thoughts. “Voldemort said something else or did something else, didn’t he?” Harry said at last. “You’ve turned your life upside down, Hermione; there has to be something more than what you’ve said.” She bristled, and he added, “Forget I said that. You’ll tell me when you’re ready – you promised that, right?”

“I don’t like keeping secrets from you – it doesn’t feel right – but I know there will be secrets kept,” Hermione said. “I should tell you this one at least, and be done with it. Professor McGonagall thinks I’m being ridiculous, or she said as much. She probably thinks I’m as flimsy as *Trelawney* now.”

Harry snorted, “There’s no chance of that!”

Hermione was becoming more nervous, he knew. She went on, “I’m still surefooted when it comes to research and I can be clever when rising to an occasion, but when it comes to other things... intuition and feelings and the like... well, it’s much more confusing!”

“I won’t think badly of you, Hermione, whatever it is – I promise,” Harry told her.

“That’s not why I’m concerned,” she sighed.

“I don’t understand,” Harry said.

Hermione sat in quiet contemplation for a long while. Then she looked him in the eyes, unflinching, and said, “Promise me you won’t be like you were last year. Promise me that, Harry – that you won’t run off and sulk and pity yourself and try to bear the whole world on your shoulders and push back everyone who cares about you. Promise that you won’t go off in a rage. Promise that you won’t run from me. Promise me those things, and I’ll tell you.”

“Erm... how bad can it be?” Harry asked nervously.

Hermione held fast. “Promise me first,” she insisted.

“I won’t go off and do something foolish,” Harry promised, “and I certainly won’t run from you. I’ve missed you and I’ve only just gotten you back, after all.”

She was so anxious that he had to close his eyes again to let it flow away. “Are you sure...?” she asked. “It’s all so uncertain... almost silly, actually. If it wasn’t still there every night...”

Harry tugged at her hands to make her stop. “Tell me... please.”

She began, “You’ve been in my mind – or I’ve been in your mind; it’s hard to know which – and it’s happened more than once –”

His eyes snapped open. “More than once? There was the dream, of course...”

“And the dream before that, Harry,” she said as though someone else might overhear.

“Before that? Which dream...?” He trailed off as he recalled the dream following Dumbledore’s casting of the secret-binding curse; he had wondered at the time if it had been real.

“We were lying down together, you were holding me... you wondered if it was something best friends do,” she confirmed nervously. “I didn’t know it was real until after Doctor Covelli had me use a pensieve and... Harry? Harry, would you say something?”

Harry cleared his throat, and forced the conversation forward. “So you’ve been in my mind, or whatever, and you saw something – or thought something, or put something together, and...?”

She nodded. “When V-Voldemort was pretending to be, you know, Sirius... I didn’t know that he was a fraud, I just knew that he was off. There was something about him that felt comfortable, even when he was acting so strangely, something that felt right. I couldn’t put my finger on it, Harry, not until he came to the house and he... he...”

Harry tugged his hands free and reached out to embrace her. “I’m so sorry, Hermione,” he said.

She slumped down and he stopped advancing. “He was almost impossible to resist,” she said weakly. “It wasn’t just the power. He felt so familiar; I had to resist him and myself at the same time. He felt like YOU, Harry – he felt exactly like you.”

Coldness spread through Harry. “It was a trick,” he said immediately. “Dumbledore already told me that some of Voldemort’s power transferred to me; he must have picked up something or another.”

“It wasn’t a *similar* feeling; he felt *exactly* like you,” Hermione said. Her voice seemed so distant. “I told you there are very few books about Legilimency. I read one of them again, the day after. Legilimency is a projection of a wizard’s own magical imprint – his aura, if you like. It’s unique, like a fingerprint; even twins would have subtle differences. I could see him before me, and yet there were moments when I was sure it was you. For a while afterward, I thought that you’d been trying to break the connection. I thought that maybe you’d been there, but I know that you weren’t, Harry – I just know.”

Harry tried to collect himself, but he couldn’t. He wanted to scream inside, but didn’t know what to scream. “S-so you think there’s more than just a transfer of power?” he managed.

“Yes,” she said, and she opened her arms to receive the embrace that she’d avoided.

Harry held back. “He could be lurking about, then, just waiting to come through and... and you shouldn’t be here, should you?”

Hermione sat up straight and reached out to him. “Think it through, Harry. Dumbledore wouldn’t even meet your eyes last year, and now you’re his apprentice. V-Voldemort... he couldn’t possess you. He can’t control you. He’s seen everything I could show him, everything except the prophecy – and he may have taken that from my Dad. I’ve nothing more to fear from being with you.” She leaned forward and clutched him tight, and he nervously brought his arms around her shoulders.

Harry broke the quiet. “I can see why you wanted nothing to do with me afterward. I was upset... all right, maybe a little angry... but it was because I didn’t know.”

She laughed nervously into his chest. “I suppose we’re even now. I’m sorry you were kept in the dark last year.”

She began to relax; her shoulders settled, and she leaned into him more firmly as her breathing slowed and deepened. Several minutes went by before he realised that he was stroking her hair, and he quickly brought his hand back to her shoulders.

“What are you thinking right now, Harry?” she asked.

“Not much,” Harry said. “I was, er, ‘being in the moment’ – I think that’s what Covelli called it. What are you thinking about?”

“Uh... I was... well... nothing important, really...” she stammered.

“What, you didn’t expect that I’d ask in return?” he sniggered.

She swallowed hard and he could feel the movement of it. “I was... I was wondering if this is what best friends do?”

Harry laughed nervously, and then tried to make a joke of it. “Well, I’m not about to be stroking Ron’s hair any time soon, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said anything,” she muttered and began to pull away.

Harry tightened his hold, not so much to startle her but enough to stop her. “That first dream... it was me, wasn’t it? I wasn’t just picking up on your feelings, was I?”

She was almost shaking, he realised. “It wasn’t the sort of dream I usually have,” she croaked.

It took very little for him to recall the way he’d felt – how he’d had to forcibly relax, how she’d felt so warm and soft in his arms. He remembered the feel of straps through her shirt, and he felt them now. He remembered being afraid of what he wanted to do, and the same fear came back to him. Now he knew. It was his fear, not hers, and it was becoming quite easy for him to tell the difference. He had no doubt now that the dreams – both of them – had been his, or had at least started as his. She had responded, but he had wanted it in the first place. *I wanted her*, he realised,

and it frightened him to the core because he wasn't simply recollecting. "Are we... are we making this up as we go?" he asked, hopeful that his voice didn't reflect his mortal terror.

Now she was truly shaking, and his hand returned to her hair as if it had taken on a life of its own. "What do you want, Harry?" she whispered.

He felt as though he might be strangled by his own voice. "That dream... I think I want that," he forced out.

She took three heaving breaths, and he was fairly sure that *he* was going to faint. "You have no idea how difficult all this is... God help me for saying it... but you need to sort yourself out first, and I should finish sorting myself out as well," she said. Then she let out a terribly long sigh and burrowed into him, which seemed to run counter to what she'd just said and thus left Harry utterly confused.

"Um... what do you mean... that I... er... need to sort myself out?" he spluttered.

She pulled away slowly, and Harry let her go. "Ron believes you're still seeing Professor Lupin's daughter – are you?" she asked. "I can't let you toy with me, Harry – I just can't do that – and I can't imagine you'd do it to me. You're not like that."

Harry frowned. "I meant what I said, and I'm not seeing anyone," he insisted.

Hermione's lips thinned. "Maybe you're not seeing her, *per se*, but you didn't contradict Ron," she said firmly.

He bristled. "Do you think I 'm lying then? Is that what you're saying?"

"Don't be snappish," she returned. "I do think you meant what you said, and I meant it when I said that this is difficult for me. We're friends; I won't run away, difficult or not. I'll help you study, if you like; I'll – I'll hold your hand, I'll spend every free minute with you if you like, but I can't let you..." Her cheeks flushed. "I'm sorry, Harry, there can't be anything like that dream – not right now. If I give into this, if we become more than friends, I need to know that you're certain – *really* certain."

Harry's brow furrowed. "Well, how certain are *you* ? How am *I* supposed to know...?"

"I couldn't be here now if I wasn't fairly certain," she said. He risked a glance at her face; she looked stricken – her brow was damp and her eyes were watery. "As I said, I still have some sorting out of my own to face."

"If you weren't certain then you couldn't push me away... Hermione, you're not making any sense," Harry protested.

Her voice trembled. "This isn't something that makes sense, is it?"

Harry sighed. "Look, the last thing I wanted to do was to make you cry –" he began.

“ – and I don’t *want* to cry!” she snapped. “I don’t want to be some sort of weepy girl – I’m not like that!”

“I’m not going to fight with you, either. I don’t like it when we argue – nothing good ever comes of it,” Harry said.

Hermione gave a hesitant nod. “W-what do we do now?” she asked.

Harry let out an exasperated groan. “I don’t know! I wasn’t trying to ask you to marry me, for Merlin’s sake, and suddenly everything’s about being completely certain. Who’s completely certain about something like this? It seems like *you’re* the one with the answers here...” He winced. “*Bugger!* That didn’t come out right – I don’t even know what to say!”

“You see? There’s another reason to worry about this, Harry,” Hermione said quickly. “There’s so much to be done, and no one can say how long we have; you can’t be tongue-tied around me, for goodness’ sake, and I can’t be that way around you either. People who are involved argue; and if we... you know... how would we get past it? You weren’t a prefect last year, Harry. You didn’t see what I saw: *couples* going from snogging in broom closets to spitting on each other. We *can’t* be like that! You need me - I have to help you, not distract you! I know I can’t be the one to kill V-Voldemort, but I might somehow find the way to do it. I need to help you, but I can’t do it if we’re not speaking to each other, and...” She shuddered, and went on even more quickly, “When I came back, I didn’t even know if you’d still be my friend, let alone my best friend... and now there’s *this* – whatever it is – and I don’t know what to do, and I don’t like not knowing – I *hate* it, really – and you don’t know for certain what you’re feeling and what you’re not – and that has to be horrible, honestly – but it all seems such a risk, and... and... what? Why are you smiling? I don’t – *mmph!* ”

Their noses bumped awkwardly and his glasses were in the way and she let out an audible gasp. Her eyes were wide with shock at first; he nearly panicked and backed off until she leaned into him and embraced him instead of pushing him away. Her lips were a little dry but very soft. Her eyes were closed when he pulled back.

When she opened her eyes they were unreadable. He reached up, tugged off his glasses and tossed them aside. “They’re in the way,” he said and he kissed her again. She laughed against his mouth, which was a strange sensation. He decided that he liked the way she tasted. She held him very tightly before she pulled her lips free of his. She didn’t frown, but she didn’t entirely smile either. She hadn’t tried to hex him or hit him or bite him, which he hoped were all good indications. She just sat there, breathing raggedly, and looked at him – searched his face for something.

He was sure that he was supposed to say something, so he let forth the first thing that came into his mind. “*That* was me,” he said. “*I* wanted to do that; *I* felt that. It didn’t come from somewhere or someone else. I just... I just thought you should know that.” *And I can’t believe I just did it, either* , he thought, and he hoped he hadn’t completely cocked up a friendship that meant more to him than he could ever find the words to express.

“W-what...?” she began.

He cut her off before she could reject him or offer the denial that was surely coming. “I don’t know what we do next,” he said nervously. “You know me, I’m not one to plan ahead.”

She laughed but he thought it was too loud, too fast, probably forced. “I was going to ask what you were thinking, tossing your glasses like that,” she said.

“There’s an Unbreakable charm on them now, remember?” he returned quickly.

“Still, we should pick them up,” she said, and then leaned over and gathered up his glasses by the bridge.

“Hermione, wait...” Harry started.

She thrust the dangling glasses into his hands. “It was nice, Harry... it was better than nice. It was also very... unexpected. All of this has been unexpected. I... I need to think.”

Harry nodded; he tried to put on a good face. “I hope you’re not angry with me,” he said quietly.

“I’m feeling a lot of different things right now, but I’m not angry; I promise,” she insisted. “I really need to think, that’s all.”

He consciously tried to pick up what she was feeling, and found himself utterly unable to do it. It seemed that there was no place to put his hands, and his stomach tossed and burned. “I... um... I guess I should walk you back, then,” he forced himself to say, “unless you’d prefer... I mean, McGonagall might still be downstairs, and...”

“I’m not running; not from you, not from her. No one is running away,” Hermione said firmly.

He let her out of his rooms first, so that he could seal the wards behind them. He followed her down the first flight, but she slowed her pace until they were side by side. She reached out to him and took his right hand with her left without hesitation. When he gave a start she said, “I told you I’d hold your hand,” and he accepted the possibility that perhaps she didn’t think him a great prat and merely needed some time to consider what had happened.

McGonagall and Vector were still sitting in the public room with the witch Harry didn’t recognise. Hermione made no effort to let go of his hand, and McGonagall’s frigid expression made it perfectly clear that the professor had noticed. They walked out of Hogsmeade in silence, hand in hand, and Harry thought that the tension slowly faded as they strolled along the carriage path. As the castle drew into view, her hand slipped free.

Hermione cleared her throat. “About tomorrow, Harry... I’ll understand if you want me to –”

Harry stopped her before she could offer to stay behind. “I’m looking forward to tomorrow,” he said. “You couldn’t possibly pass on this – it might be a once-in-a-lifetime invitation. Besides, I think it’s an opportunity.”

Hermione looked at him curiously. “Of course it’s an opportunity, Harry. You might be able to

significantly influence the goblins' position on the war."

Harry nodded. "Yeah, it would be great if we manage something like that. I meant something else, though. You said you're worried about being a distraction. Tomorrow, I can prove you wrong."

Hermione laughed. "You think so, do you? You can start by being sure to read the book that the Headmaster and Doctor Covelli sent for us."

"What, you mean 'Living Amongst Us: The Goblin Subculture'? I finished that last evening," Harry said smugly.

Hermione's eyebrows lifted for a moment, but then she summoned a sly smile. "Fine, then – you can be sure that Ron's read it. That way, I won't have to badger him."

"I already promised him I'd fly with him at four," Harry pointed out.

"There's an entire evening after that," Hermione countered.

"I have a commitment later this evening," Harry said, hoping she wouldn't ask after it because he honestly couldn't tell her anything, "but I'll give him a nudge. You're not planning to make this simple, are you?"

Hermione said, "Nothing about *us* has ever been simple." She took his hand again, gave it a gentle squeeze before letting go, and continued toward the castle. Harry followed with the slightest hint of a spring in his step.

It had taken Harry a solid hour to regain his form on the Nimbus. He kept wanting to under-steer, and wrapping himself around a stick felt much less secure than planting himself on the Bonnie. It also had a tendency to dart, unlike his Firebolt. The Firebolt would always be important to him – he could see it as a mounted keepsake – but it had become as much a reminder of Umbridge and the loss of Quidditch as it was a remembrance of Sirius. The Bonnie was like the living embodiment of his godfather, really, and Harry had to admit to himself that his once-prized broom now took second place.

He wondered if his hour of poor steering and sloppy dives and sub-par acceleration would have been something closer to a quarter-hour if he hadn't kissed Hermione. Every few minutes, he reminded himself that she honestly didn't seem to be angry with him. In the other minutes, he admitted to himself that Hermione probably would have hexed his hair off if she'd known what had happened on the beach in St. Ebb the week prior.

"Harry! Fetch the bloody Quaffle!" Ron snapped.

Harry blinked rapidly, just in time to see the Quaffle that they had been tossing; he turned hard – almost too hard – and managed to catch it in seconds.

"Where's your head today?" Ron called out. "Did you leave it in the library?"

“We didn’t go to the library,” Harry said quietly. He flipped the Quaffle in Ron’s direction, and pulled into a shallow loop.

Ron scooped up the Quaffle, and set it drifting in Harry’s direction. “You can’t let her get to you,” he advised Harry. “I’ve learned that the hard way, right? She’ll dig and dig and dig and you have to say ‘enough’! Set your line and play Keeper – that’s what I say.”

Harry caught the Quaffle and held it close. “Ron... what in the bloody hell are you talking about?”

Ron flushed. “Erm... thought you were having a row with Hermione. You have that look in your eyes; she must have said *something* horrid.”

“She didn’t do anything of the sort,” Harry growled.

“Easy, mate!” Ron said. “I’m only saying that you have that look! Are you going to toss the Quaffle or not?” Harry gave the Quaffle a disgusted toss. Ron barely managed to field it; he frowned and descended toward the open equipment box at the edge of the pitch.

Harry pushed the Nimbus into something as close to a flat spin as it would allow, and only pulled out when he could make out blades of grass. He came to a stumbling stop a few feet from the stands, and let his broom fall to the ground.

“Merlin’s Beard! Do you *want* to visit the Hospital Wing?” Ron shouted as he ran across the pitch. As soon as he drew close enough to lower his voice, he added, “I think you’d better tell me what happened.”

Ron didn’t appear angry – he seemed more concerned – but Harry held back. “It’s nothing,” Harry said. “Look, let’s try again... oh.” He hadn’t noticed that the equipment box was latched shut.

Ron crossed his arms. “Harry, this is me – Ron... you know... fighting mountain trolls, playing with big bloody chess sets, hexing mad professors, getting dumped in the lake, dodging Death Eaters and, um, brain thingies... er... *that* Ron, remember?”

Harry tried to put him off. “Ron... I really don’t think that we should – ”

Ron was having none of it. “When you say ‘it’s nothing’, that means you’re not bleeding to death. You were fine earlier, so something happened. What did she do, then?”

“She didn’t do anything! Hermione didn’t do anything wrong,” Harry insisted.

Ron stared at Harry for a few moments; his jaw tightened and his ears reddened. “What did you do to her, then?”

Harry picked up his broom and began to walk away. “Drop it, Ron,” he warned.

Ron followed closely. “Right... now you’re scaring me,” he said. “You couldn’t have hurt her – you *couldn’t* have... *Harry!* Stop walking and tell me what this is all about!”

Harry turned on him and snarled, “I *kissed* her. There – are you satisfied?”

Ron just stood there, speechless, and Harry went on his way. He was nearly to the locker rooms before Ron caught him. “So what’s the problem?” Ron asked. “You kissed her, and...” He broke into a smirk. “First Cho Chang, now Hermione... you *are* a bad kisser, aren’t you?”

“Sod off, Ron!” Harry snapped. He quickly looked around; the stands appeared to be empty.

“I don’t see the problem here. You fancy her, she fancies you... wait a minute, I’m on to you.” Ron sighed. “This is about *Heather* .”

Harry’s eyebrows shot up. “Will you shut it? We’re in the open here!”

Ron drew himself up. “Look, if you think I’m going to stand by and let you play with Hermione while you’re still thinking – ”

“SHUT IT!” Harry shouted. He was positive that one of the locker room doors had moved.

“I’m not going to shut it!” Ron returned. “You’re my friend, but so is Hermione, and – ”

Harry let out a frustrated roar. He lunged at Ron; when Harry took his next step, he dumped Ron on the grass on the far side of the Forbidden Forest.

Ron rolled to his feet, panic-stricken. “*What the bloody effin’ hell was THAT?*”

“There was someone in the locker rooms!” Harry shouted back. “I’ll not have this spread all over Hogwarts – and what if Malfoy was in there? Hermione doesn’t need any more grief, and the Slytherins *can’t* know about Heather!”

“*No! No! HOW DID WE GET HERE?*” Ron shrieked.

Harry’s stomach churned, and he quickly offered, “Er... emergency portkey?”

“EMERGENCY PORTKEY? ARE YOU...?” It was as though someone fed Ron a Calming Draught. “Are you serious? I mean, I can understand why Dumbledore would do that for you... that’s wicked...”

Harry quickly piled on to the lie. “Now I have to ask him for another,” he pretended to fume.

“Well, you shouldn’t have wasted it on *this!* ” Ron scolded. “I’m not blind – all you had to do was wave your hand toward the locker rooms, for Merlin’s sake!”

“You wouldn’t shut up!” Harry shot back.

Ron huffed, “Fine! Let’s talk about... AAAHHHH!”

Harry instantly drew his wand. “What? What is it?”

Ron grabbed him by the shirt and madly shook him. “MY NIMBUS! YOUR NIMBUS! *They’re sitting there on the bloody ground, practically gift-wrapped!* THEY’RE JUST SITTING THERE!” Harry gibbered at him and then began to laugh. Ron dramatically let go and huffed at him, and Harry’s laughter only increased.

“That’s enough of that!” Ron said sharply, and Harry wiped tears from his eyes as the laughter rolled on. “Put a cork in it, Potter!” Ron added, and Harry muffled his own mouth in a failed attempt to quiet himself.

“It’s a *broom*,” Harry choked out.

Ron looked at him as though he’d just said that magic didn’t exist. “It’s not just a broom, you ponce – it’s a Nimbus 2100-R!” he whinged.

Harry took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “It has an engraved nameplate and Devlin Whitehorn’s personal message to you written on it,” he pointed out, still chuckling. “Not very bright for someone to nick it, right?”

Ron harrumphed and set off at a brisk pace. “I’m fetching my broom,” he growled.

“Ron, you don’t even know where you are,” Harry called after him.

Ron stopped. “Please tell me that *you* know,” he said.

“This is the back side of the Forbidden Forest,” Harry said. He glanced around, and envisioned the Hogwarts grounds and surrounding area in his mind. “Erm... it might be best to use the, um, Portkey to get back... er, it was supposed to leave us somewhere close to Hagrid’s hut, not here.”

Ron hesitated. “There’s no other way? I’m not in a hurry to repeat that ride; that must be what Flooing is like for you...”

Harry shrugged. “Unless you want to walk round the whole of the Forest and past Hogsmeade, I’m out of ideas.”

“Not a very accurate thing, was it?” Ron muttered. He looked at Harry intently, and added, “It’s not a one-time sort of thing? Dumbledore gave you an unlimited Portkey?”

Harry decided to keep piling on. “Dunno... it’s always supposed to take me to the same place, so I figured if we try it again... um... it’s meant for one – maybe that threw it off?”

Ron licked his lips; he was clearly thinking over Harry’s explanation. “I suppose that’s possible... figuring that out would get into Arithmancy, I think, and that’s best left to Hermione. You could ask Bill about it. He’s probably made his share of Portkeys and what-not to get out of close scrapes. The thing is, if you’re right and the two of us together threw it off, what’s to say it doesn’t leave us in the middle of the Forest the next time?”

Harry frowned; he certainly didn’t have the time to walk back. “We still have plenty of light. I

suspect it would take a few hours to walk back; that would leave us on the edge of the Forest at nightfall.”

Ron grimaced. “Right, then – bloody Portkey it is. If we end up in *there* – ” He jerked his thumb toward the thick trees. “ – and we run across those... those *spiders* , I’ll make certain they eat you first, I swear!”

“And to think you’re my oldest friend,” Harry muttered, and Ron sniggered. Harry reached out quickly in hopes that Ron would be distracted. It worked; Ron flinched and squeezed his eyes shut. By the time he recovered, Harry had deposited the both of them unceremoniously next to Hagrid’s pumpkin patch.

Ron rolled over, breathing hard, and for a moment it seemed that he might spew; “Next time, Harry, just stun me and be done with it,” he groaned. Harry followed as Ron stumbled to his feet and began to pick his way toward the Quidditch pitch. He wondered if popping with someone was like forced Apparation; one of his readings at Grimmauld Place had mentioned something about forced Apparation causing nausea and headaches and sometimes worse. *I’ll have to ask Dobby about this before I try it again* , he quickly decided; it wasn’t hard to imagine that he and Ron – or he and Hermione, or all three of them for that matter – might have to rely on popping for a quick escape.

For most of the hike back to the pitch, Ron seemed resigned to mumbling about misplaced brooms and portkeys and other grievances. For his part, Harry was quietly thrilled – Hermione wasn’t mentioned once. The two Nimbus racers lay in the same place where they had been left.

Ron held his broom out and sighted down its length. “You don’t suppose they’re hexed, do you?” he asked. “After all, you thought you saw someone, and they were just laying here...”

Harry gave his own broom a visual once-over without touching it. “Detheridge has been covering detection; we went over a few charms for finding hexes...” He recalled the various incantations and methodically checked each broom, but found nothing. “They’re free of the basic sort, at least,” he concluded, and slung the broom over his shoulder.

Ron followed suit; then he cleared his throat in a noisy way that for a moment made Harry think of Ron’s brother Percy. “I can’t let it go, you know,” he said. “I won’t let you mess about with Hermione.”

Harry gave a start; he whipped out his wand and immediately built a silent space around the two of them. “I’m not messing about; she knows about Heather,” he told Ron.

Ron’s eyes saucered. “*Are you mad?* This is why you’re acting like the kneazle died, right? What did she do, then? Did she sock you like Malfoy, or did she cast *pruritis aegrius* on your bits?”

“No! Hermione’s not like that!” Harry insisted. “I didn’t say anything; she remembered what you said in the Room of Requirement.”

“What did I say? *Oh* ... I did mention Heather, didn't I?” Ron said sheepishly.

“Now if she knew that I'd kissed Heather as well, then she probably would have cursed me halfway to Hogsmeade,” Harry admitted.

Ron flushed instantly. “You... you *are* two-timing! Bloody hell, Harry – I won't have it, not with Hermione! What's gotten into you?”

Harry gritted his teeth. “Oh, that's rich coming from you, Ron,” he snapped.

“It's completely different!” Ron bit back. “Nobody expects anything from me, and I don't expect anything in return – it's all in fun. Nothing's gone any further than your basic snog – well, except Lavender, and we... er... have an understanding, I guess you'd call it. See, it's completely different – no one's being hurt.”

“How does Luna figure into that?” Harry asked angrily.

“That was your fault – you and Heather and whatever the two of you did. Look... Luna's not like I thought she was. She's a lot smarter than I knew, for a start, and she's got a sense of humour under all that... um... under the weird stuff, right?” Ron's easy smile dropped a bit, and he added, “It's like with Hermione, I suppose; Luna can do better than me.”

Harry couldn't believe that Ron could say that about himself with a straight face. “Don't even think that, mate,” he insisted.

Ron looked Harry dead in the eyes. His smile had returned but there was something cold and hard behind it, and Harry didn't care for that at all. “They want something that they can't get from me,” Ron said. “I'm not out to buy jewelry for a girl; I'm not shopping for dress robes, see? Come on, Harry, you've known Hermione as long as I have – she doesn't do things in halves. I don't think Luna's any different that way, now that I've gotten to know her a bit. I could ask Brocklehurst to Hogsmeade and there'd be no worries. I'm planning on it, actually.”

Harry just wanted to be done talking about Hermione; he suspected that he was in for more than his share of it later that evening. “What's your point?” he asked.

Ron rolled his eyes. “You – kissed – Hermione! What do you suppose she's thinking right now? She's probably in the Library, looking through some old scroll on relationships!”

Harry cringed at the thought; he realised that there was a very good chance that Hermione was obsessing about what had happened. “I didn't mean to kiss Heather,” he said. “I *wanted* to kiss Hermione, and I don't know what to do about it.”

Ron shrugged. “It's your mess, mate – enjoy it.” He broke into a smirk. “Now if you need Heather to go somewhere else, I'm sure I could help you with that.”

Harry smacked Ron on the arm. “You're impossible!” he groaned.

Ron closed his eyes and summoned a fatuous grin. “Come on, Harry, don’t tell me you couldn’t watch her walk in that bloody skirt all day long! How do they accomplish anything, anyhow? Skin *everywhere* ... I’d need an extra set of eyes if I were a Muggle.”

“Ron!” Harry snapped.

Ron opened his eyes again; he was back to the easy smile and the cold eyes. “Heather told me what she’s looking for, when we were on the beach. We’re looking for the same thing, Heather and me.”

“And what would that be?” Harry asked; he couldn’t keep the irritation from his voice.

“We just want to feel good,” Ron said seriously. “We’re thinking about today, see? Not next year – *now* .”

“Ron...” Harry began.

Ron waved him off. “Just don’t hurt her, Harry – don’t you dare. If you hurt Hermione, I... I don’t know what I’ll do, but it’ll be horrible!”

The feelings that Ron gave off were so conflicted that Harry’s head began to throb. He closed his eyes and tried to work through one of Covelli’s exercises.

“*Did you hear what I said?* ” Ron shouted.

Harry nodded, his eyes still closed. “I heard you, Ron. You won’t need to do anything horrible,” he said calmly.

“Er... right, then...” Ron said; he sounded confused, and Harry held back a grin.

Harry slowly opened his eyes; the throbbing was gone. He glanced at his watch and frowned. “I have to go,” he said. “Next time we fly, I’ll bring my best game – I promise.”

“You want to do it again?” Ron asked hopefully. “I was sort of wondering if some of the problem was, um, that you didn’t want to be here.”

“ ‘Course I do!” Harry insisted.

Ron smiled again, and this time it seemed to reach his eyes. “You’d better bring your game, all right! Maybe, er, you’d scrimmage with the team?”

Harry thought for a moment. “I’d have to ask McGonagall about that,” he said. “It might be against the rules.”

“I’ll have a go at the Rulebook,” Ron said excitedly. “It’ll be brilliant!”

Harry smiled at his friend. If scrimmaging would make him happy, then Harry would scrimmage –

assuming that Gryffindor wouldn't be penalised as a result. He let the silent space fall; Ron gave a hearty wave and headed for the castle. Harry stayed behind until Ron passed from view. With wand at the ready, he checked the locker rooms. He found no one there, nor was anyone hiding beneath the adjacent stands. He re-entered the nearest locker room door and then popped to the rear of the Three Broomsticks.

Madam Rosmerta nodded at him as he entered and gave a slight shrug toward the door to the private room. Harry knocked on the closed door. The knob turned, and Ted Tonks waved him in.

"Good evening, Harry. Everything is in place," Mr. Tonks said.

Dumbledore rose from a squashy armchair that he had no doubt conjured for himself. He held out a knapsack. "Everything is inside," he said.

"*Engorgio* on each item, and then cancel the feather-light spells?" Harry asked. Dumbledore nodded.

"Are you carrying your passport?" Mr. Tonks asked.

"No... I hadn't thought of that," Harry admitted. "It's upstairs."

"Fetch it, then," Mr. Tonks said. "I have some local currency for you, in the event you might have need for it." Harry casually left the private room, climbed the stairs, pocketed the passport that identified him as James Black as well as the shrunken Bonnie, and then returned. Dumbledore motioned to the two people seated before the hearth. They were completely cloaked and hadn't said a word. Harry was glad for that; he hadn't summoned the courage required to look them in the eye, not yet.

The Headmaster said, "Fawkes has agreed to provide transportation to and from the location. He will return for you two hours after you arrive." There was a fiery flash in the corner of the room. Fawkes flew to Dumbledore's shoulder and sang two brief notes. Though he couldn't see the faces of Dumbledore's cloaked companions, their postures seemed to relax and Harry was glad for that. Dumbledore gave a slight nod to Fawkes, and the phoenix left the Headmaster's shoulder and alighted on Harry's with a single flap of his wings.

"We certainly wouldn't want anyone falling by the wayside," Dumbledore said. He withdrew a great length of brightly coloured rope from within his robes, which he wrapped around Harry's waist and then tightly knotted; he then repeated the wrapping and knotting around the waists of the two persons in cloaks.

Fawkes rose into the air and slowly lowered his tail. "Think clearly of your destination, Harry," Dumbledore instructed. Harry fixed the image in his mind and then grasped Fawkes' tail. There was a rush of motion and two loud shrieks behind him, and then he found himself in the clearing that he had envisioned. He released Fawkes' tail; the phoenix flew clear of him, sang briefly and then disappeared.

Mr. and Mrs. Granger lowered the hoods of their cloaks. “Someone... might have... warned us...” Mrs. Granger gasped.

Mr. Granger laughed nervously. “Would it have mattered?”

Harry raised a hand. “Please... stay quiet until we’re on the property,” he whispered. Mrs. Granger’s eyes flitted from one tree to the next and she quickly nodded. Mr. Granger just looked at him, and Harry looked away as quickly as he could. He walked to the edge of the clearing and gave a series of complex waves with his wand; there was a ripple of *something*, and then stillness. “Come on,” he whispered. As soon as all three of them were within the cover of the trees, Harry repeated the sequence of waves and once again felt the ripple. The wards were in place, and he could breathe a bit easier.

“We should be all right now,” Harry said. “Hopefully no one was watching.”

Mrs. Granger slowed to a crawl almost as soon as they began making their way along the walk through the gardens. For a time, Harry feared she would stop at every rosebush and every different sort of flower; she lingered before a bed of monkshood. Mr. Granger’s eyes were chiefly fixed on the house – Harry supposed it was properly called a manor.

“What is this place?” Mr. Granger quietly asked.

“It belonged to my grandmother's family,” Harry returned.

Mr. Granger squinted in the direction of the sun. “It’s late morning here,” he murmured.

Mrs. Granger marvelled at a large topiary. “If our stay here is supposed to be a secret, I have to ask, Harry – how is all of this maintained?” she asked.

Harry hesitated, as he had a vague sense that Mrs. Granger would be as unyielding as Hermione when she heard his answer. “We really should make our way inside,” he said at last.

The entry doors were massive and sat beneath a portico. Harry tapped the brass doorknocker lightly, which yielded a rumble that brought to mind Hagrid seeking entry. The right-side door opened slowly.

Dobby emerged, dressed in the patchwork tuxedo that Winky had made him for the reading of Sirius’ will. “Harry Potter, sir!” he squeaked excitedly.

Harry greeted him as a friend, for he was exactly that. “Dobby,” Harry said, “I’d like for you to meet – ”

Dobby burst forward and eager shook Mr. Granger’s hand and then did the same to Mrs. Granger, as he bumbled, “You are the parents of Miss Granger! Dobby is so happy to be seeing you! Dobby is welcoming you to Henshawe Manor!” They handled quite well the spectacle of a three-foot-tall long-eared pointy-faced creature wringing their hands; Harry tried to imagine Uncle Vernon or even Aunt Petunia in the same circumstance but couldn’t manage it.

“To... where?” Mrs. Granger asked.

“To Henshawe Manor, Mistress Granger,” Dobby repeated. “Brucewood is the name of this place where Harry Potter has brought you and where we will tend to your needs.”

Mrs. Granger looked to Dobby and then to the gardens and then back to the grinning house-elf. “You care for the house *and* the gardens, Dobby?” she asked. “We’ll have to see about that.”

“Mistress Granger need not lift a finger, if Dobby can help it,” Dobby assured her; “The manor is ready for you, Harry Potter,” he then announced proudly and ushered them inside.

Both of the Grangers gaped at the sheer size of the entry hall. “Harry... this is too...” Mrs. Granger began. “Generous,” Mr. Granger finished.

Harry waved them off. “It’s sat empty for thirty years – that’s what I was told,” he said.

The four corners of the hall were fitted with large planters, filled with plants that flowered in brilliant reds and golds. “I think I recognise the gold ones,” Harry thought aloud, “but I’m not sure about the red ones.”

“Lychnis and solidago, Harry Potter sir,” squeaked a tiny voice from the shadows. “Dobby said that the colours suited Harry Potter sir’s manor.”

“I wondered where you were, Winky,” Harry said. “Come and meet the Grangers, would you?”

While Dobby was all motion and energy, Winky was tentative for the most part. She fretted with the hem of her dress as she slowly crossed the hall. “Winky will serve Harry Potter sir by serving the not-wizards as best she can,” Winky said softly.

Mrs. Granger knelt down, which left her a few inches taller than Winky and drove the house-elf’s eyes into saucers. “Will you show me the gardens later?” she asked. “They’re quite remarkable. I can’t imagine how you would have restored them after such a long time. Did you select the plants to be included?” She continued to fire away questions and Harry couldn’t help but see Hermione in her mother, bristling at the idea of being served and thirsting for knowledge.

When the questions tapered off a bit, the house-elf said to Mrs. Granger, “Winky does not know your given name, so Winky does not know how to address you.”

Mrs. Granger smiled. “My name is Cordelia.” She gestured to Mr. Granger, and added, “My husband’s name is Thomas.”

Winky nodded; she still absently toyed with her dress. “Winky will show you whatever you wish, Cordelia Granger,” she said.

Dobby tapped his foot angrily. “This is Master Granger and Mistress Granger,” he insisted.

Winky hissed at him, then said forcefully, “If Harry Potter sir is Harry Potter sir and not Master

Harry or Master Potter, then this is Cordelia Granger and Thomas Granger sir, or Madam Cordelia and Mister Thomas.” Dobby glared at her, but said nothing.

“Simply Cordelia would be fine, Winky,” Mrs. Granger interjected.

Winky noticeably stiffened, and cast her eyes downward. “Winky did not mean to presume,” she whispered.

“Our daughter has told us that your people are enslaved,” Mrs. Granger said kindly. “In our world – in the world of Muggles – slavery has been a crime for many years. We’ve certainly never kept slaves and we’ve never hired servants. I don’t know what you expect from us, but we’re likely to treat you as fellow guests even if you do provide services.”

“Hired servants wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world...” Mr. Granger said under his breath.

Mrs. Granger’s head snapped around. “Thomas!”

Mr. Granger held up his hands. “I’m just saying – that’s all!”

“You certainly won’t be treated as though you were slaves,” Mrs. Granger finished in a huff. Dobby had a glint of understanding and a few unshed tears in his eyes; Winky appeared bewildered.

Harry shuffled his feet. “Well, then... I have to set a few things in place, and then we should cast the charm as soon as possible,” he said. Watching the Grangers made him think of Hermione, and he didn’t want to do that – he wasn’t going to think of her, especially when she wasn’t even there. She believed that she was a distraction, and he wasn’t going to let her be right about it.

Dumbledore had helped him pack a kit for the casting of the charm and the marking of the supporting runes. Harry went into the study just off the entry hall and spread out the pack atop a bare desk. Because Brucewood had blood wards, he had to wet the stick ink with drops of his own blood before mixing in the water and adding the fixing oils. Once the runic ink was mixed he took the inkbottle and quill, returned to the entry doors, and began to inscribe the proper runes on the doors. Dumbledore had prepared a card that showed Harry exactly what to inscribe; after every few runes, Harry stopped to check his work against the card. He could feel Mr. Granger watching him from behind, but he shunted the feeling aside and concentrated on his work.

Once the entry doors were completed, he made his way to the interior of the house, to the safe room that he had picked out. Again, he inscribed the door, and then added inscriptions to the doorframe. He knew that Mr. Granger had followed and was still observing, but ignored it. Harry couldn’t stand inside the room without imagining Dobby making some sort of last stand against a pack of Death Eaters intent on getting at Hermione’s parents. The thought made him flush with heat; he quickly left the room as soon as his quill drew the last rune.

He climbed the stairs until he reached the small tower atop the vault of the manor’s great hall. The floor inside the tower was opened at the centre; it exposed the top of the keystone to the central

support arch. The stone was covered with evidence of runes – there were faint traces of ink here and there. Dumbledore had explained that the property’s wards would radiate from the keystone – they were far more complex than both the warding on the bothy and the warding that he had placed on his rooms in Hogsmeade. Harry carefully wrote the protective runes associated with the *Fidelius* charm across the curve of the keystone. Dumbledore believed that this would shape the result of the charm like a bubble over the entire property, and had presented evidence from various tomes and scrolls to support his belief. Harry hoped that he was right.

When Harry returned – with Mr. Granger close behind – he found Mrs. Granger reading the spines of the books in the study. She turned and asked, “Is it time?”

Harry nodded. He made his way to Dumbledore’s kit, and tucked away the quill and the inkbottle and the card. There were two envelopes inside; Harry was sure he hadn’t seen them there before. One was marked “For the Grangers”. The other said “Read Me”; the gold ink suddenly twinkled at Harry as he touched the envelope, and he let out a soft snort. He handed the first envelope to Mr. Granger, and opened the second himself.

Dear Harry,

There is no doubt that you have inscribed the necessary runes in exactly the fashion that I have described and depicted for you. I have not entered into your mind, but you remain unaware of the potency with which you on occasion project your emotions. Thusly, it is important that we dispense with the balance of your doubts.

Firstly, you possess far more than the necessary power to cast the charm.

Secondly, you possess in ample measure the necessary disposition. I have no doubt that you care for all three of the Grangers, and the depth of your care for the youngest Granger strengthens your bond with the elders.

Thirdly, Voldemort will be unable to penetrate the protections of the charm; it is truly safe for you to be the caster. Once you cast it, the charm may only be circumvented by accident or by your own willingness to allow it to fail. I know you will be unwilling to do so until such time as it is safe.

Finally, some flotsam from an old man’s mind –

There can be no active secrets between yourself and the Grangers at the time you cast the charm. Secrets will prey upon you; they will obstruct trust and may obstruct the casting. Unburden yourself if necessary. When you do cast the charm, allow your magic to flow freely. You may feel strange or uncomfortable during the casting; this is normal, and you should pay it no mind.

I am already rather fiercely proud of you, and I shall be made even more proud when you return after succeeding in this important – nay, sacred – task.

Fondly,

Albus Dumbledore

Harry re-read the last bit once, and finished just as the parchment fell to dust in his hands. He looked to the envelope; the paper faded away, leaving the golden words “Read Me” floating just above the desk top for a moment. The second “e” winked at him, then spun and fizzed like a Catherine wheel and disappeared with a loud pop.

What’s an ‘active secret’? he wondered. Was withholding something the same as keeping a secret? Did he have to tell the Grangers everything about himself? There was only one thing that seemed a bit like a secret, in that the Grangers were quite possibly the last people on Earth who he intended to tell about it.

Mr. Granger had passed the other letter to Mrs. Granger, and it too fell to dust. The Grangers shared an anxious look before Mr. Granger blurted out, “I’m glad you killed them!” Mrs. Granger’s eyebrows shot up even as Mr. Granger let out a sigh of relief and added, “I’ve wanted to say that for a month. They tried to kill us all, and I’m bloody well glad that they’re dead.”

Harry shuddered; sometimes he felt as if he would find the Grangers’ dining room through the next door, and it was one of those times just then. His chest tightened. “I didn’t have to kill them; it wasn’t right,” he said with difficulty. “I can still see it, all the blood... I could have left them for the Aurors, but after what they...” He couldn’t manage to say any more.

“I wish you hadn’t been the one to do it, Harry,” Mr. Granger said. “This shouldn’t fall to children – I’m sorry, but you’re sixteen years old! It shouldn’t fall to you and H-Hermione and the Weasley children and the others – it’s not right!” His jaw tightened as he fell silent.

Mrs. Granger went on, “We’re doing this because Hermione can’t afford to be distracted, not when she’s likely to be at the centre of things. She asked this of us, and we’re doing it, but we’d hold her here if it was possible.”

“I tried,” Harry said quietly. “Just today, I told her everyone would understand if she needed to be with you. I tried, honestly – she wouldn’t hear of it.”

Mrs. Granger gently elbowed her husband. “I think that something else needs to be said, don’t you?” She mouthed the word ‘wine’ so clearly that Harry couldn’t possibly mistake it.

Mr. Granger gave a small frown. “Harry... I shouldn’t have filled your glass more than once, and I was certainly not on my best behaviour when you joined us. I apologise for, um, getting you soused.”

“I was in a bad way the next morning, but nothing awful happened,” Harry allowed. “I don’t think an apology is needed...” Mrs. Granger rolled her eyes, and Harry added, “... but consider it accepted.”

Mr. Granger slowly let out a long breath. “It’s good to have all that in the clear,” he said. “The old man was right about that, at least.”

Harry didn’t realise that he was fidgeting until after he’d begun. “Well, then...” he said.

The Grangers shared another look. Mrs. Granger asked, “Is there something you need to tell us?”

Harry tugged at his collar. “Erm... just one thing, I suppose... um... small thing, really...”

“You’ve gone pale... surely it can’t be that bad?” Mrs. Granger offered hesitantly. For his part, Mr. Granger appeared to be bracing for horrid news.

Harry squeaked, “It’s just... um... ikissedhermione.”

Mrs. Granger crooked an eyebrow. “I’m sorry, what was that?” Mr. Granger’s mouth twitched oddly and Mrs. Granger covered the lower part of her face with her hands.

Harry winced as he said more clearly, “I kissed Hermione.”

“You *kissed* my daughter,” Mr. Granger confirmed. Harry nodded, and Mr. Granger’s mouth quirked into a grin.

Mrs. Granger let her hands drop. “You’ve gone pale over *that* ?” she laughed.

“Yes!” Harry said defensively. “She wasn’t expecting it and I think I’ve upset her, and if I’ve gone and fouled five years’ worth of... what’s so funny?” Mrs. Granger let out a snort and Harry suppressed a growl.

Mr. Granger tried to summon a serious expression but couldn’t seem to manage it, which only raised Harry closer to a boil. He said, “Don’t mistake this for encouragement, exactly. Frankly, I’d prefer that Hermione seek out a religious community... you know, we could have taken her to that priory in Begbroke...”

Mrs. Granger snorted again. “Oh, that would have been brilliant! The prioress wouldn’t have survived the first ten seconds with her... *honestly* , Thomas.”

Mr. Granger laughed, and then said, “The fact of the matter is that Cordelia and me... well, we both assumed that a fair bit of kissing went on at that house in London. Given that you’re showing signs of imminent cardiac arrest, I’d say we were well off the mark!” Mrs. Granger began to laugh, and covered her mouth again.

“It’s not funny – not at all,” Harry said flatly.

“It’s a bloody relief!” Mr. Granger said jovially. “I had something a lot more involved than kissing fixed in my head when you started to panic, let me tell you!”

Harry’s eyebrows nearly shot off his forehead. “We would never... *she* would never... that’s not it

at all!”

Mr. Granger clapped him on the shoulder. “My daughter’s boyfriend is afraid he’ll push her too far with just kissing and will literally kill to protect her. I’m having a difficult time finding fault! I am having one hell of a time getting the word ‘boyfriend’ out of my mouth, but I think righteous anger’s out of the question here – ”

Harry finally managed to cut him off. “I’m not Hermione’s boyfriend.”

Mr. and Mrs. Granger traded another look. “I see,” Mrs. Granger said. “Of course, Harry,” Mr. Granger added. Harry let a growl free.

Mr. Granger held up his hands in surrender. “We’re done stirring you up,” he promised.

Harry calmed himself and struggled to find the right words. “Hermione’s very important to me – that goes without saying, right? I’ll do my best to keep her safe – this much I can promise you.”

“We know that, Harry,” Mrs. Granger said.

Hermione’s parents were both smiling at him; part of Harry figured they should be flushing purple and frothing at him like Uncle Vernon, simply for putting their daughter in danger. Hermione was lucky enough to have two parents, both of whom obviously cared for her, but Harry wasn’t jealous or envious – he was just happy that she had what he didn’t.

“I’ve lost my parents and I can’t get them back,” Harry said. “That isn’t going to happen to Hermione, not as long as I can help it.” A draft ran through the study and stirred his hair, and it occurred to him that he could *feel* magic flowing around him. Mrs. Granger’s eyes were filled with unshed tears. Harry raised his wand, waved it as he had been shown, and said, “*Fidelius*. ”

The draft turned into a gale, and the room around them shimmered in a white light. Harry blinked against the light and struggled to hold his ground. He blinked again, and swore that the house was slowly disappearing. The light receded, and the house was gone, the land was gone – he and the Grangers and Dobby and Winky seemed to be standing there in nothingness. A dull clanging came, as much felt as heard; first the grounds reappeared, and then the manor around them. When the clanging stopped, books and papers fell throughout the study. Thankfully, the Grangers were spared somehow from the falling debris; a tome entitled *Historical Lineages in the English-Speaking Wizarding World* landed on Harry’s head.

His next clear awareness was of Mrs. Granger sitting on an armchair beside him; he was on a sofa in a room that he didn’t recall. *I really have to apologise to Shackbolt* , he thought as he tried to move and was rewarded with a crushing headache. He shook it off and glanced at his watch.

“Are you all right, Harry? Do you know where you are?” Mrs. Granger asked.

“Very near to the Pacific Ocean,” Harry said thickly.

Mrs. Granger’s brow furrowed. “Harry...?”

Harry slowly sat up. “We’re in British Columbia, Mrs. Granger. You’re on the western side of a very big island, and Fawkes returns for me in... half an hour.” He tested his footing and, finding it adequate, made his way down a corridor to a staircase and into the entry hall.

Dobby and Winky had already begun the process of enlarging the Grangers’ belongings; the hall was lined with trunks and crates of all sizes. Harry spirited Dobby into a side room, where Dobby happily performed some sort of elfish magic that relieved Harry’s headache in moments.

“Dobby, are you clear on all the contingency plans?” Harry asked.

The house-elf nodded furiously. “If the charm falls, Dobby will pop Master Granger and Mistress Granger to one of the other locations and Winky will come to Harry Potter. If Dobby and Winky are prevented from popping, Dobby will lead Master Granger and Mistress Granger to the safe room and Winky will fight.”

“Did you say Winky will fight?” Harry confirmed.

“Winky understands that Master Granger and Mistress Granger are family to Harry Potter,” Dobby said. “Dobby and Winky are both ready to follow Harry Potter’s command; Dobby and Winky will... will kill if we must. Dobby knows that Winky can be vicious, so Winky will fight first; Dobby will fight if Dobby must.”

“Dobby, you are my friend,” Harry said earnestly. “Winky is my friend, too. I want you to protect the Grangers, but I don’t want either of you to do anything foolish. I want you both to get out of here along with the Grangers, unless it’s impossible. Do you understand?”

Dobby sniffed twice, then reached inside his patchwork tuxedo and drew out a handkerchief. He blew his nose loudly and dramatically; it sounded like the horn on Dudley’s old bicycle, Harry thought. As Dobby tucked the handkerchief away, Harry spotted a blue monogram on it – A.B.W.P.D.

“How did you get that handkerchief?” Harry laughed.

“Headmaster Dumbledore gave it to Dobby when Dobby left Hogwarts,” Dobby squeaked. “He wasn’t needing to give Dobby clothes, since Dobby was *hired*. Dobby thinks it was one of Headmaster Dumbledore’s little jokes, but Dobby kept it just the same.”

Harry moved to leave, but Dobby flung himself around Harry’s legs. “Dobby is Harry Potter’s friend,” he cried. “Dobby is the luckiest elf!”

Harry managed to tug Dobby free. He lowered himself to his knees and moved to shake hands; he wanted to look Dobby in the eyes as Mrs. Granger had done with Winky. Instead he found himself gripped in a surprisingly powerful hug.

“Dobby will not fail Harry Potter,” the house elf said fiercely.

“I know,” Harry said. “Thank you.” Dobby was still twittering about being thanked by Harry

Potter as Harry made his way to bid farewell to the Grangers. He left them one last thing – a wrapped package about the size of a shoebox. He told them it was from Dumbledore. He left to meet Fawkes before they could open it.

Harry Potter and the Years of Rebellion Thrill Of The Hunt

Chapter Thirty-five

THRILL OF THE HUNT

September 15

"It's not *that* bad," Harry told Ron. His shirt fit closely, but Harry was still growing accustomed to clothing in his own size. With the waistcoat and vest added, he felt more encumbered than he would have liked.

"It's that bad, all right!" Ron moaned. "What are these things, trousers or pants?"

"I think Dumbledore called them breeches," Harry said.

"Do you want to hear what *I* call them?" Ron fumed.

"I'll take a pass," Harry laughed.

Ron's voice went shrill. "They're having us on, you know – the goblins are going to have a right laugh over us!" Harry just shook his head. "You're telling me that they actually dress like this?" Ron went on.

"Someone's never opened his eyes at Gringotts," Hermione said from behind them. Harry stood up quickly from the Common Room sofa. He smoothed his hair, but stopped as soon as he gave it a thought – it was futile, he knew.

"At least you're only wearing a smart version of what the goblins wear to work," Hermione went on. She wore a long dark dress with a lace collar. It looked heavy and it was exceptionally full.

"Would a cooling charm help?" Harry asked.

Hermione smiled broadly. "That would be brilliant, Harry!" He quickly obliged.

Ginny came stumbling down from the girls' dormitory; a pair of third-year girls gave her as wide a berth as they could manage. She had the look of someone experiencing the morning after the night before, and Ron began to glare well before she reached the base of the stairs. She walked

past Hermione, then Ron and then Harry without any more acknowledgement than a rude grunt, and then stopped dead just beyond Harry. “What in the bloody hell are you wearing?” she croaked.

“Language, Ginny!” Hermione protested.

“What were you doing last night?” Ron demanded in return; Hermione gave Ron a solid thwack on the arm.

“Working on a special project for Professor Flitwick, as if you care,” Ginny snapped back.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Ron fired off.

Harry cut in. “We’re off to meet with the goblins,” he reminded Ginny.

“Ah, the goblins,” Ginny muttered. She squinted in the direction of Harry’s neck; Harry took a half-step back. “Your ascot... it’s completely wrong,” she said.

“My... what?” Harry said.

“Ascot... *ascot*,” Ginny said impatiently. “You don’t know what’s wrapped around your neck?”

Hermione gave Ron an appraising look. “Ginny’s right,” she agreed. “Here, let me help you with it.” Ron gurgled as Hermione twisted his ascot tight.

“Neville had one with his robes for the Yule Ball. He couldn’t manage it either,” Ginny said.

Ginny had her troubles with the ascot, as well; she was on her second try when Harry cleared his throat and asked, “Do you remember what we spoke about at the Lovegoods?”

Ginny’s hand twitched and the ascot came loose again. “How could I forget?” she said quietly.

“It wasn’t you,” Harry told her. “I’m sure of it.”

Ginny started again with trembling hands. “You’re sure I didn’t let the dream happen? How can you be sure of it?” she asked.

“A lot has happened in the last month,” Harry said. “I can’t explain, but it wasn’t you. I, er, just thought you should know.”

Ginny pulled harder on the ascot than was necessary; Harry stumbled forward. “You can’t explain, or you *won’t* explain?” she asked coldly.

Harry frowned. “I thought you should know; it’s one less thing to worry about.”

“I’ll be worried about it until Voldemort’s dead and gone,” Ginny said. “I’ll probably be worried about it for the rest of my life.” Harry looked around the Common Room to see if anyone else was within earshot; Ginny pulled hard on the ascot, and Harry faced her again.

“It was me, Ginny,” Harry said. “I know it was me.”

Ginny pursed her lips, and finished spreading the sides of the fabric. She undid the top button of his shirt and carefully tucked the ascot into place. “Do you have a pin?” she asked.

Harry was confused. “A pin?”

“A stick pin – do you have one?” Ginny repeated. “It’s to keep the ends in place.”

He looked at her blankly. “No... should I?”

“It’s always good when you can pin things down,” she said absently. She smoothed the ends by moving her hands against his chest and she took her time doing it. He began to feel distinctly uncomfortable, and he was painfully aware that Ron and Hermione were both watching.

“What’s this about?” he whispered forcefully.

Ginny let her hands drop. Her tone was curious, and he couldn’t figure what she was feeling. “Thank you for letting me know, Harry,” she said. “I was getting tired of hiding myself away, you know – always making sure to stay clear of you.”

“Erm... either McGonagall or Dumbledore will be coming for us,” Harry said quickly. “I don’t think you want to be seen...”

Ginny ran her hands through her hair. “That bad, eh? I suppose the Great Hall’s out, then...”

“I could call for a house-elf –” Harry murmured. With a high-pitched pop, a house-elf appeared no more than a foot from him; he was so startled that he nearly fell.

“Esteemed apprentice Master Harry sir!” the house-elf squeaked. “Why do you call for a lowly house-elf in the presence of... of... *students* ? We is not to be seen, Master Harry sir! We is... *EEK! She-Who-Knits!* ”

Hermione buried her face in her hands, and Ron’s eyes widened before he started to laugh. ““She-Who-Knits’?” he chortled. “Oh, that’s rich!”

“Hermione... I... I’m so sorry...” Ginny giggled.

“Good morning, *Spat* ,” Harry said angrily. “I don’t appreciate having my friend’s feelings hurt.”

Spat’s eyes bugged and he quickly ducked his head. “Spat was impertinent,” he said quickly. “Spat apologises to Master Harry sir.”

“You’ve hurt Hermione, not me,” Harry snapped. “If you’re going to make your apologies, then you speak to her.”

Spat fidgeted nearly to the point of trembling. “We is not to be seen and we is not to speak, Master

Harry sir! You are the Headmaster's esteemed apprentice so we speaks to you, and we speaks to the professors!"

"Harry, please stop," Hermione said softly. Spat stared at her for a long moment, and then returned his eyes to the floor. She walked toward the house-elf, who nearly convulsed as a result.

"*No hats, Miss ...*" Spat cried.

"No more hats, I promise you," Hermione told him.

"She... the Miss is having Spat on," Spat said nervously.

"I never meant to hurt any of you!" Hermione assured him. "I don't believe that any of you should be enslaved – it's plainly wrong – but it's clear I went about things badly. I'm truly sorry."

Spat gasped. "The Miss mustn't apologise to Spat! The Miss acts like Master Harry sir, and Master Harry sir shouldn't act as Master Harry sir does!"

"If I caused you pain, Spat, then I should apologise," Hermione insisted. "Again, I'm so sorry."

The sound of a clearing throat at the portrait hole drew everyone's attention. "Pardon, but am I to understand that the elves refer to one of my students as 'She-Who-Knits'?" Dumbledore asked.

Spat threw himself to the floor. "H-H-Headmaster s-sir... Sp-Sp-Spat f-followed the will of t-the _"

"I am disappointed," Dumbledore said, and Spat responded as though he'd been struck. "I shall speak with the Taaimmainen this afternoon. In the meantime, please refrain from using that name; it is derogatory." He turned to Hermione. "And as for you, Miss Granger... I take it that this is in reference to your penchant for making elf-sized headwear?"

Hermione blushed fiercely. "Yes, Headmaster. I've not done it this year, I swear."

"You are a curious sort of rebel," Dumbledore said with a twinkle in his eyes. "I trust that you will be more diplomatic in your efforts today?"

"Of course, Headmaster!" Hermione said immediately.

Dumbledore looked at his curious watch from several angles. "Minister Fudge has somehow become aware of your pending visit with Fliptrask and his colleagues. He is most anxious to meet with the three of you before you depart," he said. "That is why I am ten minutes late in arriving here –"

A terrified squeak came from the stairs to the boys' dormitories. Two young students peered over the railing; their shock at seeing the Headmaster in their Common Room was clear.

Dumbledore gave a friendly wave, and began again. "That is why I am ten minutes late in arriving

here, which will in turn require that you make your way to the waiting carriage immediately. A pity, wouldn't you agree?" Ron appeared lost until after Harry and Hermione both smirked.

The Headmaster turned to Ginny. "Miss Weasley, you look a fright. Might I suggest that a lie-in is in order? Young elf, please fetch some light breakfast and take it to Miss Weasley in the fifth-year dormitory... some of Professor Detheridge's coffee appears in order, as well. Go on – off with you both!" Spat disappeared and Ginny trundled toward the stairs with her head ducked. Harry, Hermione and Ron followed Dumbledore through the portrait hole and toward a small staircase that none of the three students could recall ever seeing before.

The small staircase wound endlessly downward. Just when Harry suspected that they were nearing the centre of the earth, Dumbledore opened a partially concealed door that opened into the corridor that led to the first floor classrooms. Harry looked to his left; Fudge, Percy Weasley and a knot of Aurors waited at the base of the main stairs in the entry hall. Before Ron could turn, Harry nudged him after Dumbledore. They exited into the courtyard and moved briskly down the walk and then along a path until they reached a waiting Thestral-drawn carriage.

"This is where I take my leave," Dumbledore said. "Unlike Cornelius, I have every confidence in the three of you."

"Er... we won't do anything daft, Headmaster," Ron offered.

Dumbledore gave a soft chuckle; "Provided that you avoid apocalyptic errors, all shall be fine in the end," he returned. He held out his hand to Hermione and ushered her into the carriage, then stepped aside for Ron and Harry to join her.

Harry was surprised to see Fliptrask awaiting them in the carriage. He seemed to flow across the bench, his corpulent belly sagging against his legs. The goblin's dress was similar to Harry's, but more adorned – a splash of gold here; encrusted jewels there. "Greetings," he rumbled. "My presence here should be an indication to you of the importance of this event – both the hunt itself and the fact that we are allowing you to see it. Consider yourselves unduly privileged." He roughly extended a hand to Ron. "You are Mister Potter's guest. What are you called?"

"Ron Weasley, sir," Ron squeaked. "Erm... I didn't catch your... um... name?"

"I am Fliptrask," the goblin said. "The Trust Department at Gringotts is mine. You are a brother to William Weasley." Ron nodded quickly, and Fliptrask managed something vaguely resembling a smirk. "William Weasley is well regarded by most at Gringotts... he wagers well," he added.

All three students had remained standing; Fliptrask motioned with his hand, and they took their seats. The goblin knocked three times on the side of the carriage compartment and they began to move swiftly. Harry had been so caught unaware by Fliptrask that he hadn't paid any mind to the man seated to the goblin's right. The man was quite old – easily as old as Dumbledore or Croaker, he figured. He was dressed in goblin finery, but also wore a rather flamboyant cloak; Gilderoy Lockhart came unbidden to Harry's mind. His hair was long and pure white, and tied into a ponytail similar to Bill Weasley. He had an absurd moustache – it shot to the left and right like

daggers, but curled upward at the tips – and a goatee. There was an ornate sword at his side. He sat there almost primly and took in Harry with a disinterested look.

The man's eyes moved to Hermione and lingered. Harry thrust forward his hand. "Good morning, I'm Harry Potter. And you are...?"

The man's voice was much younger than the rest of him. He spoke with an accent that Harry thought to be French, though it wasn't nearly so sharp as Fleur Delacour's. "I know of you, Monsieur Potter," the man said. "I represent the Ministère de Magie before the International Conference of Wizards. I am the greatest living expert on the art of the duel. I have been a confidant of rulers, advisor to mages, acolyte of the greatest alchemist of the age, defender of the crown, and saviour of all wizards – not once, but twice. I, Monsieur, am your humble servant... Alexandre, Marquis de Maupassant." He leaned forward on the bench and gave a very formal half-bow.

Ron coughed furiously and Harry muttered, "Bloody hell!" under his breath. Hermione put her hand to her face, and unsuccessfully stifled a snort.

The Marquis's brow lifted. "What is this, *ma chère* ? I am not familiar to you? Impossible!"

Hermione's cheeks coloured. "No! Er... not at all, Marquis. Harry is... something of a fan, you might say."

The Marquis beamed at Harry. "A fan? This is so? Did my very good friend Albus gift you with my humble book?" Hermione snorted again under her breath.

"It came from my godfather's library, actually," Harry said. "It's probably not the newest edition; it's rather old."

The Marquis laughed loudly. "But of course it is old, Monsieur Potter! It is old, and the Marquis is old - we are both, ehh... *antiques* ."

Fliptrask let out a low rumbling laugh at that. "The Marquis has been a friend of goblins for many years," he said. "The Smith Guild belonged to my grandsire when the Marquis first assisted us. The gratitude of a goblin is as long lasting as his vengeance." He stared pointedly at Harry, and added, "Remember that, Mister Potter."

The Marquis put on a mock frown. "But why are you so serious, my friend?" he asked Fliptrask. "Monsieur Potter and his charming companion and their guest are ready for celebration, not lectures! Come; let us turn to more pleasant things." He leaned forward and asked Harry very seriously, "Tell me, my young friend... what little tricks have you picked up from the book?" He broke into a broad smile, and Harry couldn't help but laugh; *the man's certainly as full of himself as Lockhart* , he thought.

"Harry cast *catadromarius stranguria* on someone. I'm curious as to your thoughts on that," Hermione said flatly.

The Marquis's eyebrows waggled. "My, my, my... Monsieur Potter! You've been a naughty young man, yes? And what dishonour led to that spell, I am wondering?"

Harry's throat tightened and he felt his face heat up. "I, erm, thought that someone had cast a Cutting Curse on Hermione here," he said.

"A Cutting Curse, you say? A Cutting Curse? You are, eh, near to the end of your studies?" The Marquis toyed with the end of his moustache. "This is a grievous curse, true, but this splendid young lady could surely defend herself?"

"With what? *Protego* won't stop it, right?" Ron asked sourly.

The Marquis slowly shook his head. "No, no, Monsieur Weasley, not against a wizard of skill. *Protego*, this is your defence?" He pressed the back of his hand against his forehead. "Oh, Albus... my old friend Albus... has your head grown as soft as your robes?"

"Hermione didn't have a wand," Harry said.

The Marquis's face froze, and then his eyes narrowed and his nose flared. "Someone attacked this charming young woman –?"

"My name is Hermione Granger, Marquis," Hermione cut in.

The Marquis nodded. "*Enchanté*, Mademoiselle Granger," he said, and then began again, "Someone attacked the fair Mademoiselle Granger with a Cutting Curse when she was without wand? The attacker, he knew this?"

"He *had* to know it," Ron grumbled. "Rotten ferret... all he had to do was open his eyes."

The Marquis drew himself up as if to render judgment. "*Catadromarius stranguria* is no trifle, Monsieur Potter, but any man who would attack a woman unable to offer a defence... this man, he is a mere brute. This man lacks honour, my young friends. This man, he deserves his fate. So, tell me... was it effective?"

"Made me cross my legs, I'll tell you," Ron muttered.

"Malfoy didn't cast a Cutting Curse," Hermione pointed out. "Harry thought that he did, but he didn't. If he'd taken a moment before casting, Harry would have realised that."

"Ahh, I see – the fair Mlle. Granger, she belongs to, eh, how you say... Raven's Claw?" the Marquis said. "Monsieur Potter, he is of course the Gryffindor, the *lion*. I am thinking that most times Monsieur Potter knows when to pounce, yes? I am thinking that this moment which you seek, it may as easily have meant your death, Mlle. Granger? I am thinking that in the duel there is no opportunity to, eh, suffer the doubt?"

"I'm not a Ravenclaw," Hermione said briskly.

"Hermione's a Gryffindor, just like Ron and me," Harry added.

The Marquis bowed his head slightly. "I offer my humblest apologies, Mlle. Granger. It is only that you were thinking like the Raven's Claw – like my very good friend Filius. I had to teach him to be the lion. I do not criticise, dear young lady; the lion and the raven, they are good together I think."

"The intelligence of Ravenclaw and the courage of Gryffindor are a worthy combination, Miss Granger," Fliptrask said. "Instead we too often encounter the docile Hufflepuff and the crafty Slytherin united. We goblins see more than most wizards know, Mister Potter – much more."

"Um... Fliptrask, sir... how far are we going?" Ron asked.

The goblin smiled, which Harry found just a bit frightening – it was all sharp-looking teeth and it reminded him of Winky. "If you refer to me as `sir' when we are amongst the clans, Mister Weasley, you will cause a stir. This carriage is efficient. We will arrive in twenty minutes."

"No one said anything about horses," Ron protested.

Harry stood his ground. "You've ridden flying horses, Ron – invisible flying horses that feed on blood."

"That was an emergency," Ron glowered, "and these are... they're... well, they're *horses* – that's what they are!"

Harry's horse – an Arabian mare, the Marquis had said – nuzzled him, and he stroked its neck. "I don't see all the fuss," he said. "They seem fine to me."

"You obviously haven't ridden one of these before," Ron snapped. His horse – an Arabian of a different sort – snorted and nudged him with her head. "Geroff!" he shouted.

Harry laughed, "Spiders, horses... what else makes you shriek like a little girl, I wonder?" Ron growled at him, but Harry continued to stroke his horse until she gave a contented shudder. "Can't be harder than managing a broom, I figure," he said.

"Oi, you ever ride a broom that goes one way when you want to go another?" Ron countered. His horse snatched her own reins out of Ron's hand and whinnied at him. "Give that back, you thief!" Ron demanded.

Hermione came through the gate into the paddock alongside a goblin in a scarlet coat. Harry was pleased to see Professor Flitwick strolling behind them.

Harry quickly waved. “Hello, er... Filius! Why didn’t you tell me that you’d be here?”

Flitwick grinned. “Hullo, Harry! You didn’t enquire, did you? Ah... it’s a glorious day for this. Good morning, Mr. Weasley!”

Ron snatched back the reins from his horse. “Good morning, Professor,” he said flatly.

Hermione’s dress had been replaced by a crisply tailored version of the coat and breeches that Harry and Ron wore. “Oooh, aren’t you *gorgeous*?” she cried out happily and made straight toward Ron.

Ron turned brilliantly red. “Um... Hermione... I... uh...”

Hermione brushed him aside and ran her fingers through the mane of Ron’s horse. “I’ve never seen a colour quite like this! Remarkable...”

Ron began to cough and Harry quickly jumped in. “I thought you didn’t care for horses,” he said.

Hermione’s shoulders rose, Harry noticed. “I don’t care for Thestrals,” she said without looking his way. “They’re hardly the same thing.”

The scarlet-coated goblin drew up beside Hermione. “Her name is Lojaali, young witch. She is an Akhal-Teke – they are from the Turkish highlands and very special horses indeed. She comes from the Johtaja’s personal stable.” The goblin eyed Ron closely, and added, “You are in need of a larger horse than this, young wizard.”

“*Larger*? This one looks ruddy huge to me!” Ron squeaked.

“Nonsense,” Hermione chided him. “Harry could get by with her, but certainly not you.”

The Marquis slowly rode out of the stable. He was perched atop a horse that looked to Harry to be powerful but old. Two goblins on much smaller brown horses flanked him as he entered the paddock. A third goblin led a strong-looking black horse. “Ah, Monsieur Weasley!” the Marquis called. “They have found a horse for you, I think!”

Ron’s eyes sauced. “Er... I’m feeling attached to this one, right?” he squeaked.

“Surely not!” the Marquis laughed. “A knight errant must ride the proper sort of horse, yes? It is a proud stallion for you, sir! Stop this foolishness and claim your steed!”

Harry nudged Ron. “Make like you’re approaching Buckbeak, mate. Don’t show fear – show him respect,” he whispered.

Ron let out an audible gulp that everyone politely ignored. He approached the horse half-wincing. “Here, boy... what’s your name, boy?” Ron managed.

“Painajainen, according to the High Tongue,” the goblin holding the horse’s reins said. “In your

tongue, this is Nightmare.”

“Smashing,” Ron murmured.

The scarlet-coated goblin moved in front of the stallion and gave a hand signal; the horse went stock still. He took the reins from the groomsman and nodded. “Guess I’ll just, erm, climb aboard then...” Ron muttered. The groomsman gave Ron a foothold; Nightmare never budged an inch as Ron dragged himself up and over.

The goblin in scarlet turned to Hermione. “I apologise that you must remain with the trailing group, young witch.”

Hermione nodded demurely. “I understand, Master Gralnor,” she said. “I take no offence.”

The goblin caught Harry’s eye and bowed slightly. “I am Gralnor, Master of the Hunt,” he said. “Mister Potter, you are offered a hunt button. You and your guest may ride with the hunting party... or you may accompany the young witch in the trailing group, if you desire.”

Harry nodded curtly. He thought it odd that the goblin addressed him by name, but not Hermione. “May I ask, Gralnor... are women not allowed?” he said.

Master Gralnor’s expression went sour. “We leave such distinctions to humans. The young witch must trail because she confuses the crups.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “Er... the crups?”

“Yes, the crups,” Master Gralnor returned. “Some of the crups initially mistook the young witch for a Muggle – this was not anticipated. She shall ride, but she must not disrupt the hunt proper.”

Hermione mounted the golden Arabian in one practiced motion. “It’s been too long since I’ve done this,” she said brightly. “Thank you, Master Gralnor.” The goblin tipped his cap to her.

Ron sat in the saddle as though he might accidentally break eggs. He said, “I’ll stay back with Hermione.” *Sure, so she can keep you from going arse-over-teakettle*, Harry thought; he held back a smirk and merely nodded.

“I’ll take that button you mentioned,” Harry said to Master Gralnor.

“Affix this to your lapel,” Master Gralnor said. He handed Harry a small gold medallion with someone called St. Hubert depicted upon it, and added, “Your decision is correct. Fliptrask wishes that you join him at the front.” Master Gralnor gave Harry a slight boost, and Harry mounted his horse with considerably more grace than Ron.

“I shall remain with the trailing group as well, for I must go gently with these old bones,” the Marquis said. “Rest assured that Monsieur Weasley will ride his steed with grace when I have finished with him!”

Harry managed to guide his horse toward Hermione, who had turned away from Ron and the Marquis with one hand stifling a laugh. “What have I gotten myself into?” he whispered to her urgently.

“It’s organised like a fox hunt,” Hermione whispered back, “but I can’t imagine we’re to be hunting foxes.”

“Suppose I don’t know a single thing about a fox hunt?” Harry returned quietly.

“I’m not on solid ground, myself – not fond of the idea, honestly,” Hermione admitted. “All I can tell you for certain is that we’re meant to chase something. The hunting party follows the crups. Who knows what the crups will be following?” She shuddered.

Harry had a horrible thought for a moment, and he gave voice to it. “Erm... I’m sure they wouldn’t take us, you know... Muggle hunting...?”

“Of course they wouldn’t!” Hermione snapped. “It’s certainly not the sort of hunt I imagined, but even if they were inclined to hunt Muggles – and I sincerely doubt that – it would not only be bad business but bad form. They *do* know that I’m Muggle-born, Harry!”

“Move aside for the quarry!” Master Gralnor called out. Hermione’s horse moved to one side, and Harry managed to hold his horse still. A cart drawn by two of the small brown horses rumbled past, bearing a stack of cages. The ferret-like creatures inside mewled and hissed until they caught sight of the goblins and wizards, and then launched as one into long strings of the vilest obscenities Harry had ever heard.

“Jarveys!” Hermione exclaimed.

Harry’s nose wrinkled at the shouting. “Well... they make it easy to root for the crups, eh? Good riddance!” Hermione didn’t smile, but she didn’t scowl at the thought either.

The area at the front of the large barn began to fill with goblins and their mounts. The Marquis used the time to lead Ron around the paddock in a sort of abbreviated tuition; Hermione nodded in agreement frequently, and Harry began to pay close attention to the instructions. Then she nudged Harry and led him through a few paces.

“When did you learn all of this?” Harry asked.

“I had a horse when I was younger,” Hermione said. “It was something I was good at – riding, I mean... but it was two hours’ drive to the stable and I know it was costly, so we let it go.”

“I could keep horses in St. Ebb, you know,” Harry said impulsively. “There’s a stable inside the tower walls, and... what?”

Hermione frowned at him rather severely, which he hadn’t expected at all. “You should ride quite a lot before you even consider taking on horses,” she said.

“I thought you might like to ride, that’s all,” Harry mumbled.

“That’s madness, Harry!” Hermione protested. “You’d outfit a stable so that I could ride a few times each year? You’ve no idea of the expense!”

Harry shrugged. “I could have the stable cleaned up, buy the best horses, hire the right sort of help, and never notice the expense,” he said.

Hermione moved to ride away from him. “That’s not something Harry Potter would say,” she said coldly.

Harry manoeuvred in front of her. “What? I’m supposed to feel guilty because I have money?” he snapped.

“You were rich – truly rich – before you had Galleons to flaunt,” Hermione shot back. “I’m not impressed by wealth.”

“*Flaunt?* What are you on about?” Harry demanded.

“I don’t want to argue with you; I won’t be a *distraction*,” Hermione insisted, and with a slight move of the reins the golden Akhal circled away from him.

Harry gritted his teeth. “I’d buy Ron a new broom every day if he asked,” he called after her. “If you want all the books at Flourish and Blotts, they’re yours! What else am I supposed to do with it? I finally have something to give, and you accuse me of flaunting it?”

A series of emotions played across Hermione’s face, and Harry could read each argument and counterargument within her. He’d noticed that tendency about her long before Snape’s meddling, but it stood in sharper relief now. “See how you feel about horses after riding,” she said evenly. “Now try a few small jumps; you’ll need them to keep with the hunting party.”

By the time that Gralnor began to form up the riders into groups, Harry’s irritation with Hermione had faded and he was reasonably certain that he could take his horse over small obstacles without sending himself to the turf. Ron was sitting with more confidence; the Marquis clapped him on the shoulder as he passed. Harry saw the Marquis slip his wand out briefly and flick it toward Ron; there was a very subtle change in the way that Ron’s breeches clung to the saddle.

“A Sticking Charm – should have thought of that,” Hermione sniggered. “Ron will be fine, you know? Don’t pay attention to his horse’s name; he’s a Friesian – a real pussycat.”

“Maybe I should be riding one of those,” Harry said.

“You’ll be fine; just stay within yourself,” Hermione assured him. “Your horse seems to fancy you, anyway – what’s her name?”

“Salamaa,” Gralnor called out. Harry’s horse shuddered at the sound of her name, and advanced more or less on her own until she lined up just behind the assembled hunting party.

Flitwick rode up beside him, atop one of the compact brown horses that the goblins obviously favoured. “I imagine you’ve had little opportunity to ride, Harry,” he said. “We used to teach horsemanship at Hogwarts, in the days when Muggles still used horse and carriage. Then again, duelling with swords was once part of the Defence curriculum. The times change and we change with them – begrudgingly in some cases.”

“Dumbledore suggested that you might be here,” Harry said.

“I am closely connected to the world of goblins,” Flitwick returned. “Albus knows this well. I was surprised that he did not consult with me in detail about this, but the Headmaster is quite capable of choosing his own counsel.”

“You could have spoken to me,” Harry said.

“You could have done the same,” Flitwick pointed out. “Albus is your master; you are his apprentice. I shall not interfere in that. In any case, learning to select your own counsel is a part of taking one’s place in the world. Perhaps next time you will choose me, if appropriate? Perhaps you will not; I shan’t take offence either way.”

Harry let out a frustrated sigh. “But that’s so... so...”

“Passive? Meek?” Flitwick laughed merrily. “I wouldn’t expect you to understand, Harry, not on first consideration. Ravenclaws understand that the artistry of flight lies in knowing when to steer and when to let the broom do as it will.”

Harry didn’t hear Fliptrask ride up behind him; he was startled to hear the goblin address Flitwick: “I offer the blessings of the clan, kinsman.”

“I offer my fealty in return, within the bounds of my obligations and any claims upon me,” Flitwick answered.

Harry gaped at Flitwick. “Kinsman?”

“Filius and I share an ancestor – a great-grandsire,” Fliptrask said before Flitwick could respond; “Did you think that your professor achieved the perfect stature merely by accident?” Flitwick’s peals of laughter were the counterpoint to Fliptrask’s gruff yowls. Flitwick then said something in what Harry presumed to be Gobbledegook and then clasped Fliptrask’s forearm in a very formal way. Fliptrask responded in kind and broke into a toothy smile.

Flitwick saw the lost look in Harry’s eyes, and explained, “I was wishing him luck, Harry – it’s a tradition of the hunt. ‘May you be predator and not prey’, the saying goes.”

“Luck that I shall not require today,” Fliptrask added. “This is no hunt - it is a ritual, it is all trappings. That is enough for most of my brothers and sisters now. Someday when the wind is light and the moon is high, you will join me, Mister Potter. You will see what it is to truly *hunt* .”

Flitwick looked past Fliptrask into the distance. “Good heavens. Is that... is the Johtaja coming

today?”

Fliptrask brought his horse around without appearing to make a single movement. “It is the *Volvar*, Filius. The *Volvar*’s plans are her own – we are her instruments,” he said evenly.

Harry remembered the term ‘volvar’ from the book that Covelli and Dumbledore had provided; a volvar was a religious leader, some sort of high priestess. The goblin that approached the assembled trailing group was obviously important – dressed in very fine robes and attended by several other goblins.

“The *Volvar* has come here?” Flitwick asked. “I must say that she looks like the *Johtaja*.” The professor was unnerved, and Harry didn’t find that helpful at all.

“You have met the *Volvar*, Filius,” Fliptrask said. “The *Volvar* was merely *Johtaja* then.”

Flitwick’s eyebrows exploded upward. “Good heavens!”

“She is both *Volvar* and *Johtaja* now,” Fliptrask said quietly. “*Gretella* went to the next life ten days past. It has not been told to the clans yet.”

“She’s now both, you say? Has that ever happened before, even for a short time?” Flitwick asked in an urgent whisper. Fliptrask didn’t answer.

Harry struggled to recall the word ‘johtaja’. By the time that he did, the *Volvar* had drawn up to the Marquis, who was flanked by Ron and Hermione. A johtaja was a political leader of some sort; the book had been quite murky on that point.

“She is acquainted with the Marquis, of course,” Fliptrask said. “There are few of our age who are not.” Flitwick nodded fervently.

The *Volvar* nodded to the Marquis, and uttered a greeting of some sort in Gobbledegook. The Marquis returned the nod, and said, “Madame *Johtaja*, I am your humble servant – Alexandre, Marquis de Maupassant. This is most unexpected, yes?”

“I expected it entirely,” the *Volvar* returned. “The hunt has been blessed by your gifts to us, and in return we offer blessing to you. Our kinsmen across the sea had thought you too infirm to journey from your lands.”

“Fate is fickle, Madame,” the Marquis said gravely. “There is yet one more hunt before me – one more pledge to fulfil – and there is enough life in these bones for one more great adventure.”

The *Volvar* raised her hand, palm open. “May you have cool days and clear skies and the protection of the earth and the winds,” she intoned. “May the dreamtime be restful and may your conscience be clear. So is the will of the clans.” The goblins began to mutter anxiously.

The Marquis doffed his hat and bowed deeply. “You grant me undeserved honour... Madame *Volvar*. I accept the will of the clans.” The muttering was punctuated by shrill voices now. The

Volvar's eyes turned to Hermione, and the Marquis began, "I would be pleased to introduce –"

"The witchling is not one of yours, Marquis," the Volvar cut him off. "She is known to us. The Guilds would gladly have her, and perhaps that shall be her path one day." She raised a hand toward Hermione and said, "Greetings, Saattaja." Hermione looked around to see who the goblin was addressing.

A goblin bigger and more corpulent than Fliptrask came riding from behind Harry. "What is this outrage?" he growled.

"My word..." Flitwick whispered; he was ashen.

Fliptrask nudged Harry and muttered, "It is Grishtok. The Guilds are his." Finally Harry felt as though he was on some sort of solid ground. The Guilds were at the heart of goblin culture, according to the book he had read. There was a banking guild that operated Gringotts, a smithing guild that produced weapons and metalwork, a mining guild, and so forth. Harry figured that this Grishtok was two or more rungs higher on the goblin ladder than Fliptrask, but Fliptrask was very matter-of-fact – not at all intimidated.

The Volvar withdrew a scroll from within her robes and presented it to Grishtok. "From Gretella, with our compliments," she said.

"Did I hear correctly? Did she say 'saattaja'?" Flitwick asked urgently.

"Yes," growled Fliptrask even as he waved the professor off.

Grishtok opened the scroll, glanced at it, and thrust it back at the Volvar. "*Irregular*," he accused as though delivering a curse.

"Valid," the Volvar returned.

"Indeed," Grishtok said, teeth bared.

"Announce it," the Volvar said calmly.

Grishtok let out a hostile snarl, and then shouted, "Volvar Gretella is no more! The choosing stone has selected Kolmetoista to follow! Kolmetoista is now Johtaja *and* Volvar!" He virtually spat the last of it.

The balance of the goblins present seemed to be in shock. Fliptrask summoned a false smile, even as he fumed, "She dishonoured Grishtok – the clans may not be pleased."

He began to ride toward the smiling Volvar and the angry Guild leader and the confused trailing party, but Flitwick stopped him, asking, "What are you going to do?"

"Congratulate my kinswoman; you should do the same," Fliptrask rumbled.

Harry in turn stopped Flitwick. “Professor, what’s a ‘saattaja’?” he asked. “I’m sure that word wasn’t in the book Dumbledore gave us.”

Flitwick frowned, which was something Harry couldn’t recall seeing more than a handful of times. “A *saattaja* is a soror mystica – a mystical companion. I shall offer my congratulations and then the Volvar will explain to me why she has addressed one of my students in that way,” the professor said with a hint of steel in his voice, “and Fliptrask surely knows more than he’s letting on.” Flitwick brushed his heels against his horse and made toward the growing crowd.

Harry followed at a much slower pace. By the time he arrived Flitwick was snarling in Gobbledegook, Fliptrask was snapping in return, and the Volvar was pointedly ignoring the both of them. She spotted Harry and stopped finger-combing her horse’s mane. “I bid you welcome, Chosen One,” she called out. “I trust you understand the honour bestowed upon you through your invitation today, and the clans are honoured in return by your presence.” The phrase ‘Chosen One’ created a stir amongst her attendants.

Ron looked bewildered, and Harry figured that he probably looked the same; for her part, Hermione was locked in a rapid-fire conversation with the Marquis. Harry had no idea what to say, and he was beginning to regret the time wasted on the Headmaster’s book about goblin culture. “I suppose I’ve been chosen in a way, erm, Your Honour... but I imagine we don’t mean the same thing?” he said at last.

The Volvar rode forward until she was close enough to reach for Harry’s hand. He realised that she was reaching for his forearm in the same way that he’d seen Flitwick reach for Fliptrask, so he responded as closely as he could remember. She nodded appreciatively, and he let out a breath. “I am Kolmetoista,” she said. “The clans are mine, and the temple falls to my sisters and to me. You will please address me as Volvar, wizardling.”

Harry nodded in agreement. “I *am* honoured, Volvar; so are Hermione and Ron, I’m sure –”

“All three of you are chosen – and another, we see – but *you* are the Chosen One,” the Volvar said.

Harry said quickly, “Yes, well... is that why you called Hermione a... a ‘saattaja’? And chosen by whom? For what? I don’t know –?”

The Volvar smiled; unlike Fliptrask or the other goblins he’d seen, Harry saw nothing threatening in her smile. “But you shall, Chosen One, in the fullness of time,” she said. “The Saattaja understands.” Hermione was watching closely, brows raised and eyes wide; it certainly didn’t appear that she understood whatever it was that she was supposed to understand.

“The crups grow anxious,” Grishtok snarled.

“The crups will wait,” the Volvar said airily. “You wish to say something, Chosen One?”

Harry forced himself not to fidget. “Don’t hold up the hunt on my account, Volvar,” he allowed. “That wouldn’t be fair to everyone else.”

Grishtok relaxed in his saddle. “Agreed,” he said. “You ride with us at the front, wizard.”

The Volvar cast a shrewd glance at Harry, before she announced, “I ride with Saattaja. We do not want to ‘hold up’ the hunt, after all.” Harry didn’t need to take in any emotions not his own; he imagined that everyone could feel the chill between the two goblin leaders.

Grishtok motioned to Harry and rode away. Harry followed, but watched over his shoulder as the Volvar rode to Hermione. Hermione gave a modest bow, which drew gasps from the Volvar’s attendants and a rumbling murmur from amongst the trailing party. Her horse suddenly chose to bow as well, which very nearly sent Hermione tumbling forward over the horse’s head before she regained her balance. Harry heard Ron make a choice exclamation and saw the Marquis politely stifle laughter before his horse picked up speed of its own accord.

After the jarveys were released, followed a few minutes later by the crups, the hunt proved itself to be almost achingly slow. For animals intended to track jarveys, the crups seemed indiscriminate; they would go haring off after rabbits or even the occasional fox. Each time the hunting party would begin a calculated advance, and each time the party would slow again and allow Master Gralnor and the crup handlers to regroup. The riding was sedate for the most part, although they had forded a stream or two and crossed a ravine.

Harry felt good about his performance on horseback, and it was a smashing day – cool enough to be comfortable in coat and breeches but remarkably sunny for September. The goblins spent more time in conversation than attending to the hunt, he thought. They spoke in Gobbledegook, so Harry had asked Flitwick whether they were actually conducting business. Flitwick had answered that there was less business being conducted than he might expect. Harry asked whether Flitwick might translate some of the goings-on; Flitwick responded that Harry would learn more by watching who spoke to whom than by knowing what was said.

More than two hours passed without any of the goblins speaking to him; he felt pointedly avoided. He figured that he had learned a little, at least. There were clearly two sorts of goblins. One sort struck him as the Gringotts variety of goblin – more slightly built, perhaps a bit fussy. The other sort brought Professor Binns’ goblin rebellion lectures to life – stout, aggressive, exuding a feeling of power. Grishtok was clearly of the second variety. Fliptrask seemed to be as well, rather unlike his Gringotts colleagues. Flitwick struck Harry as a twice-removed product of the first sort.

Harry was frustrated but proud of himself for holding it in. Fliptrask unexpectedly circled away from his position close to Master Gralnor and rode beside Harry. “How do you fare in the saddle, Mister Potter?” he asked.

“Well, I’ve managed to keep from falling off,” Harry said, and several goblins joined Fliptrask in what Harry took to be polite laughter.

“Filius says that horses are no longer kept at the school,” Fliptrask said with clear disapproval. “You would not have ridden before – not with your particular Muggles. Your first ride exceeds expectations.”

“Thank you,” Harry said. “Can I ask a question?”

Fliptrask smiled and bared his teeth. The hunting party slowed from a crawl to a halt. “You can and you may ask,” he said.

“I appreciate being here, I understand that it’s an honour... erm... it’s a brilliant day to be doing this... but what’s all this about?” Harry asked as calmly as he could manage. “Why was I invited here?”

The surrounding party went completely silent. Harry sat perfectly still in the saddle – if he’d just somehow angered most of the important goblins in Britain, he decided it was best to let them upbraid him for it. Grishtok, the Guild leader, pulled out a pocket watch that at a glance seemed nearly as complicated and outlandish as the one Dumbledore carried. “Over two hours, Fliptrask,” he said. “Two Galleons to you.”

“We remain one hundred and eight Galleons net to your favour, Grishtok,” Fliptrask returned.

“As it should be,” Grishtok grunted. The goblin rode forward very slowly, his gaze unwavering and thoroughly frightening. Harry felt like a goose facing Christmas.

“For over two hours, wizard, we have talked around you, ignored you, behaved as if you meant nothing,” Grishtok said, “and you have done nothing, said nothing. Why do you show such weakness?”

“Weakness? I didn’t want to offend anyone,” Harry said. “Mostly I was just watching, like Filius suggested. This is all new to me – there’s a lot to learn.”

Grishtok’s eyes narrowed. “To *learn*?”

“Well... yes! I mean, we all read a book before coming, but it wasn’t very complete –” Harry began.

“What book is this?” Grishtok demanded.

“I know of the book in question, Grishtok,” Flitwick offered. “It offers a reasonably fair-minded interpretation of goblin culture, but Harry is correct – it is rather spotty.”

“You did not wish to offend us – why should that matter?” Grishtok snarled.

“Why would I want to offend you? I’m a guest here – that would be terribly rude of me!” Harry blurted out. “This makes no sense! Am I *supposed* to be rude?”

Grishtok returned in a low voice, “We are mere goblins, wizard – why care whether or not you offend?”

Harry was bewildered, and he tried to keep it from his voice. “I wouldn’t be rude to *anyone* who invited me to visit. Look, I admit I’m probably on best behaviour here – most all of you here are

surely very important, and I'd rather not have the end of the world on my head!"

"We are mere goblins," Grishtok repeated.

"Gringotts is the only bank in Britain for wizards, isn't it?" Harry said. "You *make* the Galleons and Sickles and Knuts, for Merlin's sake! Gringotts goes away and so does wizarding Britain, I figure. Explain to me how you're not important?"

Grishtok's gaze sharpened even further. "It would be best if you kept that opinion from your Minister for Magic," he said slowly.

Harry laughed. "If Fudge can't come up with that on his own, then he's not very bright, is he?"

Fliptrask caught Grishtok's eye, and the Guild leader gave a curt nod. "*Mister* Potter," Fliptrask said, "many wizards would have declined our invitation outright. Of those accepting, most would come on account of their wealth and our hand in it. Why are you here? Are you here because your master desires it be so? Why are you different?"

Harry took a long breath to settle himself rather than snap back at his hosts. "Voldemort is out there," he answered at last, provoking a number of anxious hisses that only served to stir him up. "Some day, he'll come calling. He's already sought out the giants and the werewolves. I don't know if he'll offer you the world or try to kill you all, but he'll come. He'll come because you're treated like you don't matter, and he'll try to use that –"

"You think it wrong, wizard – the way we are treated?" asked a very old goblin from behind Grishtok.

"Beings are better than beasts, wizards are better than beings and Muggles, purebloods are better than Muggle-borns... sometimes I think wizards only know how to look down on everyone else," Harry said. "You know, History of Magic is one goblin rebellion after the next, and I guess I see why that's so. So yes, I think it's wrong." He hesitated for a moment, and then added, "The Ministry probably deserves a rebellion right now."

Amidst a symphony of mutters and whispers, Grishtok's voice cut through. "You have just committed treason, young Potter," he said with a hint of pleasure.

Harry shrugged. "Really? Oh well, I'm used to being in trouble with the Ministry."

Grishtok crossed his arms and stared at Harry for the longest time. "Fliptrask," he barked into the silence, "another fifty Galleons to you. Do not make a habit of this." For his part, Fliptrask winced.

"Will someone answer my question now?" Harry advanced.

"Acceptable," Grishtok said. "We control the money, as you say. You *are* the money, to a great degree. If you favour us, the possibilities are interesting."

“And then there are the Muggles...” Fliptrask muttered.

“Yes, yes, Fliptrask has his ideas about wider interests,” Grishtok said dismissively. “The Gringotts directorship will not consent beyond current arrangements with the Muggle bank.”

“Why not?” Harry asked. “It’s done all right for me, hasn’t it? I mean, the Potter Trust wouldn’t be nearly as big if it weren’t for all the stock shares and properties and what-not. I’d have to look – and I don’t pretend to understand all of it – but Fliptrask here has to be responsible for a lot of the money I have... with everybody around me, er, dying all the time, he’s had to manage everything – and did a fine job of it, too, according to Ted... um, Ted Tonks, that is... my solicitor...” Harry trailed off as Fliptrask began to growl at him.

“*This is accurate?*” Grishtok barked.

Before Fliptrask could answer, Harry added, “That’s the reason my money’s still in Gringotts. I thought about pulling everything, see, but I didn’t... Gringotts has done right by me. Well... that and Ted did say I might crush the whole wizarding economy, or something of the kind.”

Grishtok grew noticeably reddish. “*Fliptrask! Another fifty galleons to you!*”

Fliptrask rubbed his hands together nervously. “Unnecessary, Grishtok,” he muttered.

“Honour satisfied, Fliptrask,” Grishtok fired back. “You would do well to wager and *lose* – VERY SOON. *GRALNOR! Do something with your worthless crups!*”

Harry’s horse startled and backed away a pace as Master Gralnor squeaked at the crup handlers. Grishtok took several growling, gnashing breaths, then spun to face Harry. He shuddered as though he was shaking away his mood, and then flashed a faint but notable smile. Harry found his arm pulled into the ceremonial shake before he could react.

“Some of your forebears favoured us in times of need as the Marquis de Maupassant has done. You do honour to your line. We will do business, Harry, son of James Potter, and we shall both prosper of it,” the Guild leader said solemnly.

Harry was startled. “Th-thank you, Grishtok,” he managed.

Grishtok stroked his chin. “It... could be... that the Johtaja is correct. Perhaps we shall soon hunt together, as she maintains? We shall feast after this embarrassment of a hunt, then, and we will talk of suitable prey.”

“Err... sounds smashing... looking forward to it...” Harry stammered. His hand didn’t twitch in Grishtok’s grasp, which felt like an achievement. The goblin let go of Harry’s arm, inclined his head in a way that suggested a bow, and rode off to light into Master Gralnor over the pace of the hunt, the colour of the crups, and a host of other things beyond the huntsman’s control. Fliptrask stayed where he was, with an icy glare directed at Harry.

Flitwick came aside Harry and pumped his hand furiously. “Good show, Harry – good show!” he

said in a forceful whisper. “You’ve accomplished decades of advancement in goblin-wizarding relations just now!”

Fliptrask snorted, “Hardly! Mister Potter has just advanced his own relations with Grishtok – at *my* expense.”

“I didn’t set out to make him angry,” Harry said quickly. “I thought he should know I’m pleased with Gringotts, that’s all – that I appreciate what you’ve done. “I’m sorry if I’ve managed to get you into trouble –”

Fliptrask wagged his finger at Harry. “Thank the gods Grishtok has gone! If you were to offer me apology in his presence, then he would now be indebted to *me* and my time at Gringotts would grow short – do you understand?”

“No, I don’t understand!” Harry fired back. “Have you been wagering on me – is that it?”

“*Of course* there are wagers – do you know nothing of our ways...? Filius... you explained nothing?” Fliptrask slowly lowered his head into his hands. “I have arranged my own doom,” he muttered.

“You were warned, Fliptrask,” Flitwick laughed. “The larger the stage, the better Harry performs. It seems you disregarded my advice, in which case it was a wasteful use of your time to seek me out. As for the rest, Harry is Albus Dumbledore’s apprentice and not mine.”

Fliptrask shook his head. “Grishtok avoids wizards – he loathes them. He rose entirely through the Smithy; not a day was willingly spent at Gringotts. Mister Potter is known to have a short temper, and you know the depths of Grishtok’s rudeness today...”

Harry was tired of being talked around; his jaw tightened. “Never wager against me,” he snapped.

Fliptrask’s glare became more calculating. “Point taken,” he said. “You will not speak favourably of me for the rest of this day.” With that he rode in Grishtok’s general direction.

Flitwick chuckled softly. “Don’t take him seriously, Harry. Fliptrask is far more secure within Gringotts than he let on. I’d be quite surprised if the Guild of Finance doesn’t pass to his control, and it’s possible that you may have just sped the process along.”

“But why –?” Harry began.

“Goblins are unaccustomed to having their standing altered so publicly,” Flitwick explained, “and *quite* unaccustomed to having it positively altered by a wizard. When Fliptrask regains his composure, he’ll recognise what you’ve done for him. Then he’ll have to determine how best he can take advantage of the opportunity.”

Harry shook his head. “What a waste of time! Why don’t they just decide what needs to be done, and do it?”

Flitwick laughed merrily. “Oh, Harry – out of the mouths of babes! I mean no disrespect, of course, but only a young man such as you could say such a thing!” Before Harry could protest, he held up a hand and went on, “You were not raised as a wizard. There are times that this is a tremendous advantage – now, for example – and times when you may be hampered by it. Tell me, do you think that the Ministry for Magic functions more as you have just witnessed, or as the ideal that you have described?”

Harry had seen enough of Fudge and Percy Weasley to know the answer, but he was cut off by a round of furious barking from the crups. The handlers and Master Gralnor raced after them, followed closely by Grishtok and Fliptrask, and then the remainder of the hunting party.

“Off we go!” Flitwick cried and they joined the pursuit.

The crups led a spirited chase that led through a dense patch of forest and into a meadow beyond. They stopped at the edge of the trees for a few moments, yipping and circling, and then tore across the open space.

“GRALNOR! We are *not* chasing jarveys – *what are they after ?*” Grishtok bellowed for all to hear. Harry figured that Grishtok was right; the crups had never run so hard, and he hadn’t heard a single insult from the jarveys for more than an hour.

Gralnor had dismounted and was huddled with his handlers and a handful of the crups. “The crups have pursued something similar to the quarry, Grishtok,” the Hunt Master announced.

“Similar? In what way?” Grishtok demanded.

Fliptrask left his saddle more gracefully than his bulk suggested and joined the handlers on the ground. Harry was sure that the goblin sniffed at the earth more than once. “Here,” Fliptrask announced after several minutes. “They were drawn by two animals. One has tracks like a jarvey, but smaller. The other looks to be a fox.” He drew Gralnor’s attention to a patch of dirt. “A fox chasing a ferret, perhaps?”

“That makes no sense,” Grishtok snorted from his mount.

“It is not a ferret,” Gralnor said. “I say a rodent of some sort, less than one foot in length.”

“Not a rabbit,” Fliptrask said.

“Agreed,” Gralnor nodded.

“This is not a pursuit,” Fliptrask said. “These animals were running together.”

“Nonsense,” Grishtok declared. “Why would a fox and a – what, a rat? – run together? For that matter, why would the crups be drawn off *again* ? I question the training of these animals, Gralnor. They should be attracted to magic, not haring off after simple forest creatures.”

Harry snapped to attention. “A rat? Did you say a rat?”

“You have something to contribute, Potter?” Grishtok barked.

Harry’s hands shook. “If it’s a rat, it’ll have a silver forepaw,” he snarled.

When Harry drew his wand, two goblins rode in front of Grishtok, but the Guild leader waved them off. “A rat with a false limb?” he scoffed.

Flitwick’s wand seemed to appear from nowhere. “Harry... I thought Mr. Pettigrew to have died as a result of his scuffle with Mr. Weasley,” he said.

“Ron said he disappeared; there wasn’t a trace of him found,” Harry returned. He looked up to see Ron and the Marquis de Maupassant approaching from the trailing party, along with a trio of goblins.

“We may be dealing with a rat Animagus, Grishtok,” Flitwick said. “Harry’s conclusion is reasonable.”

“A rat might have slipped the wards surrounding the hunting grounds,” Master Gralnor allowed, “but not a fox.”

The Marquis halted beside Fliptrask. “What is this? We are no longer hunting the jarveys?” he asked.

“Mr. Potter believes we may face an intruder,” Fliptrask said.

“Young Potter sees Animagi scurrying through the underbrush,” Grishtok huffed.

“Bloody hell... did you see *Wormtail* ?” Ron blurted out.

“The crups were chasing a rat,” Harry said.

“Monsieur Grishtok, you have protective wards in place, yes?” the Marquis asked.

“Gralnor says that something the size of a rat might have passed through the wards,” Grishtok allowed. “There is a fox with the rat – if it *is* a rat at all – and a fox could not have entered.”

The Marquis twirled his moustache. “These wards, they are... ehh... permanent?”

“The lodge is permanently warded,” Master Gralnor explained, “but the hunting ground is only warded for the hunt. Anti-Muggle charms were cast last Monday and the wards were placed on Thursday.”

“Then the fox, she could have come onto the grounds before the wards were cast,” the Marquis concluded. “Most of the animal magicks, they can be held for many days. The fox, she could... ehh... forage?”

Grishtok’s brow furrowed. “This rat Animagus is a known danger, is that correct?”

Flitwick nodded furiously. “Peter Pettigrew is a known associate of Voldemort,” he said, “and anyone in his company is surely a Death Eater.”

“The wizards would be here for Mister Potter,” Fliptrask said.

“They could also be here for Miss Granger or Mr. Weasley,” Flitwick added.

Grishtok bared his teeth. “*Unacceptable*,” he growled. “These are goblin lands. The hunt is a sacred thing. The wizards and the witch are guests. If these *things* are here, they profane the hunt. If they would do harm in this place, then they have no honour.”

Harry slipped from his horse to look at the tracks for himself. Two of the crups were moving in circles a few feet away. One broke off, licked at Harry’s hand, gave a long whimper, and then returned to the circling.

Harry slowly edged toward the two crups. “*Pettigrew! We know you’re here!*” he shouted out. “*If you show yourself right now, you might live! If you don’t, we’ll let the crups have you!*” From the corner of his eye, he saw Fliptrask, Flitwick and the Marquis carefully fan out.

Ron made the barest of gestures to catch Harry’s attention; he directed his eyes just beyond the crups and his eyebrows rose slightly. The nose and shining forepaw of a rat were barely visible within a thick tuft of grass. Harry gave a hint of a nod and then carefully signalled Flitwick. The Marquis also caught the nod; he produced a wand from somewhere and his lips moved though he said nothing aloud. The thick grass rustled and the rat took on dishevelled human form, which sent the goblins into a rage and the crups into a panic.

Pettigrew instantly directed his metal hand at Harry. “*Stay back*,” he bellowed, “unless you fancy your Chosen One in pieces!”

“If I give the order, you *die*,” Grishtok snarled in return.

“And young Harry will meet his parents sooner than any of you would like,” Pettigrew said. “We have a stalemate, don’t we?”

“I don’t recall you as delusional, Peter,” Flitwick said. “Surely you don’t believe that you’ll be allowed to go free?”

Harry felt no fear, only mounting anger. “You’ve forgotten with whom you’re dealing,” he said coldly.

Pettigrew’s face twitched. “I can be useful to you, Harry,” he said nervously.

“My parents are dead because of you,” Harry snapped, “and only Merlin knows how many others!” Sweat formed on his brow and he felt a familiar draft. He realised what was happening, if not why, and he wanted it to overtake him. He wanted to tear Pettigrew apart with his bare hands.

Pettigrew’s eyes widened. “C-call the Aurors, P-Professor Flitwick,” he said. When Flitwick

didn't move, he squeaked, "G-go on, *call them!* "

"I don't think so," Harry hissed.

Pettigrew took a halting step backward. "You're going to k-kill me? I t-thought you were your m-mother's son!"

"She wouldn't see you dead after what you've done? I doubt that," Harry sneered.

The rumble of horses at a full gallop sounded behind Harry. "Grishtok! GRISHTOK! *A wizard has the Volvar, Grishtok!* " someone called out.

"The fox!" Fliptrask shouted.

Heads turned out of simple reflex and Pettigrew was gone. The two crups who had been circling yipped and tore off across the meadow. Harry jumped onto his horse, Salamaa, and raced after the crups. As he reached the far side of the meadow, he saw Pettigrew return to human form and race into the dense forest beyond. The crups hesitated for a moment before they followed. Salamaa showed no sign of slowing and Harry pulled hard on the reins. He was completely unprepared for the rapid stop that resulted; he nearly somersaulted over Salamaa's head and barely managed to instead tumble forward and to the side.

He was still face-down when another horse halted beside him; a few moments later, the rider rolled him over and offered a hand up. "*Now we shall hunt* ," Fliptrask said, flashing his unnerving toothy smile. The goblin held an enormous dark sword in his other hand in a fashion that hinted he knew well how to use it.

The forest was thick and tall. Harry cast a quick spell to quiet his footfalls and Fliptrask was unnaturally silent as he passed through spaces that seemed half as wide as his belly. The trees were oddly quiet besides – there were no bird calls, no movement of animals, no branches rustling in the breeze. It seemed to Harry as though centaurs and spiders should inhabit the shadows.

Fliptrask placed his hand on Harry's forearm; Harry managed to bite back a shout. The goblin motioned ahead and whispered, "He's nearly to the far side... must be changing back and forth."

"Where do the wards end?" Harry asked.

"Just beyond the trees," Fliptrask said. "We can't overtake him."

"Can you keep a secret?" Harry demanded.

Fliptrask scowled at him. "That is a ridiculous question. The Trust Department at Gringotts is mine."

Harry weighed his options for an instant, then reached out and grabbed Fliptrask by the arm. "Hold on tightly," he muttered and then popped.

They reappeared just outside the forest. Fliptrask stumbled hard, barely missing the edge of his own sword in the process. Something grabbed Harry from behind. He wrested himself free and turned to face Pettigrew, an extended silver hand, and the dangerous end of his own wand.

“I won’t hurt you,” Pettigrew insisted. “I... I can’t do it... but I can stun you – AAAAGGH!” A black blur whipped past Harry’s left arm with no more than an inch to spare and Pettigrew’s silver hand lay on the ground in a growing pool of blood.

“*Your head is next!*” Fliptrask shouted. Pettigrew staggered to one side and in an instant became a rat scurrying through the grass. The goblin hustled past Harry and chased the thin red trail Pettigrew left, his sword crashing into the ground again and again. A flash of blue raced across the field as the rat slipped through the wards and Fliptrask was thrown backward. Pettigrew reappeared, pale and shaking. He tossed Harry’s wand into the grass and squeezed the stump of his right arm, and disappeared without a sound. Harry reached out his hand and summoned his wand; it bounced in the grass for a moment, and then shot through the wards and into his grasp.

“BLAST AND DAMNATION!” Fliptrask bellowed as he crawled to his feet. His blazing eyes suddenly grew even wider. “The Volvar! I cannot fail *twice!*”

Harry slipped off his waistcoat and used it to pick up Pettigrew’s silver hand. “You didn’t fail,” he said firmly. “Hang on – and mind your sword.” With another pop, Harry and Fliptrask piled into the ground just behind a crowd of goblins gathered in a circle.

A kneeling wild-eyed wizard who Harry didn’t recognise held the Volvar tight, one arm around her waist and the other holding his wand buried into the side of her neck. Hermione stood there, her lip bloodied and left eye blackening, with her wand aimed at the wizard’s head. Several of the Volvar’s attendants brandished swords, and Flitwick, Ron and the Marquis brandished their wands.

“*You bring me Potter, I tell you!*” the wizard howled. “*Potter and me, we get out of here and the goblin lives! Cross me and the goblin’s dead!*”

“I’m here,” Harry called out. “We had to deal with your friend first.” The crowd parted for him and he stepped into the circle. He tossed open his waistcoat and the bloodied hand tumbled out. The goblins let out a collective hiss. Fliptrask made his way to the fore and made a show of wiping his sword with a cloth.

“*You get me out of here, Potter! Set me free or it dies!*” shouted the wizard.

Harry went to Hermione’s side. He put his hand to her cheek and asked, “Did he do this to you?”

She nodded. Her eyes were like dark flames. “I won’t let you set him free,” she said hoarsely.

“Of course not,” Harry acknowledged.

The wizard seemed very close to madness. “*Potter! I’m not making a joke! It dies!*”

Harry shook his head. “Do you honestly think that this is going to work?”

“It dies!” the wizard gibbered.

Harry made quick eye contact with the Volvar. The corner of her mouth curled upward, and then she stomped hard on the wizard’s foot. He loosed his hold for just a moment, and she slammed her elbow into his stomach. As the Volvar rolled free, the goblins shrieked and closed in.

The wizard levelled his wand and his lips began to move, but a loud, high voice called out, “SECTUMSEMPRA!” A flash of purple rent the wizard from shoulder to hip and he crumpled to the ground.

The goblins stopped in their tracks and simply stared at Hermione as she dashed forward and began to kick the fallen wizard in the side. *“Did you think I wouldn’t fight back? I won’t be hurt again, do you hear? Never again! NEVER AGAIN!”* she shouted with each kick.

Harry was so startled that Hermione managed several more kicks before he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her back. *“Let me go!”* she screamed.

“It’s over, Hermione,” Harry said. “It’s over now.”

“Did you hear him, calling the Volvar ‘it’? That’s how they are! He thinks she’s a beast! He... he thinks *I’m* a beast!” Hermione clawed at Harry’s arms. “I’ll show him a bloody beast! *Let me go!* ”

The Volvar took Hermione’s hand. “The danger is past, Saattaja,” she said quietly. “I am safe. Your Chosen One is safe. Justice will be done.”

Hermione seemed to become boneless in Harry’s arms. “You could have been killed,” she said haltingly to the Volvar. “I wasn’t paying any mind to the surroundings, and –”

“Do you see my attendants, young one?” the Volvar asked. “The wizard was upon us before they could draw their swords. You are not responsible for my safety, though I honour your concern. We will speak of your anger, Saattaja. I will know what has been done to you.” She held up her hand. “A moment, please.”

Grishtok stood with one foot atop the fallen wizard’s chest. “This creature has befouled our lands and our hunt. What say you... Johtaja?”

The Volvar removed her ornate robes and spit on her hands. “You speak the truth, Grishtok,” she said. “Its crimes are punishable by death.”

The wizard stirred. “No... t-the M-Ministry...” he gurgled.

“I see no Ministry here,” Grishtok growled.

“These lands are not part of the world of wizards,” the Volvar agreed.

The wizard's entire body trembled; it was clear to Harry that he was dying. "The D-Dark Lord will come for you –"

Grishtok pressed down his foot. "*And we will be waiting*," he hissed. Blood gurgled in the wizard's throat.

Fliptrask knelt before Grishtok at the Guild leader's beckon, and the Volvar nodded. "Fliptrask, son of Martok, carry out the will of the clans," Grishtok commanded.

"Reclaim our lands and our hunt, kinsman," the Volvar added. Fliptrask stood and his massive black sword struck true before the wizard could react. Harry flinched. Ron looked near to spewing up, and Flitwick and the Marquis seemed sombre. Hermione wore a satisfied expression, and that chilled Harry even more than the goblins' cries.

"The hunt is concluded," Grishtok announced. "To the reception, and then to the feast!" The announcement was well received, and Master Gralnor and his handlers set about rounding up the crups and caging the jarveys. The Volvar spirited Hermione away before Harry took notice, and he instead found himself in the company of Ron, Flitwick and the Marquis.

"We're supposed to eat after *that*?" Ron whispered forcefully.

"We'll have to eat something, like it or not," Harry said. "We can't afford to offend anyone, not now – not after I managed to get the most important goblin in Britain attacked."

The Marquis cleared his throat. "I do not see the failure, Monsieur Potter," he said. "Mlle. Granger, she has earned the confidences of Madame Volvar... the confidences of the Guild and the clans fall to you... Madame Volvar, she is saying that the goblins will not go to Voldemort, and Grishtok, he is agreeing... the feast, it is an opportunity for our gallant knight errant, Monsieur Weasley... there is no failure to see."

"I quite agree," Flitwick said fervently. "You have powerful allies now, Harry – more powerful than the wizarding community recognises. If we didn't live in interesting times before..." He shook his head and smiled.

"Do we need to let Dumbledore know what's happened?" Harry asked Flitwick.

"There is no need," Flitwick concluded after a few thoughtful moments. "Albus cannot come here, so it can wait until the morrow."

"Then we eat," the Marquis said. "I shall have much to discuss on the morrow with my good friend Albus... much indeed. Come, Monsieur Weasley – I shall, ehh, educate you in the ways of fine cutlery."

Flitwick followed the Marquis and Ron slowly, and Harry remained with him. The professor said nothing for several minutes as they walked, and Harry found that he was grateful for the silence.

"Harry... about Miss Granger..." Flitwick said at last.

“I know... I know...” Harry muttered.

“That was far from a normal response,” Flitwick said gently. “She had ample time to consider spells, and she made a disturbingly dark choice. Albus has allowed that Miss Granger had a difficult experience at the hands of the Death Eaters, but this raises a legitimate safety concern.”

“She’s not a danger,” Harry said flatly.

“Oh, I don’t believe Miss Granger will begin slicing open her colleagues,” Flitwick assured him, “but consider the NEWT tuition for Defence as an example. The practical aspects are rather combative, frankly – particularly in the hands of a legitimate instructor such as Marcus. What if - ?”

“I’ll speak to Dumbledore,” Harry said. “Professor Detheridge needs to know...”

Flitwick’s brow tufted. “What is it that he needs to know, Harry?”

Harry shook his head. “It’s for Hermione to tell, not me.”

“Fair enough,” Flitwick said. “You’re a good and loyal friend to her, and I will respect that. Now then... let’s not keep Grishtok waiting. There’s quite a lot to build on, in my opinion... that is, of course, if you’re interested in my opinion.”

“I need to keep proper counsel,” Harry said. “What do you think I should do next?”

Flitwick began to put five hundred years of goblin history into context as they walked toward the large manor house at the centre of the hunting ground. As they finally neared the portcullis, Harry asked Flitwick, “Will you please look in on Hermione? I mean, I can’t imagine the Volvar would do anything harmful...”

“I remain concerned about her insistence on referring to Miss Granger as a saattaja,” Flitwick said. “I promise you that I will see to her welfare while we remain here. She is, I believe, in good hands elsewhere.”

“Oh, I forgot! Salamaa!” Harry blurted out.

“Pardon?” Flitwick laughed.

“The horse! I left Salamaa in the meadow –” Harry began.

“Gralnor and the others have taken care of her,” Flitwick assured him. “You’ve had rather enough to be going on about, don’t you think? Now then, we haven’t much time... there will be a rite performed prior to the meal; it’s a rather ancient rite, and usually reserved to the temples. I am not aware whether Professor Binns includes Baldor the Brutal in his lesson plan, but it is important that you know...”

Harry Potter and the Years of Rebellion

Harry's Blustery Day

Chapter Thirty-six

HARRY'S BLUSTERY DAY

September 19

“Again, Mr. Potter,” Covelli said calmly.

Harry staggered to his feet. “Again?” he croaked.

“Again,” she repeated, “but first - what did you learn from the attempt?”

“That I’m *hopeless*,” he bit out. “Maybe we should just give up?”

Covelli shook her head. “To walk down a corridor at Hogwarts or to walk through Hogsmeade, it must be very difficult for you; your time in the classes, it must be torture. After what was done to you, the choice is stark – either master proper Occlumency or risk insanity.”

Harry braced himself. “Again, then,” he said.

“Begin the exercise,” Covelli told him. “Think of the information to be concealed, then visualize the walls rising... the roof being placed atop them... the bars on the windows... and now... picture the building shimmering... fading... disappearing into nothingness... and there is nothing more to be seen.” Her voice held the same soft, slow pitch. “I will begin seeking the information in ten seconds. There is nothing to be seen... remember that there is nothing to be seen...”

The pressure at his temples was softer this time. He didn’t want to think about Covelli’s mental intrusion because to think about the intrusion endangered the hidden information... but he knew that she knew he was thinking about not thinking about it and that was just as dangerous. She pushed and the building was revealed, and then the pressure mounted. He began to repel her, careful not to fall back on instinctive Legilimency though that would have been so much easier. This was difficult – in its own way it was as brutal as the sessions with Snape, though Covelli seemed to mean well. When the pressure relented, Harry fell to his knees.

Covelli said nothing while Harry slowly recovered. He felt nothing from her, not a flicker of her true feelings – she had exercised great care since he had crashed through her barriers and

accidentally recovered a very dark moment from her past. He was slow to meet her eye.

When he did, she asked very calmly, “Who is she?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Harry said quickly.

“But for a minor error, I would have believed you,” Covelli said. “Remember that an experienced Legilimens will be an experienced judge of expression as well. Your mind did not betray you; it was your eyes.”

“This is impossible,” sighed Harry.

“If it were impossible, then I would leave you to the madness. You will need to learn what is called a ‘poker face’,” she said. “I learned of this from my former husband. Dumbledore also makes this face well; he should be the one to teach you, I think.”

Harry’s shoulders drooped. “So I’m supposed to block my mind, control my face... how can I do that all at once?”

“You will cross the room one step after the next,” Covelli said. “Repetition is the key. It will become second nature to you, this I promise. From this time forward, I will randomly probe your mind. This may happen in the corridors, it may happen any time that I see you in passing. I may attempt it at a distance, although it is very difficult to accomplish. You will be given no warning.”

“Wait – from a distance? I didn’t even think that was possible! This is so unfair!” Harry protested.

“It is possible but rarely practiced.” Covelli’s expression went cold. “This is necessary, and you will learn to resist me,” she said. “I would prefer that two Legilimens were regularly testing you, but the creature Dumbledore assigned to teach you was *utterly* unacceptable. Dumbledore will not assist; he will not enter your mind unless you ask it of him.”

“He said that?” Harry asked.

“You are surprised by this, as you should be,” Covelli said. “It appears that you know Dumbledore better than I knew him in my youth... but perhaps neither of us knows him now.”

“I’ve had a lot of experience with him,” Harry said.

Covelli slowly lowered herself into one of the two armchairs in her office. Harry hadn’t considered that their training might be as exhausting for her as it was for him. She took a handkerchief and dabbed at her forehead. “The memories and emotions that I recover from you are privileged,” she told him. “They will not be discussed with Dumbledore or anyone else but you, not unless you expressly permit me to do this. You are not my patient, however; you are my pupil for this subject. This means that I will not explore these things with you either, unless I feel that they impact upon your training or are of sufficient importance that they must be discussed.

So, I ask you again: who is she?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Professor Covelli,” Harry said.

Covelli flinched ever-so-slightly. “My title is ‘Doctor’, Mr. Potter – not ‘Professor’,” she said icily. “Understand this: I will not allow you to antagonise me without consequence. You are also aware that I know you are lying. I press because this must be discussed. Shall I ask once more?”

“It’s not your business, right?” Harry snapped and headed for the door. He tugged hard at the handle, but the door wouldn’t open. After an unexpected squelch, it wouldn’t even move within the frame.

“As you suspect, I already know who she is,” Covelli said quietly, “but I would have preferred that you tell me. At least our distrust is mutual – we can work with that. Now you will sit down and we will have our discussion – *please* .”

Harry sat hard enough to make the armchair creak, and tightly crossed his arms. “So you don’t trust me either? Good! Glad to hear it!” he spat. “Since you already know who Heather is, what else am I supposed to tell you?”

“I think that we should discuss your feelings for this girl and I will explain –” she began.

He cut her off, “Discuss? I’m sitting here against my will and you’re being a scold – that’s more Dumbledore’s style, isn’t it?”

“*I am nothing like –*” She stopped and let out an audible hiss, then continued more quietly, “I am not being a ‘scold’, as you say. We will discuss your feelings for this girl and then I will explain why I believe that she affects you, in particular your Occlumency shield and your emotions. Is this acceptable?”

He refused to uncross his arms. “You must know how I feel; you’re the one who pulled it out of my head. What’s to discuss?”

“I know what you felt in that moment. I do not know how you feel in *this* moment. Do you understand it yourself, I wonder?” Covelli said slowly.

“Fine. Where do I start?” he snapped.

“How did you meet her? This would be the best place to start, I think,” Covelli said.

She had to draw him out at first. He didn’t want to talk about St. Ebb, not with her. It felt to him like talking to Dumbledore, and he didn’t want Heather to be Dumbledore’s business. Whatever there was between he and Heather – and the longer he talked, the more he knew that Covelli was right about his lack of understanding – it wasn’t anyone else’s business at all. With great reluctance, he gave a spare outline of his time in St. Ebb.

“In this world, you are seen as either demon or saviour. In her world, there were no expectations

of you. You had two weeks in which to be something other than your public persona,” said Covelli.

She captured Harry’s full attention with that. He pulled his churning emotions close, and said without feeling, “Fair enough.”

“You say she was avoiding permanence? She is well-known in certain circles. Perhaps she was also temporarily shedding her persona?” Covelli suggested.

Harry thought about how different Heather seemed on the telephone than when they had been together, face to face. “All right,” he mumbled.

“For a person who is well known to the public, it is difficult to create a life or even an identity separate from the public persona,” Covelli said. “This is a matter of control, experience, resources and access. For you, Mr. Potter, there is also personal safety to be considered. These two weeks you describe, they were a meeting between the person you wish to be and the person this Heather wishes to be. Your interactions now, they are of a different character?”

“I’m not seeing her any—” Harry quickly began.

“Do not offer me a lie,” Covelli cut him off. “I know that you have remained in contact with the young lady somehow, and I also know that this has been forbidden in some way. The things I know from your memories and emotions, they are privileged – do you remember this? I know this, and I will not share that knowledge. Your interactions – they are changed?”

“Yes, but there’s still...” Harry trailed off. He didn’t want to lie to her gain – he wasn’t entirely certain whether he *could* lie to her – but he didn’t want to tell her the truth either.

“I have accessed memories of encounters at a discothèque and on an oceanfront. I have some sense of your feelings at those times,” Covelli said. “Do you feel this now, as you think of her?”

“I don’t know. Every time I’m around her...” Harry hesitated, and then added, “If you know who Heather is... do you know what she can do?”

“Yes,” said Covelli. Harry waited for her to offer something more. She didn’t.

“Do you think that’s why I get like this when I’m around her, on account of the Legilimency?” Harry asked.

Covelli let out a soft chuckle. “No, I do not.”

“Right, what am I missing here?” Harry fumed.

Covelli shook her head. “I believe we’re finished for today, and I am certain you do not wish to keep Dumbledore waiting. I am setting you an assignment.”

“An assignment? You’re not part of my tuition!” Harry protested.

“I am within my rights, given the tasks that Dumbledore has set for us,” Covelli returned. “You will write a paper explaining the difference between love and lust –”

“*Pardon?*” Harry blurted out.

“Three pages... excuse me – three *feet* should be sufficient...” She put on a wicked smirk and Harry shuddered. “This will be an opportunity to put your Gryffindor house traits to use. The research for this paper will be conducted by speaking at length with six persons of your choosing.”

“You want me to talk to six people about...?” He felt the blood drain from his cheeks. “What sort of assignment is *that* ?”

“One which I have assigned,” Covelli said curtly. “You will complete the assignment no later than tomorrow evening.”

“*WHAT? By tomorrow?*” Harry shouted. “We don’t even meet on Fridays!”

“You will be off the grounds this weekend, Mr. Potter, and I am aware of your destination.” Her voice became a bit strangled and he picked up a hint of emotion, painful and conflicted, despite her efforts. “Dumbledore will take responsibility for your security, but I know Keith MacLeish all too well. To meet with him unprepared... this would be a grave mistake. You are in need of competent advice.”

He was surprised that she knew MacLeish, and more surprised that she was willing to help. He thought of Flitwick and the goblins, and suspected that he needed counsel over MacLeish even more than he’d needed it with Grishtok and the Volvar. “I have some... er... there’s time Friday, I think...” Harry stammered, still thrown off by the peculiar assignment. He wondered whether he should bring it up with Dumbledore, but guessed that the Headmaster would be more amused than helpful.

“That is amenable. Send me a post with a time of your liking, or use a messaging spell if you have learned one,” she said, her eyes already turned to an open notebook on her desk.

“Love and lust?” Harry muttered as he left Covelli’s chambers, his mind already drifting to the lesson upcoming. “What is she on about?”

The students avoided Harry in the corridors now, even the Gryffindors. Monday breakfast had been filled with whispers about the weekend’s events. By mid-week the rumours had reached a hysterical pitch. Harry had gone on an unsanctioned hunt for Death Eaters; he had started a brawl at the Leaky Cauldron resulting in at least one death; or he had joined forces with a goblin army to plot the overthrow of the Ministry. Luna hadn’t helped matters by telling her Transfiguration class that the last rumour was the most plausible of the three. She had gotten a stiff rebuke from McGonagall for it, to which she had shrugged and then proposed that the Ministry would be well served by a proper coup d’etat. Her further insistence that the coup would best be led by Harry and his army of rampaging graphorns had earned her a detention from Flitwick – it had been ‘for her own good’, he had said. Luna had become absent-minded and quite peculiar – the Luna that

Harry remembered from fifth year, more or less – since returning to Hogwarts; try as he might, he simply couldn't figure the reason for it.

Harry paid the rumours no mind; he was accustomed to being seen as a demon, as Covelli had put it. At least no one was suggesting that Hermione had slashed open a Death Eater, who had then been allowed to bleed to death by the leaders of the British goblin community. No one accused the goblins of then beheading said Death Eater and sending the head as an owl post to Voldemort, to be immediately followed by high tea and a feast. The truth in this instance was far stranger than a Quibbler headline.

Harry still hadn't had an opportunity to go over the events of the hunt in detail with Flitwick in detail, and he wanted – needed – the professor's insight. Talking about that day with Hermione wasn't an option. Talking to her at all had become a problem. Flitwick had shuffled Hermione to the Hospital Wing for an overnight stay upon returning from the goblin hunt; he had shifted her to private tuition in Charms upon her release. Detheridge had relieved her of practical lessons in Defence, and Harry knew that she hadn't attended Dumbledore's NEWT potions class since the week prior. She was indeed the subject of rumours, but these concerned her sanity.

The former D.A. members were still looking after Hermione, Harry knew, but at a greater distance. Ron and Ginny were the only ones to sit near her at meals. She otherwise avoided them as surely as she avoided him, and she positively snapped at anyone else who drew near. He had tracked her movements through the castle for four days, and was surprised that she had only visited the library once. Most of her week had been spent either atop the Astronomy Tower or in the dungeons.

If he hadn't looked up at the proper moment, Harry would have piled directly into Hermione as he rounded a corner. "Hermione! I –" he started.

She stooped to pick up her book bag. Her hair was a tangled mess and she wouldn't meet his eye. "I've no time right now," she said quickly. "I can't talk to you –"

He bent his knees and lowered his head, and whispered, "Look, if this is about what happened at the hunt, I don't –"

Somehow she still managed to avoid looking at him. "I can't do this right now, Harry. I have to go."

"Happy birthday," he said softly.

She slowly raised her head. "I'm sorry?"

"Happy birthday," he said again, "or at least I think I have it right. This is the 19th, isn't it?"

"Birthday... I'd forgotten, honestly," she said. "Erm... thank you, but I really –"

"Have to go, I know," he finished for her. "I have a gift for you, if that's all right. Oh, and I've a

gift to deliver you as well.”

She took his hands and said, “Thank you”; there was a subtle tremor in her voice. “I really have to go, or I’ll be late for class.” She left quickly – it wasn’t quite fleeing, but close enough to sting. By the time he reached the Defence classroom, he looked forward to taking it out on Detheridge. He was quite thrown when Tonks met him at the door.

“What are you doing here?” he demanded.

Tonks wasn’t put off at all. “It’s your dancing lesson today, love – oh, I’m sorry, your ‘movement studies’,” she laughed.

“Bloody hell,” he huffed.

“Even more disappointed than usual, eh? Has someone eaten your treacle this morning?” she said.

“I was looking forward to a duel,” Harry grumbled.

Tonks reached toward his face and pinched his cheek before he realised what was happening. “Such a charming lad... I’ll be happy to put you arse-over-teakettle when we’ve finished.”

“*Fine*. Let’s dance,” he growled.

Tonks led him to a vacant room down the corridor from the Defence classroom. She tapped her wand against a wireless in the corner and a wizard’s voice squawked, “It’s all tango, all the time!”

Harry’s eyebrows shot up. “Are you serious? I’ve never heard *that* before!”

Tonks shrugged. “You just have to coax out what you want. Molly never goes beyond WWN One... my mum either, come to think of it.” She sauntered to Harry and waited for him to take the lead.

He was precise, he was determined, and he was angry. After a half hour of charging around the room, Tonks waved him away and silenced the wireless with a quick snap of her wand. “What do you think... we’re doing here? Are you... are you trying to kill me?” she panted.

“Good enough? Are we finished here?” Harry asked.

“No, we aren’t,” Tonks returned. “The point of this is to recognise how a partner moves. Dragging me around in a circle isn’t going to do –”

The room went black and then a bright red bolt sliced through the darkness. Harry rolled to one side and Tonks dove in the opposite direction. He could see her for an instant with each successive flash; she was slowly circling toward the source. The attacker spotted her and Tonks barely managed to raise a shield. Harry fired off two quick stunners at the attacker’s back, but they were somehow deflected and the second nearly rebounded on him.

Harry reviewed the room in his mind as he dodged a curse. There was no furniture save the small table for the wireless, so there were no objects of any size to banish or levitate. He tried to conjure a spread of cannon shot, but the conjuration failed; nothing he'd ever read had even hinted at an anti-conjuration jinx or anything of the like. With the next spell flash, he spotted an old house banner hanging high above. Tonks shifted to her left and Harry moved to his right. She began to fire a barrage of spells and Harry did the same, adjusting his position to assure that he didn't catch her with any stray casting; he spied a pattern to her spell choices and began to alternate his from the pattern, hoping to catch the attacker off-guard.

In the midst of the onslaught, the attacker dropped to the floor and simply disappeared. "*Lumos!*" Harry called out anxiously in hopes of slicing through the unnatural darkness. The room was flooded with incredibly bright light.

Tonks muttered, "*Torca ignis* ... bloody twit!" The wall sconces lit after several flickers, and Harry cancelled his spell. As the tip of his wand dimmed, he saw movement – a familiar sort of rippling in the air. He moved quickly to the left and Tonks circled to the right. With a quick flick of the wrist, he ran a slashing spell across the top of the banner and then propelled it quickly downward. He followed with the strongest stunner he could muster; it singed the fallen banner and drew a yelp from the attacker now shrouded beneath. The attacker fell flat and didn't move.

"*Petrificus totalis*," Harry said. Tonks vanished the banner and Harry tugged away the invisibility cloak beneath, to reveal a rigid and unconscious Bill Weasley.

"I figured it was a set-up," Harry said. "You were moving too slowly. Besides, if I was really under attack inside the castle, Dumbledore would have had help here within a minute."

"First off, wish for backup but never count on it. There are a score of things that can come off wrong," Tonks warned him. "Are you beginning to understand why Aurors learn to dance?"

"I knew where you were going to go next," Harry recognised.

Tonks nodded. "Exactly. Now... moving on... never hold back! Stunners, Harry? I know that's not the best you have; Shackbolt's given you more than that!"

"Like I said, it was a set-up," Harry insisted.

"You can't assume that, not ever," Tonks said. "As to the spell choices, what in Merlin's name were you thinking with *lumos*? The only reason we weren't both put on our backs is because you cast a bloody lighthouse! I'm still seeing spots!"

Harry shrugged nervously. "I figured that if someone made it go dark, it was for a reason; if you light up the room, then you create a problem."

"Suppose that you light up the room, and an opponent's right behind your partner? There's a green flash, and then you're *alone*," Tonks fired back. "Did you notice that I backed toward the walls? It's best to have something solid at your back, if nothing else."

“How do you know the walls aren’t dangerous? There could be... openings for wands, I suppose? Spikes that pop out – that sort of thing?” Harry ventured.

“None of that’s likely, but I suppose you could use proximity wards,” Tonks suggested. “We can ask Bill about that. First, I’d like to know what Detheridge is doing with you, because he’s surely not teaching you how to fight.”

“No, Shackbolt’s going to do that. Dumbledore’s trying to bring him on; otherwise I’ll go to him. With Detheridge, we’ve focused on healing spells. He’s gone over a lot of things, though. It’s like Shackbolt, I suppose – you learn a lot just listening,” Harry said.

“Healing? You’re still taking on Charms with Professor Flitwick, right? He’s the one to cover healing,” Tonks insisted.

“Not healing charms – healing *spells*. Detheridge keeps coming back to the difference,” Harry explained.

“Healing spells?” Tonks shook her head. “Looks like I need to wake up the genius, eh? Pity... I was so hoping to put him in a tutu first.” She cast the enervating charm and Bill abruptly sat up.

“Oi, what sort of stunner was that?” Bill blurted out. He fingered a charred hole in the back of his trousers.

“I’ve got a question for you – a couple, actually – if you can stop rubbing your bum,” Tonks laughed.

Bill scowled in return. “It needs rubbing – that stung!”

Tonks waggled her eyebrows. “Is that an invitation?”

“Not in front of the children, dear!” said Bill with a grin.

Harry crossed his arms. “Seems like the child did all right – who’s the one with a burned bum?”

“Fair point,” Bill chuckled. “A couple of questions, then?”

“You were five minutes early, by the way,” said Tonks. “So, what’s the difference between a healing charm and a healing spell?”

“I was on time by my watch. Healing spells, eh? Well, they’re a sight more powerful than the usual charms,” Bill said, “but most are fairly dangerous. Why? Is this an Auror bit?”

“Harry’s been learning them from Professor Detheridge,” Tonks said.

“Is that so? Which spells?” Bill asked.

“*ConsanESCO, medela ... focilare ...*” Harry began. Bill’s brow tufted even as Harry mumbled,

“...*morior mora* ...”

“*Morior mora* ? That’s... are you serious? He’s called that a ‘healing spell’? It’s... well... it’s rooted in the work of a Babylonian necromancer – terribly dangerous work, that!” thundered Bill.

“Yeah, I can see how it could be dangerous,” Harry agreed. “It’s really complex; very tiring to cast, as well.”

“Tiring? Tiring, he says?” Bill threw up his hands. “You’re expelling part of your life force, more or less – of course it’s tiring!”

“It’s not life force, it’s just energy, and you do get it back –” Harry fired back.

“It isn’t just energy, and yes, it comes back *if* the spell is flawlessly cast,” Bill warned.

“Dunno, doesn’t sound very useful to me,” Tonks said. “If you cast that during a fight, it sounds like you’d be left defenceless.”

Bill looked carefully around the room. He cast in quick succession a personal ward, an imperturbable charm and a silent space, then conjured three chairs and motioned for Harry to sit. “Here’s the thing, Harry: you need to take more care with Detheridge,” he said. “The man’s clearly very bright and well qualified for the subject... but there’s something dodgy about him.”

“He’s a Defence professor at Hogwarts; that’s dodgy on its own. Do you know how many Defence professors Hogwarts has had in the last thirty-five years?” Tonks asked.

“Why do you know that?” Harry wondered aloud.

“Go on, make a guess,” Tonks prodded.

“Thirty-five?” Harry offered.

“Professor Dumbledore told me that no one’s repeated since ’62, but the answer’s forty-one. They don’t always finish the year,” Tonks said.

“It isn’t just the post,” Bill said. “Three times now, I swear to you Detheridge didn’t know who I was. A couple of other times, he’s known things that he couldn’t possibly know... um... things that only our mutual friends would know.”

“Maybe Dumbledore’s talking to him? Maybe he’s part of the old crowd?” Harry suggested.

“No, no, I’ve noticed the same, and it’s not just things to do with our, uh, friends,” Tonks added. “Sometimes I swear he knows about things before they happen. A couple of people I know at the Ministry are prescient, and it isn’t nearly so sharp... and then there’s the fact that he looks different now and again – older, then younger, then older...”

“He does, doesn’t he?” Bill muttered. “It’s sort of like Remus. You don’t suppose...?”

“He’s not a werewolf,” Tonks said. “It is a bit like Remus with all the changes, but we just met the man three weeks ago. I can’t see a pattern to it, can you? Sometimes he seems so worn out, and sometimes I think he could run circles around us.”

“Maybe he’s just sick? I know St. Mungo’s can fix just about anything, but look at Moody...?” Harry offered.

“He’s not right, Harry, and he’s giving you tuition in some very dangerous magic.” Bill shook his head. “I know you’re going to have to learn some dangerous spells in the end, but *morior mora* ? It doesn’t make any sense.”

“Dumbledore reviews all the lessons,” Harry pointed out. “He knows what I’m learning.”

“It pains me to say it, but I don’t think that’s good enough any more – not after this summer,” Bill said nervously. “These are your decisions to make, and I don’t want to be like Mum on this. Just promise me that you’ll keep your eyes wide open, right? Be careful, and don’t go off half-cocked if you do see something odd... and don’t just tell Dumbledore, either. I’d like to know about it as well. Tonks feels the same. We’re working with Detheridge too, you know – consider it a matter of safety, if you like?”

“All right... if it makes you feel better,” Harry allowed.

“We’re serious about this, the both of us,” said Tonks. Harry glanced at his watch, and she crooked an eyebrow. “Sorry, are we boring you?” she laughed. “That must mean it’s time for me to knock you senseless.”

“No, no... erm... it’s just that I have this stupid assignment –” Harry began, but stopped himself quickly.

“An assignment? They’re still setting papers for you?” Bill asked.

Harry shook his head. “It’s mostly practical now. Croaker gives a lot of work, but I’m three years behind in Runes.”

“Bill can help you with Runes, you know,” Tonks said.

“Nice of you to offer me up,” Bill groused.

“Anything for you, love,” Tonks smirked. “Is it time to rub your bum yet?” Bill showed the barest hint of a Weasley blush.

Harry hastily rose from the conjured chair. “It’s nothing, really. I’ll take care of it myself –”

“I am willing to pitch in, actually,” Bill assured him. “He must be blazing along if you’re going from nothing to NEWTs; are you beyond elementary aetts?”

“It’s not from Croaker,” Harry muttered. “I’ll just be off...”

Tonks crossed her arms. “What sort of assignment? You seem twitchy over it.”

“Really, it’s nothing – just one of Covelli’s mind games,” Harry insisted, and made to leave.

Bill pursed his lips. “Covelli... she’s the new History professor, right? I didn’t think you were going to sit for History.”

Tonks’s face screwed up in concentration. “She was Hermione’s... hold up... she’s a mind healer. Is she helping you block out You-Know-Who?”

“Use his name,” Harry huffed.

“I understood that Snape was trying to teach you Occlumency last year,” Bill said. “Something of a disaster, that?”

“Quite,” said Harry. “If we’re through here, I really should –”

“So she’s teaching you Occlumency and she set you a paper,” Tonks concluded. “What, struggling with your focus?”

“What would *you* know about Occlumency?” Harry snapped.

“Only what I picked up in the Auror training on mind magic,” answered Tonks. “I know that it blocks Legilimency, that it uses a focal point and a good deal of concentration... I remember the trainer saying that strong emotions can muck it up...” She stopped abruptly, and then slowly assumed a predatory grin. “Aww, ickle Harry’s having focus problems. This doesn’t have anything to do with emissions, does it?” Harry felt the blood drain from his face.

Bill dropped the charms on the room with a quick slash of his wand. “Out,” he said to Tonks.

“Oi, I was just winding him up!” Tonks pouted.

“*Out*, Tonks!” Bill demanded. When her grin turned to a frown, he added a quiet, “Please.”

“Wasn’t trying to be upsetting... not too much...” she pouted on her way out.

As soon as the door was again imperturbably sealed, Bill motioned to the chairs. “I recall an embarrassing assignment or two during my Hogwarts days,” he said; “mostly around healing, as I think on it. I don’t know much more about Occlumency than Tonks does, Harry, but I figure that you couldn’t learn it without someone mucking inside your head. That sounds pretty awful to me. Do you want to talk about it?”

Harry really didn’t want to talk about it, but he didn’t know how to get out of the assignment and at least Bill came across as a fair-minded fellow. “Covelli wants three feet on the difference between love and lust,” he blurted out.

Bill’s lip twitched. “*Wha...?* Love and lust... er... I’m not laughing, honestly I’m not...” He

covered his face with his hands.

Harry sighed. “It isn’t funny, you know? She’s serious.”

Bill took a deep breath and then let down his hands. “If anyone had set that assignment for me when I was your age, I’d have given myself over to the Giant Squid,” he said. “You’re supposed to *research* lust...?” He snickered and looked away; Harry heard him mutter, “Oh, thank Merlin I made Tonks leave.”

“She... wants me to, um, talk to six people about... oh, this is a nightmare...” Harry stammered. Bill’s eyes widened and his jaw dropped; Harry wondered if he’d made the same face when Covelli had given him the assignment.

“‘Nightmare’ sums it up nicely,” Bill said at last. “Do you, er, want me to weigh in on this?”

Harry’s throat felt thick. “You aren’t going to tell anyone about...?” he managed.

Bill frantically shook his head. “Absolutely not! Your life is messy enough, without this getting around! Can you imagine if word got out that you’d been assigned this topic?”

“I’ve been trying not to imagine it, actually,” Harry groaned.

“That’s understandable,” Bill said. “So... do you want...?”

Harry forced himself to nod.

“This is as awkward for me as it is for you,” Bill assured him. “Is that your satchel over there? I suppose you’ll want a quill and parchment – you know, notes and such?”

“*Notes?*” Harry squeaked.

“Like it or not, you’ve a paper to write – a quick *incendio* afterward, and no one’s the wiser,” Bill said. “Look... I’m trying to be honourable here, you being an unofficial Weasley and all. It could be worse.”

“Worse? It couldn’t possibly be worse!” Harry insisted.

Bill rolled his eyes. “Is that so? Who would you rather be sitting with right now – me or Dumbledore?” he asked. Harry summoned his satchel so quickly that it took all of his Seeking reflexes to catch it.

After twenty minutes, Harry discovered that after a certain point, it simply wasn’t possible to feel any more humiliated; there was a strange sort of numbness that eventually set in. At first Bill seemed to be heading toward the “Talk” that Harry had heard all about from his schoolmates but had always managed to avoid for himself. Everything drifted significantly from that point onward, and eventually Bill seemed to run out of things to say – at least things he was willing to say to Harry. For his part, Harry had no idea what to do with any of it. He now knew that Tonks

was without a doubt seeing Bill; that a girl wasn't a slag just because she showed some physical interest in a bloke; that there were serious advantages and disadvantages to dating a half-Veela; and that not a few Chilean women had been impressed by Bill's ability to tie knots in a cherry stem with his tongue.

"That's all I have," Bill said at last. "Next week, we're going over a few ways to make this Covelli woman suffer." He shuddered. "Horrible assignment, Harry – just horrible."

"Erm... thanks," Harry managed.

Bill stroked his chin thoughtfully. "Could you do me a favour? How close an eye is Professor Dumbledore keeping on you?"

"I can go where I want, if that's what you're asking?" Harry said.

"You know that Dad is mad for all things Muggle, right? I try not to feed it too much – gives Mum fits – but now and again I like to give him some widgety thing or another," Bill explained. "Tonks picked up this Muggle wireless for him, with the earpieces and a couple of the music things... er... the square things made out of the plastics, with the spools inside of them –"

"It sounds like a Walkman," Harry said; "my cousin Dudley's had a few of them."

"Sometimes I forget that you're Muggle-born for all intents and purposes," Bill said. "I've seen one of these things before, but never gave a thought to picking one up. All you had to do was make for the nearest bodega to find good music in Chile, and there wasn't time for much other than work in Egypt."

"So...? You want me to take this Walkman out to St. Ebb?" Harry asked.

Bill nodded. "If you wouldn't mind? Mum and Dad would love to see you. Dad's become very fond of you over the years, Harry."

"I like your Dad," Harry said. "He's always gone out of his way for me. Your Mum has, too... it's just..."

"There's no need to explain," Bill said. "While you're there... you know, Dad managed to take six of us through these sorts of questions. None of us ended up too badly damaged for it."

Harry thought about how Mr. Weasley had reacted when he'd come across Harry and Heather on the beach – he had been calm and helpful and very understanding. "You think I should talk to him, then?" he confirmed.

"I wouldn't bring it up around Mum, but yeah... if you can get him free, I think you should," Bill said. "You can get yourself a decent meal –"

"Hogwarts food is rather good, you know," Harry pointed out.

“Of course it is, when you actually eat it,” Bill countered. “You’re avoiding the Great Hall as if it were cursed. So... you can get yourself a decent meal, and knock down another one-sixth of this assignment of yours.”

“I’d have to do it tonight. There isn’t even time to send an owl,” Harry said.

Bill laughed. “You don’t honestly think that’s necessary, do you? You could drop in at four o’clock in the morning and Mum would have something whipped up for you by half past. I’ve got the Walkthing in one of my cases; let’s fetch it for you.”

Three hours later, Harry pushed away his third plate of an absurdly heavy midday meal and smiled at Mrs. Weasley. “I couldn’t possibly eat another bite,” he said. “This was wonderful, really.”

Mrs. Weasley beamed at him. “With more notice, I could have managed those treacle tarts that you like so much – not that we mind an unexpected visit, of course! Isn’t that right, Arthur?”

Mr. Weasley set aside his copy of the *Daily Prophet*. “Don’t mind at all,” he agreed, “and I know it’s been said, but I’ll say it again: we can’t thank you enough for allowing us to stay here through the winter.”

“I could never have left you to those tents,” Harry said earnestly. “It wouldn’t have been right, not after everything you’ve done for me.”

Mrs. Weasley’s hands kept smoothing the tablecloth in the same place, over and over. “Harry dear... we’ve had some rough patches over the summer... things have been said, things that hurt you...”

Harry sighed. “Mrs. Weasley, you don’t need to –”

“Yes, yes, I believe that I do,” she said. “We’ve tried to do right by you, all of us, but somehow... especially of late... I’ve... I’ve...” Mr. Weasley produced a handkerchief and Mrs. Weasley dabbed at her eyes.

“It’s all right, really,” Harry insisted.

Mrs. Weasley took a handful of heaving breaths before she set the handkerchief on her lap. “All I’ve wanted to do is to keep you happy and safe, all of you... Arthur, the children, you, Hermione – you’re all family, as far as we’re concerned. Did you know that Hermione sent me a Howler...? Of course you did; I’m sure she told you straight away.”

“You haven’t hurt me, not really, but you did hurt Hermione,” Harry said. “Mr. and Mrs. Granger were very upset over it.”

Mrs. Weasley lowered her eyes. “I never meant for that. We’re terribly fond of Hermione. She’s been like a second daughter to us – and with all these men around, can you blame me for wanting

another?” She seemed to expect that Harry would say something; when he didn’t, she went on, “So many Muggle-borns live on the edges of our world or leave it altogether. I don’t want that to happen to her, Harry. It would devastate Ron and Ginny... it would devastate all of us. Hermione expects to accomplish so much. I... I thought that with her coming of age, it was best that someone soften the blow; you see?”

Harry balled his fists beneath the table. “I’m sure you meant well,” he bit out. “Did you know that she thought you were setting her up?”

Mrs. Weasley’s brow crinkled. “I’m afraid I don’t understand –”

Harry latched on to Covelli’s exercises; he took a long slow breath and pulled in his emotions as close as he could manage. “She thought you were planning to make sure she’d receive a... an offer from the right sort of pureblood,” he said. “Do you understand now?”

Mrs. Weasley was horror-stricken. “*No!* I didn’t intend that *at all* – not that I’d have minded in the slightest if Hermione had taken up with Ron – but I never intended... oh, this is dreadful... she’ll never forgive me for it...”

“I think that you should give her more credit, Molly,” Mr. Weasley said. “She’s a bright girl, bright enough to see that you had good intentions. Now... would you rather that I help to clean up, or should Harry and I go for a stroll?”

Mrs. Weasley waved her hands toward the door. “Off with you – picking up after three isn’t even a trifle,” she sniffed. “Besides, Harry needs to slip you whatever Muggle thing that Bill’s sent along.” Harry’s eyes widened and Mr. Weasley looked away sheepishly. She stood before they could and kissed Mr. Weasley on the forehead. “Go ahead – restock your collections if that’s what you want. I’m letting up on you, dear, at least until you manage to clutter the entire tower,” she laughed. “We should find something for you to do besides puttering around.”

“Let’s go, Harry – I know when I’m not wanted,” Mr. Weasley said with a wink.

“Do come back in before you leave?” Mrs. Weasley said to Harry. “I thought I might send Hermione a note, perhaps a few sweets?” He nodded briskly and followed Mr. Weasley to the courtyard and then the path that led toward the cliffs. Neither said anything; Mr. Weasley seemed deep in thought, and Harry let his irritation disperse in the warm September sun.

When they stopped at the overlook, Mr. Weasley grinned at Harry. “So, what did Bill send along? Give it over, would you?”

Harry could feel Mr. Weasley’s curiosity and enthusiasm in the air. He smiled in return and pulled Bill’s gift from his knapsack. “It’s called a Walkman,” he said. “Muggles use it to play music. These things are called cassettes; that’s where the music is kept.” Harry put in a cassette and pressed the Play button. He was surprised to find that the Walkman had working batteries. “You put this headset over your ears. These buttons make the cassette go forward and back. This one stops it. This little thing here makes it louder or quieter.”

“Amazing... simply amazing...” Mr. Weasley muttered. He put on the headset and turned the volume dial far too quickly. “*Bloody sodding...!*” Harry’s brows shot toward his hairline; he quickly reached for the Walkman and set the dial back.

Mr. Weasley nearly tore the headset off. “Er... have to experiment with that later. Now this works by... what, exactly? It doesn’t need plugs, does it?”

Harry shook his head. “It runs on batteries. If they wear out, I can get you some more. Plugs will work in the tower, by the way, provided you don’t rely on too much magic. It’s the same idea as the lights.”

Mr. Weasley laughed. “I nearly found that out the hard way... rather unpleasant to admit this, but on our first day here I very nearly set the kitchen on fire. An Ignition spell does rather ugly things to those glass bulbs – did you know that? Ted Tonks has come by a time or two to set us right. I’ve been a bit afraid to try any of my new plugs, in truth. I think I’ll wait on Ted, perhaps see if he and Andromeda might spend a weekend?”

“I can show you how some things work.” Harry hesitated for a moment. “I should tell you, though... a lot of the things you used to keep around were broken.”

Mr. Weasley sighed. “Tom Granger told me the same. It didn’t hurt quite so much to lose it all, knowing that. Harry... if you knew, why did you never say anything to me?”

“Dunno... it would have been strange, me saying it,” Harry admitted. “You were happy keeping everything, and I didn’t think it was my place.”

“Fair enough,” Mr. Weasley said, “but no one wants to look a fool. I’d like to think I would have listened to you on this, even when you were twelve. It surprises me more that Hermione said nothing about it, actually. Imagine me with a shed filled with broken things... and here we are, living in a place with wires and plugs and glowing glass lights, and the greengrocer comes to us in one of those... it’s called a lorry, right?” He made for the steep path down the cliffs to the beach, and Harry followed. “I’ve learned more about Muggles in the last few weeks than in twenty-five years on the job,” he went on. “You know, the Ministry should be ashamed of Muggle Studies? If they’d commission a Muggle-born to write the texts, they’d... well... of course they won’t. It would make wizards that much more interested in Muggles, and we can’t have that.” He sighed. “I’ve had a lot of time to think, Harry. I don’t pine for my days at the Ministry, I can tell you.”

Harry couldn’t shake what Mrs. Weasley had said about Hermione’s future. “Mr. Weasley, has it ever crossed your mind that maybe *I* might go back into the Muggle world, you know, when everything’s finished?” he asked.

Mr. Weasley slowed his pace. “That would be a tragedy,” he said without looking Harry’s way. “When V-Voldemort’s well and truly gone, you’ll have great influence – far greater than you have now. I’d rather it be you guiding affairs of state than a Nott or a Parkinson or someone else from the dark families who always seem to ride out these things. At least the Malfoys are cornered, for once.” He stopped altogether. “My family wouldn’t fare well if you were to leave, Harry. It

would be like losing Per... well, it would be like losing one of our own. I don't expect that would be your only consideration, but bear it in mind."

"I won't stay if Hermione leaves, you know," Harry said. "I won't stand by if she's held back like Mrs. Weasley said."

"When all of this is behind us... if you stand behind her, if you're known to be a good friend, then I imagine that will carry a good deal of weight," Mr. Weasley suggested. "Molly's made a worst-case point. I understand that the goblins have taken a great interest in Hermione; she could exert considerable influence from inside of Gringotts. I don't think she should expect to hold a high Ministry position, Harry – not unless the world changes a good deal – but that won't prevent her from making a difference."

Harry's emotions pulled free for a moment before he could rein them in. "She won't be unhappy with her life, not if I can help it," he promised. "I'd do the same for Ron, you know, or you and Mrs. Weasley –"

"You already have," Mr. Weasley said. "You've really no idea what you've accomplished to this point. That's not a bad thing, it seems to me. You've avoided serious arrogance –"

"Really?" Harry asked. "I know I was impossible this summer..."

"You're sixteen years old; that earns some latitude," Mr. Weasley chuckled. "You take your responsibilities seriously, and I admit to being impressed by that. We didn't know them especially well, but... I believe I'm on solid ground in saying that your father and mother would be proud. Yes, quite proud indeed, I'd say."

They were both quiet until well after they bared their feet and began to stroll southward across the sand. Mr. Weasley broke the silence. "Bill sent an owl ahead of you. I understand you've been given a troubling assignment by one of the professors? He wasn't very specific, but he suggested that I might bring it up if you kept your head down on the matter."

Harry's throat tightened. "Er... sent an owl... trying to be helpful... nice of him, that... yes, very nice... um... you see... it's just... ehh..."

Mr. Weasley pursed his lips. "I've never seen you so tongue-tied. Is it really this awful?"

"Love and lust..." Harry ground out. "She wants three feet on the difference between them."

"Lu –!" Mr. Weasley cleared his throat noisily. "I... I can't believe Minerva would do this to you!"

"It wasn't her," Harry said quickly.

"Er... that's something of a comfort, I suppose..." Mr. Weasley pulled a face. "All right, then... can you take detention instead?"

Harry laughed despite himself. “I don’t think that will work.”

Mr. Weasley continued to walk, his hands pensively clasped together behind his back. “Well... *well* ... you’re in quite a spot, eh? I won’t even ask what could have provoked this.”

“You know, you really don’t have to –” Harry began.

“Bill did mention that you weren’t left time to tarry,” Mr. Weasley said, “and I must confess... well, there’s ample evidence that I’m at least familiar with both...” He stopped when Harry began making faint choking sounds. “I won’t go there, Harry – you can take a proper breath now.”

“Sorry,” Harry muttered.

“No need,” said Mr. Weasley. “I remember when the very thought of my parents having those sort of feelings –”

Harry ground his teeth. “You said you weren’t going there.”

“True enough,” Mr. Weasley laughed.

Harry reached down, picked up a small stone, and threw it at the surf. “I can’t believe this,” he sighed.

“You know, love and lust aren’t just about pretty girls,” said Mr. Weasley.

“I’m sure that’s the idea, though...” Harry sulked.

“So you *do* have some idea why this assignment came about?” Mr. Weasley snorted. “Well, that’s neither here nor there... the point is that there’s more than one sort of love. There’s more than one sort of lust, as well. Do you think that Molly and I love our children?”

“Of course you do,” Harry said.

Mr. Weasley nodded. “And there you are. Parents love their children; there’s the love between friends, of course... we even love our familiars and pets. You can write about that, can’t you?”

For the first time since the assignment was set, Harry felt a flicker of hope. “That’s brilliant,” he said, “but... what about... um... lust?”

Mr. Weasley shook his head. “You can say... that name without the slightest flinch, but the word ‘lust’ stops you flat. There’s nothing wrong with a bit of lust; it’s good to be enthusiastic. The problem comes when it’s carried too far. Cornelius Fudge has a lust for power... so does V-Voldemort, of course.”

“I never thought of it that way,” Harry admitted.

“I’m not surprised, not after raising six boys,” said Mr. Weasley. “Now then, if you really need to

pursue this in a different way... er... I am willing to help you. I'd feel terrible if I left you in the lurch -"

"No, honestly!" Harry blurted out. "What I mean is, thank you; I appreciate the ideas..."

"Glad to be of help," Mr. Weasley said.

They both went silent again. Harry needed the release of a long walk and Mr. Weasley kept pace. As Harry slipped on his trainers for the walk back to the tower, Mr. Weasley broke the silence. "Have you thought about what I said to you the last time we were on this beach?" he asked.

"You mean what to do about Heather? It's been on my mind, yes," Harry said hesitantly.

Mr. Weasley waited for Harry to start up the path. "This really is a horrid assignment, Harry – I figure you're miserable right about now. Still... if there's no getting out of it, you may as well put it to good use, right?" he said as they started the climb.

After a very uncomfortable hour in the staff commons and an equally unpleasant two hours in the staff reading room, it was perfectly obvious to Harry that he was being avoided. Sprout and McGonagall had made polite excuses; Croaker had glared at him; Marchbanks had harrumphed for two minutes before burying herself in a book older than she was; and Vector had ignored him as obviously as possible.

He sought out Flitwick to see if he might shed some light. The Charms professor had very energetically begged off, but had then insisted that he would happily see Harry the following evening. It was the particular timing that set Harry to thinking, and he didn't care for the conclusion. *They all know about the bloody assignment!* he realised, and he began to concoct increasingly diabolical ways of hexing Covelli.

Harry was still grumbling to himself when he came upon Luna Lovegood. She planted herself directly in his path. "Hello, Harry; you're having a *perfectly* miserable day," she sing-songed; her hand twirled absently at long hair that was no longer there.

"Hello, Luna," he sighed. "I haven't a graphorn army, you know, and I'm not putting on a coup."

"Graphorns... ooh; I didn't say graphorns, did I? I meant flugelhorns, of course," she said.

Harry's eyes involuntarily crossed. "Flugelhorns? Erm... I'm not sure, but I think you play a flugelhorn?" Luna's eyes were fixed on a point a foot above Harry's left shoulder. "Luna...?"

Her eyes cleared for a moment. "I'm sorry," she said; "it was rude of me to carry on two

conversations at once. So, what can I help you with?"

"Help me with...? You're the one who stepped in front of me," Harry pointed out, "not that I'm unhappy to see you. Did *you* want something?"

"Want something? Oh... I thought you might need help with your assignment," she said absently.

"What do you know about that?" Harry gasped.

"I was walking the grounds, and the centaurs were having a chortle over it," Luna told him.

Harry desperately hoped that she was being fanciful. "I... I think I can finish it on my own, thank you," he managed.

She fixed him with an unblinking stare; her pupils contracted into pinpoints. "Lust dies. Love does not," she said.

Harry couldn't look into her eyes any longer. "Er... I don't know if I can get three feet from that, but... thank you?"

"It's the only truth there is on the matter," she said with a shrug. "If you write large, the truth can fill six inches. I could explain the mating habits of a Will 'o the Crisp for you... that could take up six feet, easily." Her eyes drifted off toward the end of the corridor and she shuddered.

"What is it? Are you all right?" Harry asked.

"It will pass," Luna said. "You were about to ask me something?"

"I was, actually..." Harry admitted. "Um... it's like this... when we were in St. Ebb, you were so... well... normal? What's happened to you?"

"I have thestrals in my belfry from fall to spring," Luna laughed.

Harry's brow furrowed. "Fall to spring... are you... are you saying that Hogwarts does this to you?"

"Everything dreams, Harry – the students, the professors, the ghosts, the owls, the portraits... even the castle dreams," she sang out. "Be seeing you!" She skipped off before he could get in a word. He couldn't begin to imagine what Luna was trying to say; it was much more confusing than her dottiness from the year prior. He considered a return to the staff commons and a confrontation with each professor until the truth came out, but decided instead to kill Covelli in her sleep and thus be over and done with it. As he continued along the corridor, it occurred to him that killing her in her sleep was not only too kind, but would be thoroughly unsatisfying. He clenched and unclenched his fists for the rest of the walk to Dumbledore's chambers.

Dumbledore's gargoyles Gareth was civil, almost stately, in stark contrast to Cyril and Godfrey who guarded the staff commons. It still startled Harry when any of the gargoyles spoke to him.

They didn't speak to or in the presence of students – he'd had no idea until the end of August that they spoke at all; it was another measure that he was now different than before. "The Headmaster is indisposed," the gargoyle said in his slow and grave way.

Harry's temper was in full flush. "Indisposed, is he? Well, he needs to be... uh... *disposed*, right now!"

"I shall enquire," Gareth said. "Know that disposed is not the opposite of indisposed... and would that they taught the Queen's English in this castle." *Even the gargoyles are against me*, Harry thought.

Several minutes later, the gargoyle allowed the door to open without comment. Harry dashed up the stairs. Dumbledore was seated behind his massive desk and a stack of papers. He had a snifter of something reddish in one hand and a quill in the other that he set down as Harry entered. "Oh, dear... that is the sort of expression one wears following a great tragedy," the Headmaster said. "Have a seat, would you?"

"I'll stand, thank you," Harry said.

Dumbledore set down his glass. "Good gracious, Harry, should I be concerned? What could have happened–?"

Harry held up his hand. "Covelli set me an assignment – a nasty bit of work," he said. "I don't suppose you know anything about that?"

Dumbledore held an impassive face. "An assignment? Is that so?"

Still, Harry spotted the barest hint of a twinkle in Dumbledore's eye. "I'm in a foul mood right now, Professor, so please don't draw this out. Either Covelli spread the word or you did. Which is it?"

"I see you've found me out," Dumbledore said with an impish grin. "It is customary for the Headmaster to prank each member of staff at the commencement of each new term... except for Mr. Filch, who possesses no sense of humour whatever."

"*A prank...?*" Harry pushed his feelings down as deeply as he could manage. "You could have added a sleeve to all of my robes, or turned me purple, or... or transfigured me into a newt, but... this?" He lost his reserve, and added with a catch in his throat, "How could you?"

"You can trust that the staff will stop avoiding you after tomorrow, and I assure you that neither Mr. Filch nor Severus was given any knowledge whatever," said Dumbledore calmly.

"You honestly think this will stop tomorrow? They must think I'm some sort of... of... pervert!" Harry fumed.

Dumbledore sat back in his chair. "Nonsense, Harry. Why ever would they think that?"

“They have to wonder why I’d be stuck with an assignment like this one!” Harry railed. “They have to think there’s something wrong with me or that I did something –”

“Ah, I see,” Dumbledore said. He took a sip of his red beverage before he went on, “In order for that to be the case, the staff would have to know what the assignment was.”

Harry was left flat-footed. “Wha...?”

“The staff was told that I’d set you to ask them particularly embarrassing questions,” Dumbledore laughed. “Having been pranked a number of times, they not only understood but were most willing to be complicit. I dare say that Filius was best at putting on, wouldn’t you agree?”

Harry’s mouth opened and closed silently several times before he forced out, “Not funny, not in the slightest.”

Dumbledore continued to chuckle. “Is that so? I found it quite amusing – in fact, I find it quite amusing even now.”

“You’ve a dodgy sense of humour, then!” growled Harry.

“So I have been told,” Dumbledore agreed.

“I’m not sure this isn’t even worse than I thought! They didn’t know what the question was, so they could have imagined something even worse than the assignment – not that there could possibly be anything worse!” complained Harry.

“No one has thought poorly of you,” Dumbledore insisted. “It’s more likely that they’ve thought poorly of me for setting you some sort of horrid question. Lemon sherbet?”

“*No!* I don’t want a lemon sherbet!” Harry snapped. “I can’t believe that you... today was enough of a nightmare without *this!* ”

Dumbledore set aside his snifter and steeped his fingers. “I should have anticipated your sensitivities, having once been of your age and station. There was no intention on my part to upset you so. I offer you a sincere apology, Harry.”

“I suppose I’ll accept it,” Harry said reluctantly.

“Your anger would be well and truly justified had I disclosed the terms of the assignment, or if those terms had somehow reached the students,” offered Dumbledore.

Harry’s inclination toward accepting the apology quickly waned. “So how did Luna Lovegood find out what Covelli set me?”

Dumbledore was noticeably startled. “Miss Lovegood, you say? Oh dear... I do hope that this has gone no further – that was certainly not my intention –”

“- and a fat lot of good that did!” Harry cut in.

“I did not share the particulars with the staff, nor did I share anything of any sort with Miss Lovegood... yet I cannot imagine that Lucia is responsible. Such petty cruelty is beneath her,” Dumbledore said firmly.

“Is it really?” Harry sneered.

“Have problems arisen between the two of you? You can ill afford more diversions or delays in your training, and certainly where Occlumency is concerned,” said Dumbledore.

Harry grumbled, “She’s not as bad as Snape, if that’s what you mean.”

Dumbledore rubbed at his eyes and let forth a long sigh. “We will have too little time as it is, you and I, without expending it on rancor,” he said.

“Then don’t prank me again. *Ever*,” Harry said flatly.

“This has been quite the misadventure, I see,” Dumbledore said sadly. “I had no intention of angering or upsetting you beyond the mild upset one associates with a prank. Regrettably, circumstances often overwhelm intentions. I had no intention of carrying two apprentices at the same time, for example, but... yes?”

Harry was stunned. “Two apprentices? But... who else?” he blurted out.

“Lucia did not tell you? It seems that her embarrassment runs deeply, indeed.” Dumbledore directed Harry to a chintz armchair, and he willingly sat. “Lucia invoked some very powerful and very old magic long ago,” the Headmaster went on. “It was necessary as she assisted me in vanquishing Grindelwald. That invocation came at a price. In the same way as the protections cast upon you imposed certain timing on your stays with the Dursleys, so this magic imposed a time of service upon Lucia. No vows or oaths of apprenticeship were sworn – just as with you – but she remained my apprentice for all intents and purposes, and that relationship was rejoined simply by entering this castle. I did not know that this would happen, or I would not have asked her to return. I would not have wished her to be bound here against her will.”

“So that’s why she won’t go by ‘Professor’?” Harry asked, still dumbfounded.

“She prefers the title ‘Doctor’ in any case,” said Dumbledore, “but it is not acceptable for an apprentice to adopt the title of ‘Professor’, even if she is a fully qualified instructor.”

“And what about ‘bound’? What do you mean?” Harry didn’t like the sound of it, whatever it meant.

“Yes, Harry – bound. Lucia is bound in service to Hogwarts for another eight months; this was the remaining term of her apprenticeship,” Dumbledore told him. “Having triggered the binding by her return, she can only leave the confines of the castle for brief periods – a few days at most – without extending that term. I have been unable to negate the binding, despite considerable

effort. It is a testimony to the magic involved that the connection remains so powerful after fifty years.”

“It is just like the Dursley’s, isn’t it? Well... at least it’s Hogwarts, I suppose. At least she’s not trapped in a house with Uncle Vernon,” Harry pointed out.

“A cage is a cage, however large it may be,” Dumbledore returned. “I wish that you had not endured the Dursleys and I wish that Lucia was free to come and go from a place that she does not hold fondly. Now then...” With a flick of his wand, a silvery phoenix raced across the study and down the stairwell. “I expect that Lucia will join us within the hour.”

“*Perfect!* There are so many things I’d like to say to her...” Harry said with relish.

“Keep in mind that it was I who pranked you. If you wish to be angry, please direct it toward me,” said Dumbledore.

Harry shook his head. “She set the assignment in the first place.”

“You will have opportunity to air your anger, though I do hold that some of it is misdirected,” Dumbledore assured him. “In the mean time, I would like you to speak of your Occlumency training.”

Harry begrudgingly recounted his sessions, and admitted that he had made progress. “We don’t trust each other, not really, but until this morning I’d have said that things were coming along.”

“Your description and the reports from Lucia are very similar,” said Dumbledore. “I am pleased that your abilities are developing. I wish the same could be said about the relationship between apprentices.”

Harry sat in silence for a while, before he quietly said, “The more she teaches me, the more I worry about Heather.”

“Miss Magruder? Has something happened of which I am unaware?” Dumbledore asked.

Harry related a portion of what Heather had said on the beach about her experience at Hogwarts and about the way that the world seemed to be pressing in upon her now. “I know I’ve asked it before, but is it possible that Snape did to her the same as he did to me?” he finished.

Dumbledore gave his beard a thoughtful stroking. “Efforts were made to teach her Occlumency,” he said slowly; it was obvious that he was choosing his words. “Those efforts were not fruitful, but she did not disclose her experiences in the castle... very curious, indeed. Your concerns may be warranted. May I contact Remus? I would prefer not to wait, but I shall defer to you.”

Harry swallowed audibly. “What... do you mean to contact him now? Erm... are you going to tell him that this came from me? I mean, it might not be for the best...”

“What would you have me say, Harry?” Dumbledore asked. “It has been three weeks since she

left us. By what other means would we know of her circumstances?”

Harry took a deep breath, and then set his jaw. “Sod it. If she needs help, I won’t stand in the way. Go ahead... Floo him.” He fidgeted for a moment, but then added, “I’ll speak to him myself.” Dumbledore’s twinkle made an appearance, and Harry resisted an impulse to poke the Headmaster’s eye.

“I am unable to contact Remus by Floo; however... Fawkes, would you be so kind?” Dumbledore let fly a second silvery phoenix, and Fawkes sang a single trill before giving chase.

While they waited, Harry asked Dumbledore about Detheridge’s tuition. He managed to work in Bill’s concerns without giving up the source. The Headmaster took a long time to answer and he chose his words carefully. “Marcus understands the importance of his instruction as well as anyone who has ever taught at Hogwarts,” he said.

“You said you wouldn’t keep things from me,” Harry warned.

“I have made promises to Marcus regarding the details of his past, present and future,” Dumbledore said. “He is a cautious man, as he should be. If you wish to know more, you must ask him directly.”

Fawkes reappeared just then with Remus Lupin in tow. Lupin was rumpled and particularly weary-looking. “You needed to see me, Albus?” he croaked; when he caught sight of Harry, he stammered, “Hello! I... er... never expected...” He stopped and sniffed. “What’s happened?” he demanded. “Something’s happened, I know it!” Harry tried to stand by way of greeting but was assaulted by a flood of raw emotions.

“Some concerns have been expressed that impact upon you, Remus,” said Dumbledore. He nodded at Harry, and added, “The floor is yours.”

Harry put his hands to his temples. “Er... it’s about Heather –”

“What? What’s happened? Where is she?” Lupin growled. “Did someone find out... has there been an attack? Why are we standing here when we could –?” Dumbledore put his hand on Lupin’s shoulder and the werewolf quieted, though he was still panting.

There wasn’t so much anger as guilt and hurt and shame – it was simply raw, unrestrained. Harry recovered himself just enough to blurt, “When is the full moon?” He slid out of his chair and fell to his knees before he could muster one of Covelli’s techniques.

Remus crossed the room in an instant. “What on Earth...? Albus, I understood you were teaching him to sort this out!” he snarled.

“He is progressing,” Dumbledore said, “but your feelings are overwhelming, Remus – even I can feel them. I know it is difficult, but please settle yourself.”

“Heather... she’s... *she’s your cub* ... I didn’t get that... didn’t understand...” Harry bit out

against the onslaught. “Should have said that... straight away...” He tried to shake off the overwhelming sense of protectiveness that washed over him, but there was a second wave of it.

“I’m sorry, Harry” Lupin said quietly, “I didn’t set out to hurt you. I’m so sorry.”

“Stop, just stop...” Harry managed. His defences almost fell a third time when Lupin knelt next to him and pulled him into an awkward half-hug.

“All right... now... about Heather -?” Lupin started anxiously.

Dumbledore made Lupin move off. “You were asked to settle yourself,” the Headmaster said firmly. “Miss Magruder is in no immediate danger.” A small bar of chocolate appeared in Harry’s hand.

Harry stayed on his knees, eyes closed, as he found his centre and imagined a wall. His forehead was damp from the struggle by the time he opened his eyes. “I... I thought I was catching on to this,” he sighed.

“You are doubtless ‘catching on’, as you say,” Dumbledore assured him. “Remus is a good man, a good man indeed, but he is also a sentient magical creature. To answer your earlier question, the full moon rises tomorrow afternoon. As I said, even I could feel what you felt.”

Lupin slumped into a hastily conjured chair. His breaths were long and slow and forced. “You’ve never spoken of this before, Albus. I had no idea...”

“With few exceptions, this phenomenon is exclusive to a Legilimens,” explained Dumbledore, “and passive Occlumency dulls the sense of presence.”

“Is this why Severus has always disliked me so?” Lupin wondered aloud.

“I rather doubt that. It may contribute to his animosity but you are aware of Severus’s reasoning, however flawed it may be,” Dumbledore said. He extended a hand to Harry. “Harry, you will fare better seated than kneeling upon a stone floor.”

Harry stumbled back into his armchair. “What was that?” he said. “It was... I don’t know... it was so out of control...”

“Breathe easily, Harry. You felt Remus’s uncontrolled aspect,” Dumbledore said. “The wolf was upon you.”

Lupin’s voice cracked. “That’s the state of my life once every four weeks. I’m truly sorry, Harry – if I’d truly understood what you were experiencing... it’s safe to say that I would have handled many things differently...”

“The wolf...” Harry murmured. “The wolf...?” His eyes widened. “*The Wolf!* But... but... she isn’t a werewolf, I mean, we know that much... I don’t understand it – how could...?” Remus edged forward in his chair, but this time Harry had control of his senses.

Dumbledore stroked his beard thoroughly before he said, “I gather that the ‘she’ in question is Miss Magruder? Explain yourself, please.”

“I... I’m trying to figure how much I have to tell. It’s private, and I know what it means to have that violated,” Harry protested.

The Headmaster’s gaze was penetrating, though Harry didn’t feel any sort of probing. “Is this a matter of Miss Magruder’s personal safety?” Dumbledore asked.

Harry relented. “It was in her memories, see? There’s something always there, in her mind – The Wolf, she calls it. When she uses Legilimency, it comes as a wolf. She even left scratches on Snape when she forced him out at the club – real scratches.”

“Scratches... *do you mean to say that he attacked Heather?*” Lupin shouted.

“He complimented her for it,” said Harry. “He was impressed.”

“Severus said nothing of this,” Dumbledore murmured. “What you describe should not be possible...”

Lupin bared his teeth; even in human form, it was a frightening sight. “I’m going to pay Severus a visit – TOMORROW NIGHT!” he roared.

“You will do nothing of the kind,” Dumbledore said calmly. He summoned a dark green bottle and an empty snifter from his desk. Harry thought the liquid inside smelled faintly of wood and grass. The Headmaster poured the snifter half-full and held it out to Lupin.

“Now is *not* the time –” Lupin started.

Dumbledore stopped him with a look. “I had planned to visit you later this evening, but yes, I believe it is precisely the time.”

Lupin took it and raised it to his nose. “It smells... how odd... it’s not Wolfsbane Potion, of course – too aromatic – but there’s a hint of the scent... what is this?”

“It is from the cellars of an old friend. He tells me that a mutual acquaintance used it long ago to ‘temper the humour of werewolves’. This is absinthe,” Dumbledore explained.

The snifter shook in Lupin’s nervous grasp. “Absinthe? But – but that’s been banned by wizards and Muggles alike! It’s lethal, isn’t it? I may as well take the Wolfsbane potion and off myself properly!”

Dumbledore shook his head and smiled faintly. “A handful died from absinthe a century ago, and those deaths were as a result of improper distillation. Properly prepared, this is no more deadly than Firewhiskey – be it to Muggles or to magical folk. The scent you identified is wormwood. Now, this particular bottle dates to the year of my birth. I have made it my occasion to sample it on my birthday each year, but you are in more need of it than I. Raise your glass, Remus. It is not

Wolfsbane Potion, but it may ease your pain.”

Lupin looked dubious, but he slowly lifted the snifter and sipped. “It certainly tastes better than the potion,” he allowed.

“I suggest that you drink it down,” Dumbledore said.

Lupin’s foot twitched oddly. “Bottoms up, then,” he said and then drank the remaining absinthe in a single swallow. “That’s peculiar...” he mumbled just before his eyes rolled back in his head.

“Steady him,” Dumbledore commanded, and Harry bolted to Lupin’s side. The werewolf shuddered and his hands shook for most of a minute before he went slack in his chair.

Dumbledore waved his wand in odd fashion and muttered approvingly at the blue light that shone around Lupin’s head. “A better result than I had imagined, Harry,” he said. “He will not be lucid at the full moon, but I expect that he will obtain more control of the days preceding and following the transformation. *Enervate* .”

Lupin took in an exaggerated breath and sat up, glassy-eyed. “Goodness...” he mumbled.

“Do take a moment, Remus,” Dumbledore said. “My friend suggested that this might possibly happen. The combination of wormwood and angelica causes the absinthe to react differently to your essence than would be the case for, say, Harry or myself.”

“I feel... I... I feel myself again,” Remus said slowly. “Good Lord, I was raving, wasn’t I?”

“I do not pretend to understand what you experience each month, Remus. If this burden could be lifted from you, I would do so without hesitation,” said Dumbledore. “As it stands, my friend has agreed to re-examine the Wolfsbane Potion in order to see if your sensitivities can be alleviated. He is the greatest intuitive Potions Master I have ever known.” He turned to Harry. “I have also asked him to consider taking up the Potions position here at Hogwarts, at least for the balance of this year. If he agrees, then I will give over responsibility for your tuition in that subject.”

“I’m in control, Albus, but don’t mistake that for happiness or satisfaction,” said Lupin.

Harry nodded in agreement; he would not be deterred any longer. “So, did Snape turn Heather into a weapon, or not?” he asked. Lupin shifted uneasily in his chair. There was another wave of protectiveness, but Harry found it far easier to weather.

Dumbledore closed his eyes and released a heavy sigh. “I must confer with Lucia on this matter. Our efforts in this matter were undertaken without key information, and Severus’s omissions merit concern.”

Remus gripped the arms of his chair so firmly that the wood creaked. “Concern? *Concern?* We were concerned about Heather going *mad* , and it’s now suggested that dear old Severus somehow *cocked up the whole business?* To hell with control! If this is true, Albus – if we find out with certainty that it’s true – I swear to you... tomorrow night I pay a visit – *tomorrow night* , and the

consequences be damned!”

“Calm yourself – let the absinthe do its work,” Dumbledore said. “We will determine what has happened and take steps to remedy it.”

Harry stared boldly at the Headmaster and said, “If Snape did to her what he did to me, I’ll force him outside the gates. I wonder how long it would take the Death Eaters to collect him.”

“We require Lucia’s expertise,” Dumbledore said. “She was unable to participate in Miss Magruder’s examination and instruction, though I did consult with her at the time. It is clear that critical information was withheld.” He looked to the portrait wall. “Ethelred, has Dr. Covelli left the History classroom?”

A portrait of an ancient wizard wrapped in ermine robes snapped to attention. The wizard left his frame for a few moments. Upon his return, he reported, “Madam has retired to her study, in the company of a student – a fair young maiden with locks of brown. I regret to say that Madam spied me as I entered.”

Dumbledore released another silvery phoenix. “I expect that she will find this second message more provocative,” he said. “If not, then I shall dispatch Fawkes to collect her.”

“I’d be happy to collect her. Please allow me,” Harry said with malice.

“It would be best if she were collected intact,” Dumbledore deadpanned. Harry grunted, and then the study went silent until Covelli reached the top of the steps.

“What has happened, Albus?” she asked briskly.

Harry stood and glared at her. “Snape’s done something terrible to my friend, that’s what... oh, and I hate you.” Lupin crooked an eyebrow at the last.

Covelli took two long, calming breaths before speaking. “I presume we speak of the same young lady as this morning?” She turned to Lupin. “We have not been introduced. I am Lucia Covelli, instructor for the History of Magic and... and Albus’s apprentice.”

Confusion played across Lupin’s face for a moment before he rose and took her hand. “I’m Remus Lupin,” he said. “Heather Magruder is my daughter, and Harry’s parents were among my closest friends at school.”

“Remus taught Defence here at Hogwarts three years ago,” Dumbledore added, “and it is indeed Miss Magruder of whom Harry speaks. It seems that when you were consulted, key information about the nature of her ability was absent, and perhaps withheld.”

Covelli turned to Harry. “There is more than that which I have seen?”

“How am I supposed to know what you have and haven’t seen?” Harry shot back.

“Did the young lady mislead you, Albus?” Covelli asked.

“It appears that we underestimated Miss Magruder’s desire to end her time with us,” said Dumbledore.

“It was awful for her –” Harry started without thinking.

“Explain, please,” Covelli interrupted.

Harry winced. “Er... what I mean is... she didn’t want to... um...”

Lupin looked to him with heavy eyes. “Harry, I know that you’ve continued to speak with Heather since that night; it was obvious from the start. I’m not stupid, you know? I suspect you’ve seen each other as well. If you truly care about her... if you know anything that would be helpful, anything at all... please...”

Harry began to retell Heather’s description of her time at Hogwarts, which led to her difficulty in managing the emotions around her, which in turn led to Heather’s defence against Snape’s Legilimency attack at Cabaret Molière. Lupin’s face became more ashen with each revelation. Dumbledore listened intently. Covelli wouldn’t meet Harry’s eye.

When Harry finished, Covelli said, “If you wish my involvement, Albus, then I must speak with the girl. Her reaction to magic, it brings to mind similar reactions of non-magical patients over the years. Would someone explain the meaning of the wolf, please?”

Lupin’s shoulders hunched and his eyes fell to the floor. “You see, Madam Covelli –”

“‘Doctor’ Covelli is preferred to ‘Madam’,” said Covelli, “but I am called Lucia by my peers. Please consider yourself as such.”

“Remus, if you prefer that I...” Dumbledore began to offer.

Lupin shook his head. “No, I’ve borne it for over thirty years. I’m well aware of what I am.”

Covelli’s eyes widened. “*Licantropo* ...” she murmured.

“Yes, I carry the lycanthropic curse. I am a werewolf,” Lupin confirmed sadly, “and thus I understand why you are unwilling to offer any further assistance.”

“No! No, you misunderstand!” Covelli said quickly. “I am... I am simply taken by surprise... and I am very confused. How is it that the young lady is your daughter? You married her mother, yes?”

“Actually, no,” Lupin said.

“Miss Magruder is Remus’s daughter by birth,” Dumbledore explained.

Harry was surprised and not a little pleased to see Covelli taken aback. “But... but... how is that... how?” she spluttered.

Remus frowned. “In the usual way, Doctor,” he said briskly.

“I... had understood that lycanthropes could not produce or bear offspring to term,” Covelli said. “As I recall it, the literature states –”

“The literature is wrong in this instance.” Dumbledore smiled. “I knew prior of two cases where a werewolf had sired a child. The common factor had not occurred to me until just now. In those cases and in the case of Remus, the mother of the child was a Muggle.”

Covelli raised one hand to her mouth and her fingers tapped at her lips. Her eyes narrowed, and Harry was reminded of Hermione’s expression when she picked her way through a problem. “In these earlier cases, did the offspring have magic or did they not?”

“I do not know,” Dumbledore admitted. “That is an interesting question, most interesting indeed.”

“This Heather, she is not a lycanthrope herself?” Covelli asked. “You would of course have told me this was the case, Albus.”

“No, thank Merlin,” Lupin said.

“Yet the talent manifests as a wolf...” Covelli said. “The other two cases may be important.”

Dumbledore nodded. “I shall make enquiries. As to arranging a meeting between yourself and Miss Magruder... Remus?”

“There’s no earthly way it could take place before Monday,” Lupin said. “Shona could never persuade her to do it prior to the performance. Is it... is it safe to wait?”

“There is no reason to believe otherwise,” Dumbledore said.

“We must know what has and has not been done. I will speak to the *brewer*,” Covelli spat.

Dumbledore frowned. “In future, please refer to Severus by name. Despite his actions and circumstances, he does still reside within these walls and certain decorum is expected.”

“You still offer a defence, but the brewer has lost the right to a name. The brewer is a creature, nothing more,” Covelli said coldly. For an instant, Harry felt the same darkness that had filled Covelli’s violent memory from the war with Grindelwald.

Dumbledore’s eyes bored into her. “You will not confer with Severus alone. I will be present. Is that understood?”

Covelli noticeably shuddered. “I understand and will comply,” she said bitterly, “but you will not compel me to name something so undeserving – I refuse.” Harry was startled by the exchange,

both by Dumbledore's command and by Covelli's acceptance of it; Lupin appeared equally startled.

"So be it," said Dumbledore, and he turned his attention to Lupin. "Am I to assume that Miss Magruder's unavailability is due to Keith MacLeish's upcoming soiree? He has extended an invitation to me for the entertainment and a reception following. I dare say that everyone of standing in Britain has been invited."

Lupin seemed to shake off the exchange between Covelli and Dumbledore. "Shona's invited, and intends to take me as her guest," he said. "I haven't agreed to it at all; my presence would be difficult to explain and I don't want to take any more unnecessary chances."

"I can't imagine many from the Ministry making an appearance, especially Fudge," Harry said.

"Oh, indeed he will. I did say everyone of standing in Britain, Harry. Although I understand that Her Majesty possesses a long memory for public slights and doubtless would refuse to appear in the same building as Miss Magruder, it is likely that someone will represent the Royal Family," said Dumbledore.

"You're having me on!" Harry said.

"I only wish that were true," Dumbledore said. "The Muggle Prime Minister will be attending, and Cornelius is not one to be upstaged. This is a significant event, Harry, in addition to being an untenable secrecy and security risk."

"It's sheer madness," Lupin agreed. "If I could pull Heather free of it, I'd do so in an instant."

"The Ministry has made its bed and now we must all lie in it," Dumbledore continued. "The rest of the world will be watching us and many will be hoping for a debacle. Mr. MacLeish has been a masterful manipulator in all of this. If nothing else, I do hope that we shall gain a clearer view of his true aims. It seems that he does nothing by halves."

"Truer words have not been spoken," Covelli said. "I have asked Mr. Potter to meet with me tomorrow in advance of meeting –"

Spending an extra minute with Covelli was simply too much after the events of the day; Harry's temper blossomed at the thought. "I've changed my mind on that! I'd rather – I'd rather – oh, sod it, I'd rather spend tomorrow with a Dementor!"

"That is completely uncalled for, Harry," Dumbledore scolded.

"Uncalled for?" Harry gritted his teeth. "With all due respect, Headmaster, you're not the one stuck with this... this... *assignment* ..."

"I realise that this assignment lies outside your zone of comfort, Mr. Potter –" Covelli began.

Harry shouted, "*Outside of my zone of comfort?* Where do you get off, you effin' –"

“*Harry! Enough!*” Dumbledore cut him off. Lupin’s mouth dropped open in shock.

Covelli went on as though nothing had been said. “– and I am sympathetic to your prior experiences – believe me when I say this – but I stand by my reasoning in the selection of the topic,” Covelli said. Harry crossed his arms tightly and his fists balled. Breathe, just breathe, he thought.

“Albus, I need a word with Harry – now, please,” Lupin said.

Dumbledore gestured at the door that led into his private library. “Please avail yourselves of the room beyond. Lucia and I will address student-related matters.”

“You have that accursed twinkle in your eye, Albus,” Covelli said. “What have you done?”

“A great many things,” Dumbledore sighed as Harry entered the library.

Lupin closed the door as soon as he and Harry passed through it. “I won’t have this woman involve herself in Heather’s situation until someone explains to me what in Merlin’s name that was all about. You can be rather intemperate, Harry, but that’s not how this feels to me. You’ve been wronged, I think, and I don’t like it.”

Harry felt a flicker of Lupin’s protectiveness again, and it was even clearer to him than before that the feeling didn’t stop with Shona and Heather. He let himself breathe in and out and forced himself to pull back from his own anger. “Erm... thank you for that, but the assignment is my problem. I don’t like Covelli, not in the slightest,” he said at last, “but she’s the proper one to sort this out.”

Lupin hesitated, and then said, “Your word on this is enough for me... but I can’t help wondering what sort of assignment could cause you to be so agitated?”

“This isn’t something that I can talk through with you,” Harry said seriously.

Lupin looked baffled. “Come again? It’s not as though she has you revising the twelve ways to kill a werewolf with silver implements. Short of that, I can’t see any school topic we couldn’t touch upon – if you want to, that is.”

Harry paced the room, faster and angrier with each crossing. Lupin finally stepped into his path and said, “That’s quite enough stomping about!”

No matter how much he wanted to hold it back, Harry couldn’t manage it anymore. “Love and lust – she’s making me write three feet on the difference between them, and it’s to be based on discussing the point with six people... and then Luna found out about it somehow and Dumbledore pranked me over it and... *there! Satisfied?*”

The blood drained from Lupin’s face. “That’s... disturbing...” he managed.

“I told you! I wanted to keep quiet, but you wouldn’t let it go,” said Harry.

Lupin walked unsteadily to the nearest chair. “No... no... it’s right that I know when something’s troubling you... and this certainly qualifies... is there water in here? I need water...” He radiated confusion and frustration and such a jumble of other emotions that Harry felt the need to sit as well.

Harry conjured a rough-hewn glass of water and held it out to Lupin. “It’s been a long day,” he said.

Lupin downed half the glass immediately. “I imagine so,” he acknowledged. “This Dr. Covelli... she must have had a reason for setting an assignment like this. Did you provoke her, or is she merely as abrasive as she seems?”

“She saw some things during our Occlumency sessions,” said Harry

Lupin rubbed at his temples. “Who have you spoken with, may I ask?” he asked.

“Mr. Weasley and Bill Weasley, so far... and Luna, I suppose,” Harry answered.

“Those are, uh, interesting choices,” Lupin said. “Have you learned anything worthwhile?”

“Well... Bill... let’s just say that he knows how to hook up with women in Chile,” Harry offered.

Lupin had tipped up the glass and was in mid-swallow at that; Harry barely avoided the spray. “I don’t imagine you’ll find that useful,” he coughed.

“Mr. Weasley, he made me think,” Harry went on. “He talked about family and friends, and about lust for power. That hadn’t occurred to me.”

Lupin nodded. “He’s a good man, Arthur is. I’d have expected him to mention family. Lust for power... he’s certainly correct on that point but I wouldn’t have thought of it either, at least not on the first pass.” He added with a wince, “Do I want to know what Luna had to say?”

“It was the only thing she said that I could make sense of,” Harry said, “but I still don’t know what I think of her answer. She said that lust dies, but love doesn’t die. I can’t believe she found out about it – Covelli *must* have told her!”

“Perhaps Albus is giving a dressing-down for that, as we speak?” Lupin offered. He finished the remaining water, vanished the glass, and then settled in his chair slowly, almost painfully – the movement made him seem very old to Harry. “Luna certainly went straight to the heart of the matter,” he said. “I think that your mother and father would have agreed with her.”

“Were they in love, my mum and dad?” Harry blurted out.

Lupin smiled a smile that was sad and warm all at once. “Never doubt that, Harry,” he said. “It took them long enough to arrive at it, but by the outset of our seventh year there was no question.”

“I have my mum’s journals – not sure I told you that,” Harry said.

Lupin’s eyes lit. “That extra trunk from the Dursley’s – of course, it belonged to Lily! I imagine there was more inside than simply the journals?”

“She had all of her school things packed away,” said Harry.

“If you want an idea of what happened between the two of them, then give Lily’s journals from sixth and seventh year a go,” Lupin suggested. “I don’t know what she wrote, of course, but I know what I saw and I know what she said to me. She loved James, and I know that James loved her.”

They sat silent for a time while Harry thought about tackling the journals again, and while Lupin appeared to reminisce. Harry cleared his throat. “I’ve read most of Sirius’s journal, but... er...”

“I doubt his observations on the matter were printable,” Lupin snorted.

Harry nodded. “Erm, he had a lot to say about lust... I suppose that’s why I asked...” Lupin said; his lips twitched for a moment before he burst into laughter. Harry quickly joined him but it didn’t last.

An awkward silence followed until Lupin broke it. “Do you think we’ll be able to move beyond all of this? I want that very much.”

For an instant Harry wanted to lash out but the feeling passed. He had to talk his way through an answer. “Last time you were here, it was just words,” he said. “This time, it’s not. I didn’t understand how it is for you, not until just now.”

Lupin fidgeted and wrung his hands. “It’s not an excuse – I have no excuses to offer - but I found myself confronted by something I’d never felt,” he sighed. “The focus of my life has been control, as it must be. Shona was the only person for whom I’d ever... in any case; I thought she was gone forever. When I saw her standing there in front of me – and when I knew for certain that Heather was... well, it was too much to hold inside. I looked at you, and all I saw was danger.” He met Harry’s eyes and added, “The worst part is that I was correct. Something’s been opened up inside of her and no one knows how to put it back. If the Death Eaters were to find out that you fancied Heather, it wouldn’t be a day before they had her. If they were to find out what she can do, then Merlin only knows what would happen. In either case, Harry, she wouldn’t survive it. You don’t understand how difficult this is... I can’t let that happen, Harry – I *can’t*.”

Harry couldn’t look at him anymore. “I know that,” he said. “I know it, and I know I’ve been selfish, but... how do you know if feelings are real? Maybe it’s just something my mind conjured up? Maybe I’ve just picked up on something inside of her? Maybe... maybe getting inside her mind burned out something in mine? Look... I know I haven’t shown any good sense, right?”

“I wouldn’t put it quite so sharply,” said Lupin. “You could have been more open that you’ve been in contact with Heather; you could have done something as foolish as taking her to

Hogsmeade or Diagon Alley, I suppose. In fact, I have it on good authority that you took Hermione to Hogsmeade recently, even so far as visiting your rooms. As much as I don't want to see Hermione injured again... at least she has the capacity to defend herself or escape. What I truly don't understand is where she fits into this puzzle. I was fairly certain that there was something blossoming between you and she, and apparently you're not at odds... was it the attack that changed everything?"

"Have you seen Hermione since then?" Harry asked.

"No, I've not, but I've been given a rough sense of what happened," Lupin said. "Has she improved?"

Harry frowned. "Sometimes it seems that way, but since the goblin hunt..."

Lupin's brows beetled. "Pardon? Did you say 'goblin hunt'?"

"Oh, right – Hermione, Ron and I went to the goblin hunt over the weekend," Harry said as if it were nothing of importance.

Lupin shook his head. "It's never simple with you, is it? Explanations are in order, I believe."

Harry detailed the hunt and its aftermath. He wavered over telling Lupin the whole truth even as he told the story, but decided that Lupin could be trusted despite everything. *Lupin's the one my mum and dad should have trusted, after all – not sodding Wormtail*, he thought.

"I'm pleased that you've stuck by her. She's earned that," Lupin said.

"She didn't have to earn anything. Hermione's my best friend," Harry returned.

"And that's where it ends?" Lupin asked.

"I don't know," Harry admitted. "Kissing her certainly didn't clear matters."

"You... seem to be working toward a mastery in that subject..." The werewolf's jaw twitched, and for a moment Harry thought of readying his wand.

Lupin seemed to settle after a while, and at last he said, "I understand now why your professor set this assignment. You've been kissing your best friend while you're still somehow involved with my daughter – please don't explain the details, as I don't want to know. There's no kind way to say this, Harry: you're being a wanker where all of this is concerned."

Harry's eyes widened. "You... you just called me a wanker!"

"Yes, I did - it seems descriptive of your choices," Lupin agreed. "You didn't inherit this sort of behaviour from James. Sirius, on the other hand, was quite comfortable with stringing along two girls at once. I am being as... *restrained* as I can muster, given the parties involved..."

“I’m not trying to string anyone along,” Harry insisted. “I told Hermione what I wanted but she was the one to back away, and Heather’s the one who started snogging –”

“*Please* don’t explain yourself!” Lupin insisted. “All you’ve managed is to reinforce my point. You, sir, are a wanker – a big bloody *wanker* . My question is this: what do you intend to do about it? Well? What of it?”

“You called me a wanker again! I can’t believe you said that!” Harry gasped.

“Why ever not – because I was considered the reasonable one amongst my friends? Sirius and your father were the standards of comparison; I assure you that my reputation was very easily earned,” Lupin said.

“But... but... you called me a wanker...” Harry mumbled.

“We’ve established that, yes, and you’ve bloody well earned it! I shall continue to say it until you’ve sorted yourself! There should be one and *only* one object at a time for your affections – is that understood?” Lupin snapped. “I loved Sirius like a brother, but you don’t need to honour him by being as he was. He wouldn’t want that, and you damn well know it. You’re *Harry* , not Sirius and not even James, and you don’t need to be anyone other than yourself. Remember that!”

Harry bristled but he couldn’t completely set aside the concern and the fear and the love and the fierceness in the room. He couldn’t keep himself from understanding. “I’m not trying to be Sirius,” he fumed.

Lupin’s expression lightened. “At heart, you’re the same person who I had the pleasure of meeting three years ago – decent, loyal, self-effacing,” he said. “I do understand that you’re confused about these things. Every teenaged wizard is something of a wanker, you see – it’s all a matter of degree.”

“Would you *please* stop saying that?” Harry huffed.

Lupin held up his hands in defence. “All right, all right – I’ll let it pass for now. Just... will you please promise me one thing, Harry?”

“That depends on what it is,” Harry said warily.

“I think you earned this assignment honestly, and I want you to promise me that you’ll take it seriously,” Lupin said. “You don’t have the luxury of making choices based on lust, and yes, I know that life is unfair. It’s not as simple a matter as hurt feelings - there are very real risks surrounding you; we’ve gone over this before. I can accept those risks for myself but I still haven’t the faintest idea how to protect Shona, let alone someone who leads as public a life as Heather. We’ve both had our summer, you and me, but now it’s a different season. You admit you’ve been selfish, and so have I... Merlin knows I’ve been terribly selfish. There are so many difficult choices to be made...”

Dumbledore and Covelli were having a quiet but clearly fierce exchange when Lupin opened the door. He gave Covelli a stare hard enough to cut glass and snapped, “Did you share Harry’s assignment with Luna Lovegood? If you did, then I will prevent you from seeing Heather with everything available to me.”

Covelli was clearly taken aback. “Are you suggesting...? I would never... the very suggestion... it is true that I took some small pleasure in setting this assignment but... to divulge this...”

“You shouldn’t take pleasure in making a sixteen-year-old with the weight of the world on his shoulders feel just that much more miserable,” Lupin growled. “Merlin knows I’ve managed that these past weeks, and I’ve felt guilty about it almost from the start. Having come to my senses, I’m not keen on having someone else do the same!”

Before Dumbledore could intercede, Covelli raised a hand. “I swear upon my magic that I disclosed Mr. Potter’s assignment to no one save Albus Dumbledore.” A flash of white light leapt from her fingertips.

Harry quickly deflated. “Then how...?”

Covelli began to pace. “Miss Lovegood is an interesting person to me. This is not the first time that she has been a part of something curious, you see? Did she explain how she came to know of the assignment?”

Harry closed his eyes. “She... she said the centaurs told her; she said they were having a laugh over it.”

Covelli raised an eyebrow. “The centaurs?”

The corner of Dumbledore’s mouth twitched. “When Miss Lovegood was having her chat in the Forest, might she have related her recent theories regarding a certain impending goblin insurrection?” he asked, the twinkle in his eyes fully stoked.

“You have no right to find humour in any of this, Albus,” Covelli hissed.

Harry ploughed on. “I admit Luna’s a bit dotty, and even more so since the start of term... she said something strange about dreams...”

Covelli’s attention immediately returned to Harry. “She mentioned dreams in a specific way?”

Harry nodded. “She seemed awfully confused,” he admitted; “I think she was trying to tell me that Hogwarts makes it worse for her somehow. She said that even the castle dreams; I can’t imagine what she meant by it.”

Covelli’s eyes lit. “Albus, I will seek out the girl unless you have objection to it.”

Dumbledore hesitated for a moment, and then nodded. “I would appreciate a report by the close of next week. Well, then... despite everything, it seems that this evening has had one unabashedly

good outcome.”

Covelli said tiredly, “I’m hard pressed to name one; what would it be?”

“Harry and Remus have put aside their differences – a splendid thing, indeed!” Dumbledore turned to Covelli and added with a twinkle, “Reconciliation is good for the soul, it seems.”

“Reconciliation? How dare you even speak the word! I shall speak of *reconciliation*, you... you old fraud!” Covelli spat. She launched into a bewildering rapid-fire string of what Harry assumed to be Italian. Remus took an unconscious step backward.

Dumbledore was reduced to staccato interruptions. “Oh, my... I have never before been referred to as... that could not be done without a de-boning hex... I have no earthly idea what that means, but it sounds... now, that is simply gratuitous... *good heavens, woman!*” He groaned and waved his hand. Covelli continued railing at him for several seconds before she realised that she could no longer be heard; her face exploded in deep crimson.

“This seems like a perfect opportunity to borrow Fawkes, wouldn’t you agree?” Remus said. He was clearly straining to hold back laughter. “It was a pleasure to meet you, Doctor; I do hope that we meet again under better circumstances. That was a smashing assignment, by the way.” Harry groaned at that. Lupin put a hand on his shoulder, and said more seriously, “Harry, my door is open to you... excepting tomorrow night, of course. I hope you feel the same.”

Harry shook his other hand. “Give my regards to Shona, eh?”

“Fawkes, if you would be so kind?” Dumbledore asked wearily. The phoenix crooned softly and offered his tail to Remus. They disappeared in a flash.

Covelli remained in a shuddering rage, and it wasn’t lost on Harry that Dumbledore had moved to the opposite side of his desk. Still, he wasn’t about to miss a golden opportunity. “So, I understand that we’re both apprentices,” he smirked. “I suppose there was enough to think about – that must be why you didn’t tell me, right? Well, I’m Mr. Potter, but my *peers* call me Harry. I think your assignment’s finished, and you won’t be setting me another.” He turned to the Headmaster. “It’s Hermione’s birthday today and I have a gift to leave with her. If it’s all right...?”

Dumbledore gave his beard a stroke. “It is Miss Granger’s birthday? This would be her seventeenth, no less. A token of some sort is in order... would you wait for a moment, please?” He disappeared into his library and came out with a book that appeared to be very old. Covelli tried to see the book’s spine but Dumbledore moved in a way that blocked her view. Gold wrapping appeared around it, finished with an elaborate red ribbon and bow. He put the package into Harry’s hands, and then waved absently toward the stairs.

“Good evening, Headmaster,” Harry said. “Good evening... *Lucia*.” Covelli’s eyes narrowed into slits, and Harry returned a fatuous grin.

Harry could hear the Fat Lady speaking to a student as he approached the entrance to Gryffindor House. “I see your dilemma, Miss, but the common room is set aside for studying – certainly not the corridor. Kindly return inside,” the portrait said sternly. He stopped short to observe.

“I have a scroll to finish for Potions,” the girl returned, “and this is the quietest place for it.”

“It is fifteen minutes past curfew,” said the Fat Lady, “and I do not want to see points taken from this House –”

“Then perhaps you can tell the stupid, *stupid* girls in the dormitory to stop nattering about *boys* and open a book now and again, or perhaps you might ask the upper years to stop carrying on in the common room as if there was a party every evening, or perhaps you could tell the whole of Gryffindor that this is a *school* – that some people are here to *learn*?” she said angrily.

“That is quite enough, young lady!” the Fat Lady scolded. “You must learn the virtues of your House like any Hogwarts student worth her salt –”

“Do you mean boasting and eating? I... I wish I could be Sorted again! I’d beg with that stupid Hat! I’d... I’d rather be... I think I’d rather be in *Slytherin* than here!” wailed the girl.

“That is an outrage!” railed the Fat Lady. “I’m calling for a prefect this instant! Oh, Violet...?” She leaned to one side and her head disappeared from the frame.

Harry took the opportunity to emerge from the shadows. “I remember you – you’re Laura Davies,” he said.

“M-Mr. P-Potter... I didn’t... you... you’re so quiet...” she stammered.

He fought the impulse to grin when she unconsciously gave him a half-curtsey, and said, “It’s best to keep the Fat Lady on your good side, you know?”

Just then the portrait hole opened and a frowning Parvati Patil came through. Her eyes narrowed and she advanced on Laura. “Not you again,” she sighed. “Do you seek out new ways to cost us points? It’s occurred to Ron and me that we might be better off asking McGonagall to deduct ten points a day and be done with it! Collect your books and come inside – *now*, please.”

“We were just having a chat, Parvati; there’s no need for a snit,” said Harry.

Parvati raised a hand to her chest. “*OH!* I didn’t see you there!”

Harry assumed a professor’s posture as best he could. “Since I’m on staff, Miss Davies can’t be out of bounds – wouldn’t you agree? I’ll take matters from here,” he announced.

“Of course,” Parvati said quickly. “When she returns, would you please be sure that she actually comes inside?”

“We’ll be in shortly,” Harry said. “Is Hermione about?”

Parvati's face fell just a little; Harry felt a flicker of sadness, but couldn't place the reason for it. "We've managed to get her to stay with us in the common room for once. It's her birthday, you know?"

Harry nodded. "I have some things for her. If you could keep her from slipping upstairs...?"

"If Seamus would stop teasing Neville, it would be a little easier," Parvati sighed.

"Are they still on about that redheaded boy's wand?" Laura grumbled.

Parvati stood straighter. "That's none of your concern, Davies," she said.

"It's my concern if other students can't use the common room, and it should be yours as well," said Harry. "Where else should a student study after curfew?"

"Why would anyone study after curfew... well, other than Hermione?" Parvati asked. "This isn't Ravenclaw..."

"Only Ravenclaws are supposed to study, is that it?" Harry returned.

Parvati crossed her arms. "You aren't the most studious person in the castle yourself, Harry."

"Things change when you're the Headmaster's apprentice," Harry said flatly.

Something shifted in Parvati's eyes. Harry had seen the same shift many times since returning to Hogwarts: it marked the moment when Harry changed from fellow student to something more in a person's mind. Sometimes he found it painful to watch; with Parvati, he didn't feel that. "I... I suppose they do," Parvati said. "Still... first years should keep a stricter curfew, you know?"

"If you can't find a place for Laura to study, then talk to the other First Year girls, or cast an Imperturbable Charm on her bed curtains, or something. If you're going to be in Hermione's place, then act like a prefect," Harry snapped.

"I'll...er... just be going inside, then... no need to get shirty with me..." Parvati said nervously as she edged back through the portrait hole.

The nervous first-year tried to scoot past Harry and into the common room but he blocked her path. "The first weeks here can be difficult," he said. "My best friend was miserable until Halloween."

"I'm going to hate the next seven years, I just know it," Laura said. A tear rolled down her cheek, and Harry hoped he wouldn't have to console a crying girl – he knew he wasn't very good at it.

"It can't be all that bad," he assured her. "This was my house, you know? I promise you it isn't terrible."

"The girls are all giggly, and the boys are more interested in how loudly they can belch than

anything of importance,” she huffed. “I haven’t seen anyone study except the fifth and seventh years... and Hermione Granger.”

“You know her name, do you?” said Harry.

Laura rolled her eyes. “Anyone who follows the papers knows her name and she’s very bright – that wouldn’t be hard to tell even if everyone didn’t say so – but it’s not as if she could help me because I’m just a first-year who no one likes and she’s... well, she’s *Hermione Granger*, for goodness’ sake!” Her cheeks abruptly burned red. “Oh! I can’t believe I’m telling *you* about her – what was I thinking?”

“I don’t mind it,” Harry said. “First off, you might have more in common with her than you know. Still, I’ll bet you think she’s a bit... erm... scary?”

The girl squeaked, “I wouldn’t have said ‘scary’, not exactly...”

Harry shrugged. “It’s all right. Hermione’s had a rough go of it – that’s been in the papers as well. If enough people think you’re scary, then it’s not hard to actually become scary, you know?”

“What a horrible thought!” Laura gasped. “Do you... do you think she feels like she’s all alone?”

“I don’t know,” Harry admitted, and he hoped that Hermione didn’t feel that way – he knew the feeling too well.

“I don’t think she’s scary,” Laura insisted, “but even if she wasn’t... *intimidating* ... I don’t know what I could do. She’d never study with someone like me.”

Harry pursed his lips in thought, and then nodded. “I don’t suppose she would study with a first year, no. She might tutor a first year, though.” He hesitated a moment, and then decided, “I think I might consider that as well.”

Laura’s eyes widened. “*What...?* You actually mean that *she* might...? And *you* might...?”

“I’ll make you a proposition. If you can convince a dozen first years to form a study group –” Harry began.

“A dozen? But... but there are only nine in all of Gryffindor House!” Laura protested.

“I know that,” Harry started again. “If you can convince a dozen to form a study group – and at least one from each house –”

“From each house? How can I do that? No Slytherin’s ever going to speak to me!” she pleaded.

Harry didn’t acknowledge her objection. “If you can manage that,” he promised, “then I’ll personally tutor your group in Defence.”

The first-year let out a tiny gasp. “You’re not joking, are you? Please tell me you’re not having

me on!”

“I wouldn’t do that,” Harry assured her. “In fact, I’ll make it one better. I’ll try to convince Hermione to pitch in – she might cover Transfiguration or Charms, maybe even Potions. If she won’t do it, I’ll find others. If you put the work into bringing together a group, then we’ll come through.” He stuck out his hand. “Are we agreed?”

“Y-yes! *Of course!*” she said instantly. “I... I don’t know what to say... I...”

“You could say that you’ll stay inside the tower after curfew, for a start,” Harry said with a smirk.

“I promise!” Laura said earnestly. “I won’t cost Gryffindor any more points!”

Harry laughed, “Don’t promise that! I’d rather you think about how you can earn points.”

“I know! I could answer more questions in class!” she beamed.

“That sounds like a good starting place,” Harry said. He nodded to the Fat Lady, who waggled her eyebrows at him and then moved aside. “Shall we?” he asked, with a wave toward the opening. The girl nodded enthusiastically and burst into the common room ahead of him.

Parvati had been perched near the opening and nearly had to jump aside. She crooked an eyebrow at Harry. “What did you say to her? She looks like it’s Christmas come early!”

“I just set her a task, that’s all –” Harry stopped as soon as he realised where Laura had gone. “What on Earth is she doing?” The first-year stopped by the fireplace, right in front of where Hermione was seated. Neville stopped telling off Seamus and turned to watch quietly along with most of the students in the room.

Laura quailed, but cleared her throat and said, “Excuse me... Miss Granger...?”

Hermione looked up from a book in her lap. She appeared far more composed than earlier in the day. Her hair was neatly brushed, and if there were still circles under her eyes then she’d made an effort to cover them. She gave a faint smile. “My name is Hermione. May I help you with something?”

“Um... you see...” Laura clasped her hands behind her back and fidgeted as she blurted out in one breath, “Mr. Potter said that if I managed to organise a study group with eleven other first years and at least one from each house he would tutor us in Defence Against the Dark Arts and he said he would ask you to tutor in some of the other subjects but I wanted to ask you myself because I think you’re brilliant and I want to score Outstanding on all of my OWLs like you did so I figured that if I can learn how you do your revisions I might have a better chance of it and I’m not asking because I think you’re feeling all alone now even though I kind of think you are and I don’t think you’re scary – not at all – even though you’re sort of intimidating but I really do want you as a tutor assuming I can actually manage to put together a group and... and...” Seamus burst into loud guffaws and the first-year turned crimson. Hermione looked out-of-sorts. Harry began to

edge across the room.

“I don’t know... er... wow... just wow,” Neville managed.

Parvati called out, “I think you’ve said more than enough, Davies – off to bed with you.”

“Davies? Are you Roger’s sister?” Hermione asked quietly.

“You know him, too? Mr. Potter told me he knew him when he took me for a broom ride in Diagon Alley which was really nice of him and...” Laura blushed even brighter. “I’m saying too much again, aren’t I?”

“I know your brother. He helped me a good deal with my Arithmancy when I was a third year. You know, I never considered at the time that he was in his OWL year – it was especially generous of him,” Hermione said.

“I’m sure he’ll love to hear that...” Laura said politely, but her head was tilted down and she seemed very small. Harry wondered if Hermione had looked so tentative at the outset of her own first year; it was hard for him to remember her that way.

“As for the rest,” Hermione went on, “I... it was a lot to take in at once. I’ll need some time to consider it and to discuss this with Harry... apparently it didn’t occur to him to mention this in advance...”

Laura looked up abruptly. “Oh! I didn’t really give Mr. Potter a chance – I mean, he just made the offer – but if you want to talk through it with him, he’s right behind you.” Hermione turned slowly in her chair; as soon as she’d turned far enough to leave Laura’s view, she gave Harry a stern glare.

“Och, he’s so doomed...” Seamus muttered.

“Come on, Davies, it’s well past time for you to go upstairs,” Parvati said. She gave Laura’s arm a tug until the first-year followed her away.

“Do you think Dean would be up for a game of Exploding Snap?” Neville asked Seamus. “I know we don’t ordinarily play it upstairs for fear of the hangings catching fire, but since he’s already up there and Ron’s still on rounds I figured that we could start a game... you know... upstairs? In our room?”

“Subtle, Neville,” Seamus chuckled. “We’re off, then.” He mouthed ‘doomed’ at Harry on his way past.

Neville stopped at the foot of the stairs and tapped his foot. “Well? Come on, you lot!” he called to the half-dozen other students still milling about. Two fifth-years grumbled a bit, but they all made their way to the stairs before Neville gave Harry a nod and disappeared up the spiral.

Harry forced himself toward the fireplace, one step at a time. “The thing is –” he started.

“I assume you had planned to discuss this with me?” Hermione said frostily.

“Of course I did! I didn’t expect her to just dash in here and spill her guts!” Harry shot back.

Hermione’s glare faded away. “No, I suppose you didn’t…”

Harry took a seat across from her. “You look like you’re feeling better since this morning.”

“I was a mess, wasn’t I?” she sighed. “There’s just so much to consider, so many things happening at once, and none of it is easy… I suppose I’m still a mess, only a freshly washed one.”

“I’m sorry she was all over you like that,” Harry said. “The girl certainly says what’s on her mind.”

“She meant to be nice, I’m sure. Was… was I like that during first-year?” Hermione asked.

“Sometimes, yeah,” Harry admitted. “You like to say what’s on your mind – or at least you used to like that.”

“I don’t do that so often anymore, do I? There are so many things that can’t be said, too many things,” said Hermione. “Some things can’t be said in front of others, some things are supposed to be said in front of others… how does a person keep it all straight?”

“Keep what straight, exactly?” Harry asked.

“Never mind, it’s not important,” Hermione said quietly.

“So… was she right? Do you feel all alone?” Harry asked.

“Not just now,” Hermione said. “What about you? You’re living alone, studying alone… how do you feel?”

Harry thought about it for a moment before he said, “Busy, for the most part.”

“Do you miss living here?” she asked.

“I… I miss being part of the House sometimes,” he said. “I miss Quidditch, but I wouldn’t have had time for it this year, and I admit it’s a lot easier to quit because you’re Dumbledore’s apprentice than because you’re too busy for it. I’d have never heard the end of it.”

“That’s true,” she said, “and I think it’s good that Ron’s the Captain now. He’s really coming into his own, you know? It looks good on him.”

Harry’s brow furrowed. “Oh? Oh… I see…”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “I didn’t mean it like that, for goodness’ sake! Besides, he’s had Lavender on his arm for the last several days.”

“You said her name without shouting!” Harry teased.

“I think she might be good for him, in a way,” Hermione said slowly.

“But you still think there’s something better for him?” asked Harry.

Hermione nodded. “I do, but I doubt he’d agree with me. I won’t bully him into something, that’s for certain.”

Harry felt a catch in his chest. “I can’t imagine he’d say ‘no’ if you asked. You know he still fancies you, even if he won’t say so.”

Hermione’s eyes widened. “Wha... you thought I was talking about myself? Harry... I can’t believe you would think that! If I fancied Ron, why on Earth would I have let you kiss me?”

“All right, you wouldn’t have... but do you...?” Harry stopped himself before he could ask her a question that he wasn’t sure he wanted her to answer.

She sat forward on her chair. “Do I what?”

Harry scrambled for an answer. “Erm... do you think there’s someone else for Ron, then?”

Hermione looked at him as if he had lost his senses. “You need to pay better attention. Luna, of course!” she said.

“*Luna*? Um... have you spoken with her recently?” Harry asked.

“Not for a few days, no,” said Hermione. “Why do you ask?”

“Something’s very wrong. She was raving at me earlier today about dreams. I think that there might be something about Hogwarts that affects her,” Harry said.

“Why would you think that? It would have to be something that only affects her, and that’s rather unlikely... wait, did you say that she mentioned dreams?” Hermione asked.

“The *castle* dreams, she said. I actually thought about trying to lure her to the Hospital Wing,” Harry admitted.

Hermione’s eyes lit. “Do you suppose...? Thank you for telling me, Harry. I’ll be sure to seek her out tomorrow.”

The portrait hole slid open and Ron bounded into the common room. “Harry! I didn’t expect... Hermione! You’re not upstairs!”

“That’s a brilliant observation, Ron,” she said.

“I’ll be back in a snap – don’t go anywhere!” Ron shouted as he raced up the stairs.

“What was that all about?” Hermione wondered aloud.

“Has he given you a birthday present yet?” Harry asked.

“Birthday... oh, that. No, he –” she began.

“Here I am!” Ron said. He hopped over the back of the sofa that separated Harry and Hermione.

“Just the three of us, eh? No matter... I’ll start!”

Hermione squinted at him. “Start...?”

Ron shook his head. “Your birthday party, of course. I’d sing but then you’d have to pay Madam Pomfrey a visit for your ears, so we can skip that bit –”

Harry held out a hand. “Ron... mate! Slow down, would you? Were you hexed on rounds or something?”

“It’s nothing like that,” Ron assured him. He produced a rectangular package. “I’m just excited because I have at last managed a good gift! It’s thoughtful, even!” Harry nearly fell out of his chair with laughter. Hermione politely covered her mouth with one hand.

Ron roughly handed Hermione the package. “What? I’m not allowed to be impressed with myself?”

“I’ll open it straight away, then; I could use a good impressing,” Hermione chuckled. She opened her eyes unnaturally wide. “See? I’ve just the expression for it.”

“Ha, ha.” Ron pouted. “See if I go all out for you next year, then.”

“Ron, I hope you didn’t spend a lot of money on this,” Hermione said seriously.

“I wouldn’t tell you if I had,” Ron said.

“All right, now I’m curious,” said Harry. He picked up his chair and set it down beside Hermione.

Hermione slipped open the wrapping. Inside was a white leather-bound book with elaborate inlays in various shades of crimson and gold. A title was illuminated on the front cover and the spine: “The Granger Grimoire”. She opened the cover with shaking hands. The book was filled with blank sheets of parchment that looked very soft and very expensive.

“I don’t... I don’t know what to say... I...” Hermione stammered.

“Dad told my brothers and me that we could start adding to the Weasley grimoire when we come of age... ‘course none of the books fared well...” Ron’s throat seemed to tighten before he went on, “Anyway, I figured that you should start your own, now that you’re seventeen and all.”

Hermione set the book down and enveloped Ron in a fierce hug. “It’s brilliant, absolutely

brilliant,” she said before she let him go.

“Good on you, mate,” Harry said. Ron hadn’t exaggerated – it was a smashing gift, a thoughtful gift. Hermione slowly released Ron and took up the book again.

“You have one of these somewhere, Harry,” Ron said. “The Blacks must have had one as well.”

“It’s probably in the family vault,” Harry figured.

Hermione traced the inlays with her fingertips. “This must have cost a fortune, Ron... I love it, but I don’t know if I can accept this.”

“It’s not the sort of thing you can return,” Ron said. “You didn’t open the other one.”

There was another rectangular package inside the wrappings. This one was smaller. As Hermione began to open the second package, Harry noticed an acrid smell. “Take extra care with this one,” Ron said; “It’s practically falling apart.”

The book inside looked as if it had been through a fire, but it gave off a subtle sense that something far worse had happened to it. Hermione shivered as she touched it. “What happened to this book?” she whispered.

Darkened flakes fell away as she slowly brushed her hand across the cover. Harry squinted at it, and with a little imagination he could make out the tattered gold lettering: “The Grimoire of the Honourable House of Prewett”.

“I couldn’t possibly...!” Hermione gasped. “I care for you very much; truly I do, but...” Her brow furrowed. “You can’t give this to me, Ron – you’re not allowed. Isn’t it expected that this would go to Bill, if he should marry and have children?”

Ron shook his head. “Bill gets the Weasley Grimoire; this one goes to Ginny someday, actually. Problem is, the magic’s bleeding out of it – look at it crumble! No one’s even opened it since... well, since we picked it out of the rubble. Mum doesn’t know I brought it here, but Dad does, and... look, this isn’t exactly a normal gift ...” He fidgeted as he went on, “I was hoping that you could copy whatever spells are still in there before they’re gone altogether, see? I figured they could be the first to go into your grimoire –”

“And you’d like me to make a second copy for your Mum?” Hermione finished for him.

Ron’s voice diminished to a mumble as he stammered, “Er... I did get a second book made, but I could ask Professor Flitwick... there must be some Ravenclaws who would jump at something like this... suppose it’s not right for me to make you work for a birthday gift, anyway...”

“This isn’t something trivial like asking to copy class notes; it’s important to your family, and it’s obviously important to you,” Hermione said. “It would be a privilege – of course I’ll do it, Ron.”

Ron brightened up considerably. “There were some dead useful charms in there, at least that’s

what I remember. I think you'll be impressed," he said with not a little pride.

Hermione very carefully set the charred book aside and pulled Ron into a second hug. "Anything I ever said about your lack of sensitivity, Ron... I take all of it back, every last thing," she sniffed.

Harry reached out and gave Ron's shoulder a brotherly squeeze. "How am I to follow that?" he said. Ron simply smiled at him, and then slowly eased Hermione an arm's length away.

"Honestly, Harry – this isn't a competition," she tut-tutted.

"Why, thank you for reminding me," Harry said casually. "I'll just hold these until Christmas –"

"Not hardly! Give them over!" Hermione laughed. She grabbed at the first of three packages that Harry had stacked atop the low table.

"That one's from Dumbledore," said Harry.

Hermione's eyes went wide. "The Headmaster sent me a birthday gift?" She quickly dispatched the crimson ribbon and tossed aside the gold paper. Ron and Harry leant in for a closer look.

"A book – figures, I suppose, but what is it?" Ron asked.

"Give me a moment to read the runes..." Hermione said.

"He took it from his library," Harry said.

Hermione set the book down and frowned. "I can't believe he referred to this as a gift."

"It's not from the Hogwarts Library – it's from his own library," Harry repeated. "I don't think you're meant to return it, if that's the issue."

"This relates to the research I've been set, and it's something I would *want* to keep," Hermione said flatly. "I'd rather not read it at all."

Ron put on a smile. "A book you don't want to read? That's not possible –"

"There are things I know now that I wish I didn't," Hermione said harshly.

Ron shifted uneasily in his seat. "Er... how about that next package, eh? It looks too small to be a book. That's a good thing, right?"

"This one's from a friend," Harry said. "I told him I'd pass it along. I can't say who he is – it's a *secret*."

Hermione stared at the red-wrapped package for a long time. "Tell your friend that I don't want to know where they are. It isn't safe for me to know," she said at last.

Harry thought on that and decided to answer, “I’m fairly sure there isn’t parchment inside.”

“So it’s a gift...?” She reached for it quickly and tore at the paper. A small square mirror tumbled out. There were a few faint spidery lines etched in the surface.

Ron raised an eyebrow. “Isn’t that...? Didn’t that belong to, um, you know...?”

Hermione started to breathe rapidly. “I never actually saw you use this,” she said. “I’m guessing that it doesn’t require a wand?”

Harry cleared his throat. “Um... if you want to talk to her, you just say her first name. There was a note with the other one, so I figure she knows what to do.”

She looked at Harry wild-eyed. “I don’t need this, you know – I don’t need it. I can do this myself. I can do what has to be done.”

Ron reached out to put a hand on her shoulder. “I don’t know what this is all about –?”

She swatted his hand away and snapped, “No, you don’t.”

“I don’t know what this is about,” Ron said again, “but you’re not doing anything on your own. You sound like Harry did last year.”

“This isn’t about what you want,” Hermione said angrily. “There are things I have to do – there are things I know – and you can’t help me, not you and certainly not Harry.”

“And now you really sound like Harry did,” Ron fired back. “So much for being the brightest witch in our year, eh?”

“Stop it!” Harry growled. “Hermione’s nothing like I was last year, and it’s her birthday – I won’t have us at each other’s throats!” Ron sullenly crossed his arms and Hermione shrunk in her chair. He reached out and took Hermione’s hand. “I didn’t think this was something you needed. I figured it was something you might want. Keep it, in case you change your mind.” Hermione brought her legs up and wrapped her arms around her knees.

“Is the last one from you, Harry, or is it from your *friend*?” Ron asked. Harry glared at him.

“I’m sorry I was cross with you both,” Hermione said quietly.

Harry hefted the last package. “This can wait until tomorrow if you like,” he said.

She let her legs loose and shook her head. “Best that I open it now,” she said.

He handed her the package slowly, and hoped she would like the gift inside. The bookseller in Edinburgh had taken a full week and a good deal of money to secure it. After her response to the mirror, he was more than a little worried about the response that the book might provoke.

She stopped when the publisher's box was half-revealed. "What on Earth...?"

Harry started, "It's..."

"I know what it is," Hermione whispered. She removed the rest of the wrapping and stared silently at the box for a long time before she took out the book inside.

"Erm... it came from a limited edition – the bookseller told me there were only two hundred made – and, um, you might want to open the cover," Harry said nervously.

Ron leant in, perplexed. "Where's Pooh Corner, and who has a house there?"

She turned open the cover. "It's signed... good heavens, it's signed by both A.A. Milne and the illustrator..." Her eyes were misty when she looked up at last. "How could you possibly...?"

"I saw the photo in your Dad's study," Harry said. "He told me it was the first book you ever read, so I thought you should have it."

"You could have gone to WH Smith and picked up a new edition for ten pounds," she sniffed.

Harry felt his cheeks warm and he looked down at his feet. "I figured you'd like this better," he said softly.

"And Harry catches the Snitch again," Ron said with a disbelieving shake of the head. "Oh, well – I gave it my best effort."

Hermione sprang to her feet and dragged Ron to his. "Remember, it isn't a competition," she said and pulled him into a third hug. Harry hummed the first bars of "Weasley Is Our King" and Ron stuck out his tongue.

She released him and slowly advanced toward Harry. "And as for you..."

Harry wasn't sure what to make of the look in her eyes. "You... you did like it... right?" She answered with a breath-taking embrace. When she loosened her hold, she didn't pull away; instead she brought one hand up to his cheek. The combination of the look in her eyes and the emotions flowing from her nearly made his knees buckle.

"If you're going to kiss him, would you get on with it?" Ron said. "I'll turn away and count to ten... don't think I could stand watching you snog his face off."

Hermione's lip quirked and she started to chuckle. Her arms fell to her sides and she lowered her head against Harry's chin and nose and lips. He instinctively kissed her forehead, and she raised her head as if stung. The same look was still in her eyes when she put one hand around the back of his head and brought him to her. It wasn't as clumsy as the first time they'd kissed – they only bumped noses once. It wasn't at all lost on Harry that this time she had kissed him.

"TEN," Ron called out. Hermione buried her head against Harry's shoulder and laughed so hard

that she shook in his embrace.

Harry pulled a face at Ron. "If you weren't such a good friend..."

"That's right, and best you don't forget it," Ron returned with a smirk.

Hermione turned to face Ron, but her left arm stayed firmly against Harry. She was still flushed from laughing. "Will you be all right with this, if... you know...?"

Ron pursed his lips, and then said, "I will, actually. I'm a little surprised myself, but I will. So, are you...?"

Harry wouldn't have noticed that Hermione tensed if they hadn't remained so close. Still, she didn't pull free or let her arm fall. "I don't know," he said before she could speak. "It's like this..." He struggled for the right words. "Hermione and me, we just... we just *are*."

"We are, aren't we?" Hermione agreed.

Ron rolled his eyes. "Completely mental, the both of you."

"You should probably head back to Hogsmeade while there's still light," Hermione said, even though she made no move to let him go.

"Oi, I have something to say about that," Ron said; he made an attempt to look stern that Harry thought missed the mark.

"What, about going back to my rooms?" said Harry.

"Look, Hermione won't say it and it doesn't seem like anyone else will, so I suppose it's my place to do it." Ron took an exaggerated breath, and said, "Come back to Hogwarts."

Harry's brow furrowed. "I am back at Hogwarts, in case you hadn't noticed."

"No, you twit!" Ron huffed. "What I mean is that you should let those rooms go and come back to Hogwarts. You should be here, that's what I think."

Harry abruptly pulled free of Hermione. "Why? I'm under Dumbledore's thumb enough as it is. I'm free, living in Hogsmeade –"

"Free to do what?" Ron pressed. "You're working with the teachers most of the time anyway. What, you think Dumbledore would lock the gates as soon as you brought in your trunk?"

"He might!" protested Harry. "Who put you up to this?"

Ron's jaw clenched. "I put myself up to this. We need you here! Dean's painting all the time and Seamus is trying to get in a different girl's knickers every week and Neville... well, he's Neville... and Ginny's driving me mad and there's no one to look over my Quidditch plays or for

me to crush in chess now and again. You know that Hermione needs you here, but apparently she's decided on a holiday from bossing the two of us –"

"That's enough," Harry said. "Hermione, do you really...?"

She wouldn't meet his eyes. "It's not important what I think on this. If you like living in Hogsmeade, then you should live there."

Harry said, "Still, I'd like your opinion."

Hermione seemed to fight an internal battle before she said with clear reluctance, "I think you should live wherever is the safest, Harry. You're too important to leave that to chance. Now, I have a bit of revising left this evening. Thank you so much for the gifts." Before Harry could say anything else, she darted forward and kissed him on the cheek. He found that he didn't want to take his eyes off of her, and stood there as she vanished the stray wrapping and settled in with a tattered textbook. He could see that there was writing all through the margins.

"Are you going to stand there all night?" she asked without looking up. He knew that the corner of her mouth was crooked in a smirk even though he couldn't see her face.

"I've never seen you write in your books before," he said, rather than stand there dumbly.

"Flourish and Blotts couldn't obtain enough copies," she said, and held up the book. Harry could barely read the faded title: *Advanced Potion Making*, by Libatius Borage. "It's been out of print for years, apparently. I was given this one by Professor... er, sorry – by Snape at the end of the first class."

Harry felt a flash of anger at the name. "After he took points and insulted you, I'm sure," he said.

"The side notes are intriguing," she said. "It's going to be dark soon; you should go."

"I can take a hint," Harry said. A quick glint of light caught his eye, and Harry noticed that she'd slipped the mirror inside the cover of the book. He hoped she would use it.

"I'll walk out with you," Ron said. As soon as they cleared the portrait hole, he grabbed Harry firmly by the upper arm.

Harry pulled away. "What gives?"

Ron snarled. "You're done with Heather, do you understand me? *Finished.*"

"I know," Harry said.

Ron was thoroughly red. "I told you what would happen if you hurt Hermione, and I meant it. You're not invincible, you know, and I'm not the only one who would give you what-for. I'll bet I could get Bill to hex you from here to Egypt! The twins might come back to finish seventh year, just out of spite!"

“Ron – I know,” Harry repeated. “Someone reminded me today that we’re not on holiday anymore. It’s over, all right? It couldn’t work out even if I wanted that... and I don’t want that, not really.”

“I don’t want to hear ‘not really’,” Ron said. “Do you fancy Heather or not?”

Harry took a long time to answer. “I liked the idea of it,” he said at last. “I don’t really know her, and I don't think that's going to change.”

“And there are more important things to do, aren’t there?” Ron added.

Harry nodded. “I know what I have to do. The summer’s over now.”

Ron crossed his arms. “Well, you still can’t hurt Hermione, right? As far as I can see, if the two of you ‘are’, then you and anyone else ‘aren’t’.”

Harry smiled. “I understand,” he said, and he started on his way down the corridor.

“I expect to see that trunk of yours,” Ron called after him. “You’re moving back in here.”

“Good night, Ron,” Harry returned.

Harry Potter and the Years of Rebellion The Typhoon Tycoon

Chapter Thirty-seven

THE TYPHOON TYCOON

September 20

“Tun-de-ray,” Harry said. The tip of his wand gave a sickly flicker. A small clay figure set atop his small dining table trembled and then went still. He went back to the faded book that Flitwick had loaned him. “No, that's not it,” he murmured.

Tundere / tutudi

Two companion spells used by apothecaries to separate and reduce various raw ingredients to granules (tundere) or pulp (tutudi). The wand movement for both spells requires a slight variation on the Bachman Waggle, whereby the right rotation is reversed. Neither spell will act upon a living animal or conjured ingredient.

Harry gave his wand the designated waggle and pronounced, “Too-too-dee.” A sharp yellow beam lanced out and reduced the figure to dust. He scratched his head and wondered aloud, “Wrong rotation?” *Sometimes it's all in the pronunciation*, he reminded himself as he set a second figure into place. *Let's try Tundere again*.

“Tun-DAY-ray,” he called out, and the figure fell into a pile of several hundred equally sized pieces. Satisfied with the result, he cast *Reparo*. The pieces stayed in place without so much as a shudder. He set his wand on the table in disgust and quickly paged through the book.

“Strange... but if that's what it says... *Finite incantatum. Reparo*,” he said. The second clay figure quickly reformed.

Harry stood before his sofa with some trepidation, and said to himself, “All right, Filius, you thought I might be able to do this, so... *Tundere!*” The sofa vibrated rapidly and then fell into six good-sized piles of small pieces. He fell to his knees from the effort. His sofa had been neatly sorted into three different fabrics, two sorts of wood and a pile of metal bits.

“*Finite incantatum. Reparo*,” he said, and the pieces whirled about until they took the rough shape of a sofa. Rather than joining together, they simply hung there and wobbled. Harry happened to

open his hand. Two loose granules flew free, and his sofa regained its form in an instant. *That's a twitchy spell*, he thought; *you need every single bit in order to reverse it*. He supposed that an apothecary didn't have much call to restore an ingredient already reduced to small pieces or pulp.

Flitwick had opened Harry's eyes to the idea of using spells for wholly unintended purposes. *Tundere* could clear a fallen boulder. *Tutudi* could turn the ground beneath an opponent's feet into something resembling quicksand – at least when the Charms professor cast it. Remembering one's options in the heat of the moment was another matter entirely. In a dozen practice duels, he had yet to last more than two minutes against Flitwick.

Harry dragged himself off the floor and fell heavily onto the sofa, which promptly fell into a thousand pieces. He landed on one shoulder against the granular remains of the sofa's metal frame and let out a loud “Oof!” His wand buzzed as someone passed through the simple perimeter ward he had cast in the stairwell. With a wince, he pulled himself up from the floor once again. Someone pounded roughly on the door and he made ready.

“You all right in there? I thought the roof was caving in!” Detheridge called out.

“What kind of wand do you have?” Harry returned.

“I'm not the only one who could tell you that, but I'll play along. Six inches, redwood and horned owl feather,” Detheridge said, and then added with a grumble, “and you'd better not be setting me up for a wand joke. I've heard enough about my six-inch horny owl to last a lifetime.”

Harry had no doubt it was Detheridge. “I'm all right; no worries,” he laughed through the door.

After a few silent moments, Detheridge asked, “So can I come in or are you busy? Just because there's no tie on the door doesn't mean there's no bra on the floor, you know?” Harry spluttered something unintelligible and flung open the door.

The Defence professor loped inside and said with a shake of his head, “You're too easy to wind up. When I was your age -”

“I really don't want to know,” Harry cut him off.

Detheridge's eyes widened. “Why did you kill your couch?” he asked.

“Couch? Oh, the sofa! I was practicing spells for Filius,” Harry said sheepishly.

Detheridge sifted a handful of granules. “It sure wasn't a *Reducto* r curse – not a mark on them... what on Earth did you cast?”

“*Tundere* – it's an apothecary spell,” explained Harry.

Detheridge let the granules scatter and laughed, “Leave it to Flitwick; I'll bet he'd duel you with a Hedge Trimming charm just to mix things up!” Harry's hand automatically went to his hair and Detheridge laughed even more loudly.

“You don't have to duel him every other day,” Harry complained.

“I thought I'd catch a late breakfast downstairs,” Detheridge said. “Join me. We need to talk.”

Harry checked his watch. “I have Croaker in an hour and he's firm about time.”

Detheridge muttered something about a sharp stick that Harry couldn't quite make out, and then said, “I'd say we could go up to the castle for a bite, but Rosie would skin me alive if I didn't stop for at least one meal a day.”

“Rosie?” Harry asked.

“Sorry... Madam Rosmerta to you,” Detheridge said.

“Er... never knew she was called Rosie...” Harry mumbled.

“Enough of that – there's a lot to cover,” said Detheridge. “You're meeting Keith MacLeish tomorrow, is that right?”

“What of it?” Harry asked as he set his wards and descended the stairs. “Do you know him?”

“I've worked for him a time or two... wouldn't say I know him, exactly,” Detheridge said.

Harry perked up immediately. “What's he like?” he asked. Detheridge motioned for Harry to hold his question. He gave Madam Rosmerta a roguish smirk; to Harry's shock, her cheeks reddened before she waved them to an open table.

“All right,” Detheridge said as they took seats, “you want to know about MacLeish. I'll tell you what I can.”

Harry stammered, “Wha... but... you... she...?” and leant his head toward Rosmerta, who was making for them with a large plate and a bowl.

“I thought you didn't want to know,” Detheridge said. “Besides, I'm a gentleman -”

“The hell you are,” Rosmerta purred as she set the plate before Detheridge. She looked to Harry and asked, “What would you care to eat, dear? Nothing as odd as this one, I'll wager.”

“I like my Wheaties, thank you, and I *have* shown my appreciation for your efforts,” Detheridge pouted. Rosmerta gave a very unladylike snort in reply.

“I'll have whatever is easiest for you,” Harry said.

“So like your mother, you are,” said Rosmerta with a smile. “That would be tea and scones... unless you fancy some of that tree bark Marcus favours?”

Harry peered past Detheridge's eggs and rasher of bacon and into the bowl. “Erm... do I have to?”

he asked.

"It's good for you," Detheridge protested. "Fine, but you're drinking orange juice at least. I don't know how you people drink anything that comes from a pumpkin – blech!"

"I figured that pumpkin juice was just a wizarding thing, you know? You don't drink it in America, then?" Harry asked.

"No one with taste buds does!" Detheridge answered immediately. "It's definitely an English thing... like marmite." He shuddered and his mouth wrinkled up.

"I'll grant you that one," admitted Harry.

Rosmerta shuffled off to fetch Harry tea, scones and orange juice, and Detheridge returned to the matter at hand. "So... MacLeish. Let me see... he's about McGonagall's age, but looks a bit younger. He went to Hogwarts, but he's had one foot and half the other in the ordinary world for as long as I've heard tell. His magical family is on his mother's side -"

"So his dad was a Muggle?" Harry cut in.

Detheridge explained, "His father was a newspaperman in Australia, and that's where MacLeish made his money at first. He bought up ordinary newspapers all over the world, and moved into TV after that – you know, the 'telly'?" When Harry nodded, he went on, "MacLeish owns satellites – they're the things up in space that bounce the TV shows around the world. He does something or another with telephones, too. Anyway, he started buying up the wizarding papers a few years ago, and wizarding radio – wireless, you folks call it."

"Right, then – so he's rich. Why does everyone hate him so – is it over the money? What's his interest in me, do you think?" asked Harry.

Detheridge rubbed his chin. "I don't rightly understand why he's interested in you... never have... but the rest? It comes down to two things. First and most important, he thinks we should reveal ourselves to the rest of the world."

"What? That's bloody mad!" Harry squawked.

"A lot of wizards agree with you," Detheridge said with a shrug. "MacLeish's point is that we won't be able to hide much longer, not without a lot more effort. Wizards in America understand that. The kind of secrecy you'd need would turn everything on its head – we're just too integrated there. The second reason is more of an English thing... a European thing, I guess. We just don't care all that much about bloodlines. See, MacLeish... he goes out of his way to lift up new wizards, poor wizards, creatures, even squibs; he's well known for it. I figure that's why I didn't last. You'd call me a pureblood here – I go back a good ten generations."

"Well, I can't fathom revealing the wizarding world, but the rest... look, I'd probably do the same in his place," Harry admitted.

“Then you might want to think about living somewhere else,” Detheridge returned. “Now if you really want the skinny on MacLeish, then you sit yourself down with Lucia.”

Harry's jaw instantly tightened. “I don't want to talk with that woman about anything,” he snapped.

Detheridge snorted and said, “Oh, grow up.”

“Marcus -” Harry started to complain.

Detheridge shook his head. “Don't 'Marcus' me,” he said. “Lucia's smart, she's savvy, she's rich, she knows MacLeish inside and out, she knows some awfully sophisticated magic, and your friend Granger leans on her. Now she isn't perfect, and neither are you. Do you want to burn the next year butting heads with her? I figure she can be your ally or your enemy, and there won't be a lot of middle ground. You're a couple of stubborn mules.”

“You don't know what she -” Harry started.

Detheridge set his spoon down hard. “No, I don't know – don't need to know,” he said. “You don't have to forgive her – you don't even need to like her – but you have to work with her. You need to work with me, with Flitwick, with Shacklebolt, with Albus, with Albus's friends... damn it, Harry, you need to work!”

Harry sat back in his seat. “I... uh...”

Detheridge did the same. “Look, I know you take a lot of grief from people. I don't want to pile on, but right now you don't need sunshine from me – you need the truth. You ready for my take on our first three weeks together?”

Harry swallowed audibly. “Er... am I?”

“Unimpressive, Harry! You can do better,” Detheridge snapped. “I know Granger was hurt – hurt badly – but I've had the same talk with her. I'm giving her two weeks to pull it together, and I think she's going to have to stay in private lessons for a while. As for you, you've had a month and a half to jerk around and it stops here. There's a Dueling Club you haven't started yet, lessons to do, spells to master, and a pack of lunatics out there who'd kill you just as soon as look at you. Albus doesn't have the stones to say it, so it falls to me. *Snap out of it!*” He shoved a spoonful of the awful looking flakes into his mouth, chewed roughly, and went on, “All this running around the country puts you and everyone else on your tail at risk, and you damn well know it. Maybe I don't have all the facts, but if this is just about getting laid -”

“Wha...? That's... that's... you've absolutely no idea about it!” Harry shouted.

Detheridge let out a long sigh. His speech had never been formal and the ebb-and-flow of his cadence was always noticeable, but now it became even stronger. Harry had never heard its like, but there was something inescapably rural about it. “Back in the day, I used to hunt,” Detheridge said. “You ever hunt, Harry? I suppose not. My uncle, he taught me to do it like an ordinary –

none of this crappin' around with a wand. There's a sport to it, see... ah, forget it. Point is, I used to have this hound that went by the name of Buck. Now he was supposed to follow the scent trail until we treed whatever we were after, or at least cornered it. Buck, though, he never could get it right. He was always jumpin' from one trail to the next to the next, confused as the devil. He'd find two good trails, and the useless sack o' bones liked one as much as the other. He'd sniff at this one and sniff at that one and go around in circles for a while, and then he'd plop down on the ground, scratch himself and howl away... scared off the quarry, 'course. So we'd head on to the cabin, he'd plant his snout in a bowl of dog food and I'd take whatever was in the cupboard. Buck was a stupid damn dog – worthless for huntin', but he's what I had.”

Harry was utterly lost. “Uh-huh...” he said blankly.

“Missing the point?” Detheridge asked.

“Completely,” Harry said honestly.

Detheridge reached toward him blinding fast and swatted him atop the head. “Stop sniffin' around and pick a trail!” he barked. “Settle up with MacLeish, get back here and get to work! All right... that's all I have.”

Harry sat there, shocked and angry and unmoving, as Detheridge polished off the remainder of his breakfast. The professor at last pushed back from the table and said, “Let's go.”

“I still don't want to talk to Covelli,” Harry said.

“Boo-hoo, m'boy. You can use our time slot for it – I know she's free,” Detheridge shot back.

Harry scowled at him. “Fine, then. We'd best pick up the pace. It takes about twenty minutes to walk up -”

“Walk? Who said anything about walking?” Detheridge said. “You've got your bike, don't you?”

Harry felt for the Bonnie in his pocket. “You could ride pillion, I suppose...?” he said.

“Pillion... you mean on the back?” Detheridge snorted. “I won't fit on the back of that thing. Now if I still had my Hog...”

Harry gaped at him. “You rode around on a hog? Right... I'd have to see that to believe it.”

“No, not on a *pig* !” Detheridge groaned. “I'll explain it on the way. Now then... you plan to tell me how this thing works without a clutch?”

“Come in,” Covelli called out.

Harry didn't want to come in, not at all, but neither did he want to be on Detheridge's bad side. The professor had managed to hound Harry for the balance of the day. They had passed in the corridors

half a dozen times by the noon hour, though it was rare that they would see one other in the castle at all outside of scheduled tuition. Hastily scrawled platitudes about responsibility, duty, pride in one's work and picking a trail had turned up in the pockets of his robe, in the books packed inside his rucksack, and even inside his trainers. It had been quite enough, and so it was that Harry came to Covelli's study. He pushed open the door with a loud squeak.

“And so Mr. Detheridge's motives become clear,” Covelli said.

Harry frowned. “I'll come back another time -”

Covelli quickly rose from behind her desk. “No! No, please – sit.”

A long sigh escaped Harry's lips and he sat heavily on the armchair opposite her. “Right, then...” he started, but he really didn't know what else to say or even what needed to be said.

Covelli wouldn't meet his eyes. “It seems that Marcus believes me so weak, prideful or self-absorbed that I would not seek you out of my own accord,” she said. “He decided that I would not apologise without first being confronted by you. He should not have made this assumption on my behalf; it was not his place.” She returned a sigh of her own and added, “Now we shall never know if he was correct.”

Harry shifted uncomfortably in his chair. Covelli's tone, her behaviour, even her posture was different than in all their previous encounters. He wasn't merely uncertain; he was bewildered. “Erm...” he began.

Covelli held up a hand. “Please, let me speak my peace,” she said. “When I have finished, you may, ehh... 'let me have it', as they say.” Harry folded his hands in his lap and waited.

She steepled her fingers, closed her eyes and began, “When August began, I was preparing for classes. I was a professor of psychiatry, you see? I was seeing patients in hospital and my regular clients as time allowed. I was editing manuscripts for colleagues and preparing to begin a paper of my own. Since that time, I have retired from my post, given up my practice, and returned to a world that I chose to leave behind. I have lost my professional identity and for the next several months I have lost my freedom.”

“Why are you here, then?” Harry asked.

“I returned to this place because I was needed,” she said. “It is the same for you, is it not?”

“But you hate Dumbledore – that much is obvious...?” said Harry.

Covelli sagged in her chair. “I do not hate Albus... that is far too strong... but I did not return for his sake,” she said. “What is the worst loss you can imagine, Harry?”

“My friends,” he said immediately; “I can't imagine losing any of them, and I know I probably will.”

“I have lost friends and family, and it is excruciating,” she said, “but there is something worse for a person of my profession and inclinations. I have lost my objectivity, my professional distance, you see?”

“Sorry, I don't see,” Harry admitted.

“One must sit at arm's length when dealing with matters of the mind. The relationship between a client and myself is meant to be outgrown,” Covelli tried to explain. “Personal issues that affect the professional are not supposed to intrude...”

“So you're here for Hermione, then,” said Harry.

“I am here because I grew too close to the situation and too close to the client,” Covelli corrected him. “That was my folly - one that I did not expect after so many years. I allowed myself to be a witch rather than a physician. From there, it was a short journey to becoming mentor rather than healer, friend rather than advisor.”

“When I saw you with her in the Library, that first time we met, you seemed like a second mum,” Harry observed.

“The relationship between Miss Granger and myself is complicated and, for the moment, remains privileged,” Covelli said in a measured way. “I have treated you poorly as a result of it, however, and for this I do apologise. Now is the time when you let me have it.”

Harry wasn't quite ready to accept the apology, but he told Covelli honestly, “I'm glad you're here for her.”

“I hope it will be enough. I hope it will help more than harm,” said Covelli. “Do you know I was furious with Albus for allowing her to attend the goblin hunt? He was wrong to allow it. I was wrong to blame you for it, however.”

“Is that why you stuck me with that assignment?” Harry asked.

“The purpose of the assignment was to lead you to logical conclusions,” Covelli insisted. “I understand that Marcus took a different approach this morning?”

Harry laughed despite himself. “He slapped me on the head and said I was a hound.”

“He said you were a dog...? The man is bewildering,” Covelli said. She paused, crossed her arms and added, “And so, it comes to this: can we work together, you and I?”

“We have to work together,” Harry answered. “It must be strange for you, being a student again. I don't want you to treat me like a little boy, but I honestly don't expect to be treated as an equal.”

Covelli sat straight in her chair. “We are peers in academic rank,” she said. “As a witch, I have yet to earn a mastery and have not practiced my craft in a good many years. I vastly outrank you in life experience and scholarly training, but there is much in the way of magic that I must re-learn.

As an example, you could easily best me in a duel were we to face each other today. Perhaps we shall learn from each other, yes?”

“That's... an interesting idea,” Harry decided.

“In that spirit, we should speak of Keith MacLeish,” Covelli offered.

Harry nodded. “Marcus said you know him rather well?”

“I know Keith very well indeed,” said Covelli. “We were married, he and I.”

“Married?” Harry goggled.

“Yes, married – from 1967 until 1977,” Covelli confirmed.

Harry was caught completely flat-footed. “I... I had no idea...” he managed.

“It is not something that I publicise,” she said.

Harry thought back to the invitation from MacLeish. “He married again, then? I know that he has a daughter and I had the impression that she still lives with him.”

Covelli's expression blanked. After a time, she said quietly, “Nicola was born in 1975... I would rather not discuss her just now.”

“Sorry, I was curious because his note said she would be there for the weekend,” Harry said.

Her eyes widened noticeably before she regained control. “This would not be wise. Nicola is, ehh... fragile,” she said. “I must contact Keith and convince him otherwise. If he will not listen to reason, then we will speak of this – I promise you.”

“I didn't mean to pry,” Harry said.

Covelli took a long deep breath before she said, “That was not your intention, I know this.” She folded her hands and asked, “What do you need to know about Keith? What is his interest in you?” Harry did his best to explain the business relationship that Diggle had set up: the sale of the castle, the share in the *Daily Prophet* and the license for Harry's name and face. He figured that he did a fair job, because she seemed to understand.

When he was finished, she nodded and paused in thought. “That is not enough,” she concluded. “His interest is greater than this. Keith would not go to these lengths for this agreement. In his world, this was a very small transaction. Perhaps it would help to read his note?”

“I've read it and re-read it, actually... could practically recite it by now. Nothing stands out for me,” Harry said. He fished in his rucksack and found the dog-eared invitation.

Covelli read the invitation and muttered all the while. “Pevensey... I take it this refers to the Black

property... but the performance is in Edinburgh... he's putting his wealth on display for the purebloods... oh, dear, Catriona's been charged with the *Daily Prophet* ?”

“The note's on the back side,” Harry told her.

“Yes, I see this... 'anxious to met you', he writes... it is true that he has few partners, and interesting that he describes you as such... very interesting... 'my daughter and I'?” Covelli set the invitation down on her desk and wondered aloud, “What game is afoot, Keith?”

“I suppose I'm glad you're confused,” said Harry. “I kept wondering if there was something about this that I was supposed to understand, something I was missing?”

“He does not want your money or your lands or the right to place your image on chocolates,” Covelli said. “He wants *you* , Mr. Potter. The important question to answer is why he wants you.”

Harry hesitated before he said, “Er... Harry; you can call me Harry, if you like?”

For the first time since he had met her, Covelli gave a genuine smile. “I would like that,” she said. “You may call me Lucia if you wish.”

“I'll work on that,” Harry said.

Covelli picked up the invitation again. “It is written that you may bring a guest of your choosing,” she said. “Who will be your guest?”

“I had thought about asking Hermione, but I don't think that's for the best,” Harry admitted.

“I should say not,” said Covelli. “The other young lady who inhabits your thoughts will be the centre of attention.” When Harry's eyes narrowed, she added, “We both know that there are other reasons for Miss Granger to refrain from travelling.”

“This is my chance to tell Heather that we're just friends,” Harry said.

“You think this will be so simple?” Covelli asked.

Harry nodded and said, “I don't see why not?”

Covelli shook her head and smiled. “I am sorry for this, but... Harry, you are so young,” she said.

“I need her to be my friend,” Harry insisted. “I think she understands me, you know? Heather could be like... like family.”

Covelli pursed her lips, then allowed, “This is a more effective message; I hope that she will hear it. And so, returning to the matter at hand... what guest will you choose? It would be the Weasley boy, perhaps, or Mr. Longbottom? It is without saying that Albus would prefer you select one of his flock – the older Weasley or this Tonks, perhaps?”

Harry thought on it for a while, and then he took on a mischievous smirk. “How would you like to go to a party?” he asked. Covelli's face went bone-white and her mouth opened and closed without a sound.

“I'm serious,” Harry said. “It would put him back on his heels, wouldn't it? Besides, you're worried about your daughter, right? If you're there, I'd think that would keep him in line.”

“I... I...” was all Covelli managed to say.

“I could ask Filius – he gives good advice,” Harry mused. “You can forget Tonks – she has a big mouth. I'd probably ask Mr. Weasley before I'd ask Bill.”

“You would not prefer to take a date or a friend?” Covelli asked.

“Everyone seems to think that MacLeish will eat me alive,” Harry said. “I figure good advice is more important than a good time.”

Covelli looked down for a long moment, and then met Harry's smirk with one of her own. “I would treasure a photograph of the expression on Keith's face when I am introduced,” she said. “Understand this, Harry: my presence may create a stir amongst some of the old families, if they choose to attend. I was rather famously cast out of my own family.”

Harry shrugged. “So was Sirius Black,” he said. “I figure it's a point in your favour.”

At the conclusion of the day's classes, Harry met Covelli at Dumbledore's office and they Flooed to the Leaky Cauldron. From there, Covelli hailed a taxi. After a stomach-churning run through traffic that rivalled the Knight Bus, they were deposited at a dingy car-park not far from Heathrow.

Harry tried to ask Covelli, “What is this place?” but she merely held up her hand and allowed the driver to deposit their luggage at the kerb.

As soon as the driver was properly tipped and sent on his way, she said, “People in the know call this the Nexus. It is the designated apparation point for Heathrow, the collection point for the Strait Line, a regular stop for the Knight Bus, a wizard-friendly place for cars-for-hire... if you have a mind to travel in and out of England, you will come here at some point.”

“Heathrow has an apparation point? Why?” Harry asked.

Covelli gave him an odd look. “Heathrow has an apparation point because it is the largest airport in the country,” she said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

Harry's brow furrowed. “Why wouldn't you just pick up an international portkey?”

“You make that sound as if it were an easy thing,” said Covelli.

“They mustn't be too hard to come by. How else did everyone get here for the World Cup?” Harry concluded.

Covelli shrugged. “There are exceptions to everything, of course. An event like the World Cup allows a wizarding government to shower gifts upon the favoured. All that is required is to place the proper coins in the proper cauldron, yes?” As she collected her luggage, she went on, “I had forgotten the last Cup was held here. You do realise that it was in the Ministry's best interests to ease transportation in and out of the country at that time? It is quite another matter if a citizen wishes to come and go. The Strait Line is expensive, but nothing compared to the license fee for an international portkey.”

Harry asked, “And the Strait Line is...?”

“Oh, dear... you truly have been isolated, haven't you?” Covelli said. “We shall have to address that.” With that, she led him to what appeared to be a gatehouse for the car-park – it was no more than ten feet across. She casually let her wand slip from her sleeve into the palm of her hand and tapped the door to the gatehouse. There were several odd clicks and a groan, and then the door opened inward.

The room inside was easily twenty times the size of the exterior and filled with a dizzying array of witches and wizards, more than Harry had ever seen inside any single building excepting the Ministry or Hogwarts. He saw robes and cloaks and coats in styles he'd never before seen or imagined; people of all sizes and colours; baggage-toting creatures that made house-elves seem quite ordinary. A number of vendors were milling about with trays and cases, hawking everything from Seasickness Elixir (“Why would anyone want to be seasick?” Harry heard one wizard say) to Muggle gazetteers of England. There were at least two clothiers who had set up shop, both of whom were overburdened by wizards and witches attempting to dress as proper Muggles. A booth to one side was a perfect miniature replica of Gringotts, complete with a goblin guard; through the open doors, Harry could see two tellers doing a brisk business in currency exchange.

A tall man in what looked to be an ancient naval uniform strode into the crowd and called out, “For those with passage on the M.V. Hermes from Southampton to New York, we will begin collecting luggage at Counter Four in exactly ten minutes... ticketed passengers only, please!” With that, the man retreated to a large red counter shaped rather like the number four.

A witch nearly bumped into him as she shouted, “The Muggle autobus heading to Heathrow departs from behind the car-park in five minutes! If you've not acquired an authorised ticket, make your way to Counter One immediately!” The tall, white Counter One looked even more like a number one than Counter Four looked like a number four. Covelli took up station in a queue that led to Counter Two, which looked remarkably like the aforementioned number in blue.

“I've reserved a car,” she told Harry. He nodded, too overwhelmed to say anything. They had advanced about halfway through the queue when Covelli abruptly stepped out and into the paths of a finely dressed witch and wizard.

“Will wonders never cease? Hello, Giancarlo,” she said grandly.

The wizard looked up and stopped dead. “I... er... how unexpected...” he bumbled. “I didn't know you were in England...”

“Greetings to you, Mrs. Covelli - or MacLeish - or is there yet another Mr. Lucia these days?” the witch said coldly.

Covelli let forth a tinkling and undeniably false laugh. “Ah, Echidna... smashing to see you as always,” she said. “Which half are you today, I wonder: nymph or snake?”

The wizard grimaced at Covelli and said, “That was uncalled for,” in a perfunctory way, then added, “What brings you to England?”

“I've taken up a post at Hogwarts,” Covelli said. Harry was quite certain that the unpleasant witch hissed at that.

Covelli went on, “This is my colleague...” She stopped and it was obvious to Harry that she hadn't intended to introduce him. For that matter, he hadn't considered the risk of being seen as himself amidst the wizarding public. *Too late for worries now*, he decided.

With his wand concealed in his left hand, he reached out with his right toward the wizard; “Harry Potter,” he said casually. The man's mouth fell open. The witch managed to capture surprise and horror in a single expression.

“Carl Greengrass,” the wizard said quickly. “This is *truly* unexpected!”

The witch manoeuvred past and presented her hand as though it was to be kissed. Harry grasped her hand by the fingertips and bowed slightly, uncertain what else to do. She raised an eyebrow, leant her head back in a superior fashion and announced, “I am Echidna Yaxley Greengrass.”

Harry promptly returned his attention to Mr. Greengrass. “Ted Tonks mentioned your name,” he said. “It was in connection with one of my family's properties; he told me we would have been far better served if you'd been involved.”

“Is that so? Ted and I have done a good bit of business over the years,” Mr. Greengrass said. “Is he handling your affairs?”

“Some of them,” said Harry. “Would Daphne Greengrass be your daughter?”

“She would,” Mrs. Greengrass said stiffly.

“She's a year mate of mine – a fine witch,” Harry said.

“I am surprised that one of your... station... would speak well of a daughter of Slytherin House,” Mrs. Greengrass sniffed.

“What station is that?” Harry asked. “I'm the Headmaster's apprentice, that's all. As for Slytherin...? I make my opinion of a person based on what he's done, not his house.”

“Did you receive my Christmas gift last year, Echidna?” Covelli asked Mrs. Greengrass. “You failed to send a recognition of any sort.”

Mrs. Greengrass rolled her eyes. “Who would be caught dead in a short-sleeved robe?”

“Someone with nothing to hide, of course,” Covelli said in a voice cold as ice.

“Lucia!” Mr. Greengrass snapped. “Considering the choices you've made -”

“- which anyone with a sense of decorum *would* hide...” Mrs. Greengrass added.

“I know what you are, woman,” Covelli said. “Don't let her poison Daphne with it, Carlo.”

“You would do well to take young Mr. Potter's advice,” Mrs. Greengrass said. “I am a Slytherin, but I am not my brother.”

“Ahh, you are not one of the minions; you throw teas for them instead,” Covelli spat.

“We will never be able to reconcile, Lucia, not as long as you hold this bitterness,” Mr. Greengrass said sadly.

“I will never reconcile as long as my family stands in league with darkness,” Covelli returned with equal sadness.

“It's not like that, Luci, not at all. I don't want anything to do with *any* of it, and I certainly don't want that for Daphne,” Mr. Greengrass said.

“Daphne has to concern herself with the future of the House of Greengrass, as well as the Nascosto family,” Mrs. Greengrass added; “Family comes before the rest of this nasty business, or have you forgotten the meaning of family after so many years?”

“Er... we're next in line,” Harry said. “Would you like me to pass along your greetings to Daphne? I imagine I'll see her in passing next week?”

Mr. Greengrass said heartily, “Yes, that would be splendid! In fact, I'd like to take lunch with you and Ted at some point – in Hogsmeade, perhaps? Would you accept my owl post?”

“Sure, that would be great,” Harry said. He shook Mr. Greengrass's hand again. Mrs. Greengrass looked Harry up and down with an appraising eye.

With that, Harry found himself standing before Counter Two. A wild-haired witch barely taller than the blue counter peered over at him. “May I help you?” she asked.

Covelli cut in, “I have a car reserved for -”

The tiny witch's eyes bugged. “Blimey, you're him! There's a car waiting for you! Up now, mustn't keep Mr. MacLeish waiting!” She clapped her hands sharply and a hulking creature scuttled into

view. “Grok, take their luggage to the third floor – third floor!” The creature sidled along and swept up their luggage into its extremely large hands.

Harry said in a sharp whisper, “Bloody hell – that's a troll!”

The witch winced. “*Shhhhh!* Do you know how hard it is to find a good luggage troll? He's quite sensitive, you know?”

The troll – which was really quite small as trolls went – made a face that was arguably a pout, let forth what might have been a sigh, and said in a voice that could have been sad were it not so guttural, “You follow Grok.”

They followed the troll into what seemed to be an elevator, and found themselves exiting onto the third floor of the car-park a moment later. Several cars-for-hire and limousines waited there. A long lean man in a dark blue suit came forward with a sign in his hands that said “POTTER”. He took one look at Harry's forehead, said, “This way, sir... madam...” and led them to the largest limousine present.

The drive to Pevensey seemed to take a very long time. Harry couldn't tell if the limousine was magically enhanced or simply of the Muggle variety; it wasn't larger inside than it had appeared, but it did move very quickly. He tried for a time to make conversation with Covelli, but she only commented that Harry had handled himself well with Mr. and Mrs. Greengrass. She became visibly more tense as the drive went on. He tried to take a short kip, but couldn't find a comfortable spot.

Eventually they left the main motorway and followed a series of ever smaller roads until they could see a hill in the distance that overlooked the sea, capped by a very old and battered-looking manor. They were ushered through two sets of gates and directed for quite a long while through trees, across a grassy plain and then up a steep curve that deposited them on the far side of the manor. It was a much larger building than he had guessed at first sight: four ivy-draped floors arranged in two massive wings. The entry was surrounded by a series of enormous tents and pallets of blocks and tiles and whatnot were stacked seemingly everywhere. The drive in front of the main entry appeared freshly laid, but the macadam was liberally strewn with mud.

The door of the limousine opened and they were assaulted by the whirs and bangs and pounding of construction. Workers hustled in and out of the tents and supplies whizzed to and fro – some by forklift and some by magic. There were perfectly ordinary-looking men in coveralls, dark-robed wizards, goblins... Harry had no idea what to think.

An older man in coveralls with a tool-laden work belt greeted them with a wave. “I'm to take you inside,” he said.

“Er... quite a sight,” Harry said.

“Not the usual work site, eh?” the man said with a lopsided grin. They made their way through the small city of tents and through the massive front doors.

Harry couldn't help but gape at the entry hall. The manor certainly wasn't Hogwarts, but it made the Black tower seem as if it were a cottage. He had felt magic throughout the grounds, especially around the tents – it was a sort of tingling awareness – but there was no sense of it here. The portraits didn't move. There was no immediate sign of ghosts or any of the wonderful strangeness he associated with wizarding buildings. There was in fact something that brought Privet Drive to mind: a sound, the only sound to be heard save the rap-tapping of their shoes on the marble floor and a hint of dripping water. It gnawed at him.

“What is that sound?” he whispered forcefully.

Covelli stopped, which brought their escort to a halt as well, and craned her head. “Do you speak of the low-pitched sound?” she asked. “Is it something of a hum and a grinding all at once?”

Harry placed the sound just then and gave an involuntary shudder. “Yeah, that's the one,” he said. It was the sound of the cupboard beneath the stairs.

Their escort harrumphed, “It's the air handling... 's been a week or better and we still can't mend the rattle.”

“Right...” Harry said. He rolled his shoulders to loosen them. Covelli shot him a curious look. He wasn't about to say anything.

The escort aimed them toward a set of wide and ornate stairs at the far end of the hall. Covelli seemed to take note of the artwork here and there. Harry noticed that both the stairwell and the hall were wide and open; there were few pillars or statues or other places to hide from view. He wondered who had planned it that way: the Blacks or MacLeish.

“This is ostentatious, even by Keith's standard,” Covelli said. “He has brought most of his collection. I wonder who he wishes to impress?” She gestured toward a small painting perched amidst larger ones; Harry wouldn't have paid it any mind. “See how this one is unlit? It almost hides, does it not?” she said. “It is by far the most expensive work in this hall. This is the way that Keith thinks, you see; this is the way that he displays his things. The brightest light is cast on that which matters least. That which he values is kept in shadows. Keep this to the fore, Harry.”

“Mr. Royston's on his way. I'll be takin' my leave,” their escort said. He tipped his hardhat and trudged away.

The man who appeared at the top of the stairs was nearly as wide as he was tall, and wore a sport coat made up in the most garish colours that Harry had ever seen. He was tanned and the only hair on his head was a bushy grey moustache. He stopped dead in his tracks. “Merlin's ghost... they said it was you, Luci, but I wouldn't have believed it,” the man called out.

“Hello, Curly. It's been a long time, no?” Covelli said with a quaver in her voice. “Harry, this is Curly Royston, Keith's right hand. Curly, this is -”

Royston cut her off. “This is Harry Potter, of course,” he said, and he started down the stairs in a

slow and deliberate way. “Luci's overstating things, Mr. Potter. The Vox Corporation has 22 vice presidents, and I'm one of them.”

“Arthur Pendragon had many knights and Lancelot was merely one of them,” Covelli said.

Royston let out a great snort and returned, “...and I've better judgment than that poor sod! Better to be Galahad than Lancelot, what? Best to be Sir Bors, actually.” He reached them and took Covelli's hand. “Ah, just look at you! Ninety-times out of a hundred, it's shite to say someone hasn't changed in years. You, however... I'm jealous, you know?” He rubbed his head and gave a rueful smile.

“Please! You've not had hair in all the time I have known you,” Covelli tut-tutted.

Royston moved off and gave Harry a very firm handshake. “Keith's been looking forward to this. He'd been hoping to do it earlier, but you know how it is?” He turned and led them back up the stairs. “He's using one of the dining rooms as an office during the renovations. Mind the puddles – you should switch to trainers for the weekend, Luci.”

Covelli broke into her tinkling laugh. “My heels are charmed; as you say, 'no worries'?”

Royston and Covelli fell into an easy conversation. Harry thought they seemed familiar but not close, more like his status with Seamus and Dean than his friendship with Ron or even Neville. He quickly lost interest and took in his surroundings. It seemed as though there was a camera in every nook and at every corner. They turned and made their way down a long stone corridor with no windows. The ceiling was dripping in a few spots and there was no avoiding the water on the floor.

The only feature in the entire corridor was a single large door on the left side about halfway down. Harry felt a very strong tingling as he passed it. He let his hand trace along the stone wall as they continued on. The sensation was like static shock from metal on a cold winter's day. It faded away as they left that corridor and moved into a smaller one. The larger glass doors to either side were very modern-looking and seemed quite out of place. The doors to the left led to a north-facing balcony. He could see a dining room through the doors to the right. Large windows on the opposite wall overlooked the sea. Royston held up a hand and went inside.

A man stood at the windows, hands behind his back. He had thick steely-grey hair and strong features. He wore a Saville row suit and trainers. “Thirty-six million pounds and I have to listen to drip, drip, drip,” Harry heard him say.

“You don't care for clouds nor rain, Keith, and here you sit in a dreary old manor,” Royston said. “It's your money, though.”

“G'day, you old bastard,” Keith MacLeish snorted.

“Your guests have come,” said Royston.

MacLeish turned to face the doors. He went still for a moment, but then smiled, straightened his

suit jacket and made his way across the dining room. Harry quickly found his hand enveloped. MacLeish was quite tall; Harry had to raise his head to meet the man's eyes. Just as quickly, he was released.

“You're the last person I expected to see,” MacLeish said to Covelli.

“I should hope so,” Covelli said.

There was a long uncomfortable pause before MacLeish waved at chairs around the cluttered dining table. “Welcome to the manor, Mr. Potter,” he said. “You know, I thought I was getting a rare deal from your man Diggle, but I'm beginning to wonder if I wasn't had. It'll be a minor miracle if we're ready for the reception tomorrow. The family quarters are in good shape, though, so it's not a bad place to stay the night.”

A house-elf abruptly popped into the room. It was clad in an impeccable suit coat and trousers complete with pocket watch, and Harry goggled at it. “Master MacLeish, sir -” the house-elf began.

“G'day, Bluey,” MacLeish said, “and if you keep on with that 'Master' business, I'll ask you to call me Keith for a week.”

Bluey shuddered. “Yes, Mister MacLeish, sir,” the elf said. “Mr. Yoshi has sent the day's *Yomiuri Shimbun* , sir.”

MacLeish looked at his watch. “Is that so...?”

“Mr. Yoshi sent make-ready sheets, Mr. MacLeish, sir,” Bluey said, and he produced a stack of newsprint from thin air.

MacLeish strode back to the dining table. “Let me have at them,” he said.

Bluey looked to Royston and then saw Covelli. “Madam MacLeish! B-Bluey is... is Madam really here?”

“Good day to you, Bluey,” Covelli said, “and I am Dr. Covelli now – surely you recall that?”

“Madam will always be Madam MacLeish,” Bluey said with certainty.

Covelli began, “And this is -”

Bluey bowed low to Harry. “Bluey knows of Harry Potter, sir,” he said. “We know of Harry Potter, sir, house elves and goblins all. Bluey knows that the Manor comes from Harry Potter, sir... Bluey is not sure whether to thank Harry Potter, sir.” Royston chuckled at that.

“This is the first time I've even seen the place,” Harry said.

Bluey looked out the windows. “Bluey senses a storm coming – more rain and more clouds.”

“It's not the most cheerful place, what?” Royston said.

Bluey looked left and right nervously and said in what was more or less a stage whisper, “Bluey did not think we would move to Woop Woop.” MacLeish choked and Royston couldn't hold back laughter. Bluey tugged lightly on his ears and moaned, “Bluey was just saying...”

“Speak your mind, always speak your mind,” MacLeish coughed. The house-elf nodded furiously and popped away.

“So why did Nakamura send this early?” Royston asked.

MacLeish ran his finger down one of the pages. “He's making a point, and not for the first time. Summers and his crowd keep pushing the Nikkei in the weekly calls. Yoshi says it's time to get out. High operating costs, tight labor, trade restrictions, and a tight-arsed central bank... my gut says he's in the right. Thoughts?”

Royston shrugged. “Nakamura knows Japan. You know how I feel about Summers – he's useful as an ashtray on a motorbike. 'Sides, I'd take your gut in nine out of ten matches.”

MacLeish looked to Covelli. “What do you think, Lucia?”

“What do I think about Japan? I found it a lovely place to visit,” she said.

“I know you still read the papers,” MacLeish scolded.

“The confidence of the people is diminished – it shows between the lines,” said Covelli. “There is a bluster in the business pages and all the while the usual sources are quiet. These are ill omens.”

MacLeish nodded. “We start selling on Monday, then,” he said; “I'll call Yoshi myself.”

Royston made for the door. “I need to check on today's tally of fines from the Ministry,” he said.

MacLeish shook his head. “Do you suppose they'd bring their dogs home if we dropped a thousand galleons per day into Fudge's coffers?”

“You know my opinion: don't bother to bribe someone you can put out of office in a fortnight,” Royston said. “Splendid to see you, Luci... cheers, Mr. Potter.” Harry waited until Covelli chose to take a seat and then joined her opposite MacLeish.

The silence became uncomfortable, before Covelli motioned to MacLeish and said, “Begin your presentation when you wish, Keith.”

MacLeish ran a hand through his hair and laughed. “You've made an unexpected choice as an advisor, Mr. Potter. I've had several hours to think on it, and you still have me at a disadvantage. You see, if Luci weren't here, this is the spot when I would impress with everything I know about the Boy-Who-Lived... family betrayed by a friend, but not the one everyone suspected... no one left, not even a grandparent, so you were placed with your mother's sister, about whom the best

I've heard is that she's the worst sort of Muggle – not that I believe it, as I rather doubt your relations are axe-murdering pedophiles, but they certainly didn't care to raise a wizard. If I didn't know better, I'd suspect old man Dumbledore actually set out to make sure your childhood mirrored that of Tom Riddle – oh, yes, I know exactly who Lord Voldemort is. I imagine there would have been an outcry over the whole matter if the old man hadn't been so free with confounding charms, obli-viations and the like.

“Now I'll play the devil's advocate: Dumbledore didn't want you hounded, because you would have become an arrogant bastard otherwise – not that you haven't, because I suppose you might be one beneath it all, but it would have been a sure thing if the whole wizarding world had been within reach of you. So the old man gets you to Hogwarts, keeps you on ice every summer, and puts you through one test after the next in between, and somehow you come out kind, generous, self-effacing and otherwise worthy of hero status. All you have to do is win, and you'll be the perfect person to help Dumbledore keep the status quo in England.”

“Keith...” Covelli warned.

“Mr. Potter,” MacLeish went on, “tell me that you haven't been handed scraps of information here and there? Tell me that you know a tenth as much about the wizarding world as you should, or anything at all of the wizarding world outside of Britain. You're being set up - that much is clear. Either you will kill Lord Voldemort and die in the attempt, or you'll be victorious and become the face on Dumbledore's master plan for the future.”

“Dumbledore is many things, but he is not so callous as that,” Covelli objected.

“What do you mean, I kill Voldemort? Where did you get that idea?” Harry asked dangerously.

“Information is power, Mr. Potter, and it never ceases to amaze me that it can be bought so easily,” MacLeish said. “You were born as the seventh month died and you're quite clearly marked. I'm told there's more to it, but the rest has been elusive.”

Harry drew his wand but Covelli stilled him. “This is a dangerous game, Keith,” she said.

“Put that away, would you?” MacLeish said. “If you were to use it, you'd never make it out that door alive, and I've no wish to see you harmed. To the contrary, I have a very strong interest in seeing you do away with Riddle and his toadies – that doesn't stop with the ones with the snake on their arms, either. I'm not the only one playing dangerous games, by the way. What on Earth made you return to Hogwarts, Luci?”

“That is a professional matter and none of your concern,” Covelli said archly.

“I don't like threats. You'd better get on with this unless you want me to walk out of here,” Harry snapped.

“Fair enough, Mr. Potter,” said MacLeish. “I assume you've done some of your own homework, so you have some idea of where I stand. Europe is the last bastion of blood purity in the wizarding

world, and Britain is its crown jewel. My goal is simple: to end pureblood hegemony. I want a first-generation witch or wizard as the Hogwarts headmaster within forty years. I want a first-generation Minister in twenty years. There are two ways that can happen, as I see it. If you kill Riddle, then almost anything you desire will become reality. If you want to see change, it will happen. Absent that, should Riddle win, the rest of the world will eventually rise up and eliminate him. Anyone who supports him will be purged – ergo, the purebloods will eliminate themselves.”

“You want a puppet who does what you want, or a dictator who hates what you want and is so evil that everyone will oppose him,” Harry simplified.

“I think we want the same thing, or we wouldn't be having this conversation,” MacLeish insisted. “I know you're no fan of the Ministry, especially after the last year. Fudge is still in power for two reasons: because Dumbledore wants him there, and because I haven't decided to bother having him removed. Each time I meet the man, my resolve on that slips a bit more. Should I remove him? Would that demonstrate my intentions to you? Should I set bounty hunters after Riddle, perhaps?”

“Don't do that!” Harry said.

MacLeish's brow furrowed. “Why not?”

“You'll only get them killed,” said Harry.

MacLeish eased back in his chair, and said with a predatory smirk, “You seem sure of yourself... quite sure. I shan't need to purchase the rest of the prophecy – I have my answer.”

Harry's fists clenched and unclenched. “I don't care for you, not one bit,” he said.

“Yet you would still stop a wizard from beating a house-elf, wouldn't you? You'd still treat a goblin respectfully? You'd still ally yourself with an impoverished wizarding family of good will rather than a wealthy one of bad intent? If your child was a squib, you'd still raise that child as if it were your own? You don't care for me, but you wouldn't eliminate me as a result... you won't even shut me out before I have my say. Oh, we really do want the same thing,” MacLeish concluded.

“If you don't want me to like you, then what do you want?” Harry demanded.

“A full and fair hearing,” MacLeish returned. “I want you to hear my reasons for upsetting the apple cart, and I will take your full measure. If that comes out as I expect, then I intend to make a proposition – a business proposition, if you like. I would also appreciate it if you would meet my daughter, Nicola.”

“Is that why you brought Nicola here?” Covelli asked. “Is that why you have endangered her, why you have brought her to a place that could become a war zone at any moment?”

“You give Voldemort and his men too much credit,” MacLeish dismissed her. “They're terrorists, Luci – effective ones, but terrorists all the same.”

“If they are such a simple obstacle, then why did you not take action during the last conflict?”

Looking backward, this smacks of cowardice,” Covelli said angrily.

“He was so successful last time because the Ministry had done such a brilliant job of dividing the people, and because most of the natural opposition had been virtually run out of the country in the '50s and '60s, - and you know all of that perfectly well,” MacLeish fired back. “The Ministry was doing his job for him; all he and his Death Eaters had to do was pick off the dangerous opponents one by one. Dumbledore did a terrible job of prosecuting a resistance - the man needed a PR professional in the worst way, still does really. Who would I have helped? Where was the groundwork for making any sort of difference? Look at the last fifteen years, Luci: Voldemort went away and nothing happened. *Nothing* . This time, there's someone to rally around, and he's sitting here with us. Only Dumbledore can muck that up, and he'll manage it if given half a chance.” He looked to Harry. “If you could do one thing right now to trip up the Death Eaters, what would you do?”

“I'd round them up – arrest all of them,” Harry said.

“Arrest them for what?” MacLeish asked. “For wearing a Dark Mark? The ones not in prison already used the Imperius Curse as their excuse, and the Ministry bought into it. The ones on the run are being shielded by someone – either someone wealthy or someone inside the Ministry.”

“Cut off their money, then,” Harry offered.

“How?”

“Have it confiscated,” Harry said.

“How? Forfeiture laws? The Ministry will never pass them,” MacLeish laughed.

“The goblins, then,” offered Harry.

“Ah, the goblins,” MacLeish said. “You don't know them, obviously - they're too factionalized. Only one thing will bring them all together, and that's a rebellion... now there's an interesting possibility.”

Covelli's brows shot up. “Are you proposing to set off a goblin rebellion?”

MacLeish smiled. “If that's what it takes, why not? The British Ministry has earned a rebellion or two.”

“You... you can't just come into England like a... like a *typhoon* and expect everything to fall before you!” Covelli spluttered.

“Britain is ready to fall, Luci – a stiff wind will do the job – and it's going to fall hard, in one direction or the other. In the end, the good lads will win. That's precisely why you're here, Mr. Potter,” MacLeish said. “I've no intention of meeting with the baddies. Riddle and I were schoolmates; at one time, I thought we were friends. I didn't know what he was, not then. Luci, she knew exactly what he was. I wish I'd known you then, Luci... I really do.”

He stood and went to the windows; without looking at them, he went on, "There are more than two sides in play, however. Even now, there are dissident groups preparing to kill Voldemort's sympathisers... there are pro-Voldemort groups plotting to prop up the Ministry, and other pro-Voldemort groups plotting to take it down... there are mild-mannered wizards of good intention who would love nothing more than to kill for revenge... there are wizards who by any right should be pro-Voldemort that would love nothing more than to survive and be left alone. It's a very large, very complicated game of chess, and the pawns are already in play. Are you a pawn, Mr. Potter, or are you a knight? Or perhaps, are you the queen?"

MacLeish turned and faced them with a smile. "How are you faring with my little songbird, by the way?"

Harry leapt from his chair. "You... you set that up! You made it happen, didn't you?"

"I set the conditions, nothing more," MacLeish countered. "I gave the young lady her month of holiday, which I expected would take place very near to your tower house... arranged for her management to flush her out... used my new properties for her rehearsals and for photography and what-not... ensured that you would be able to communicate after the fact... just a few helpful conditions, Mr. Potter. You're the one who wandered into that restaurant, you're the one who found yourself attracted to someone whose story is a parallel of your own, and you discovered on your own that she's a squib with an interesting ability. It's hard to manage a human lie detector, I must say."

"Why?" Harry demanded.

"Why is it hard to manage a human lie detector? Well, that should be rather -"

"You know what I meant – WHY?" Harry said much more forcefully.

"To broaden your horizons," MacLeish answered. "Dumbledore has been far more manipulative than I. There are perfectly good families on the right side of this conflict – Bones and Abbott come to mind – but you've been thrown at one family from the start because that family was in Dumbledore's pocket. Why not the young Bones heir as a sister figure or a prospective spouse? I'll tell you why: because Amelia Bones is too far from the old man's reach. Perhaps the Abbott girl? Donald Abbott has been on the wrong side of Dumbledore in the Wizengamot too many times. I doubt Dumbledore planned on a first-generation witch becoming close to you and the Weasleys – Granger, isn't it? - but I'll wager that the girl looks up to him as a grandfather or something of the like. You've never had opportunity to meet anyone of interest who falls outside of Dumbledore's sphere of influence, let alone an ordinary person or a squib. The fact that Magruder's father was Sirius Black... I admit that's icing on the cake." Before Harry could cut in, he added, "You needed breathing space – not the sort that Dumbledore was willing to give, but genuine breathing space... time with someone who didn't see you as a saviour or a hero-in-the-making or something breakable. I made that happen, and I don't regret it."

"You put her in danger!" Harry growled, even as he was pleased inside that MacLeish hadn't sussed out Heather's actual parentage.

“Life's a chance,” MacLeish said. “She's in no more danger now than she was at the age of seven, forced out onto the streets of Edinburgh in the dead of winter.”

“You honestly believe that, don't you?” Harry said in disbelief.

“Not with one-hundred-percent certainty,” admitted MacLeish. “That's why the two of you haven't appeared together on the pages of the *Prophet* – or one of my ordinary papers, for that matter. If you're serious about her, of course, then that will change. You're both public figures, after all.”

“I'm not serious about her, then,” insisted Harry. “She's a friend – she could have been family!”

“That's true, I suppose, if things had played differently,” MacLeish said. “You'd have grown up together... hadn't considered that angle... What do you want of me? I could arrange for Obliviation, if you like: the girl, her mother, others in the know?”

Harry gave that serious consideration for a moment, but shook his head. “No... I want her away from here, as far away as you can manage,” he said.

MacLeish stroked his chin thoughtfully. “My people could arrange a tour of the Far East and America, I reckon... for how long?”

“As long as it takes,” Harry returned, “and I want Shona to go with her.”

“How do you expect me to manage that?” MacLeish asked.

“Buy the restaurant, offer her a job... whatever you have to do,” said Harry. MacLeish looked Harry in the eyes for a long time; Harry didn't flinch.

“Done,” MacLeish said.

Covelli broke in, “What do you truly want of Harry, Keith, other than to antagonise him?”

“As I said, I wanted to take his measure. I've taken it, and I like what I see,” MacLeish answered. “I must seem like a loose cannon to you, Mr. Potter -”

“This is because you are a loose cannon, Keith,” Covelli cut him off. “What has happened to you? You are reckless now, when you were not reckless before.”

“There's no time for caution – time is running out,” MacLeish snapped. “Everything is converging now, Luci – can't you see it? With a few decisive events, everything I seek can come to pass. Twenty years of work...”

Covelli raised an eyebrow. “You've not had an influence in England until just now, Keith. You avoided England, in fact; I could see the pincer strategy at work.”

“You've not been in England for a very long time, nor have you been active in wizarding affairs,” said MacLeish. “I have been involved here, Luci – very involved. When you return to Hogwarts,

see if you can't access the register of births. Look forward a few years. I think you'll be quite surprised.”

“The register of births...? I do not understand...” Covelli said.

“You've been getting squibs to marry,” Harry blurted out.

MacLeish gave a small smile. “Continue your thought, if you would?”

“You're interested in squibs,” Harry said.

“True,” admitted MacLeish.

“And you know a lot about families here – bloodlines and the like,” said Harry.

“I won't deny that,” MacLeish said.

“You're hoping for more Muggle-borns, aren't you?” Harry concluded.

MacLeish clapped politely. “You're rather quick, aren't you?” he said. “The pureblood families in power are breeding themselves into extinction. They're already vastly outnumbered by half-blooded and full-blooded wizards... but what would happen if there were a sudden infusion of first-generation wizards, all of them bringing a contemporary sense of the rest of the world?”

“Chaos,” Covelli said flatly.

MacLeish's smile grew. “Not chaos, per se – merely an irresistible force applied to an object too small to remain immovable. There will be a revolution in Britain, Luci, whether it's borne of a victorious hero or the defeat of a vile dictator or a goblin uprising or a wave of new wizards. Mr. Potter, it's best for all of Britain that it be borne of a victorious hero – peaceful change really is for the best. I can't tell you what to do; if you defeat Lord Voldemort, no one will be able to tell you what to do. What I *can* do is to give you something to ponder, other than Dumbledore's line.”

“Dumbledore is not an evil man,” said Covelli.

MacLeish shook his head in disbelief. “No, I don't think he's evil... but I can't believe you, of all people, are defending the man! He let Riddle live – you said that yourself. Where are your first-generation English friends, Luci – your Muggle-born friends? London? Edinburgh? No, they're in New York or San Francisco or Sydney.” he turned to Harry and added, “Twenty years from now, where will your Muggle-born friends be, Mr. Potter? The answer to that is in your hands, isn't it?”

Harry thought of Hermione – of what Mrs. Weasley had told the Grangers about marriage proposals and job prospects and her chances with the Ministry, of how he'd offered to spend whatever it took to change that for her. What of Dean, or Justin Finch-Fletchley, or the Creevey brothers? Even Dumbledore had said that Harry could have the power to change things for the better, once Voldemort was vanquished. Was Dumbledore really pointing Harry toward keeping the British wizarding world more or less the same? Why hadn't he directed Harry toward someone

like Susan Bones? Her aunt was head of the DMLE, so surely the Bones home was quite safe. His reason might have been as simple as seeking people from Harry's own house; it was more difficult to socialise across house lines, in truth. Were the Weasleys intended to run across Harry at the entry to Platform 9 ¾? How much was fate versus accident versus careful planning by the Headmaster? There was a lot MacLeish said that Harry didn't agree with, but some of it made too much sense to ignore.

"I still can't decide if you're a madman," Harry said; "I'll listen for now - I won't be your puppet, but I'll listen."

"Splendid!" MacLeish boomed.

"Will you listen to me, I wonder?" Covelli asked MacLeish.

MacLeish's face softened. "I always listen to you, Luci," he said.

"This reception you have planned, it is dangerous," Covelli said. "I ask you not to proceed... or at the very least, to send Nicola away from it."

"Nicola won't be a part of it, of course," MacLeish said; "it's well understood that she's ill. I've worked at that image, and you have as well."

"My concern is for the safety of all present," Covelli clarified.

"People from both sides will be attending and there'll be more security than you've ever seen in any one place. Voldemort won't be taking any free shots, not unless he wants to lose all of his financial backing," MacLeish assured her.

"If he can be rid of me, he might not worry about his supporters," said Harry.

"I've already eliminated the transition from here to Edinburgh," MacLeish said. "That's why the work around here is at such a pitch. If they can't finish in time, then we'll have it in tents on the grounds. Luci, we've had weeks to think this through. If you honestly want me to move Nicola, I'll do it, but you know how she takes a move..."

"I have no right to tell you what to do in her case," Covelli said.

"You're right, you haven't," MacLeish said immediately. "She still loves her mum, though, and I won't be the one to spoil that."

"Why, Keith – why do you so badly want Harry to see Nicola?" Covelli asked; her distress was palpable to Harry.

"So he'll understand," MacLeish said. "There's no time left for games, no time at all. I need to know he understands what I'm doing and why, and I need to know if he's the right man to back. Once he meets Nicola, I'll have my answer."

Covelli looked to Harry. She said gravely, “If you intend to do as Keith asks and be introduced to our daughter, then I must exact a promise from you – an oath, one that cannot be broken. If you will not do this, then I will do everything in my power to prevent you from ever meeting her.”

“Dr. Covelli... I don't understand what's going on here. You... you're not afraid I'll hurt her, are you? That's absurd,” Harry scoffed.

“No, that is not my fear. Only a handful of people know the truth of this matter,” Covelli said. “I assume that all of those people are oath-bound, Keith?”

“Under pain of their own magic,” MacLeish confirmed. “Mr. Potter, I had hoped to dispense with this in your case, as a measure of trust... Luci, are you certain...?”

“I wish to trust you, Harry, but I must insist,” said Covelli.

Harry couldn't resist his own curiosity, but was still suspicious. “What sort of oath?” he asked.

“I would have you swear never to speak of what you observe while meeting with Nicola or the truth of her circumstances except to myself or Keith, or with our permission, or with the permission of our estates,” Covelli returned.

“If there's to be an oath, it would be with my permission or the permission of my estate,” MacLeish corrected her. “Nicola is in my sole care.”

“Yes, of course,” Covelli said quietly.

“I can't see what the problem would be,” said Harry. “This is your business, really.”

“You may see some rather odd things,” MacLeish said. “There are certain... legalities to consider, as well.”

“You're not doing a smashing job of talking me into this,” Harry said nervously. “Is someone trying to hurt your daughter? Is that it?”

Covelli looked Harry straight in the eyes, let down her Occlumency shields and said, “She could be in mortal danger if the wrong persons knew the truth.”

“Can I help?” Harry asked her.

“I don't know,” she said. “I don't believe anyone can help, not now.”

“I'm not so sure that's true,” MacLeish countered.

“I swear it,” Harry decided. “I shan't tell a soul what I see, not unless you say so.”

“I'm satisfied,” MacLeish said. “Luci?” Covelli gave the slightest of nods, and MacLeish led them from the dining room and back in the direction of the entry hall. They stopped halfway down the

long stone corridor, before the door that had made Harry's hand tingle so strongly.

MacLeish withdrew an unassuming wand from within his suit coat and began a long incantation. A bluish glow encompassed the wand and the door for a moment, followed by a loud *click* . Behind the door was a second door, made of dark and roughened metal. Harry could feel the pulsing of what he knew to be a ward, one as strong as anything he had felt at Hogwarts. After a second incantation and a flick-and-swish, the metal door slid to one side.

Beyond the door was an enormous space, far too large to be contained inside the manor. It was like a wizarding tent gone mad. The ground – or floor, or whatever it might have been – was covered with ankle-length grass and actually rose and fell like natural terrain. There was a blue sky with light clouds overhead. To one side there was a structure, a bothy similar in size to his own. Beside the structure was the largest mushroom Harry had ever seen, surrounded by equally spaced and smaller mushrooms; the top was draped with a cloth and set with tea service for six. There were trees, and the largest had a swing hung from it. There was even a small pond.

A woman emerged from the bothy. Harry recognised her immediately: she was the mysterious woman from Cabaret Moliere, the one with the magical coat and the odd accent. She'd had the misfortune of snogging Snape in the wake of the connection with Heather, as he remembered it. She recognised Harry as quickly, and said, “We meet again, Mr. Potter.”

MacLeish stepped forward. “Harry Potter, Bret McCrary,” he said; “Obviously you remember Mr. Potter, Bret.”

“McCrary... oi, I tried to hire you as a tutor!” Harry said.

“I hope you didn't waste too many owls,” McCrary returned. “I'm employed, as you can see. I'd rather you didn't spread that around, by the way; technically, I'm not supposed to be in England.”

Harry nodded. “Dumbledore said that; he expected you might kill Snape. ”

“Severus Snape? Old Dumbledore told you that, did he?” McCrary laughed. “It's an ancient family conflict between McCrary and Prince. I don't care much about the whole business. If it'll make you feel better, Potter, I'll only behead the man if he gives me cause to do it.”

“Don't hold back on my account,” said Harry. McCrary cocked her head for a moment and then broke into laughter.

“Who'sit, Miss Bret?” someone called out from the bothy. “Is Daddy here?” The curtains on one of the windows opened for a moment and closed as quickly, and then the door flung open. A woman bounded toward them, past Harry and nearly tackled MacLeish.

“Daddy!” she shouted. The sky abruptly cleared of clouds and Harry thought he heard birds chirping.

“Hello, Nick-Nick!” MacLeish said brightly. “Look who's here to see you...”

The woman turned in a flash and looked beyond Harry. “M-Mummy?”

“Hello, moppet,” Covelli managed to say.

“Mummy's here! Mummy's here!” she exclaimed and rushed at Covelli, who hesitantly put out her arms. The woman – obviously she was Nicola MacLeish – clutched at Covelli and jumped up and down in excitement. She was taller than her mother and Harry thought that they might both topple over.

“Oh, oh, oh – Mummy, Mummy! I... I got pictures for you – you wanna see 'em, Mummy!” Nicola asked happily.

“Of course I do,” Covelli said without expression. Harry knew the look on her face: she was trying to use Occlumency in order to stay in control.

Nicola abruptly turned to MacLeish. “Daddy...? W-will you still like me if I did something bad?”

“I'll always love you, Nicola, you know that,” MacLeish said.

She lowered her head and squeezed her eyes tightly closed. “I... I... I broked-ed a wand. I didn't mean to – honest!”

“It was the one Weitzmann made for her,” McCrary said quietly to MacLeish.

Nicola didn't raise her head. “It got so hot, an'... an' my hand, it burned, so I... you still like me, Daddy?”

MacLeish walked over and pulled her into a one-armed hug. “It's all right, everything's all right,” he said.

“Itsinthepond,” Nicola blurted out.

MacLeish quirked his lips. “What's this?” he asked.

Nicola ducked her head, pointed quickly and said, “Pond.”

“Oh, Nick-Nick...” MacLeish laughed.

“It burned so I put it in water,” she said matter-of-factly.

“You did the right thing,” said MacLeish.

“An'... an' Miss Bret, she got me 'nother wand – look! Look!” Nicola said. She held up an ornate white-coloured wand that looked to be about a foot long.

MacLeish's brow furrowed. “That's... that's very nice of Miss Bret...” he said.

“An' she teached me to do things, too!” Nicola went on.

Harry was at a complete loss. Nicola MacLeish had to be about the same age as Tonks, he figured, but she was like a little girl inside a big body. Her hair was cut short and round and the fringe hung in strands down her forehead. Her eyes were large and showed everything she was thinking: wide with excitement, scrunched shut when scared. Her emotions projected so strongly that he had to join Covelli in Occlumency exercises, even though he had already reached the point where crowded Hogwarts corridors merely resulted in a faint cluttering of his mind. Nicola had Covelli's nose and cheeks and MacLeish's eyes, and her hair was a rusty reddish colour; Harry thought she might have been pretty if she didn't have a child's haircut and a child's expression on her face. That was when she noticed Harry watching her, and her eyebrows disappeared into her fringe.

“H... Har... Daddy, that's... Daddy! Oh, oh! It's Harry Potter!” she shouted, and then she clapped her hands together and her feet stomped up and down, and she sang over and over, “It's Harry Potter! It's Harry Potter!”

She stopped and ran up to him until her face was only about a foot from his. “Daddy says don't hug the boys so I have to shake your hand,” she said. Her expression turned into a parody of seriousness and she pumped his hand up and down.

“Erm... hi... Nicola,” Harry said.

Her face went blank for a moment as if she was trying to recall something, and then she lit up again. “I was playing Harry Potter... come see! Come see!” she bubbled, and pulled him by the hand hard enough to shift his feet. He shrugged and let her take him to the bothy.

Most of the interior was an enormous bedroom filled with dolls and stuffed animals and picture books. “Do you like my room?” she asked, even as she still tugged at his arm.

The walls were of rough-hewn light-coloured wood and the space was open and bright. He wasn't entirely certain whether to address her as a child or an adult. “It's a nice room,” he offered.

She took out the white wand and looked around the room for something. “Oh, there he is!” she said, and picked up a rather well-worn teddy bear. “This is Harry.”

“Er... pleased to meet you, Harry...?” Harry said.

Nicola grinned at him. “Harry needs a broom... Oh! Miss Bret said I hadda use a wand,” she said. He nearly ducked as she waved the wand in a random pattern. A miniature Firebolt appeared and hovered beside her.

“On you go!” she said to Harry the Bear, who clambered aboard the broom. With that, the raggedy bear began to circle the room.

“Harry has to be the Triwizard,” Nicola said very seriously.

“Does he really?” said Harry.

Nicola nodded. “Oh, yes – Harry always wins!” She waggled and weaved with the wand – Harry took two steps backward – and a disturbingly realistic three-foot-long dragon appeared at the centre of the room. “That's Dragon,” she said.

“Uh... hello, Dragon,” said Harry. Dragon greeted Harry with a burst of fire that littered the floor with sulphurous sparks. “It actually breathes fire! That's... that's quite a dragon you have there...”

“This is the part where Dragon chases Harry,” Nicola announced. Dragon engaged Harry the Bear in a dizzying aerial ballet that set three books afire and left the Firebolt singed and a quilt on her bed torn. Before Harry could extinguish the books, Nicola wiggled the white wand and the flames disappeared. Dragon crumpled into an exhausted heap beside the bed while Harry the Bear took a victory lap and then dismounted the Firebolt into Nicola's arms.

“Good show! See? Harry always wins!” Nicola said with delight. Dragon let out a super-heated snort of disgust and then appeared to go to sleep.

Harry wondered if the entire place might be a sort of Room of Requirement, but wasn't certain how to ask. He settled on asking, “Does this room make Dragon for you?”

Nicola shook her head wildly and said, “No, silly! Dragon comes when I want. Harry flies when I want.” She found a battered golden cup on the floor, handed it to Harry and told him, “You can give Harry the Cup now.”

The bear reached up to take the Cup and Harry decided to give a small bow. “Congratulations, Sir Bear,” he said.

“Say 'thank you', Harry,” Nicola scolded. Before Harry could speak, Harry the Bear set down the cup and bowed grandly.

“You're welcome,” said Harry, because he didn't know what else to do.

Nicola proceeded to show Harry every inch of her room. He was positive that she introduced him to a hundred stuffed animals, most of whom greeted him warmly. One of the picture books she showed him was about the Triwizard Tournament; he nearly pitched over in shock. It only depicted the first two tasks and it did so in a rather heroic way, but the source for her Harry and the Dragon game was clear enough. She did nearly all the talking and Harry was happy to observe because he was less likely to say or do something wrong. She was nearly as excitable as Dobby, he decided. As time went on, he noticed that she seemed to lean slightly to one side and that her face drooped just a bit on that same side, but it didn't keep her from smiling almost continuously. By the time MacLeish came and suggested that Nicola go to her mother, Harry was exhausted. He let himself be led out to the mushroom-table and the mushroom-chairs. McCrary joined them there.

Harry took a seat and immediately jumped to his feet. “Bloody hell – these are real!” he shouted.

“They're comfortable as well,” MacLeish said. “Sit. You're knackered.”

Harry asked MacLeish straight out, “Is this a Room of Requirement?”

“A what?” MacLeish returned. Harry explained the Room to MacLeish, who hadn't encountered it during his Hogwarts days and clearly wished that he had.

“Everything here is real,” McCrary said, and she admitted, “The first time she decided her room should be a castle for the day, it scared the hell out of me.”

Harry looked around the room in awe. “I don't understand... look, I don't want to be rude, but what happened to her?”

MacLeish's face went stony and when he spoke, his voice was flat and tight. “Nicola was oxygen-deprived at the end of Luci's pregnancy and severely so during the birth. She had a stroke shortly after she was born, as well. An ordinary child would likely have died within a few hours. Magical children are different, of course. It was several hours before she was responsive. The doctors were shocked by it all. We didn't know the extent of what happened until we took her to a healer. She wasn't growing as she should, you see...”

Harry cut in, “Er... if you'd rather not -”

“I have to tell it,” MacLeish said; “You need to hear this.” He took a long breath and his jaw tightened. “The healer informed us that Nicola's brain was damaged and that she would never develop properly. He proceeded to inform us that under the Enfeeblement Clause of the International Statute of Secrecy, we were required to give her up to the local Ministry. I asked what would become of her, and he said... he said that in Switzerland – that's where we were at the time – she would be placed in a locked ward. He warned us not to return to Australia or Britain, because they would... they would...”

McCrary patted MacLeish's forearm and said to Harry, “If she'd been born at St. Mungo's, they would have administered a lethal potion on the spot.”

“A lethal... they would have killed her?” Harry gasped.

“They're afraid of the unintentional magic,” McCrary explained. “A witch like Nicola doesn't necessarily grow out of it, right? In America, she would have been raised as a Muggle, hoping that it would go away eventually – like it does for an untrained Muggle-born.”

“Couldn't they obliviate her or something?” Harry asked. “What about something to suppress her magic?”

“What would you obliviate?” McCrary asked. “Magic wasn't a conscious thing for her -”

“She didn't understand that she was doing it until she was thirteen or fourteen -,” MacLeish said.

“And the idea of potions or artifacts that suppress magic is a myth, nothing more,” McCrary finished.

“If they existed, I would have found them,” said MacLeish. “Obviously, I had the healer obliviated to within an inch of his life. As far as the wizarding world is concerned, Nicola suffered a severe case of dragon pox as a young child and is too frail to appear in public. Dragon pox can leave children as squibs, and a lot of people assume that's what happened to her.” His face reddened and he added, “A pureblood who I won't name once asked me why I didn't 'cause her to go away', since a squib daughter wasn't good for anything other than a kidnapping target.”

“I don't... I don't know what to say,” Harry managed.

“Bret, I need to speak with Mr. Potter alone,” MacLeish said. McCrary nodded and walked away.

MacLeish pounded his fist on the mushroom-table, hard enough to scatter the tea service. His eyes were wild. “That's the world you live in, Harry! It's a world where innocent children are poisoned to death because they don't measure up. Here in England, they probably would have sought out your Muggle-born friends and poisoned *them* if they could have gotten away with it. It's all right for a Slytherin to raise his children in hopes that they get a fucking Dark Mark when they grow up, though... that's fine in people's eyes, as long as there are galleons to be had under the table. I've done what I can in the rest of the world. Australia's become a model for the integration of Muggle-borns and squibs. Europe's the toughest nut to crack, and I'll damn well crack it. When that's done, the Statute for Secrecy is next.”

“Someone told me that you want to bring us all out into the open,” Harry ventured.

“Not tomorrow or next year, but yes, that's my eventual goal,” MacLeish said.

Harry immediately objected, “The world's not ready for that – it would be a disaster!”

MacLeish smiled. “As I said, not tomorrow. The world's unprepared for it because no one's ever attempted to prepare it. If people can accept the idea of aliens, they can accept magic if given time and opportunity.” He turned and looked toward Nicola. “I want to take my daughter for a simple walk in a park; that's not too much to ask of the world. It's unlikely to happen in my lifetime, and I know that. I'm nearly seventy, Harry, and I have health issues. My father was sixty-six when he died and my mother's family were short-lived as wizards go. Someone else will have to look after Nicola ten years from now, and she may live another hundred. She'll be able to walk free someday if I have to spend every last cent, if I have to call in every favour I'm owed, and if I have to personally pressure every leader in the world - wizarding or ordinary.”

“You want my support, then,” Harry said.

“I wanted a fair hearing,” MacLeish corrected him, “and I've gotten it. Of course I'd like your support, but you have to survive Lord Voldemort and his men first. You'll need to tell me how I can help you in that. If I can't have your support, I hope you'll consider staying clear of the whole issue...”

Harry's eyes narrowed. “There's something else,” he said.

“A favour,” MacLeish said. “Would you be willing to look in on Nicola from time to time? She's wanted to meet you for quite a long time, you see? She's not always this happy, Harry. A simple visit from time to time... I'd appreciate it. It's not tit-for-tat, either; I'll take care of Magruder and her mother whether or not you agree.”

“Look at what I can do, Daddy!” Nicola called out. “Come quick! Come here, Harry Potter!” Harry eased himself off the mushroom-chair – he didn't want to brace against the mushroom-table to do it – and followed MacLeish toward the pond.

Nicola held out her white wand, pointed it at the bothy and said, “Akko Harry the Bear!”

McCrary said gently, “It's *Accio* , Nicola – *Accio* . Go on, give it another try.”

Nicola took an exaggerated breath, screwed up her face in concentration and shouted, “Accia Harry the Bear!”

“You're almost there,” McCrary said. “*Accio* .”

Nicola nodded furiously and mouthed the word over and over. “Acci... Acci... *Accio* Harry the Bear!” The bear flew out the door of the bothy and sailed into her arms.

McCrary smiled and told her, “Well done, Nicola – very well done.”

Nicola clutched the bear tightly and said brightly, “See, Daddy? I used-ed a wand!”

Covelli's eyes were wide. MacLeish said approvingly, “I see that, sweetheart.”

“Did you see, Harry Potter?” Nicola asked.

“I did see,” said Harry. “I'm glad you brought Harry instead of Dragon.”

“Dragon don't like water. 'Sides, Dragon went home,” Nicola said.

MacLeish said, “It's almost time for supper. We'll see you later?”

“Is Mummy coming back?” Nicola asked desperately.

Covelli nodded. “I'll see you again,” she said.

“Why aren't we having supper here?” Harry asked. “Are there other guests?”

MacLeish stopped cold for a moment. “No, not tonight... I can't think of any reason... shall we have supper with you tonight, Nick-Nick?”

Harry thought Nicola's face might split from her smile. “Oh, Daddy!”

McCrary said, “I'll arrange it,” and headed toward the warded door. Harry followed her closely.

“That's not a wand, is it?” he asked when they were a fair distance from Nicola and her parents.

“She's burned or blown up a hundred wands or more,” McCrary said. “It's just a pretty stick. I'm trying to make her think she's using a wand, understand?”

Harry did understand. “If she believes she needs it, you think her magic might settle down?”

McCrary shrugged. “I'm hoping the idea that magic uses spells and words might sink in. I had to try something to help her.”

“I thought you were a Defence teacher,” Harry said. “Why are you doing this?”

“A teacher? No, I wasn't a teacher. This was just another job – a good-paying one. I wasn't hired for this, but Keith ran short of staff and I took a rotation. I've never looked back,” McCrary returned. “She needs people who won't quit on her. Some of the minders she's had... I'll tell you this much: if anyone even considers hurting her, I'll kill them on the spot.” As she unsealed the door, she added, “That includes you, Potter.”

It was a simple supper, the sort Harry might have found in any ordinary home on a typical evening. Nicola looked as if Christmas had come early. Covelli was a blur of emotions thinly concealed. When the supper was finished and the talking died down, they bade Nicola goodbye – she tried to be brave about it but her distress nearly put Harry to his knees for a moment. Harry told Nicola that he would see her again and he swore that MacLeish's eyes twinkled, though under the circumstances it wasn't irritating. When they left and the doors were sealed, MacLeish had he and Covelli shown to the guest quarters.

Covelli waited in the corridor as their escort left. When he was gone, she said to Harry, “Now you have seen her. Keith explained the circumstances, yes?”

Harry nodded. “All of it,” he said.

“What are your thoughts on her?” Covelli asked.

“She's... sweet,” Harry decided. “I'll visit her again when I'm able.”

Covelli arched an eyebrow. “That is all?”

“Why did you and MacLeish split up?” Harry asked boldly. “Was it over her?”

“You have seen one side of the matter,” Covelli insisted. “I have seen her level a room when a toy was taken away. She would never set out to attack anyone or anything. Would you not say this of your friend Lupin as well? I believe her magic has become innate, Harry – it is possible that she could kill with a thought. Nicola is no safer than a werewolf at the full moon. Even Keith understands the danger; she has spent her life in the most pleasant prisons that could be purchased.”

“But you still love him, don't you? I could feel it. I don't understand...” Harry said.

“I was broadcasting my emotions? Ah, it is of no matter,” Covelli said; her voice shook. “If Keith told you of everything, then he told you of the healer in Switzerland. I felt that we should bring Nicola to England for the potion. Keith knew this, and there was no going back from it.”

Harry was dumbfounded. “You... you... but the potion...?”

Covelli said fervently, “Nicola lives in her own locked ward. She is without friends. When she is an old woman, she will still be a child – a terribly dangerous child. She can Apparate. Did Keith tell you this? This is why she lives behind six inches of cold iron, and why she is allowed neither globe nor maps. Her power continues to grow, just as it does in a young child. I have no idea if it will ever stop. She is innocent and without guile. What if someone of ill intent was able to secure her trust? There is a reason for the law, Harry – it did not come to pass in a vacuum, even if Keith believes it to be otherwise.”

Harry asked, “Do you still think that? If you had it to do over, would you still...?”

Covelli's eyes went wild and for a moment Harry thought she might slap him. Her hand came down and she closed her eyes; they were rimmed with tears.

“Yes,” she said. “Good night, Harry.”

Harry Potter and the Years of Rebellion

Rue Britannia

Chapter Thirty-eight

RUE BRITTANIA

September 21

After a terse and mercifully brief breakfast, Harry had little if anything to do. He wasn't especially interested in what the workmen were doing nor did he wish to stand in their way. He spent the balance of the day with his books and papers – writing a scroll for Croaker, drafting a strategy for Flitwick, going over the plans for the Defence Club, reading ahead for Detheridge and making notes for his sessions with Dumbledore. His schedule was far fuller than it had ever been, but it didn't seem a drudge to him. Hogwarts exerted a different sort of pressure now. He wasn't competing for marks anymore; his final examination would be scored based on survival. Oddly, he found this challenge more comfortable than his previous five years of study.

At four o'clock, he was interrupted by a knock at the door to his guest room. MacLeish's house elf, Bluey, stood at the door with an armload of long plastic bags. “Bluey is pleased to bring Mr. Potter garments for this evening,” he said.

“Come in, come in,” Harry said quickly. He had planned to wear his dark suit, but wasn't surprised that MacLeish would provide something for him. Bluey snapped his fingers; one of the bags vanished and the clothing within was hung in an armoire Harry hadn't noticed. The tuxedo reminded Harry of his dress robes for the Yule Ball during his fourth year. There was a small velvet case at the bottom of the armoire. Harry opened it to find two pins.

“Mr. MacLeish provides these pins for Mr. Potter,” Bluey explained. “These are the crests of Mr. Potter's noble houses.”

Harry looked over the tuxedo and grimaced at the bowtie. “I think I can tie one of these...” he said.

“Bluey ties them for Mr. MacLeish – best Mr. Potter keeps that to himself,” the house-elf said quietly. “Madam MacLeish ties the ties for Mr. MacLeish in days past.”

“You like her, don't you – Lucia, I mean?” Harry said.

Bluey said, “Yes, Mr. Potter. Madam MacLeish is good for Mr. MacLeish,” then added not quite

under his breath, “even if they fight like two kneazles in a trunk.”

“Oh, I like you,” Harry chuckled.

“Mr. Potter is too kind. Mr. MacLeish greets you and Madam in the entry hall at fifteen minutes to the hour,” Bluey said with a bow and then disappeared with the faintest of pops.

Harry gave five fruitless minutes of attention to his hair – which was especially uncooperative – before he turned to his bowtie. After a dozen attempts, he wished for a talking washroom mirror that had some idea of how to tie a proper knot. He was happy to be interrupted by a soft rapping at the door.

Covelli was wearing an off-white dress without sleeves and cut low enough in the front to favour a quite expensive-looking pendant. She looked Harry up and down, and stopped on the bowtie draped limply across his shoulder. “It is rather different than a Windsor knot, yes?” she said.

“I think the one with my dress robes must have been charmed,” Harry grumbled.

“Allow me,” Covelli said, and she proceeded to put the bowtie in perfect order in a single attempt.

“Er... thank you,” Harry said.

Covelli gestured to the corridor. “Keith's protocol staff will have a difficult evening, I fear,” she said. “It would be best if we made our way to the hall.”

They found MacLeish pacing at the foot of the large stairs. The hall was spotless. There were rows of hors d'ouvres to each side, stations to serve drinks, and a small army of people attending to details that were unfathomable to Harry. He figured that if MacLeish's intention was to impress, then this should manage the job nicely.

“There you are!” MacLeish exclaimed. “We sent out entire wardrobes – entire bloody wardrobes! How difficult can it be to dress oneself? At least women's dress robes come close to blending...”

“Oh, dear...” Covelli said.

“I've four people working the reception tent, and at this rate it'll be midnight before we get everyone past,” groaned MacLeish.

“Keith... it may be for the best to keep the gatherings separated,” Covelli said.

“I've already separated the social hours and the meals,” MacLeish admitted, “and only a few of us will be going between the two. There's no practical way to carve up the performance. I don't care if they can't talk with an ordinary without being tongue-tied; they just need to look the part. Could you...?”

Covelli sighed, “Very well; I shall see what you have wrought.” She left for the tent outside, and MacLeish led Harry to a room just off the corridor that joined the doorway and the entry hall

itself. There was a bar in one corner, from which a manservant was prepared to serve drinks.

“We’ll be pulling aside some of the guests – dignitaries and the like – so they can be introduced,” MacLeish explained. “You’ll enter just before I do. This is a chance for you to meet some of the wizarding elite, not just from Britain but from around the world. Let’s take advantage of it, shall we?”

The room filled and in short order, MacLeish was leading Harry around the hall from one wizard to the next. Harry was surprised at how many of the guests had come from abroad. Some were investors in MacLeish's magical ventures around the world and others were public officials of various stripes. After several introductions, MacLeish was drawn into a conversation about American wizarding radio that Harry could barely follow. He moved to slip away just as Dumbledore entered. If he hadn't already seen the Headmaster with his beard and hair shortened back in St. Ebb, Harry might have missed him entirely. It was the Headmaster's guest who took Harry by surprise.

“Ron?”

“Harry! Quite a crowd, isn't it?” Ron returned.

“You're looking dashing today, Harry,” Dumbledore said. “That applies to you as well, of course, Mr. Weasley.”

Ron, who was perfectly dressed, shrugged. “It's not maroon, there's no lace and I don't look like a goblin on parade,” he said.

“I'm glad you're here, mate, but... er...” Harry started.

“I thought it might be helpful if a familiar face or two were present,” said Dumbledore. “And thus Mr. Weasley is spending the evening completing a special assignment for the Headmaster. That in and of itself should be good for a common room story or two, I imagine?”

“Amazing...” Ron said. “Quidditch stars... that bloke over there's the sporting reader for the WWN, I think... is that Celestina Warbeck?”

“Where?” Dumbledore asked.

“There, with that... um... that’s a hat, isn’t it?” said Ron.

“That is Miss Warbeck indeed,” Dumbledore said, “and I can think of nothing suitable to say about that hat. Nonetheless, we shall be gentlemen on this occasion and keep our amusement to ourselves. If you will excuse me, I should see if Mr. MacLeish and his courtiers might benefit from my assistance.”

“This should be fun to watch,” Harry murmured.

“Is Dumbledore always like this?” Ron asked.

Harry kept his eyes on the Headmaster. “Like what?” he said absently.

Ron shrugged. “You know, like he's being today – funny, friendly, that sort of thing?”

“Sometimes,” Harry said.

Dumbledore appeared almost jovial as he approached MacLeish. MacLeish met Dumbledore with an equal smile and an engaging handshake. The surprise of the assembled witches and wizards was palpable.

Ron squinted at the other side of the room. “Neville?” he called out.

Neville raised a hand. “Harry! Ron...?”

Harry clapped Neville on the shoulder. “What are you doing here?” he asked.

“Same as you, I expect,” Neville said. “Gran insisted that I come – gave the Headmaster a right tussle over it. Susan Bones is here somewhere as well, and Serena Fawcett – she was a Ravenclaw, remember? – and a few others, as well...”

“Mr. Urquhart? Madam Urquhart? If you please...?” someone called. A younger student who Harry dimly recognised and a woman who looked to be his mother made their way to the door from the anteroom to the entry hall. They stood framed in the door as a polished voice announced, “*Mr. Quentin Urquhart, fourth year student in Slytherin House at Hogwarts School and Heir Presumptive to the House of Rackharrow, accompanied by his mother, Madam Ursula Urquhart.*” With that, they strolled into the hall.

Susan Bones emerged from the crowd. “I should have known you'd be here, Harry,” she said with a smile. “Father, this is Harry Potter.”

A man of similar height to his own with Susan's hair extended a hand. “Leonard Bones, Mr. Potter. My daughter speaks highly of you, as does my sister.”

“I like Madam Bones,” said Harry; “She’s honest.”

“This MacLeish certainly knows how to put on a spectacle, eh? I haven't seen anything on this scale since... well, since 1981. What do you think of all this?” Mr. Bones asked.

Harry said, “He wants to show his influence. He has interesting ideas.”

“Is that so? I'd like to hear about it some time,” said Mr. Bones. “At any rate, I couldn't miss a chance to escort my Susie to the biggest event of the year.”

“Dad!” Susan said as she flushed.

Ron and Mr. Bones made small talk about Quidditch and Susan nervously downed two drinks before their names were called. “*Mr. Leonard Bones, 6 th Lord of the Noble and Most Respected*

House of Bones, accompanied by his daughter, Miss Susan Bones, Heiress Presumptive to the Noble and Most Respected House of Bones and Inheritor of the House of Marchbanks. ”

Ron turned to Neville but was quickly distracted. “Will you look at that? Didn't expect to see *him* here...”

“Mr. Viktor Krum, Seeker for the Bulgarian National Team and newly signed by the Fitchburg Finches Quidditch Club, accompanied by Her Royal Highness Emilia, Master Enchantress, Duchess of Solversborg and daughter of Christian III, the Muggle King of Sweden. ”

“Bloody hell!” Ron said, loudly enough to attract attention; “And how did Fitchburg pick him up, anyway? I can’t believe Vrastra would let him go!”

“Krum doesn't aim low, does he?” Neville said. “I'm sure you'd agree, Harry, since you're aiming at Hermione these days.”

“Aren't you the cheeky one?” said Harry.

“I took a shot from the bar,” Neville whispered. “Don't tell Gran – she'd flay the skin off my back.”

“A shot? Do you mean firewhiskey?” Ron asked.

Neville snorted, “I’m not stupid; steam rushing from my ears might be a bit obvious, what?”

“Dunno... doesn’t sound so bad,” Ron said nervously.

Neville slung his arms around Ron and Harry. “Morgana's tits! Is that who I think it is?” he blurted out.

Ron gave a sad sigh. “I'd heard he was out of St. Mungo's. Hermione mentioned seeing him, didn't she?”

“Not to me, at least that I remember,” Harry said. “I can't believe that git's running free.”

“Mr. Gilderoy Lockhart, best-selling author of 'Joined Up Letters: Rediscovering the Real Me and How the Wizarding World Should Be”, and assistant director and chief spokeswizard for the Dark Forces Defence League.”

Ron turned to Neville. “Er... Morgana's tits...?”

“Just slipped out,” Neville winced. “Looks like it's my turn – I'd best stop hiding from Gran.”

“He really did have something from the bar, didn't he?” Ron said in disbelief as Neville drifted away.

“Mr. Neville Longbottom, sixth year student in Gryffindor House at Hogwarts School, Heir

Presumptive to the Noble House of Longbottom and the House of Croaker and Inheritor of the House of Castor, accompanied by Madam Augusta Longbottom, Matriarch of the Noble House of Longbottom and the current year's chair for the Daughters of the Goblin Wars."

And so it proceeded, one after the next, until few remained. One of those was a girl he knew that he'd seen around Hogwarts, who looked to be quite alone. Harry took a deep breath and made his way to her. "Hello," he said, "You're...?"

The dark-haired girl bore herself up and shook his hand. "Serena Fawcett; I know who you are, of course," she said, and then turned to Ron. "You're a Weasley, aren't you?"

"Ron Weasley," he said and put out his hand.

"Are you here on your own?" Harry asked.

Serena nodded. "I hate society functions," she said. "It's hard to fathom I tried to put my name in the Goblet of Fire, isn't it? I'd rather have faced a dragon than to have come here, but my aunt insisted."

"My brothers tried to enter; it didn't go so well for them," Ron said.

"Yes, we had matching white beards for a time. I should have known better, but I thought I had a charm that would do the trick," she said.

"It's just as well for you that it didn't work," Harry said flatly.

Serena paled and said, "Oh, sorry... it wasn't my intention..."

"It's nothing," Harry waved her off.

"You could walk with us if you like?" Harry said abruptly to Serena.

"It might be taken a bit odd were I to enter with two men in tow, wouldn't you think?" she returned.

Ron said, "Wouldn't have thought of that... look, why don't you go in with Harry? It really isn't a bother..."

Serena stopped him. "How would you like to create a stir, Weasley? We can be uncomfortable together, if you like?"

"Are you sure?" Ron asked. "I mean, I'm glad to do it but I wouldn't want you to think I'm... er..."

"It goes without saying that you're absurdly brave. If you've spent five years standing at Harry Potter's side and he hasn't turned you away, then it stands to reason that you're a loyal friend and certainly not a gold-digger," Serena said. "Why wouldn't I wish to be seen with you? Shall we?"

Ron pursed his lips, and then said with a shrug, “Why not? You really think there'll be a stir?”

“Oh, most definitely,” Serena said. Harry and Ron approached the staffer closest to the door, who appeared annoyed but scribbled changes on two cards.

“Miss Fawcett?” the staffer called.

“Are you ready for this?” Serena asked Ron uncertainly.

“Erm... sure?” Ron said, and she let out a nervous giggle.

“Miss Serena Fawcett, Heiress Presumptive to the Noble and Studious House of Fawcett... accompanied by Mr. Ronald Weasley, captain and Keeper of the Gryffindor House Quidditch Club, and known across the wizarding world for the mid-air rescue of his sister from the clutches of the notorious terrorist Peter Pettigrew.”

Ron caught Harry's eye and mouthed in a panic, “Studious?”

Harry had to turn away to keep from laughing. He did wonder what it really meant to be an Heiress or a Master or a Lord in wizarding terms; it was one more thing that no one had ever bothered to explain. His thoughts were disturbed by the shrill voice of Minister Fudge, who was in the midst of a tirade launched at Dumbledore. Covelli looked on in amusement. A woman Harry presumed to be Madam Fudge watched in discomfort.

“Now see here, Dumbledore, I'm the Minister for Magic! I shan't have a schoolmaster follow my introduction!” Fudge blustered.

“I am somewhat more than a schoolmaster; you must admit that much,” said Dumbledore.

“Dumbledore -” Fudge began

Dumbledore held up his hands. “Cornelius, if you had been listening previously, then you would have heard clearly that I have already conceded your argument. Surely you do not believe that the order of introductions is of any significance to me?”

Fudge stood there for a moment with a look on his face that somehow reminded Harry of Aunt Marge's dog, before he straightened his coat and said, “Well... well... that's settled then, isn't it?” Dumbledore whispered something to Covelli, who responded with tinkling laughter, and left Fudge in consternation. They took their places before the door.

“The Honourable Albus Dumbledore, Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards; Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot of Scotland and England; Headmaster of the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry; Grand Sorcerer; Master Alchemist; and honoured with the Order of Merlin, First Class, for his defeat of the Dark Lord Grindelwald... accompanied by Doctor Lucia Covelli, practitioner of Muggle healing arts; instructor of the History of Magic at Hogwarts School and apprenticed to the school in alchemy and historical research; and recipient of the Order of Merlin, Third Class .”

There were noticeable intakes of breath at the references to alchemy for some reason. Harry shook that off and half-listened to Fudge's interminably long introduction. The room was emptied now and he expected that he would be next.

MacLeish moved smoothly beside him. “Your friend Weasley went with the Fawcett girl, eh?” he said. “It's just you and me, then. After you?” Harry took his place hesitantly and the man with the polished voice looked over a card, then looked at Harry, and then returned his eyes to the card.

“Harry Potter - ”

The hall went abruptly quiet and hundreds of pairs of eyes turned to face the corridor. Harry forced a smile onto his face. The speaker licked his lips and began again.

“Harry Potter, 13 th Lord of the Noble and Courageous House of Potter; 21 st Lord of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black; Inheritor of the Houses of Wright, Molyngton, Piggott, Waldegrave, Bartelot, Grimsby, Milhollen, Bennet, Farthing, Stanwix, Boothby and Henshawe; and apprenticed in specialised studies to the Honourable Albus Dumbledore .”

Harry knew all of that from the Potter tapestry that he and Luna had examined, but it was startling to hear it aloud. He nearly caught his foot on the corner of a rug. The applause that erupted ranged from enthusiastic to perfunctory; all Harry knew for certain was that it was loud. As he looked into eyes filled with greed, laud, lust, disgust, and hope, it occurred to him that perhaps being introduced simply as The-Boy-Who-Lived wasn't so awful after all. He found himself shaking hands with people he'd never seen before, and then was quickly flanked by Dumbledore and Covelli in such a way that the message to the crowd was clear: stay clear of Harry Potter unless invited. The speaker lightly cleared his throat – just enough via the *Sonorus* charm that he captured everyone's attention – and then announced,

“Your host for the evening is Mr. Keith MacLeish, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of the Vox Corporation, a 1945 graduate of the Hogwarts School from Gryffindor House, and the new publisher of The Daily Prophet .”

MacLeish made his way into the hall without making any remarks. He shook hands with Minister Fudge and Dumbledore, before the speaker finished by saying, *“Please avail yourselves of refreshments. The evening meal will begin in forty minutes .”*

Dumbledore patted Harry's shoulder. “A spectacular event, is it not?” the Headmaster said; “I recommend that you take a moment for an Occlumency meditation. The machinations of others in several languages can be quite oppressive.”

“Is that why I'm looking for an exit?” Harry asked.

“Perhaps so,” said Dumbledore. “Take a moment to still yourself and shut out all the conflicting thoughts in the room.” He waited patiently whilst Harry closed his eyes and put himself through one of Covelli's calming exercises.

When he was finished, Dumbledore added, “This event calls to mind a gathering of the International Confederation: instructive but tedious. Tell me, Harry – what do you believe is happening around us?”

Harry saw Fudge stood to one corner, immersed in conversation with a coterie of witches and wizards. “MacLeish is making Fudge look like an idiot,” he said.

“And that should matter to whom?” Dumbledore asked.

“The people he's speaking with, I suppose?” Harry returned.

“Some of those are his sycophants, but others are less closely tied,” observed Dumbledore. “This is a rare opportunity to contrast Minister Fudge with his international counterparts. Mr. Robbins, the Australian minister, has already ingratiated himself with most assembled here, including those now with Minister Fudge. It doesn't do at all to pale against the colonials, I assure you. Even Mrs. Grolier, the consul from the American government, appears weightier than our Mr. Fudge this evening. What else do you see?”

“MacLeish wants to show he has power,” Harry said.

“Clearly, but to whom?” asked Dumbledore.

“Fudge...?”

“Certainly.”

“Fudge's supporters...?”

“Quite so.”

“The wizards from other countries...?”

“This is an opportunity to strengthen his influence, yes, although that does not come with risk.”

“To me, I suppose...”

“That is clear.”

“To the other students he invited?”

“He would seem to be cultivating your generation. I was not pleased by the prospect of allowing students leave during the term, but would have looked petulant by objecting,” Dumbledore said. “What if I were to tell you that a fair number of my school colleagues from around the world are in attendance?”

“Is that how he's putting on for you?” Harry wondered.

“In that he may be making a statement about the quality of your tuition, yes... yes, I do believe you are correct,” agreed the Headmaster. “Do you see how persons with sympathies leaning to both sides of the fight with Voldemort are present? He is making it plain that he is open to speaking with anyone. At the same time, he shows a bias toward international cooperation, freedom of commerce and freedom of enquiry. For most, these are difficult points with which to disagree, but they do seem to set Mr. MacLeish against Voldemort. Do you think this to be accurate?”

“I think he's on his own side, honestly,” Harry said.

Dumbledore smiled. “Perhaps this sort of thing is your cup of tea?” he said. “If I might have a few minutes of your time, there are a few of my colleagues and friends whom I should like you to meet.”

Now it was Dumbledore who led him through introductions. Instead of being introduced as MacLeish's business partner, he was now the Headmaster's apprentice. He was introduced to Mrs. Grolier, who identified herself as the wizarding attaché for the American embassy; and to Mr. Robbins, the Australian Minister. Harry shook hands with Amos Diggory, who was cordial but visibly uncomfortable. There was a quick exchange with Madam Bones; she reminded Harry that they needed to establish a regular meeting regarding his affairs. He also met a man introduced only as Mr. Whyte, who was apparently the head of the Department of Mysteries. Mr. Whyte seemed untroubled by the damage wrought in June, but eyed Harry rather like a walking laboratory experiment. Dumbledore took him past several of the wizarding nobles, some of whom he had already met.

The rest were the Headmaster's counterparts from around the world. Most of them ran together in Harry's mind, excepting John Bear. Bear was the principal of the Rogue River School for Shamans and Sorcerers. He said that the school was in Arcadia but then talked of the Rocky Mountains, which Harry understood to be in America. His manner was casual and his dark suit was of a cut Harry had never before seen. There was something about the way he spoke that captivated Harry, something powerful and unclouded. Bear mentioned that the next conclave of the International Confederation would be held in Arcadia and he invited Dumbledore to bring Harry for a visit. Dumbledore was unreadable on the matter but Harry hoped that it might happen.

MacLeish caught up with them. “Hello, Dumbledore,” he said. “Listen, I’ve someone at the other reception who Harry must meet.”

“Ahh, this is about Mr. Lowell?” Dumbledore asked.

“Edward’s a good man for Harry to know,” MacLeish said.

“Lowell... Edward Lowell... you want me to meet the PM?” Harry realised.

“Right in one, Harry,” MacLeish said jauntily.

Harry took a deep breath and nodded. MacLeish led him toward the doors and outside to one of the

massive tents; Dumbledore followed them. MacLeish gave a nod to two men standing at the entry to the tent; they gave way, and the three of them entered the crowded tent.

“I have met the man on one occasion, in the company of Minister Fudge,” said Dumbledore. “He seemed bright and rather decisive. Mr. MacLeish may offer an introduction, or I may do so. Which would you prefer?”

Harry searched the room for the Prime Minister, whose face he knew from the telly. Lowell was near the centre of the tent, shaking hands with a throng of people despite being surrounded by several black-suited men. Harry thought for a long moment, and then said, “I’ll manage it myself.”

“Harry... I am not sure that would be the wisest course...” Dumbledore said.

“His security is expecting me –” MacLeish began.

Harry shrugged. At that moment, a knot of guests drifted past; he took the opportunity and darted forward before either man could follow. He worked his way into the crowd around the Prime Minister, and was very surprised to see one of the men in black suits.

“Shacklebolt?”

The bald wizard nodded in recognition. “Hello, Potter,” he said; “Mr. MacLeish said you’d be dropping by. Mr. Prime Minister...?”

The Prime Minister gave a practiced smile and extended his hand automatically. “Good evening,” he said to Harry.

“Hello, sir... erm... I’m Harry Potter,” Harry offered.

Prime Minister Lowell crooked an eyebrow and turned to Shacklebolt. “This is Harry Potter?”

“He’s much more than he appears,” Shacklebolt returned.

“I see you shook off MacLeish,” Lowell noted.

“I can speak for myself,” said Harry.

“If half of what I’ve heard is true, I’ve no doubt. Walk with me,” the Prime Minister said. With a nod, four of the black-suited men took up places around them. Shacklebolt remained behind. Harry let himself be led out of another door from the tent and to a large limousine.

“Let’s sit for a while, Mr. Potter,” Lowell said. One of the guards moved to open a side door, and Harry followed Lowell inside.

Despite feeling at a remove from both the wizarding and Muggle worlds, Harry couldn't help but feel a thrill at meeting the PM. Edward Lowell was a popular and powerful figure. He was Britain's first true wartime PM since Churchill, and many older Englishmen compared him

favourably to his famous predecessor. If it weren't for the Scottish Problem, he would have faced only a semblance of opposition.

“It's a pleasure to meet you, sir... er, Your Honour...?” Harry began.

The PM laughed aloud. “Your Honour... oh, that's rich! 'Mr. Lowell' will do nicely,” he said.

Harry cleared his throat and then asked, “What can I do for you, Mr. Lowell?”

“I'm well informed of your world, Mr. Potter – better than any of my fellows in a century or more, I'll wager,” Lowell said.

“Do you have a squib in your family?” Harry wondered.

“A squib... that's one of your sort with very little magic, is that it? No, I've no squibs in my past – at least none of whom I'm aware,” Lowell said. “Your man Fudge gave me the customary briefing a month or so after I took office. A few weeks later, MacLeish revealed himself to me. I take what he says with fair suspicion, but he has made some useful contacts for me. He also discovered that a childhood friend of mine attended your school; she and I take tea now and again.”

“So you know about me...?” Harry ventured.

“Not only does my old friend have interesting tales to tell, but my office takes both of your magical papers,” Lowell returned. “I don't entirely know what to make of all of this, in truth. If there's one certainty, it's that there's no middle ground about you: either loved or reviled. I respect that in a man – it means you're not afraid to speak up.”

“I do my best,” Harry said nervously.

“I imagine that you do,” said Lowell. “My youngest is about your age – he's in his final year at Eton. John's biggest worries are his maths. You're apparently a national hero... heady stuff for a school boy, isn't it?”

“I don't let it go to my head, if that's what you're getting at, sir...?” Harry protested.

Lowell went on, “This Voldemort chap – your man Fudge spent a year denying his... well, his return from the dead, apparently. Now MacLeish's paper is printing self-defence instructions, that other paper is starting to make a bit of sense, and Fudge spent the best part of an hour last week dancing around my enquiries. What should I make of that?”

“If you do take the *Quibbler*, then you know what I had to say on the matter, Mr. Lowell,” said Harry.

Lowell looked at Harry in a penetrating fashion. “If I were to ask your Mugwump – that's his title, correct? – I wonder what he'd say on all of this?”

“You'd have to ask Dumbledore himself. I'm sure it would be well thought-out,” Harry said

quickly.

“Your people can mess about in a person's memories – is that right?” Lowell asked.

Harry stammered, “Er... did MacLeish bring that up... sir?”

“Is this something that's done routinely?” Lowell demanded.

Harry pulled at his collar. “I... er... you should probably be asking someone else...”

Lowell said, “Too many of the items in your papers would be noticed otherwise – dragons swooping above a beach filled with holidaymakers, for goodness' sake?”

Harry took a notable interest in his own shoes. “It's done to Muggles quite a lot, I think,” he admitted. “It's part of how the magical world remains hidden.”

“Three weeks ago, the Crown Office official authorised to know about you people suddenly lost all memory that magic exists,” Lowell continued. “Can you explain that?”

“What are they up to?” Harry blurted out.

“You think it's your Ministry people at work, do you?” Lowell asked sternly.

“It's either the Ministry or Voldemort's people. This fellow might have stumbled across something important...” Harry considered aloud.

Lowell said tersely, “The bridge collapse in Wales – it matches up with the report of some sort of creature on the rampage... The sleeping sickness spreading in the North Country – it's the work of those Demented creatures, isn't it?”

“Dementors, sir,” Harry corrected him.

“Your world is about to go to war -” Lowell began.

“It's already at war,” Harry cut in. “People might not think so, but it's already started.”

“MacLeish says this Voldemort of yours is a terrorist, but you're acknowledging this as a war. Your papers have begun to call you the Chosen One. They seem to think you're the one to end this mess. Do they have it right?” Lowell asked.

Harry thought a long while before he gave a single nod to the PM.

“Your world is at war, the outcome rests on a school boy, and meanwhile the leadership of this nation are expected to simply forget? I won't have the British people victimised by a foe that they can't even see! I won't have it!” Lowell snapped. “MacLeish is a newspaperman; he shades the truth without a thought. Fudge won't say whether the sky is blue. It sounds as if your Mugwump won't be of much help... Potter, are you or are you not a citizen of the United Kingdom?”

“Er... as far as I know, Mr. Lowell,” said Harry. “I have a passport...”

“Are you therefore one of Her Majesty's subjects?” Lowell demanded to know.

“I suppose that I am,” Harry said. “Erm... what do you want, exactly?”

“What I demand is to be kept informed by at least one of my countrymen,” Lowell answered.

Harry started, “I'm not sure that I can -”

The limousine door opened and Dumbledore cheerfully moved past the black-suited men, who showed no inclination whatever to stop him. He entered as though expected and seated himself next to Harry. “I see that you have acquainted yourself with young Harry, Mr. Prime Minister?” he said.

“What the devil...?” Lowell gasped.

“You will find that an accomplished wizard is able to go more or less wherever he wishes,” said Dumbledore. “However, you may be assured that I mean you no harm.”

Lowell squinted at him. “Unless I’m mistaken, you’re the Mugwump.”

Dumbledore bowed his head. “Albus Dumbledore, at your service,” he said.

“Now see here, I was speaking with Mr. Potter! I understood that he was considered an adult in your world, and allowed to keep his own counsel,” protested Lowell.

“Indeed he is,” Dumbledore said. “Doubtless you were hoping to round out your perspective on recent events in the wizarding world? It is what I would do in your place, especially when a young man of unimpeachable character and unique insight is made available... so much the better that he is inexperienced in the realities of politics, wouldn't you agree?”

Lowell's eyes narrowed. “What are you implying? I have every right to speak with British citizens as I please!”

“It is worth noting that not only is Mr. Potter an accomplished young man, but is also my apprentice,” Dumbledore said. He turned to Harry and asked, “Now that you have taken the Prime Minister's measure, do you feel that his brief from Minister Fudge has been adequate?”

“Are you asking if Fudge is telling Mr. Lowell what he needs to know?” Harry wondered.

“Yes,” Dumbledore said.

“Absolutely not, sir,” Harry said without hesitation. “I'd be furious with Fudge if I were Mr. Lowell, especially over this business with the Crown Office.”

Dumbledore frowned. “Pardon?”

The Prime Minister explained the likely obliviation and the Headmaster's frown deepened. "Oh, Cornelius... what are you doing...?" he said softly.

"Surely Fudge serves at Her Majesty's pleasure just as the rest of us," Lowell said; "I'm of a mind to arrange for his sacking."

Dumbledore stroked his beard for a time before he said in a most cautious way, "Minister Fudge is... that is to say his position is rather antiquarian in nature, Mr. Prime Minister. In the very strictest sense, Queen Margaret lacks the authority to dismiss the Minister for Magic. Minister Fudge was within his rights as we understand them to order the obliviation of this fellow at the Crown Office – the modification of his memory, in other words. In fact, he could order Her Majesty's obliviation, were her knowledge of the wizarding world deemed to have come from a source outside the Royal Family itself. We would never permit that to occur, of course."

Lowell opened and closed his mouth silently several times, before he exclaimed, "You must be joking!"

"Alas, no," said Dumbledore. "Although the Parliaments of Scotland and England approved the Acts of Union of 1707, the Wizengamot – our legislative and judicial assembly – did not. We had already formally separated from Muggle authority by that time, and had strenuously opposed the Union of Crowns by King James. As you can imagine, we were not enthralled by King James; he was rather interested in the persecution of supposed witches and wizards. Although we commonly refer to the British Ministry for Magic, it is, in fact, the Ministry for Magic of Scotland and England. We are obligated by law and charter to advise as necessary the highest Muggle civil authority in Scotland and England – that would be you, Mr. Prime Minister. We have as a matter of courtesy briefed the Crown Office since the early nineteenth century. However, we have never officially recognised an invested monarch of the United Kingdom, nor have we recognised the invested monarch of Scotland and England since 1688."

Lowell closed his eyes. "1688... that's when James II was deposed..." His eyes snapped open, and he asked, "Are you saying that you magical sorts are *Jacobites*?"

"If you are asking whether the wizarding world accepted the ascension of Mary II and William of Orange, the answer is no, we did not," Dumbledore returned. "As for Jacobites, I do know that at least two wizarding clans covertly supported Bonnie Prince Charlie."

Lowell laughed nervously. "So Her Majesty can't sack Fudge because you people consider the House of Stuart to be the lawful Royal House," he said. "Who is the King or Queen of England, then?"

Dumbledore replied, "The rightful King of Scotland and England is at present the Duke of Bavaria, I believe... although the Princess of Liechtenstein may now be the Queen, if the Duke has passed on. I confess that I have not kept abreast of these matters for many years."

Lowell rubbed at his forehead in agitation. "Obviously, we won't be having the Duke of Bavaria do anything whatsoever on behalf of the Crown. The people at the heart of the Scottish Problem are

glorified Jacobites; they'd probably agree with you that he's the King.”

“Quite so,” Dumbledore agreed. “I am afraid that the unseating of Mr. Fudge remains a matter entirely in our hands. If this were to be undertaken today, I must warn you that we would face a very real and rather dangerous vacuum. For example, I could take on the position in an interim capacity, but would then have to leave the Wizengamot – a body that currently houses a number of members sympathetic to Voldemort’s public agenda. If the Wizengamot were to elect a new Minister, even with my presence, it is possible that a candidate sympathetic to Voldemort could receive an interim appointment by plurality.”

“So you're saying that Fudge is the least of all evils... this just gets better, eh?” Lowell sighed.

“Let me lay out my present concerns, Mr. Prime Minister,” Dumbledore said. “First, you must receive necessary information. It would seem that Minister Fudge is not meeting this burden. Second, we must resume our courtesies to Her Majesty's Office. Third, we must assure that both you and Her Majesty are appropriately protected against Voldemort and his men.”

“You think we're directly in danger from him, do you?” Lowell asked. “That explains why Fudge placed Shackbolt – he’s a good man, by the way.”

“I was responsible for Mr. Shackbolt’s placement through the offices of the Wizengamot; Minister Fudge showed an unwillingness to take that step, and I disagreed,” Dumbledore returned. “Yes, Mr. Prime Minister, I do believe you may be in direct danger. Voldemort was born and raised in the Muggle world – in your world. He is well aware of your leadership role and the importance of the Queen. Voldemort could walk unimpeded into your residence this evening if he so chose. It would be foolish to understate the danger, and we have an obligation to protect you accordingly. Now then, as Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, I am empowered to provide you with a brief independent of the Minister. I should like to meet with you as soon as possible to address the concerns I have named.”

“I appreciate that, Mr. Dumbledore. This is an unexpected turn of events, given what I've been told about you,” Lowell admitted.

“Have you been speaking out of turn, Harry?” Dumbledore asked; his mischievous smirk gave him away.

“Neither Fudge nor MacLeish painted a flattering picture,” said Lowell.

“I imagine you are well accomplished at negotiating your responsibilities amidst a sea of manipulation, innuendo and even vendetta, Mr. Prime Minister? I fear it is a professional hazard for the both of us,” said Dumbledore.

“Indeed,” Lowell said.

“In any event, I place a good deal of faith in Harry's opinion on these matters; he is my apprentice, after all,” the Headmaster said. “I am disappointed by Minister Fudge's conduct. This will be

addressed.”

“I hope so, Mr. Dumbledore. Let me be perfectly clear on this point: if this war of yours escalates, we will take action,” Lowell said. “I’ll be moving to disseminate information about your world across a larger number of people within the government. You won’t be able to erase enough memories to hide away from us –”

“Please be cautious in this,” Dumbledore requested. “There are compelling reasons for the wizarding world to remain hidden.”

“That is your problem, and not mine,” Lowell said coldly. “We’ve already lost hundreds of British citizens to this madman, and I won’t allow it to continue. A fair number of people know about your world. There are students with ordinary parents, there are these squib folk, and there are people like MacLeish. All it would take is one: a single motivated person could lead us to your Ministry, your homes, your shopping districts, or the school you lead. I suspect you’ve heard of the SAS and the RAF...?” Harry went pale.

“I recall the Battle of Britain and the invasion of Normandy. I know of the firestorms in Germany, and of the great bombs used in Japan. You need not remind me of the horrors that can be visited by Muggle armaments,” Dumbledore said. “Please, let us not descend into threats –”

“I don’t threaten; I make decisions,” Lowell said. “I’m told that there are fewer than fifty thousand of you people in Britain. If the government of the United Kingdom is drawn fully into this war, then all of you will lose. Unless or until that happens, we will cooperate as may be appropriate. For the moment it seems that you are the only avenue, Mr. Dumbledore, but I don’t like your ministerial situation – not in the slightest.”

Dumbledore said, “I wish to see the end of Voldemort and the danger he poses to all of us. We are indeed your countrymen, Mr. Prime Minister, despite Minister Fudge’s view of Her Majesty’s right to rule.”

“I’ll be looking for deeds rather than words,” Lowell warned. “Now... how do I contact you? I imagine that odd portrait leads directly to Fudge and his staff?”

Dumbledore stopped to contemplate his options. “An owl would be rather conspicuous, wouldn’t it...?” he mused.

“Erm... I could give you the number for my mobile...?” Harry suggested.

Lowell said absently, “I hope you mind the tolls better than my son; he ran up a hundred quid last month.”

“It’s hard to arrange service where I live,” Harry said. “I ended up with a pay-as-you-talk price plan; it does mount up, doesn’t it?”

“Indeed it does...” Lowell murmured as he withdrew a business card from within his suit coat. As

he put it in Harry's hand, he began to laugh. Harry's lip twitched and he couldn't help but join in. Even Dumbledore was caught up in the absurdity of the moment, as a young wizard and the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom finished the exchange of mobile numbers.

Dumbledore said nothing to Harry after they left the company of the Prime Minister; he merely patted Harry on the back. As they returned to the wizarding reception, MacLeish tried in every way imaginable to find out what Lowell had said to Harry, without actually asking. The attempt wore on Harry, and he spent the last few minutes before the meal was served in the company of Ron, Neville, Susan Bones and Serena Fawcett.

The table at the front of the hall was round and had eighteen places set. It was a few steps from a sleek podium; MacLeish took the place closest to the podium. Harry was ushered to the seat at MacLeish's right. Dumbledore was directed to the seat at MacLeish's immediate left, but he smoothly moved Covelli into his place and instead took the chair to her left.

Harry was surprised when Madam Longbottom took the seat to his right; Neville sat next to her. "Good evening, Mr. Potter," she said. "How are you enjoying the dance thus far?"

"Er... dance?" Harry said.

"All events such as these are a dance," she said with unexpected lightness. "I must say that it is best to simply enjoy oneself and hold to the pleasantries. It wouldn't do to dance too closely with the pretty ones, however... that would be unseemly and quite premature. One must always remember the rules of proper courting. Ah, I see Miss Warbeck is approaching... good evening, Celestina! What a grand hat you've chosen for the occasion."

Celestina Warbeck, the well-known wizarding songstress, drew near in such exaggerated fashion that Harry struggled to keep from laughing. "Augusta *darling*, it's wonderful to see you gracing the head table. Isn't Keith a dear?"

"He appears to be a nice young man," Madam Longbottom said.

"Celestina... of course... it has been far too long," came a voice from behind Harry, with an undertone of pompous cheer that was all too familiar.

"Gilderoy! How smashing to see you! And your new book – it's so deep, so deliciously provocative!" Warbeck fawned.

"You've read it, have you?" Lockhart said.

"Of course not, *darling* – I pay people to do that sort of thing... but if Reichard says your book is deep and provocative, then surely it is!" said Warbeck.

Lockhart turned to Harry. "Ahh, Harry Potter! I see you've taken my advice to heart, and then trumped it! To completely turn your relationship with the press by purchasing a part of it... such a cunning use of resources, I must say."

“I see they’ve let you out. Good on you,” Harry said flatly.

“I gather you’ve not read my book, either?” Lockhart returned. “Let me take the opportunity to thank you personally, young Harry: you saved my life that day in the chamber, literally and figuratively. I shan’t forget it.”

Harry was caught flat-footed. “I... uh... er... how much of your memory have you gotten back?”

“Oh, I remember everything,” Lockhart said smoothly. “It’s astonishing how clear my thoughts have become, really. I’m a new man now. I do hope you have the chance to peruse my book, Harry; I’m most curious as to your reaction.” Before Harry could say anything, he added, “I assure you, it’s nothing like my other books. My days of claiming credit for the feats of others are over. I prefer to find my own greatness.”

“Is that so...?” Harry managed. Lockhart did look like a changed man: his flamboyant robes were exchanged for a subdued tuxedo, he was still well-coiffed but less grandly so, and his smile fell within normal human proportions.

“Absolutely so,” Lockhart said. “I’ve mastered my fears and I know where my life shall lead from this point forward. It’s liberating to put aside fear, Harry; I highly recommend it.”

Harry was bewildered. “Erm... I’ll keep that in mind...?”

“Do read my book,” Lockhart said. “I provided a copy to your friend, Miss Granger. Has there ever been a more accomplished and able Muggle-born? Ahh, it appears young Mr. Weasley shall be joining us as well. I trust that Mr. MacLeish has all the brooms under lock and key?” After a pause for a bit of polite laughter from the surrounding witches and wizards, he nodded to Harry. “A pleasure, Harry Potter... I do believe I shall speak with Mr. Weasley now.”

Conversation around a table that seated eighteen was cumbersome at best. Harry spent most of the meal talking with Niall Pucey, Adrian Pucey’s father. Mr. Pucey was a wizarding barrister who represented the Wizarding Law Society of Scotland and England, and Harry made certain to congratulate him on Adrian’s appointment as Head Boy. Seated next to Mr. Pucey was Orson Montague, who represented the Magical Merchants Association. Mr. Montague threw around business terms that sounded thoroughly Muggle to Harry despite Montague’s own admission that he was a Slytherin.

Lockhart made a point of smiling at Harry every so often, and once raised his glass to Harry for no obvious reason. He did the same to Ron once, who blanched at the sight. Harry made a mental note to ask Ron what Lockhart had said.

Eventually the pudding course was collected and conversations ebbed. MacLeish was introduced once again, and he made his way to the podium. Without prelude or notes, he began, “Thank you for joining me this evening, all of you. As the new publisher of the *Daily Prophet*, I take seriously the responsibility that comes with serving as this community’s principal source for news and information. In these challenging times, it is more important than ever for the people to have a

fair source for information, and a balanced presentation of the day's events. You have doubtless noticed changes in our format and substance, and there will be more changes to come.” Murmurs arose from several places around the hall.

“Expect that we will look upon our institutions and civic life with a critical eye,” he went on. “Expect that we will entertain and even shock from time to time, but that we will always inform. The *Daily Prophet* shall not be the voice for a favoured few; it shall no longer be a repository for folderol, and it shall not be an instrument of propaganda.” Minister Fudge turned a Vernonesque shade of puce at that.

MacLeish shook his head and said, “I hear the same rumours as the rest of you. Ignore anyone who says that the *Prophet* is now a tool for Americans or Australians to invade British culture or to overrun British merchants. Ignore anyone who suggests that the *Prophet* is moving offshore, or that it shall be replaced by the *Quill* or the *Shaman*, or other such rot. I took my schooling in Britain. It should now be abundantly clear that I reside in Britain. Ladies and gentlemen, the *Daily Prophet* is and shall remain Britain's newspaper.”

With that, the wizards and witches assembled broke into applause that continued to build until many of those assembled rose to their feet. Dumbledore clapped heartily and gave an approving nod. The only person at the head table who failed to applaud was Fudge; it appeared as though he couldn't decide whether to be angry or pleased.

MacLeish raised his hands to quiet the crowd. When everyone was once again seated, he said, “My table mates this evening are an accomplished group. First of all, I am joined by the Minister for Magic of Scotland and England, the Honourable Cornelius Fudge, and his enchanting wife Wilhemina. Thank you for gracing us with your presence this evening, Mr. and Mrs. Fudge.”

MacLeish went on to introduce the rest of the people at the head table, and Harry began to puzzle out the man's reasoning. Covelli was present as Harry's advisor and guest, and her presence surely affected MacLeish as well. Obviously, the politicians were in attendance: Fudge, the Australian minister Robbins, and the American attaché Grolier. Harry placed Dumbledore in that category as well.

There were both social and business interests represented. Serena Fawcett and Neville were heirs to very old families – as was Harry, of course. Mrs. Longbottom was recognised by MacLeish in her capacity as the chair for the Daughters of the Goblin Wars. Mr. Montague and Mr. Pucey's presence was self-explanatory in Harry's mind. The Longbottoms were well known as supporters of Dumbledore. Harry knew that at least parts of the Montague family supported Voldemort. Harry had no idea where the Fawcetts or Puceys fit on that score.

The last group was made up of celebrities, Harry decided – and that apparently included Ron. There were also Celestina Warbeck, Lockhart, Gwenog Jones from the Holyhead Harpies, and Glenda Chittock from the Wizarding Wireless Network.

Harry marvelled at MacLeish's comfort with speaking before a crowd. The man knew how to raise and lower the spirits of listeners, when to speak boldly and when to fall nearly to a whisper, and

how to compliment someone he clearly couldn't stand in a way that was both respectful and infuriating to the recipient. There was no magic involved, Harry was sure of it – this was art.

Conversations resumed, and Harry attempted to avoid Celestina Warbeck, evade Glenda Chittock from the WWN, and to deflect some rather odd questions from Serena Fawcett. It was something of a relief when someone whispered in MacLeish's ear, and MacLeish announced that it was time to move outdoors for the entertainment.

The events of the weekend had been so encompassing that Harry had forgotten about Heather until they left the manor and began to descend a gentle hill that had been converted to an amphitheatre. The stage backed up to a cliff and the sea lay beyond. A broad aisle split the seating in two; wizards were led to the right and Muggles to the left. Harry was placed in the front row of the right side, in the seat closest to the aisle. Ron sat to Harry's right, Neville to Ron's right, and the others from the head table took up the rest of the row. MacLeish took the aisle seat on the left side, across from Harry.

Ron's eyes swept the stage. "How many are there in that band, do you think? Fifty? A hundred? This is going to be something, eh? Flitwick's teaching Gin to play like one of them, is that it?" he asked.

"I honestly don't know what he's teaching her," said Harry.

MacLeish rose from his seat and sauntered toward Harry. Curly Royston made his way onto the stage. Harry felt the telltale tingle of a ward being raised; the audience on the left side of the amphitheatre very clearly became distracted. MacLeish nodded at Royston, who raised his wand to his throat.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen," Royston said. "I'll wager that not a few of you have ever been in a crowd this large before, eh? There are two different groups of musical performers on this stage; sometimes they'll be playing together, and sometimes separately. The small group, behind me, is a popular band... an ordinary version of the Weird Sisters, if you know them. The much larger group, to my right and your left, is called an orchestra. There are more than five dozen musicians in the orchestra, playing more than a dozen different sorts of instruments. They will be a fair bit louder than you've heard from the Wireless, unless you're like my grandchildren and run the bloody thing loud enough to split your head in two. There will also be very bright cones of light, some bright flashes of light from time to time, and perhaps even a few things that might seem like spells being cast. All of this is perfectly ordinary and should be no cause for alarm. This entire property is very heavily warded and is also secured by a force of nearly one hundred; we do not expect any disruptions to occur. If an emergency of any sort does arise, either I or another of Mr. MacLeish's associates will come to the stage. Please enjoy the performance."

The orchestra began to tune up, and Harry nearly felt the collective gasp from behind him. It was a much bigger, bolder sound than Harry had expected – quite different than classical music heard through stereo speakers. Harry watched Kirley Duke fuss with several guitars, one after the next; he was recognized by more than a few witches and wizards despite his well-groomed appearance.

Ron leant toward Harry and said, “Sounds like they found Kirley out... wouldn’t have expected Susan Bones to squeal over him.”

Neville turned his head and said casually, “Don’t mind hearing Susie squeal, myself...”

Ron’s eyebrows shot toward his hairline. “Bloody hell, Nev! How much did you have?” he whispered forcefully.

Harry smirked at Neville. “Susie?”

“Er... just slipped out...?” Neville said sheepishly.

Mrs. Longbottom, at Neville’s right, glowered at Harry and Ron and snapped, “Decorum, please!” She cuffed Neville on the back of his head and added, “*You* know better, young man!” Harry and Ron both straightened in their seats. Neville rolled his eyes and made a conscious effort to slouch.

After a few minutes, the lights that ringed the seats dimmed and then went out entirely. A spotlight shone on the stage and Heather appeared. She was a vision, Harry thought, in a gossamer gown that was longer than her dress on the beach but nearly as close-fitting. He heard a few nasty remarks about Heather’s weight waft from the rows behind him; she was certainly fuller than the sort of women who turned up in adverts and what-not, but not in a way that should have provoked those witches. Hermione wasn’t particularly slender – probably about average, based on Harry’s observations – but that didn’t keep her from being beautiful in his eyes. Not even Lavender and Parvati, who were perfectly capable of serious cattiness, had ever commented on another girl’s weight – at least not within his hearing. He resisted the urge to loose a few minor curses.

When the orchestra began to play and Heather began to sing, the comments stopped. She was in fine form, Harry thought. When she hit an exceptionally high note against the backdrop of the orchestra, Celestina Warbeck’s monstrous hat fell to the floor; both Ron and Harry shook in their seats to keep from laughing. Harry took several opportunities to look at the first few rows of spectators. Most were transfixed; even Fudge uncrossed his arms after a time, and appeared at least noncommittal. Warbeck seemed flustered, particularly after the loss of her hat. Lockhart seemed noticeably interested in Heather, which was peculiar given that he was used to being fawned over rather than doing the fawning himself; beyond that, Harry found the man’s interest both unpleasant and more than a little untoward given his age.

The performance went on for an hour and a half without interruption. There were only two truly awkward moments between the Muggles and the wizards. The first came when Kirley Duke was featured as a soloist. A good share of the wizards hooted and cheered, whilst the Muggles looked on in confusion. The second came when Heather launched into a Scottish folk song. MacLeish winced and a good share of the Muggle crowd stiffened. A number of the wizards seemed to recognize the song, however; they clapped along and cheered at the finish.

Near the end, Heather sang the song she had sung in the club, the one during which they had fallen into each other’s minds. Harry resolutely closed his eyes from start to finish. When he opened them again, he saw that she had spotted him despite the lighting. Heather made her way to the

front of the stage. It surely looked to the balance of the crowd that she was singing to MacLeish, but Harry knew better. She sang notes that Harry knew were impossible to sing. Ron was absolutely gobsmacked and Neville's mouth hung open. Warbeck was riveted, her hat tightly wrapped in her hands.

As the performance moved toward its conclusion, Harry could feel the power of the orchestra. It brought to mind Dumbledore's comment in St. Ebb that music was a magic of its own. He was sure that Dumbledore had said that previously as well, but couldn't remember when or where. He glanced around and knew that he wasn't the only one to feel it; even the Muggles showed signs. By the end, Harry was lost in the music. The rising to their feet of the applauding crowd brought him back to attention.

Heather gave a friendly wave to the audience, but there was something off about her – a tired emptiness in her eyes, a stiffness to her posture. Harry was immediately concerned but it occurred to him that Harry Potter didn't know Heather Magruder, not as far as either the Muggle or wizarding worlds were concerned. As much as he wanted to slip behind the stage to find out what was the matter, he knew that he could not. Kirley Duke and the other musicians in Heather's band – her 'boys', Harry remembered – came forward, obviously excited about the performance. Duke pulled her into a warm hug and then gave her a kiss that Harry thought was a bit more than a friend would give. For a moment, he felt a pang of jealousy, but only for a moment. She took a stumbling step forward as they all bowed; Duke caught her by the elbow and frowned.

The Muggles began to move out of their seating. Curly Royston made his way toward Harry, but stopped short, cast several wide-area spells and then *Sonorus* at his throat. He said, "You are invited to meet the orchestra conductor, principal performers and our vocalist for the evening, Miss Heather Magruder. Please keep in mind that with the exception of Mr. Duke, these people are unfamiliar with the magical world. If you feel that you cannot pass through a receiving line without asking a suspicious question or making reference to the magical world in some fashion – and that would include Mr. Duke's tenure with the Weird Sisters – please do not join the queue. On behalf of the Vox Coporation and Mr. MacLeish, I do hope that you enjoyed the performance and our evening together, and I offer our best wishes for your good health and the vitality of your magic. Good evening."

Most of those who had been introduced at the banquet joined the queue, which led to the side of the stage and toward a good-sized tent placed to the rear. Harry found himself behind a score or more of witches and wizards, bunched together with Ron and Neville and just ahead of Madam Longbottom, Celestina Warbeck and Lockhart.

"The young lady was truly remarkable, was she not?" Lockhart said grandly.

"She did strike some notes that I would have thought beyond a Muggle," Warbeck sniffed.

"One might think you were jealous, dear friend," Madam Longbottom said.

Warbeck waved her hand dismissively. "She's a stripling of a girl – just wait until the years catch up with her range. If I were that age today, I could match her best without a thought."

“Would that be without a potion?” Lockhart said casually.

Warbeck took the posture of a Veela ready to throw fire. “I have *never* resorted to enhancement potions, Mr. Lockhart! That is why my repertoire has changed over the course of my career, unlike some who I will not name!”

One side of the tent had been drawn completely open. Heather and her band mates and several members of the orchestra stood in a row just inside, with MacLeish positioned at the end. She still wore her dress from the performance and Harry saw her shudder. He figured that she was cold, and would have cast a quiet warming charm if he hadn’t been surrounded by other wizards. As they drew closer, he saw that her eyes were glassy, and that the movement was more of a twitch than a shudder. She appeared nervous as she clasped hands and spoke to the wizarding well-wishers.

“Look at that dress - you can almost see through it!” Ron muttered.

“Really?” Neville said; he leant forward and squinted into the tent.

“Something’s not right,” Harry said quietly to Ron. Just then, the witch shaking Heather’s hand stiffened as if in fear and took an awkward step back. The queue continued to move, but Heather began to receive consistently queer looks.

“She looks potted,” said Neville. “Do you think she might have taken a shot or two herself?”

“I don’t know...” Harry said as he continued to watch.

There were five wizards and three witches between Harry and Dumbledore, so Harry couldn’t quite make out what was exchanged when the Headmaster reached Heather. Covelli moved to Heather quickly, and Dumbledore moved down the line directly to MacLeish. Harry wanted to bolt the queue but kept himself in check. Despite the confusion, the queue continued to press forward.

Heather reached toward him. “Harry! It’s too much... it’s too much!” she blurted out.

“It’s too... what’s too much? I don’t understand,” Harry said.

Kirley Duke pushed past the orchestra conductor. “Heather? What’s this about? Do you need some air?” he asked.

“I don’t know... it’s just too much...” she managed.

“Miss Magruder is obviously confused, Mr. Potter,” said Covelli quickly. “She seems to know things that she shouldn’t know. Albus is fetching Keith. Mr. Duke, I’ll ask you to leave her some room, please?”

Ron moved uncertainly to Harry’s side. Neville took a deep breath and ploughed forward. He took up Heather’s hand. “Neville Longbottom,” he said; “You were magnificent, Miss.”

Heather’s eyes fluttered. She rambled, “I... ohhh... your parents... I’m so sorry, Neville, truly I

am! But... no, you really are courageous, you just need to trust... never doubt who your friends are... Harry would be the best of friends if you'd simply ask it, and Ron as well... never doubt, Neville... never..."

Neville snatched back his hand. "Harry, you didn't...? How could she know...?"

Celestina Warbeck sauntered forward in her exaggerated way and presented her hand as though Heather was supposed to kiss it. Covelli moved to stand between them and said, "The young lady is exhausted. This reception is at an end."

"That's right," Kirley said firmly.

Warbeck's brow creased. "Is that so? I doubt that is your decision to make, young man." She fixed her gaze on Covelli. "And you are...?"

"I am a physician," Covelli said haughtily, "as well as a close friend of Mr. MacLeish. I must see to Miss Magruder's needs now – if you will excuse me?"

Heather looked deeply into Warbeck's eyes. "Sing what's in your heart," she said weakly. "Tell your fans to sod off – what do they know, anyway? You know you want to make a change, right? Sing what's in your heart. Always sing what's in your heart..."

Warbeck caught her hat as it fell to one side. "Er... thank you... I... you're a remarkable talent... uh... it was a privilege..." she managed.

Heather locked eyes with Lockhart. "Wha... you... how... YOU!" she spluttered.

"I'm sorry? I don't believe we've met?" Lockhart said jauntily.

"How could you... how could you do the things you've done?" Heather thundered. She pulled herself free from Covelli, shaking all the while. "HOW COULD YOU?"

Lockhart took a step forward. "Clearly something is troubling you, young lady. I merely wished to compliment you on your performance – Celestina is right to say that you are remarkable."

"HORRIBLE! HOW COULD YOU DO THOSE THINGS?" Heather railed at him. Covelli attempted to seize her by the hands but failed. Harry readied himself to head her off. He wondered if he might have to stun her.

"Heather, that's enough; let me take you back to the dressing rooms," Kirley insisted.

Lockhart sighed. "I've done all that I can to apologise for the things that I've done," he said. "Everything is out in public view now."

Heather's eyes bugged. "APOLOGISE? THAT COULD NEVER BE ENOUGH! WHAT YOU'VE DONE, IT'S UNFORGIVABLE!"

Kirley snapped, “Heather, that’s enough! Now, let’s go... Doctor, will you help me get her back to her room? I think she has some medicine...”

“What I’ve done to Harry... to Mr. Potter here?” Lockhart asked. “I’ve apologized personally to Harry, Miss... and how can you know of such things? It’s not possible for someone to...” His eye twitched and Harry realised that Lockhart was being drawn into Heather’s unconscious legilimency. Suddenly everything made sense, and he leapt forward so that his body came between their eyes.

“YOU MUSTN’T!” Heather shouted. “HARRY, YOU CAN’T FORGIVE HIM, NOT EVER! SOMEONE LIKE HIM WOULD NEVER REALLY APOLOGISE – HE’LL NEVER TELL THE TRUTH! HE CAN’T MEAN IT! DUMBLEDORE, WHERE ARE YOU? GET AWAY FROM HIM WHILE YOU CAN, HARRY! YOU STAY AWAY FROM HARRY – STAY AWAY!” She rushed forward and Harry wrapped his arms around her before she could claw at Lockhart.

“She... she’s mad!” Lockhart gasped.

“Someone conjure the poor girl a chair!” came a voice from one side. Three chairs appeared from thin air all at once.

“Oh, for Merlin’s sake – *what are you thinking ?*” Lockhart snapped. In a flash his wand was drawn, and everyone in the receiving line save for MacLeish and Kirley Duke went slack. Heather let out a keening wail for a brief moment and then slumped into Harry’s arms so heavily that Ron had to steady the both of them.

Kirley rushed to Heather, prised her from Harry’s grasp and began to lower her to the ground. “What in the Nine Hells have you done?” he hissed at Lockhart. Covelli went to her knees and immediately began to examine Heather.

“I fulfilled the requirements of the law,” Lockhart said firmly. “Conjuring chairs before a group of Muggles – of all the foolish things that could have been done!”

The crowd parted and Dumbledore and MacLeish passed through. “You performed an obliviation on someone in obvious physical distress without first finding the source of the distress, Gilderoy?” Dumbledore said. “I would not expect such incompetence from an upper form student, let alone someone who is a known expert in obliviation!”

“You could have killed her, fool!” Covelli snarled. “As it stands, she will live, but Merlin himself could not predict the extent to which she will recover!” She looked to MacLeish, and added, “She needs to be transported to St. Mungo’s immediately. Arrange for it.” MacLeish rushed from the tent.

“The demands of secrecy always come first, Professor Dumbledore,” said Lockhart. “These are all well-known and well-travelled Muggles. As such, they would have posed a special risk to us. I stand by my actions and the Wizengamot will do the same should you press the issue – you know that. Now then, it would be best if the DMLE were to complete the rest of the obliviations. I find

myself rather shaken by all of this business. As for the young lady, I assume that she will in fact recover. That would be in your best interests, Mr. MacLeish, so I'm sure you'll use all of your special privileges to make it so. If not... I'm afraid that is the tragic but unavoidable cost of the security of our world."

Kirley stood up and pushed back his sleeves. "Tragic cost? She's a squib, you son of a bitch! If you'd stopped for half a second to ask...!"

Lockhart hesitated, but only for a moment. "Is that so? A squib...? Well, I suppose that explains the extent of her talent, doesn't it? Still, did it seem as though she was capable of maintaining our secrets? I think not, and there is no exception for illnesses. It still merited –"

Kirley advanced on Lockhart, but before he could reach him, something inside Harry snapped. A gust of hot wind ripped through the tent. Lockhart flew backward and tore through the canvas, and Harry tore after him. He grabbed Lockhart by the lapels and threw him back into the tent; then he seized Lockhart's jacket again and repeatedly slammed him into the ground. "WHY DID YOU OBLIViate HER? HOW MANY LIVES HAVE YOU RUINED ALREADY? YOU HAD NO RIGHT! WAS IT YOUR JOB? ARE YOU AN AUROR? I DON'T THINK SO! YOU MIGHT HAVE... *you might have killed her* ... you might as well have... what gives you the right...?" Ron and Neville pulled him away, and Kirley proceeded to take up where Harry had left off. A half-dozen wizards had to tear him away. Lockhart rolled over and coughed uncontrollably; it was the only sound to be heard in the tent.

Amidst the hush, Dumbledore's quiet voice was nonetheless commanding. "This has been a most unfortunate affair," he said. "Something clearly happened to this young woman, and it was quite obviously magical in origin. Because of Mr. Lockhart's quick and unthinking action, not only will it be difficult to determine what has happened, but great harm may have been done. We do not obliviate when it may cause harm. The DMLE does not do so, the Aurors do not do so, and certainly a private citizen – however well intentioned – should never do so."

"That's why we don't mix with Muggles. MacLeish, this whole business was a mistake," someone called out sharply.

"That is a discussion for another time," Dumbledore said. "Mr. Lockhart has in turn suffered the results of Mr. Potter's quick and unthinking action. At this point, it would be for the best for all parties to let cooler heads prevail, and for the young lady will receive the healing that she requires."

Lockhart sat up and rubbed the back of his head. He reached for his wand and collected it from the ground. Four long scratches across the top of his head dripped blood; he was able to stop the bleeding with some effort, but the scratches were still raw and looked as if they would require a healer. "You want me to absolve your apprentice, do you?" he asked as he vanished bloodstains from his skin. "I may have acted hastily, but I didn't earn a beating. Who am I to do what I did, you ask? Who are you to attack me, Mr. Potter? Are you an Auror? Are you a member of the Wizengamot? Were you carrying out a sentence? Who are you?"

Ron squeezed more and more firmly on Harry's wrist until Harry forced himself to say, "I was wrong. I shouldn't have done that. I wasn't thinking."

"Perhaps the Hogwarts Board of Governors was right about you?" Lockhart said. "Perhaps it's not safe for you to be at Hogwarts, even under the watchful eye of the Headmaster?"

"I've been no trouble at Hogwarts," Harry said.

"No... no, you haven't... not to-date, at least," said Lockhart. "In any case, you would be at the mercy of the Dark Lord anywhere else. I will not be the instrument that sends you away, not for the crime of punishing me for my wrongs. Consider this a repayment of my debt to you, Harry Potter. There will be no hearings, no punishment for your actions this evening – at least not by my hand. Professor Dumbledore, you have staked your reputation on Mr. Potter; I suggest you modify your approach toward him." Lockhart struggled to his feet and extended his hand to Harry.

Though he would have rather shaken a nundu's paw, Harry took the hand that Ron pushed forward and let Lockhart take it. Lockhart gave a respectful nod, and released him. All was quiet for a moment, and then the crowd in the tent began to applaud.

"As for you, Duke," Lockhart said, "I owe you nothing. I'll see you before the Wizengamot for assault –"

MacLeish reappeared with three healers in tow. "You may have cost me ten million galleons through your negligence, Lockhart," he snapped. "As your publisher, that does not make me happy. Perhaps our next meeting will include a goblin adjudicator?"

Lockhart gave a hollow laugh. "That's how it's going to be, is it? You're rather transparent, MacLeish. For all the airs you've put on this evening, I think everyone can see exactly what you really are. Very well – Mr. Duke, be sure to thank your employer for his intervention. Mr. Potter, I leave you in the hands of your master."

The crowd hushed. Dumbledore hesitated for a moment, and then stood before Harry. "Mr. Potter, I expect better of you," he said. "You should expect better of yourself. With the exception of such activities as may be necessary to manage your affairs, you are confined to the Hogwarts grounds until the term break. Professors Detheridge and Flitwick will accompany you to Hogsmeade in the morning to collect your belongings and move them to the castle. Is that understood, apprentice?"

"Yes, Headmaster," Harry said in a small voice.

As the attentions of the crowd drifted away from Harry and toward Lockhart, Ron came forward to Dumbledore. He said in a near-whisper, "Headmaster, Heather's mum and dad... were they with the Muggles tonight?"

Dumbledore paused for a moment before he quietly returned, "I believe they were, indeed. Mr. Weasley, would you be so kind as to fetch them on my behalf? I would rather not alert Mr. MacLeish or others to the situation, so please act quietly but with haste. I will meet you at the

front of the stage in two minutes.”

MacLeish slowly walked toward Harry and Dumbledore. He stopped two paces away and folded his arms. “This didn’t turn out as I had expected,” he sighed. “I’d hoped for gains, not losses.”

“With high risks come great rewards... or great failures,” Dumbledore said gravely.

MacLeish rolled his eyes. “Thank you for the wisdom, but I didn’t order Chinese take-away, Dumbledore,” he snorted.

Dumbledore cocked his head. “Pardon...?”

“Never mind; I’m too tired to explain it,” said MacLeish. “Will you want Lucia to see Harry back to Hogwarts?”

“A Portkey will do, thank you,” Dumbledore said. “Harry dislikes them rather intensely, and a journey of several hundred miles should do him a world of good.” He handed Harry a copy of the evening’s program. “This leaves in sixty seconds.”

“Please... I want to know if Heather’s all right,” Harry told the Headmaster.

“Either Dr. Covelli or I will see that you are kept abreast. Good evening, Harry,” said Dumbledore.

Harry shuffled from foot to foot as he said to MacLeish, “Look... I’m sorry that I... er...”

“What, sent my party arse-over-teakettle? You certainly did that, didn’t you? Duke was no help, either,” MacLeish frowned. “You’re not responsible for whatever happened to Heather Magruder _”

“Yes, I am; it wouldn’t have happened if it weren’t for me!” hissed Harry.

“Yes, well, you’re not the centre of the world, Potter – hate to be the one to break the news, but that is my job, isn’t it?” MacLeish fired back. “Now, are you going to fuss like you need your nappies changed, or are you going to figure out who did this?” He glared over Harry’s shoulder at Lockhart. “I think we can safely name the prime suspect, eh?”

“I haven’t time to explain, but I really do think I’m responsible,” Harry said.

“Fine, then!” MacLeish snapped. “We’ll look into it anyway, if someone can spare the time. Oh... one last thing for now: the next time you decide to lay someone out, I suggest that you finish the job. If you don’t finish the job, then it’s likely he’ll return the favour eventually. Be seeing you.” A moment later, the tent and the stage and the rolling hills of the former Black estate swirled away.

& & & & & & &

Harry landed hard on the lawn about two hundred feet sort of the castle's main doors. Flitwick rushed out the doors to meet him. "Albus let us know you'd be on your way. Obviously something untoward has happened..."

"I'd rather not talk about it, Professor," Harry said. He brushed the grass from his tuxedo and took up a brisk walk to the doors.

"It's Filius, Harry – we're not amongst students," insisted Flitwick as he hurried to keep stride.

"Can we do this tomorrow, Professor?" Harry asked.

"Very untoward... it must have been very untoward, indeed," Flitwick said. "In any case, Albus said that you could occupy the spare bed in the sixth year Gryffindor dormitory this evening. Marcus and I will look at the vacant staff housing in the morning. Honestly, I think it's for the best that you reside in the castle, for a number of reasons."

"Yes, Professor," said Harry.

Flitwick stopped him at the doors. "If you continue in this fashion, I shall have to demand an explanation," the professor said in a tone as close to stern as he could muster.

"My apologies, Professor Flitwick; it's been a very long weekend and I wish to retire," Harry told him.

Flitwick crossed his arms and let forth a harrumph. "I see. We'll have ample time to speak of this in the morning, Harry. I trust you can find your own way to the Gryffindor entrance?"

"Good evening, Professor," Harry said, and he nearly ran across the entry hall to the stairs.

When he entered the common room, everything came to a stop. Katie Bell broke the silence. "Harry! Er... wasn't expecting to see you here... in a tuxedo... a grass-stained tuxedo... looking quite fit, though..."

Hermione, who was in her usual seat near the hearth, let her book fall into her lap. "Are you all right? Where's Ron – is he still with the Headmaster? What's happened?"

"It's wonderful to see you, as well," Harry snapped. "Ron's fine. I'm going to bed."

Dean Thomas did a double take. "To bed? Here?"

"Yes, Dean: here, in the dormitory, in the bed that all of you were keeping for me," said Harry.

"Sure, sure – we kept it for you. But why here, when you've your own place in Hogsmeade?" Dean asked.

"As of tomorrow, I won't have my own place anymore. I'm sure it'll be in all the papers," Harry returned. He stopped at the first step leading to the boys' dormitories and turned to face the

common room. Everyone gaped at him; no one even blinked.

Hermione was the first to move. Her lips pursed in the way that signalled questions or unwanted advice or admonishment, and Harry wouldn't have it. His mouth moved and words came out and he couldn't stop them. "Are there any more questions? Does anyone else need to know everything about my day, what I like to eat, who I fancy, or whether I'm an attention-seeking lunatic? Oh, wait; I'm the Chosen One this week, aren't I? That's Britain, isn't it? Build someone up for the pleasure of tearing them down: that's the ticket. Blather on about how bad things have become, and do nothing to fix them... or worse still, pretend they aren't bad at all and force everyone to agree with you. I know! You can support one side until they stumble, and then tell everyone you're for the other side – always have been, right?"

"You should have seen your embarrassing bloody Minister tonight, and your bloody nobles and the famous people and all the rest... Gilderoy Lockhart was there! He was sitting there just like nothing had ever happened, and then he had the nerve to Oblivate someone without knowing the first thing about the situation! He didn't know anything – just figured it was another random Muggle, so it was perfectly fine. Cast first and ask later! Oh, she was a squib? She already knew about us? No worries, then – she was just a squib. It'll be no great loss if her brains are scrambled, anyway."

"And we're supposed to go to war against Voldemort to save this mess? Oh, yes, of course we are! We're Brits, stiff upper lip and all. Rule Britannia, right? Rule Britannia... it should be *Rue* Britannia! Rue Britannia; Britannia, rue the day! Oi, *Rue effin' Britannia!*" He stopped, heaving for air.

Seamus Finnigan broke the silence. "Um... we just wanted to know if you were all right, mate," he said nervously.

Hermione stood. "Harry... the obliviation... was it your friend...?"

Harry's voice cracked as he said, "Not tonight, I... I can't talk about this tonight." He rushed up the first few stairs and out of sight.

Dennis Creevey's voice wafted up the stairs from behind him. "Is it going to be like last year again?"

"Let's just hope for the best," Harry heard Katie Bell say.

"Should we keep our fingers crossed?" someone asked.

Harry stopped halfway up the stairs and breathed raggedly. "Great... just smashing," he muttered under his breath. "I proved myself crazy twice in one night." It was an effort to reach the sixth year boys' room. He closed the door firmly behind him and tumbled onto his old bed without prelude. He didn't expect a good night's sleep, and his expectations were met.

Harry Potter and the Years of Rebellion

The Old-Old Crowd

Chapter Thirty-nine

THE OLD-OLD CROWD

September 22

“Not a bad day for a stroll,” Detheridge said.

“Yes, September is pleasant enough,” Flitwick agreed. “Don’t be fooled; winter will set in soon enough.”

“What do you think, Harry?” asked Detheridge.

“Dunno... I suppose it’s nice,” Harry said flatly.

Detheridge was quiet for a while before he said, “The countryside in these parts reminds me of where I grew up.”

“Wherever were you brought up, Marcus?” Flitwick asked. “I’ve often wondered about your accent. Of the Yanks I’ve known, I’ve never heard its like.”

Detheridge took on a wistful look. “Born and raised in Maine,” he said. “Haven’t been there in near to thirty years, but I suppose it took.”

“Maine... I’m not familiar with Maine. What sort of city is it?” Flitwick wondered.

“I don’t think it’s a city, Professor Flitwick,” Harry said.

“Maine’s a state,” Detheridge explained; “Think of... I don’t know... Surrey? Cornwall?”

Flitwick squinted at Harry. “I have reminded you repeatedly that my name is Filius,” he chided.

“Yes, sir,” said Harry.

Detheridge snapped, “That’s enough foolishness, Mr. Potter. This is on account of something you did, not Flitwick here. You put Albus in a terrible position – what did you expect would come

from it?”

Flitwick crooked an eyebrow. “You managed to coax the events from Harry, did you? I couldn’t get him to speak of it last night.”

“We haven’t spoken of anything,” Harry said. “The papers hadn’t come yet at breakfast, and the old man wasn’t at the head table, was he?”

“I’m Professor Flitwick to you, but the Headmaster is now the ‘old man’?” Flitwick tut-tutted.

“How would you know the first thing about last night?” Harry demanded of Detheridge.

Detheridge stopped walking for a moment, and then shrugged. “Word gets around quickly. I do live in Hogsmeade, after all,” he said.

Harry wasn’t satisfied, but he let it go. All he wanted to accomplish was to get in and out of Madam Rosmerta’s garret as quickly as possible. It was bad enough that he was to be confined to Hogwarts; he didn’t care to parade the fact before the entire village.

As soon as they entered the Three Broomsticks, Madam Rosmerta put aside her work and came straight away. “Oh, Harry!” she said. “Is this true? Are these real photographs?” She held up a copy of the morning’s *Daily Prophet*. The headline blared:

POTTER POPS LOCKHART:

Master Obliviator Spells Squib, Bloody Harry Makes Him Pay

There were two photos displayed beneath: the first showed Harry slamming Lockhart to the ground over and over again, and the second was of a contrite-looking Harry being dressed down by Dumbledore.

“Erm... photos don’t lie, I suppose...” Harry mumbled.

“Good heavens!” Flitwick squeaked at the sight.

“Good on you, then!” said Rosmerta. “That louse went a full year without settling his account. After they sent him to St. Mungo’s, I went to Gringotts for it. The trustee told me there was nothing left – not even his salary from Hogwarts! Can you imagine it – with all the books that man must have sold?”

“I must say that I’m not surprised,” Flitwick said. “Gilderoy was never a terribly responsible sort. For the life of me, I still don’t understand why Albus hired the man in the first place. I realize the Defence post has been hard to fill for many years... oh, no offence to you was intended, Marcus!”

“None taken; I knew the position was cursed when I accepted it,” Detheridge admitted.

Flitwick gasped, “Then why on Earth...?”

“I needed to be here,” said Detheridge. “Besides, the only one who’s actually died is the fellow Albus brought in five years back – Quirk, or something – and that wasn’t from the curse. The Crouch boy doesn’t really count, to my mind.”

Flitwick pondered that for a moment. “There have been deaths after the fact; you can’t say with certainty that they weren’t curse-related,” he returned.

“I can, actually,” Detheridge assured him.

Rosmerta waved the paper to seize their attention. “Harry, do you want me to speak with that old goat? I know a thing or two about Albus, and trust me when I say that I can change his mind on this. Confining you to Hogwarts – honestly!”

Harry shook his head. “It’s not worth the bother, but thank you. It means a lot to me that you’d, you know... stand up for me like that.”

“If you’re certain...? Well, you can count on me, and not just on account of your mum and dad. Ted Tonks paid on the garret for the entire year and I’ll be holding it for you. I’m still having words with that Headmaster of yours the next time he darkens my door... locking you away in the castle over this... all that alchemy must have addled his brain,” Rosmerta huffed. “I suppose you’re here for your things?”

“I’m afraid he is, Madam,” Flitwick said.

Rosmerta narrowed her eyes at Detheridge. “I see you’re part of this, Marcus?” she said dangerously.

Detheridge held up his hands and said, “I’m just a pack horse; Harry’s apprenticed to Dumbledore, not to me. If it were my choice, I’d just hex the boy to within an inch of his life and be done with it.”

“Thanks a lot for that,” Harry said sourly.

Flitwick drew a pocket watch from his robe. “I do have to lecture at ten o’clock, Harry. If we could...?”

“Yes, yes, off with you,” harrumphed Rosmerta. “I’ll have scones for you when you leave, Harry, and there are always more where those come from.” She muttered on as she went back to the bar. “Confined... not a brain in the man’s head sometimes... I should set Aberforth on him; that would fix the pillock... I hope that phoenix sings his beard... the poor boy’s been through enough...”

Harry couldn’t help but smile as he climbed the stairs. Even though it had only been three weeks, he had begun to feel something of an attachment to the garret. Madam Rosmerta had gone out of her way to make him feel at home, he thought. Sometimes Rosmerta reminded him of Mrs. Weasley; he wondered if she had children of her own. He reached the top of the stairs, then took a step backward and quickly drew his wand.

Detheridge moved beside him and silently mouthed, “What’s wrong?”

Harry mouthed back, “My wards have been down.”

Detheridge palmed his wand and cast two spells. “They’re up now,” he whispered.

Harry shook his head. “They aren’t mine,” he returned.

Detheridge looked to Flitwick, who drew his wand as well. He moved to one side of the door and Flitwick to the other. Flitwick motioned to Harry to stay back, and then counted off 1-2-3 with the fingers on his free hand. At three, the door vanished. Detheridge cast three quick spells – one of which Harry thought was a shield – and then dashed briefly into the open doorway. He laid down a series of stunners and then cleared off.

“Come in, gentlemen,” came Dumbledore’s voice from within. “I’ve been expecting you, but I had not expected to be met with a fusillade of stunning spells. Well done, Marcus... Filius... and well spotted, Harry.”

Harry’s grip on his wand tightened, even as he struggled to keep a grip on his anger. “You broke my wards! This is my flat, whether I’m going to be living in it or not! You can’t just walk through my door any time you like! There... there must be rules about that!”

“Indeed there would be, Harry, had I at all intended to enter your residence. You see, I used to live in this garret many years ago. This area was given over to general storage at the time, and my room was located where the washroom now lies. I apparated here with the intention of arriving in the unused space, and in doing so I’m afraid that I collapsed your wards. May I ask how you knew that the replacement wards were not your own?” asked Dumbledore.

“They didn’t feel like mine,” Harry snapped. “Now what are you doing here?”

“It was my intention to speak with you in a place free of unwanted ears – more properly, to speak with you and our two colleagues,” Dumbledore said. “I had no intention of invading your private space, nor will I do so once you have returned to the castle. Alas, this is yet another example of how things are not always what they seem, nor do they always turn out as intended.” He looked to the side of the room and put on a small smile. “I would ask that we sit but you’ve quite thoroughly destroyed the sofa, Harry. Nothing I have attempted has had any lasting effect.”

Flitwick walked to the pile of sofa bits and sifted through them. “Is this the work of the apothecary spells I gave to you?” he asked.

“I think I twiddled them,” Harry admitted. “I won’t be distracted, though. What do you want, Dumbledore? You could have just summoned me to your office.”

“As I said, I wished to speak with you in a place with no unwanted ears. Regrettably, that cannot always be said of my office,” said Dumbledore. He gave his wand a negligent flick and four squashy armchairs appeared in a circle. With another flick came a table in the centre of the circle,

topped by four cups and a steaming pot of tea. “Do you take sugar, Harry?” he asked.

“None for me, thank you,” Harry said sullenly.

“Two sugars please, Albus,” said Flitwick.

“If the world was ending, you Brits would stop for a spot of tea,” Detheridge sighed; “You know I can’t abide by it.” He waved his wand sharply and a paper cup of coffee appeared in his free hand.

“Get on with it, then,” huffed Harry.

“Why did I limit your movements, Harry? Can you explain my actions?” Dumbledore asked.

Harry goggled for a moment before he fired back, “Why should I have to explain your actions to you? That’s all wet, isn’t it?”

“Humour me, apprentice,” Dumbledore said.

“I put you in a terrible position,” Harry sullenly returned.

“I would rather hear an explanation in your own words,” Dumbledore chided him.

“It’s the truth, isn’t it? Lockhart obliviated Heather, I laid him out, and you punished me for it. You did what you had to do,” said Harry.

“That is a partial truth,” Dumbledore countered. “You left out an important step in the sequence of events.”

“I don’t follow,” Harry said.

“What happened immediately after you ‘laid out’ Gilderoy, as you put it?” asked Dumbledore.

“Well... Lockhart got up from the ground, and he...” Harry stopped and thought for a moment. “He turned the whole thing around, didn’t he? How’d he manage that?”

“That is an excellent question,” Dumbledore said. “I am not certain of the answer myself. Gilderoy has always been possessed of a smooth tongue, but I do not recall him responding smoothly to difficult situations.”

Harry thought of Lockhart’s recurring cowardice during his year as a professor, and nodded in agreement. “So you had to head him off, then?” he advanced.

“Well put,” said Dumbledore. “That was made all the more important by those present. Many of the dignitaries in attendance were within sight of the events, and they recognized what Gilderoy had done to Miss Magruder. However, a number of very important wizards missed the first events and only observed Mr. Lockhart’s abrupt journey through the side of the tent.”

“Through the side of the tent, you say?” Flitwick squeaked. “What in heaven’s name did you do, Harry?”

“I got angry,” Harry said.

Detheridge snorted, “That explains it.”

“Quite so,” said Dumbledore. “In any event... unlike your former professor, Harry, I am quite capable of responding to difficult situations. Improvisation is a skill of mine and one in which I’m rather proficient, if I might be so bold. What conditions did I place upon your movement?”

“You confined me to the grounds, which is why we’re here,” Harry grumbled.

“It was already your intention to relocate to the castle, was it not... or was young Mr. Weasley incorrect?” Dumbledore asked.

“He was trying to push me into it, yeah, and I think Hermione wanted me to agree to it,” admitted Harry.

“Hence my choice was inconsequential,” Dumbledore declared.

“You didn’t just make me move back to the castle, you *confined* me there,” argued Harry.

Dumbledore stroked his beard and asked, “Was that without exception?”

“There was something about tending to my estate, wasn’t there?” Harry acknowledged.

“I allowed that you could leave when it was necessary to manage the affairs of your estate,” clarified Dumbledore. “Obviously, you must also attend to your duties as my apprentice. Recount for me, if you would, the instances when you have left the Hogwarts grounds since the beginning of term?”

“Other than coming back and forth to Hogsmeade? Well... there was the Goblin Hunt...” Harry began.

“That fell within your responsibilities as an apprentice. Since I was uninvited, it was necessary for you to attend in my stead,” said Dumbledore.

“I went to talk with Arthur Weasley once... and I went to see Heather at my beach...” Harry added.

“Both journeys were to a property of your estate,” Dumbledore affirmed. “It is necessary to provide upkeep and oversight for one’s properties. It would be shameful to allow further decay or decline – an affront to your two families, surely.”

“What if I need to go to Diagon Alley?” Harry asked.

“You will certainly have to meet your trust manager from time to time – Fliptrask, is it?”
Dumbledore returned. “There is also the matter of the Weasley twins’ establishment, of which you are a part owner. Between the two, I would imagine that at least three journeys are justifiable between now and the holidays.”

“Hogsmeade?” Harry continued.

“You are expected to arrange regular meetings with your conservators, and we can’t expect Remus or Madam Bones to conduct your business here in the castle. That would set a grievous precedent, given the number of heirs presumptive in attendance,” Dumbledore said. “No, no, I would expect you to take those meetings here. I imagine Madam Rosmerta would be accommodating in that respect. You will also need to meet Mr. Tonks on occasion. I am certain that Professor Tonks would be happy to escort you.”

“Er... MacLeish’s castle?” Harry went on.

“Business of the estate, given that you share joint ownership in the *Daily Prophet*,” Dumbledore said easily.

“The Ministry?”

“If you are summoned there, you would surely have to comply.”

“Uh... Edinburgh?”

“Potions supplies, of course – I can’t be expected to arrange for those, and that seems suitable work for an apprentice.”

“What about Monte Carlo?” Detheridge smirked. “Surely you can’t keep him from there, or Ibiza... or how about New York? New York’s nice this time of year.”

“There are Confederation meetings in New York from time to time,” Dumbledore said with a casual air. “Monte Carlo... perhaps you intend to set Harry an assignment in the calculation of probabilities?” Flitwick broke into peals of laughter.

“You didn’t cover Ibiza, though,” said Detheridge.

Dumbledore’s lips quivered. “It has been known to be a nesting ground for the white phoenix,” he said, “although I suspect young Harry’s head might be turned by entirely different sorts of birds?”

Detheridge began to laugh. “How can you do that with a straight face?” he managed.

“Decades of practice, Marcus,” Dumbledore said serenely.

Harry shook his head. “So you gave me a meaningless punishment to make it look good?” he asked.

“It is not entirely meaningless. I imagine you will find ever increasing demands on your person simply by being present within the castle. I have a few activities in mind, as it happens,” Dumbledore said. He clapped his hands and continued, “Firstly, I believe you would benefit from occasional attendance at N.E.W.T. level lectures, if invited by the staff. Secondly, you will travel to Hogsmeade on the third Saturday of October in my company. Some former associates of mine will be visiting. You must meet them, Harry – it is imperative.”

“All right...” Harry said, with not a little apprehension.

“Well, that wasn’t at all cryptic, was it?” mocked Detheridge.

“The both of you will be in attendance,” Dumbledore said to Detheridge and Flitwick. “This will simply be a gathering of old friends, who are seeking to make new friends. No one is to make more of it than that. Do we understand one another?”

Detheridge said, “Clear as crystal.”

Flitwick nodded in agreement but said, “May I ask a question, Albus?”

“You may always ask,” Dumbledore allowed.

“Will any of my former apprentices be in attendance?” Flitwick asked.

“I am expecting Oscar Pomfrey to join us,” said Dumbledore.

Flitwick appeared lost in thought and the four men sat quietly for a few moments. “This may prove a dangerous game,” he said at last.

Dumbledore steepled his fingers and said, “It is a game that you are not required to play.”

Flitwick scowled, which was an expression Harry had never seen on the professor’s face. “Of course I’m required!” Flitwick said dangerously. “At any rate, this will not be a repeat of the last war; with Rinalda gone, there is nothing left to stay my hand. I will stand with you and whoever else is willing to stand with us. This is a matter of honour.”

“Of course,” said Dumbledore.

“Do not take me lightly; you know better than that,” Flitwick warned.

“It has been a long time – longer for you than for me,” Dumbledore offered.

Flitwick rose from his chair and stood defiantly. Despite his height, he suddenly seemed quite imposing. “Harry has been helping me to burn off the dross. You will find my skills more than adequate,” he said with steel in his voice.

Dumbledore raised his hands in defence. “I do not doubt it, my friend,” he said. “If, however, you require a practice duel to raise your spirits, then I will be happy to oblige you.”

The corners of Flitwick's mouth rose. "You wouldn't last beyond seven minutes against me," he said.

"Ah, then some of the dross remains! In your best days, it took you no more than four minutes to best me," Dumbledore laughed.

"That's true, but I'm not the only one of us who should be in his dotage," Flitwick returned.

"I'm still waiting for you to give me a proper duel," Detheridge said to Flitwick.

"We shan't duel, my good man," Flitwick said; "Duelling isn't your style; we would be more suited to a contest."

Detheridge broke out in a big smile. "Don't tease me, Flitwick," he said.

Dumbledore lit up. "Contests would be smashing!" he said. "In a few weeks, we may have an ample supply of participants. It would do the students a world of good to observe the efforts of experienced wizards, would it not?"

"By 'experienced', do you mean 'old', Albus?" Flitwick said merrily.

"One does suggest the other," said Dumbledore. He rose from his seat and then vanished it. "Would you care for some assistance with packing, Harry, or would you rather we await you downstairs?"

Harry considered it and then tried to keep a grin from forming. "Why don't you wait downstairs, Headmaster? I'm sure Madam Rosmerta would love to catch up," he said innocently.

"Oh, dear..." Flitwick said under his breath.

"A capital idea, Harry," Dumbledore said. "I wouldn't mind one of her delicious scones, as I missed breakfast this morning."

Detheridge was last out the door and onto the stairs. He turned back to Harry and said, "Lucia will invite you to sit in on History of Magic in a few days' time. Take her up on it."

"She told you that?" Harry asked.

"It was mentioned at some point," said Detheridge. "By the way... that was a nasty trick you just pulled on Albus."

Harry shrugged and Detheridge laughed. "No need to hurry along, mind you," Detheridge said, "but I'm heading down... yeah, she's winding up now. This should be fun to watch."

Harry took a deep breath and looked around the living room. It dawned on him that there was actually very little to pack. He summoned a few things to the bedroom and began to load his trunk. He bundled a Quidditch shirt around the photo of Hermione to protect it from the rest of the

contents. Then he sat on the end of the bed and just breathed. He waited a quarter of an hour – to allow the dust to settle downstairs – before he floated his trunk to the stairs, locked the door and re-cast his own wards.

October 1

The History of Magic classroom was utterly transformed from the days of Professor Binns. Harry had never thought about it before, but he wondered why the room had been shot through with cobwebs during Binns' days. It was possible, he supposed, that the house elves had been warned off; more likely, they hadn't been able to stay awake in the room any more than the students had.

Covelli had imbued the room with her style. It was light and airy; the walls were adorned with still paintings of various styles; and even the windows had changed shape. Hermione whispered something about 'Italianate', he thought; it slipped his mind as Covelli entered and the room quieted. Books were open, parchments were out, and ink bottles were uncorked. It was utterly unlike any History session that Harry had ever attended.

"We are joined today by my fellow apprentice, Mr. Potter. Thank you for coming; I hope you find this hour enlightening," said Covelli. "That applies to all of you, of course." She waved her hand absently and a large chalkboard appeared. She tapped a piece of chalk twice with her wand, and it rose into place against the slate.

She cleared her throat and began, "Today's topic is Goblin Rebellions." There were several audible hisses, at least two gagging sounds, and more than one inkpot was tipped. Harry's stomach roiled.

Covelli let out a great snort. "I cannot believe that you fell for such a silly joke on my part," she laughed. "If I choose to speak of goblins again in this class, it will be of today's goblins and not of the rebellions. In fact... I will now summarize for you the totality of lessons learned from the various goblin rebellions. Quills, please?"

She snapped her fingers, and the chalk moved to write as she spoke. "Number one: The goblins did not lose rebellions due to the magical superiority of wizards. Number two: The goblins did not lose rebellions due to the numerical superiority of wizards. Number three: The goblins lost rebellions due to disagreements and – on occasion – battles between their own factions. Number four: Each time the goblins lost a rebellion, they nonetheless won something of value from the wizarding community. *E così finisce.*" By the time Covelli looked up, not only had Hermione's hand flown into the air, but also the hands of Mandy Brocklehurst, Anthony Goldstein, Susan Bones, Ron, and even Malfoy.

"Meh... let us move on to something of more consequence," she said with a flippant air. With a clap of her hands, the slate was cleared; a rumble of murmuring began as people tried to finish their notes with the help of neighbours. Covelli paid the rumbling no mind as she strode toward the magical projector at the centre of the room.

Harry nudged Hermione. "Do her slides look different to you?" he whispered.

Hermione said without looking away from her parchment, "Slides...? Oh, do you mean her projections? They're not exactly slides, of course; some of them are actually extracts from –"

"I asked if they look different than the ones the other professors use." Harry said.

Hermione set down her quill and squinted toward Covelli. "They're a bit blockier, aren't they? I hadn't noticed."

Ron turned around and whispered, "Hers are in blue cases; everyone else's are clear. Her stuff seems a lot newer, as well; that's not saying much next to Binns, 'course..."

Hermione chewed at her lip. "Hadn't noticed that either..." she muttered.

This time, the chalk scratched against the board before Covelli began to speak. "Today's topic is 'Major European Wizarding Conflicts of the Last Two Hundred Years'... yes, Mr. Goyle?"

"Bloody hell, Goyle raised his hand?" Harry hissed. Hermione grasped Harry's hand to quiet him.

"Er, is that summat we're supposed to be talking of, Professor Doctor?" Goyle asked.

Covelli gave a thin smile. "'Doctor' will do nice, Mr. Goyle. What do you mean by your question? I do not understand."

"It's just... seems like old Ghostie only talked 'bout really old stuff," Goyle said slowly as two seventh-year Slytherins snickered. "Seems to me that's because old Ghostie knew what were on the NEWT exams, mum... and if the newer history weren't on the exams, then it seems to me the Ministry don't want it there."

The room grew very silent, so silent that Harry heard Ron's stomach gurgle. Covelli cleared her throat, a sound which echoed across the room. "That's 'Professor Ghostie', Mr. Goyle. Five points to Slytherin on your behalf, however, as that was an astute observation."

Malfoy raised his hand amidst the chuckling. When called upon, he demanded, "What would lead you to think that the Ministry for Magic is hiding our own history from us? That's a rather treasonous idea, isn't it, *Doctor*?"

"Only if I am making an unfounded accusation, *boy*," Covelli returned. "I am happy to continue that discussion outside the confines of this class. Now then..."

Ron carefully leant back toward Harry. "Malfoy's shilling for the Ministry?" he whispered.

As Covelli loaded the projector, Lavender Brown - who was seated beside Ron - turned and said, "He's probably living on a trust allowance, and that means the Ministry's probably in control of his Galleons."

Hermione muttered, "Good point," and then bit down on her quill so hard that a small piece came loose.

The projector came to life with a *pop* , and the head of a wizard appeared above Covelli's desk. It slowly spun in a circle. The wizard had long, aristocratic features and foppish hair. "This," said Covelli, "is the only known image of a wizard called Racine. It was crafted from a pensieve image taken from one of his victims who happened to survive. I assure you that this did not happen often."

"He doesn't look like much," Adrian Pucey said.

"Looks can deceive, Mr. Pucey, though at first glance I would not disagree," said Covelli. "Racine was responsible for the deaths of at least a thousand witches and wizards over a ten year period, and ten times that many non-magical people."

"Bloody hell," someone forcefully whispered.

"It was certainly bloody, and surely it was hell for some," Covelli agreed. "Racine was an alchemist - of that, history is certain. His true identity was never revealed. It is believed that he was pursuing a new form of alchemy, but that the results were rather ruthlessly suppressed upon his defeat. He was brought down in 1815 by this man -" She changed the projection to reveal the head of an unremarkable wizard somewhere in his middle years. "Nicolas Flamel," she finished.

Terry Boot raised his hand. "I had understood that Flamel was purely a scholar, Doctor," he said.

"One cannot live for hundreds of years without a rather... varied existence," Covelli countered. "A case in point, Mr. Boot: the Headmaster has been a scholar and educator for much of his life, yet he led the group who vanquished the Dark Lord Grindelwald."

Tony Goldstein's hand shot up. "Headmaster Dumbledore led a *group* against...? What group, Doctor? I've not seen any references to a group -"

Covelli waved him off. "We will come to that," she said with visible discomfort. "Shall I continue?" The entire class sat forward in their seats. Harry had to admit that Covelli was drawing him in, which was something he'd never expected from a history class.

"Master Flamel had a team of his own," Covelli continued. She changed the projection again. Racine's head moved far to the left and Flamel's to the right, where it was joined by four more. The first new head briefly glowed. "This was Takeda Yatsusana, one of Master Flamel's three apprentices at the time. Master Yatsusana was apprenticed to Flamel by his father, who was a leader in the Japanese magical community and the first Japanese representative to the ICW."

The second head then glowed. "This was Boris Karensky, the second of Master Flamel's apprentices in those days. Master Karensky was one of the greatest of Flamel's alchemical apprentices. Those of you in NEWT Potions will work from some of his postulates."

The third head took its place. The wizard was still a young man in the image that floated over Covelli's desk, but Harry had no doubt about his identity. "This is Alexandre de Maupassant, the third of Master Flamel's apprentices," Covelli said. "De Maupassant has been an alchemist,

duellist, gourmand, and a lover of women – absurdly so... and in my informed opinion, he is... eh... the ‘right pain in the arse’."

Hermione appeared scandalized but resigned – Harry figured she’d spent enough time around Covelli to expect such a remark – even as Ron attempted to stuff his fist into his own mouth to hold back the laughter. Harry discovered that Hannah Abbott snorted when she laughed, and that Terry Boot hiccupped. For his part, Malfoy was rubbing at his temples and forcibly looking downward so that no one would see him smile. Harry was half-tempted to launch a mild stinging hex so Malfoy would raise his head, but thought better of it.

When the class returned to a semblance of order, Covelli motioned to the floating images. “You may now ask your questions,” she declared.

Goyle raised his hand once again, and the class went deadly silent; Malfoy appeared thunderstruck. “You say that the Marquis is a right pain in th’ arse – beggin’ your pardon, mum – like the bloke’s still kicking,” he said; “Blimey, but he’d be an old bugger, eh?”

“Two more points to Slytherin, Mr. Goyle, but do know that Mr. de Maupassant’s title is spoken as ‘mar-KEY’, not ‘MAR-kwiz’,” Covelli said kindly. “I did indeed use the present tense. The Marquis remains alive to this day... despite his best efforts from time to time. He is rather like a woman when asked his true age...” This time the laughter started with Lavender Brown, and soon the room was filled with snorting and hiccupping and braying and coughing.

Harry saw that Goyle was tapping the fingers of one hand with the other, as though he was counting. Above the din, Goyle said quietly, “Right, had to be an old enough bloke to fight... was with Old Man Flamel ‘round 1800...”; then he nudged Pucey and whispered, “The bugger must be ‘round about two hundred and thirty.” With that, he tapped Pucey’s arm and half-raised his own before pulling it down quickly.

Harry leant close to Hermione’s ear and asked, “What’s going on with Goyle?”

“He worked out how old the Marquis is, didn’t he?” Hermione whispered.

“Looked like it to me. Is he giving it over to Pucey?” wondered Harry.

“Goyle’s been different this year,” Hermione allowed. “You haven’t seen it, of course, because you’ve not been around the classes. It almost seems as if he’s studying... perhaps he really is?” Pucey shook his head firmly at Goyle, who sighed and slid his hands beneath his bottom as though he wanted to keep them from rising. Hermione turned to Harry with her eyebrows raised; he gave a small shrug in return.

“Mr. Goyle, you have something else to add?” Covelli asked abruptly.

“Erm... no, mum... uh... Professor... er, Doctor... nothing to add,” Goyle said roughly.

“Our man Greg was just saying that the Marquis must be in the neighbourhood of two hundred and

thirty years old,” Pucey piped up. Goyle turned an unattractive shade of purple at that.

“You are not required to answer my questions unless I say it is so,” Covelli said to Goyle. “I admit that I am curious how you came to that number, however.”

Pucey slapped Goyle on the shoulder. “Out with it, Greg. You’re not a muppet, and Malfoy shan’t be treating you as one,” he said.

Malfoy threw his quill against his desk and it clattered into the next row, close to Pucey and Goyle and three seats behind Harry. “Enough, Pucey – I get it!” he snapped.

“Mr. Malfoy! Collect your quill immediately!” Covelli demanded.

As he passed, Malfoy hissed at Pucey, “Bloody upstart... your family was nothing when mine was already fully ascended... probably grubbing in the mud, weren’t they...?”

Pucey began to rise from his seat but Goyle caught him by the sleeve. “Draco aren’t worth it... got a big mouth and a little wand,” Goyle said in full voice.

“You will pay me the respect I’m due!” Malfoy shouted at Goyle.

“MR. MALFOY!” Covelli shouted in return. Pucey looked to Harry and mouthed ‘take points’. Harry’s brow beetled, and Pucey repeated the same phrase.

“Twenty points from Slytherin and detention with Mr. Filch, Mr. Malfoy,” Harry said calmly. “That’s a sight better than Dr. Covelli has in mind, I’ll wager, and a sight better than you deserve. I won’t make you apologize to Mr. Pucey because I doubt you’ll mean it.” He quickly turned to Covelli and added, “I apologise for stepping in, ma’am, but I’d really rather hear the rest of your lecture than listen to this twaddle.”

“Thank you, Mr. Potter, and I thank you for the bit of flattery as well,” Covelli said. “Mr. Goyle, I shall have to take two points for your comments regarding Mr. Malfoy, without consideration for their accuracy.” Her expression was even, almost empty. Harry recognized it for what it was: the blankness of intense Occlumency. He was sure she had been thinking of something more permanent than the removal of points, at least for a moment. She took a long breath and added, “Five points to your choice of house, Mr. Potter...?”

Harry thought for a moment, and then said, “Slytherin, please – on behalf of Mr. Goyle.” Ron turned to Harry, dumbstruck.

Covelli cracked a small smile. “I would have made a similar choice. Mr. Malfoy, you will collect your things and leave my presence – *now*. You will report to Mr. Filch this evening. It is fortunate for you that Slytherin is without a Head of House.” She crossed her arms and waited until Malfoy left the room with a loud slam of the heavy doors.

“Now then, Mr. Goyle, would you care to explain why you believe the Marquis de Maupassant is two hundred and thirty years old?” Covelli asked.

Goyle tugged at his collar as though it had suddenly gone tight. “Well... er... it’s like this... the bloke was with Old Man Flamel, see? You say they offed this Racine in eighteen hun’red an’ fifteen, and that Racine was offin’ wizards for ten years... that puts it to eighteen hun’red an’ five. He was out of his regular schooling, eh?” Pucey grinned at him.

“That would explain an estimate of two hundred and five years, roughly,” said Covelli. “Why did you add twenty-five years, Mr. Goyle?”

Goyle cleared his throat; it was a rough sound. “Flamel, he were an alchemist, and an apprentice would be twenty-seven at the least, mum.”

Covelli couldn’t keep the surprise off of her face. “Ten years beyond essential schooling was the apprenticing standard prior to ICW standardization, Mr. Goyle... well done. This takes us to... two hundred and fifteen. The additional fifteen years, if you please?”

“Marquis is a royal thing... wit’ a name like his, I figure on the Muggle Frenchies. There ain’t no French royals, mum, not since seventeen hun’red an’ ninety or thereabouts,” Goyle said. “I figure he did his proper schooling before that, so he’s from seventeen hun’red an’ seventy... maybe before that, so I put in another ten years...”

“Oh, very well done, Mr. Goyle!” Covelli said with a happiness Harry had rarely heard in her voice. “Application to one’s studies does wonders, yes? Remain diligent, if you please?”

“Good show, Greg,” Harry heard Pucey whisper.

“Haven’t brought in this many points since... since never,” Goyle muttered in return.

“Before we move onward,” Covelli said, “it is important to name the fourth man whose head adorns our room. Does anyone happen to recognize this man? I do not expect it would be so. Anyone?”

After a few moments of silence, Covelli said, “This is the fourth member of Master Flamel’s team, Jean de Flandres. Mr. de Flandres was the non-magical fourth son of a renowned French wizarding family – you’ll not find a witch or wizard in France who will speak of which family it may have been. He was a soldier who supported the French revolutionaries prior to the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte – who became the non-magical Emperor of France for a time – and was in hiding when he crossed paths with Master Flamel.

“It was Mr. de Flandres who made the initial connection between Racine’s victims and then correctly pointed Flamel and his apprentices. Master Flamel noted in documents of the time that Mr. de Flanders personally saved his life on at least three occasions between 1807 and 1815. He arranged for Mr. de Flanders to meet a young witch from Belgium, to whom he was eventually married. Their third son, August de Flanders, rose to serve as the Belgian Minister for Magic before falling victim to one of Grindelwald’s attacks in the 1930s. His descendants are an accomplished group, and continue to play a major role in European wizarding life.” The only sound in the room for more than a minute was the scraping of quills on parchment. It wasn’t lost

on Harry that he had learned more wizarding history in the course of half an hour than he could recall from the five previous years. He wondered how the blood purists in the room felt about the idea that a Squib had saved the life of the world's greatest alchemist not once, but three times.

“And now we move to Tramposo,” Covelli pressed on.

“Tramposo?” Ron whispered.

“He was a Spanish dark wizard,” Hermione told him quietly.

“Miss Granger, I prefer that you share with the class as a whole,” Covelli said. “Who was Tramposo, if you please?”

“Antoni Serra Tramposo was a Spanish dark wizard whose rise began in 1877,” Hermione said quickly, almost reflexively. “He was defeated by the Marquis de Maupassant in 1886.”

“Two points to Gryffindor, Miss Granger, but Tramposo was not precisely a Spaniard,” corrected Covelli.

“Tramposo was Catalanian, of course; he came from Puigcerda. With a difference of a few miles, he could have been a Frenchman,” Daphne Greengrass tossed off casually. She finished with a wink at Hermione and a chilling glare at Covelli.

“Two points to Slytherin, Miss Greengrass... and one taken for failing to be recognized before speaking,” said Covelli. She changed the projection to reveal a sleek-looking long-faced wizard with an alarming smile. “The wizarding governments of Europe were in turmoil in the 1870s, and the time was ripe for someone like Tramposo. He wanted to see the restrictions on secrecy lifted and a greater Europe established under the rule of the magical community. He intended to use the non-magical royals of the day as his tools. It was during such an attempt that Tramposo was found out by the Marquis de Maupassant.”

The Marquis's image returned – older, but not sixty years older to Harry's eye. “He was unable to rouse the Ministers of the day, and so he assembled a group that spread across Europe to contain Tramposo and his followers. This period was marked by infrequent but bloody battles, but it was Tramposo who suffered most of the losses each time.

“The Marquis's colleague Boris Karensky took charge of the hunt in the east, working from St. Petersburg. Roger Potter... Mr. Potter's great-great grandfather, I believe... organized the Germans. The Dumbledores looked after England and a goodly portion of France. Karensky took charge of the entire operation for a time while the Marquis dealt with a blood feud that resulted from his... ehh... indiscretions with the wife of an Italian count, but that is another matter...”

Harry reeled from the idea that he wasn't the first Potter to be part of the first line of defence against a dark wizard. As he thought on it, however, he supposed that the House of Potter must have acquired the title of ‘Courageous’ for a reason – a reason that came about long before Roger Potter took a stand.

“Tramposo was fond of using magical creatures in battle, both naturally occurring and those of his own design. The Marquis enlisted a friend of the Headmaster, our own Professor Croaker, to take charge of the offence against these creatures. Professor Croaker was forced to wipe out or contain entire species, some of which no longer live even in the history books. Some held him responsible in those days, but I assure you that this was the only means to put a stop to Tramposo. This vile man was in his own way every bit as horrible as your Voldemort –” Covelli stopped for a moment to allow the inevitable hisses and shuffling to stop.

“The Marquis and his closest colleagues eliminated Tramposo and his inner circle in a pitched battle near Barcelona. The battle began on October 22, 1886 and lasted nine days,” Covelli said. The room grew quiet. Harry tried and failed to contemplate a nine-day fight between wizards like Dumbledore and Voldemort. The projections faded and then winked out entirely.

“In the end,” Covelli said into the silence, “the Marquis and four of his comrades – Headmaster Dumbledore, Professor Croaker, Professor Marchbanks, and Tiberius Ogden – were all who remained alive on the field of battle. The Marquis returned to his château and did not leave it until the twentieth century dawned.” Silence held once more until the signal came for the end of the class period.

Covelli cleared her throat. “You have your readings for the next session; be certain to continue research toward your end-of-term papers, please,” she said. “We will take up with... with Grindelwald at next week’s session...” She walked slowly to her desk and turned her back on the class as they gathered their things. Harry dashed out of the classroom well ahead of Hermione. He caught Pucey and Goyle just as they reached the stairs that led down to the dungeons.

Pucey went halfway for his wand before he realized it was Harry who pulled at his robe. He quickly recovered and said coolly, “Leave the sneaking to the snakes, Potter.”

“Why did you have me take the points from Malfoy?” Harry demanded. He turned to Goyle and added, “Pucey baited him; and when Malfoy didn’t bite, you went for it as well. Covelli would have done it if I hadn’t been asked. I don’t follow...?”

Pucey crossed his arms. “Have you ever heard of the Hogwarts Book of Punishments?”

“The... what?” Harry managed.

“I’m surprised; I’d have figured on you for a chapter of your own,” Pucey chuckled. “You have heard of the Hogwarts Register of Births, correct?”

“You know...? The enchanted book what records each magical birth? The one old McGonagall uses?” said Goyle.

“Yes, I know about the Register,” Harry said impatiently. “This Book of Punishments, it does the same with detentions or something?”

“Detentions, points – all of it,” Pucey confirmed. “There’s something about the Book that even a

lot of pure families don't know, you see?"

"The parents can have it," Goyle said solemnly. "Every time there are points taken, they get an owl."

"What sort do you expect might make that arrangement?" Pucey asked.

Harry thought for a long moment. "So you wanted my name next to the points... what, in case Malfoy's dad ever collects his post? You figured that it might make Malfoy look better?"

"That's it in one," said Pucey.

Harry couldn't follow the reasoning. "But... it looks like you're trying to push him aside, right? Why do you care how he's seen?" he asked.

"Have to be Slytherin to understand it," Goyle said.

Harry shrugged. "Apparently," he said.

Pucey patted him on the shoulder. "No worries, Potter. I asked you to do it and you came through. That works in both directions." Goyle gave a stiff nod and they started down the stairs.

October 6

Harry had gone from being merely busy to nearly frantic. He was continuously scheduled from eight in the morning until six in the evening, Monday through Saturday, with special tutorials on Monday and Thursday evenings. He read, he wrote, he analysed, he watched, and he fought. He assisted Detheridge with the first through third years, and he assisted Bill and Tonks with the Duelling Club – Harry was supposed to be in charge, but it rarely played out that way and he was happier for it. Dumbledore pulled him in at odd hours for tuition that ranged from managing one's emotions to the magic behind wizarding portraiture to handling student problems to means for permanent conjuring to various strategies for success in ten-pin bowling. Harry quickly learned to expect the unexpected with the Headmaster. In addition, Dumbledore continued to instruct Potions – 'my replacement is on his way', he regularly said – and a number of people including Harry were beginning to wonder if the Headmaster might end up splitting his time for the entire term.

Once he returned to the castle, Harry began to take his Sunday meals at the Gryffindor table. Some of the staff had been vocal in their opposition to this, but Harry had insisted and Dumbledore had prevailed upon the rest to accept the decision. It was his free day, and Harry wanted to maintain some sort of connection with people other than Ron and Hermione. He wanted to keep Neville close and Ginny as well. He wanted to look after Luna when he could manage it, and it was easier for him to ask after her on Sundays. Hermione, Ginny, Neville and even Ron were also on 'Luna watch'. Hermione mentioned that she had some ideas about what might be affecting Luna, and Harry knew that Covelli had met with Luna more than once.

As the evening meal on Sunday the sixth of October came to a close, Harry wanted nothing more

than to return to his quarters and gain an extra few hours of sleep. He was about to beg off early, when the doors to the Great Hall slammed open and Hagrid burst through.

“Evening, all! ’E’s here at last, Perfesser Dumbledore! Do I bring him here, or would yeh want him off ta his rooms?” Hagrid called out.

“I expect he has been looking forward to his introduction,” Dumbledore returned over a flurry of whispering. “Do ask his preference, Hagrid, but I dare say he will choose to meet us here.”

“Righ’,” Hagrid said. He disappeared into the corridor for a few moments, and then returned. “Yeh had him in one, Perfesser,” the giant gamekeeper laughed. He walked down the centre of the hall and took his seat at the head table.

Harry stifled a laugh when the unknown guest entered the hall. A stunning young woman in a sleek gold robe walked at his right. Hermione took in a sharp breath. “What’s he doing here?” Ron whispered.

The man doffed his hat. “Felicitations to you, people of Hogwarts!” he said. “I am your humble servant, Alexandre, the Marquis de Maupassant. As to your, ehh, vacant post for the Potions... she is no more, for I shall be teaching you on the morrow.”

Dumbledore put on a mischief-laced grin that gave Harry pause. “Splendid to see you, Marquis! Would you be so kind as to introduce your associate?”

“But of course! A wizard of such advanced age as myself cannot manage his affairs without the help, you see? I am so fortunate to have the help of a lady as lovely and accomplished as this. She -” He directed the attention of the hall to the dark-haired beauty beside him. “She is Mademoiselle Anna de Flandres. The father of Mlle. de Flandres, he is Achille de Flandres, Ministre de la Magie for Belgium. Mlle. de Flandres was schooled at the Scuola di Magia e Stregoneria in Venice, and she has the Mastery in Potions from the International Confederation. She studies with me now for the Mastery in Alchemy. Mlle. de Flandres, she will be the last of my apprentices.”

“Thank you, Marquis; and welcome to Hogwarts, Miss de Flandres,” Dumbledore declared. “Obviously, some of you – especially those young men who come from established wizarding families – are familiar with the Marquis’ infamous manual, *Scandalous Tactics for Duelling*. I assure you that this is far from the pinnacle of his long and illustrious career. The Marquis, like myself, apprenticed with Nicholas Flamel and is a formidable potions scholar. He has served his people with distinction for more than two hundred years and has been the official representative of France to the International Confederation of Wizards since 1903.

“The Marquis will be taking up residence in the south tower, which has been unoccupied for many a year. Potions instruction will be moving to the tower as well. Your prefects will distribute additional information at tomorrow’s breakfast. Should any additional texts be required, they will be provided to you all as a courtesy. It is also my pleasure to announce that, in addition to taking up the post of Professor of Potions, the Marquis has consented to serve as the Slytherin Head of House for the remainder of this year.”

Harry didn't know what to make of the reaction from the Slytherins. It occurred to him that this was because the Slytherins didn't know what to make of the Marquis. Adrian Pucey was the first to stand and applaud; he was quickly joined by Malfoy. The combination appeared to stir the rest of the upper form students, who were then followed by the younger years.

“Please, please... resume the sitting, please,” the Marquis insisted. “I, ehh, relish the chance to do this for Hogwarts. I am not a young man, but I remember well my good and noble friends who came to me from the house of Slytherin. They understood the honour and they understood the meaning – the purpose – of cunning. My young snakes, we will remember that to be the Slytherins is to be, ehh... how you say...?” He turned to Mlle. de Flandres, and rattled off, “*Les maitres de nos destinees ...?*”

She hesitated for a moment, and then said in a flowing accent, “You will remember to be the masters of your destinies.”

“Yes, yes... these are the words,” the Marquis said. He drew his sword with frightening speed – so quickly that the Hufflepuffs near him ducked for cover – and held it before him, point up. “I salute you, Hogwarts. Perhaps you will decide that the last Potions Master, he was not so bad – who can say?” He replaced his sword in its scabbard and bowed to the head table. “If you will grant me leave, Mugwump Dumbledore? I am unaccustomed to the travel and must rest these old bones.”

Dumbledore smiled kindly. “By all means, Marquis. Hagrid, would you... no, no. Mr. Potter, would you be so kind as to direct the Marquis? He will be in the south tower.”

Harry spoke up, “Er... the south tower, Headmaster?”

Dumbledore laughed, “Of course! It has been many a year, after all. Take the Marquis and his associate to the first floor landing and then to the right. From there, the portraits will guide you.”

“Best I follow along with the luggage, Perfesser,” Hagrid said. “These two, they don’t travel light.”

The Marquis replaced his sword in its scabbard. He flashed a broad smile at Harry, reached out, and clasped both of Harry’s hands. “Monsieur Potter... how excellent to see you once again!” he said.

“Er... a pleasure, sir,” returned Harry.

“And Mlle. Granger... I remain enchanted,” the Marquis said. He released Harry, leant toward Hermione and kissed her on each cheek. While she spluttered, he straightened and thrust his arm across the table. “Monsieur Weasley, how fare you, my young chevalier?”

“Very well, sir,” Ron squeaked. He gestured awkwardly toward Neville. “Uh... this is...”

Neville stood and bowed slightly. “Marquis, I am Neville Longbottom, of the houses of Longbottom, Croaker and Castor. It is an honour, sir.” Ron gaped at him, and both Parvati and

Ginny studied him rather intensely.

“Monsieur Longbottom, I know of your families; the honour is mine, young sir,” the Marquis said in very formal fashion. “You are of the same house as Algernon, yes?”

Neville nodded. “Yes, sir; he’s seated right there at the –”

“I see him there, yes,” the Marquis said dismissively. “Algie and I, we are fully acquainted. He is a brilliant man, no? Still, he is... ehh... *quelle bourrique* !” Lavender nearly spat pumpkin juice at that, and then broke into a fit of coughing.

Mlle. de Flandres let her hand rest on the Marquis’ arm. “Pardon, Your Grace, but you were intending to refrain from... public judgments...?” she said.

The Marquis patted her hand. “Of course, of course,” he said. “There is nothing to fear, dear girl; I am the old fool... this is known by all, yes?” He turned to Harry and continued, “Monsieur Potter, I am ready to be taken to my rooms. You will escort my apprentice.”

With that, the Marquis began to issue rapid-fire instructions to Hagrid regarding the luggage. Harry was sure that at least some of them were in French, and Hagrid did a good deal of nodding. Anna de Flandres crooked her arm and stood patiently until Harry realized that he was expected to take her arm. He did so uncomfortably, and saw that Hermione was watching with a smirk on her lips.

No words were spoken as they walked down the first floor corridor. Mlle. de Flandres kept her hold on Harry’s arm, and even tightened it at the sight of a clutch of castle ghosts. The Marquis was chatting away with Hagrid, who seemed amused both by the Marquis and by the directions coming from the portraits.

“You are not what I expected, Mr. Potter,” she said abruptly.

Harry answered with a start, “What did you expect, exactly?”

“The Marquis, he described a chevalier – friend of the goblins, defender of the downtrodden, vanquisher of dark wizards,” Mlle. de Flandres said. “You seem... common.”

Harry voice tightened. “I see.”

“I do not say this to offend,” she added. “The Marquis is an extravagant man; he enjoys the trappings of wealth and power. Your Headmaster, he exudes power. I assume that you can feel this. You seem a common man – an ordinary man – though you, too, give off an aura of power. You are unaffected by your accomplishments. This is an unexpected quality, an attractive quality. You are an attractive man... if a bit shorter than I would have thought.”

“I get that rather a lot – the comment about being short, that is,” Harry said.

“Size is not equal to greatness,” she countered. “Napoleon, he was a very short man.”

“Erm... are you flirting with me?” Harry asked.

Mlle. de Flandres drew back from him and searched his face with her eyes before she broke into a soft laugh. “But of course – outrageously so,” she said.

Harry was taken aback. “Why?” he asked.

“We have a mutual friend, you and I: Fleur Delacour...” she said.

“Really? You know Fleur well?”

“Fleur’s father is a diplomat. My father and he operate in the same circles, and our families have been well acquainted for a century or more,” said Mlle. de Flandres. “When I asked after you, Fleur told me that it would be best if I were very direct in my intentions. Have I not been direct?”

“Very direct,” Harry said.

“By coming to Hogwarts, I will be able to complete my studies with the Marquis and pursue you as a partner,” she said simply.

Harry stammered, “A p-partner? Look, you’re attractive – very attractive... er... very, *very* attractive... gorgeous, actually... but I’m already... uh... in partnership, and there’s Voldemort to think of, and you must be five years or more –”

Mlle. de Flandres’ brow creased. “This is all the more reason to diversify your interests, Mr. Potter.”

“Diversify...? I... er... I’ve not heard it put that way...” managed Harry.

“Is that so? But why...? Oh – oh, my; the words were chosen poorly,” she said. “I was not referring to pursuit of a sexual partner or marriage partner – although I certainly wouldn’t dismiss those possibilities.”

“Gkkk,” Harry said, or something very like it.

“I was referring to a business partnership, of course,” Mlle. de Flandres assured him. “The Marquis has offered me the opportunity to acquire his horticultural concerns, but even with my family’s resources this will require a minority partner. I feel there is an opportunity to not only improve the quality of patent potions but also to control the European market.”

“I... uh... I’ll put you in contact with Ted Tonks; he handles my money – that sort of thing,” Harry said quickly.

“Really? You would do that? Oh, how excellent! I shall have to thank Fleur... and thank you,” she said happily and bounced up and down on the balls of her feet. Mlle. de Flandres bounced very pleasantly, Harry decided, just before she leant in and kissed him on both cheeks.

Harry managed to get out, “Hagrid? How far is this tower, anyway?”

Hagrid called back, “Just ‘round the bend, Harry – *erf!* Bloody luggage... has a mind of its own, eh?”

The south tower was much lower than the others, just three floors from bottom to top. The first floor was dominated by a bright and airy potions classroom with a very modern look to it. Stairs led to the second floor, which included two offices and quarters for Mlle. de Flandres. The third floor was given over to the Marquis. His chambers were massive and opulently furnished. Mlle. de Flandres took charge of the luggage and the Marquis strolled from room to room.

“I will make do with this,” he announced at last.

October 8

Covelli's projector came to life. The lights in the History classroom dimmed, and an angular face appeared above her desk. It was familiar and large - larger than the floating heads from the previous class – and a collective gasp filled the room.

Her voice sliced through the air. “Grindelwald,” she said, which brought a second gasp.

She began to pace along the aisle that divided the students in two. “He was a philosopher who became a politician, and a politician who became a zealot and a mass murderer, on a scale never seen or even imagined in the wizarding world,” she explained. “Miss... Greengrass, who was this man? Where did he come from? How did he rise?”

Daphne Greengrass sat bolt upright. “Er... Grindelwald was born in 1862 in Austria, to pure-blooded parents reputedly tied to the Knights of Walpurgis. He -”

Covelli cut her off. “What was his name?”

Daphne hesitated for a moment. “His name was Grindelwald. That's all he was called: Grindelwald.”

“Two points to Slytherin for the first portion of your answer,” Covelli said. “Anyone?”

Anthony Goldstein raised his hand. “Walden Grindelius Ollivander,” he said.

“Three points to Ravenclaw,” said Covelli.

“Ollivander? Not *the* Ollivander?” Dean Thomas blurted out.

Anthony shook his head. “They were first cousins, twice removed,” he said, “but dark wizardry runs in the family. My wand's from Gregorovitch, thank you very much.”

Covelli drew her wand and cast illuminated letters into the air; they were soft and solid, unlike the flaming letters Tom Riddle had used.

OLLIVANDER

She slowly repositioned the letters and used her body to partially block the view until she finished the task. As soon as her wand was put away, she stepped aside to reveal the new words:

AN_ EVIL_ LORD

“I can't believe I didn't see that,” Anthony murmured.

“Some believe that the family was cursed many centuries ago,” said Covelli. “For whatever reason, the various branches of the Ollivander family produce a dangerously dark wizard every few generations. Ollivander used his first and middle name to create Grindelwald, but he was also paying homage to a minor dark wizard called Uberwald. Uberwald was a friend of the Austrian Ollivanders who started an uprising over encroachment by non-magical folk into the mountain region where he lived. After sacking the homes and lands of several dozen settlers, he attempted to infect an entire village with dragon pox. Uberwald unwittingly discovered that non-magicals cannot contract the disease; instead, he and his follows accidentally infected themselves and all died shortly thereafter.

“Grindelwald completed his studies at Durmstrang under the Ollivander name, and then took up the study of philosophy at a non-magical university in Sweden -”

Pucey raised his hand. “A university, ma'am? That's the sort of place you attended to become a doctor, right?”

“Well recalled, Mr. Pucey – one point to Slytherin,” Covelli said. “Ollivander completed a doctor of philosophy degree, thus earning the privilege to refer to himself as a doctor. It was at about this time that he experienced a series of very negative incidents involving non-magical people, including thefts, assaults and the murder of a close friend. A few months later, he saved a close wizarding friend from possible death at the hands of a group of rural non-magicals who were in fervour over witchcraft. It was then that he adopted the name Oliver Grindelwald, and began to write a series of tracts about relationships between magical and non-magical people. He grew increasingly bitter, and began to be seen in Austria as a voice for even greater separation. Now then, how did Grindelwald begin his rise to power?”

Hermione raised her hand. “He was elected to the Cisleithanian Court in 1908, and appointed Vice-Chancellor in 1914,” she said.

“Correct – two points to Gryffindor,” Covelli said. “By the time he rose to Vice-Chancellor, his adopted first name was rarely used; he was merely referred to as Grindelwald. What happened in 1914 that changed the social and political landscape in Europe? Anyone? Those of you with a non-magical upbringing may have an advantage here...”

Terry Boot tentatively raised his hand. “That's when the Muggles started their world war, isn't it? Some royal was shot during a visit to the Balkans, and then everything went pear-shaped.”

“Professor Tonks must be changing the Muggle Studies course rather significantly,” Covelli said. “Two points to Ravenclaw, Mr. Boot. The First World War began in 1914 and proceeded until 1918. The War left Germany in ruins, opened the door for the Communists to take over Russia, and ushered in an era of economic instability that culminated in a world wide economic depression by the end of the 1920s. All of this affected the magical community across Europe as well, to a far greater extent than wizards of the day recognised. Suddenly food was scarce; the cost to maintain secrecy increased dramatically, and the war had destroyed major magical creature preserves, goblin mines, and other significant resources. As non-magical Germany descended into chaos, magical Germany followed. The Austrian Chancellor for Magic resigned under duress, and Grindelwald was elevated. By 1930, he had consolidated the magical governments of Austria and Germany and had moved the seat of government to Salzburg.

“Grindelwald used his 1933 address to the International Confederation of Wizards to speak on what he termed 'the natural development of the human species'. You will read the text of this speech for the next session, at which time we will discuss its implications for today's wizarding community. At the time, the implications were perfectly clear. Grindelwald believed that it was the right of the magical community to control the world, magical and non-magical alike. He believed that magical people represented the next stage of human development, and therefore that non-magical people were inferior and could not be trusted to manage their own affairs. He believed that non-magical people had to be shown a 'firm hand', whether by wizards or by their own leaders, and he was increasingly attracted to the policies of the non-magical German leader Adolf Hitler.”

Harry couldn't help but notice that Covelli was growing pale and her right hand was shaking. By Hermione's reaction, he was sure that she noticed the same. Still, Covelli kept on. “By 1934, he saw Hitler as the perfect tool for subjugating the non-magical people of Europe,” she said. “Hitler and his minions were fascinated by the non-magical world's idea of magic and the occult, and Grindelwald played to this fascination. By 1936, a number of Grindelwald's lieutenants were implanted into the upper echelons of Hitler's Nazi Party. Here are some of the wizards and witches involved.” The projector clicked, and a series of smaller heads replaced that of Grindelwald. She looked to the first one on the left, and blanched. “One of Grindelwald's chief associates... Otto Bormann... was a cousin of... he was a cousin...”

Anthony Goldstein started to stand. “Dr. Covelli...?”

Covelli slumped against her desk and babbled, “...was a cousin to Martin Bormann, who was Hitler's right hand... Martin Bormann died in the spring of 1945, but Otto... some thought he was dead, but I knew better... they'd gone to ground and they had help, help in high places... I tracked him for weeks, months...” She stumbled forward and Ron burst from his seat to catch her.

“Help me out here, Goldstein,” Ron groaned.

“He had to die...” Covelli murmured. Her hair blew as if in a breeze, even though the room was still.

“Send for Professor Dumbledore,” Hermione said.

“There was someone called Bormann, in the memory I saw,” Harry recalled.

“Send for Professor Dumbledore – now!” repeated Hermione. Harry drew his wand and cast his stag Patronus twice in the direction of the Headmaster's study. Hermione followed with a half-dozen castings of her otter in a variety of directions.

“I'll fetch Pomfrey,” Pucey said. “Greg, help them carry the Professor to her study -”

Ron shook his head. “We're not going farther than the desk,” he said; “There's something really wrong here...”

Hermione dashed to the desk and Harry followed Pucey out the door and into the corridor. “Be sure that the hearth in the Professor's office is unblocked,” Pucey called back as he took to the stairs in a dead sprint.

Harry turned back toward the classroom and nearly ran into Professor Croaker, who was panting and huffing. “Did that otter belong to a student? Fine piece of work, that,” he managed.

“Come with me,” Harry said.

Somehow Croaker managed to enter the classroom first. He started, “What have you gotten up to now, Lucia... oh, dear...”

Professor Marchbanks ambled into the room next; her cane thumped loudly against the stone floor. “Good heavens, has she been telling you children of the days of Grindelwald?” she bellowed. “Would someone do us all a favour and cancel the charm on that blasted apparatus, please? You there – Longbottom, isn't it? I think we've all seen quite enough of those ghastly faces.”

Croaker waved his wand mildly in the direction of Covelli. “Her magic's a bit off, but it's nothing Albus or Alex – or I, for that matter – can't reckon with,” he pronounced.

“The girl's magic has always been a bit off,” Marchbanks declared, “but her heart was in the right place. Now do you see...? This is what comes of having the Ministry interfere in the content and conduct of teaching and examinations. The poor dear has no business discussing those dark times, none whatever. Where are her notes, Algernon?”

“Most likely on the lectern,” Croaker said absently. “Lucia...? Can you hear me? If you can, it would be good form to say so...”

Marchbanks leafed through a stack of parchments and a Muggle notebook. “She always was the well organised one,” she said fondly.

Pucey returned to the room. “Pomfrey's nowhere to be found, but the Headmaster's on his way. I think the Marquis was headed in this direction as well.”

“Splendid! Alex is the best one to sort this out, I should think,” Croaker said. “So... shall I finish

the lecture, or would you rather have a go at it, Zelda?”

“My name is Griselda, you oaf, and I'll thank you to speak it properly,” Marchbanks returned. “If I am reading correctly... Professor Covelli had reached the latter 1930s...?”

“Do you seriously intend to continue?” drawled Malfoy. “A number of my fellow students seem rather disturbed by all of this.”

The Headmaster swept into the classroom. “Your concern is touching, Mr. Malfoy, but Dr. Covelli would not appreciate a disruption in your tuition – even if she is the cause,” he said. “The Marquis will join us shortly. Professor Croaker, if you could relocate Dr. Covelli to her office? Mr. Weasley, Mr. Goldstein, please assist Professor Croaker in any way that he asks.”

“Would you prefer to take this lesson, Professor Dumbledore?” Marchbanks asked. “There is no one more qualified to speak on the topic of Grindelwald.”

Dumbledore stroked his beard. “Do you know... my goodness... do you know that I've never really spoken on the topic? Isn't that odd?”

“Given the things we saw, the things that we experienced, I do not find it odd at all,” Marchbanks returned.

“What has young Lucia done with herself, Albus?” the Marquis called from the doorway. “I do not relish putting back together what she has torn asunder. It was my understanding that the return to Hogwarts, it would settle this for all time?”

“We will speak of this later,” said Dumbledore. “Marcus, were you sent for?”

Detheridge stood immediately behind the Marquis. “Is she all right?” he asked.

“She will be fine, Marcus – of this you can be certain,” Dumbledore told him.

Detheridge seemed to fight an internal battle before he said, “Tell her... tell her that he's dead, Albus. He's stone dead. She'll understand, I think. Tell her I can explain myself later.”

“Is it true that you will tell these young people of Grindelwald?” the Marquis asked.

“It would seem to be so,” said Dumbledore.

The Marquis nodded. “I will tend to Lucia,” he said. “Perhaps I will join you in the telling? It seems strange that five of us are present here, does it not?”

“It does indeed,” Dumbledore said softly.

Marchbanks let out a great harrumph. “Are you going to get on with it, or should I make a futile attempt to count my liver spots?” she demanded.

“There is no need to be rude,” the Marquis scolded her.

“You've had no right to criticise my behaviour since sometime in the nineteenth century,” Marchbanks fired back loudly. “Go and do your work, and I shall do mine.”

“You are a stubborn old woman,” said the Marquis, to a chorus of barely stifled snickers.

Marchbanks waved her cane at him. “And you, sir, are a lecherous old fool. *Go* ,” she snapped.

The snickers turned to snorts before Dumbledore settled the class. “As amusing as this by-play has been, we have a limited time available to us and I am – as Professor Marchbanks rightly observed – the rank expert on Grindelwald. Where should I begin, Professor?” he asked.

“Lucia was speaking on Grindelwald's chief minions and drawing comparisons to those Nazi chaps,” said Marchbanks.

“I see... My preference is to focus on the major events themselves. If there are comparisons to be drawn, then let them be drawn against the present time,” Dumbledore declared. “Miss Granger, would you be so kind as to pass me Dr. Covelli's projections?”

He quickly flipped through the small stack and nodded approvingly, then handed back one projection to Hermione. “Would you please cast that one for me?” he asked.

A map of Europe appeared above Covelli's desk. There was a modest patch of red drawn on the east-central part of the continent. “This was the extent of Grindelwald's control in 1928,” Dumbledore said. He waved his wand slightly and the red stain spread into a good part of what Harry knew to be Germany. “This was the area of his control in 1931, after the German magical community was brought under the jurisdiction of the Austrian ministry.” With another wave, the red spread over Switzerland and Poland and parts of Eastern Europe. “By 1937, Grindelwald had declared this area to be Cisleithania, which was the old form for Austria and Hungary. In each new area of conquest, he made the argument that the magical community was no longer in control of its affairs with respect to the Muggles, and that the magical community needed to purify its position. In 1938, his government began to seize Muggle-born children from their families by the age of one, to be raised by the state and instructed in the ways of a proper witch or wizard – as Grindelwald saw that to be, of course.”

Now the red stain covered most of France and the Low Countries. “Grindelwald's men followed the Muggle armies of Hitler into France,” Dumbledore told the class. “It was in France that for the first time, Grindelwald ordered the elimination of certain wizarding communities that he considered threatening to his vision of purity.”

Seamus Finnigan raised his hand. “Er... so Grindelwald was a blood purist, then – like You-Know-Who?”

“It was a different sort of purity, young man,” Marchbanks cut in. “Grindelwald wanted wizards to be purely that, and not to sully themselves with Muggles and the like. He wanted to kill wizards

who disagreed, and to kill Muggles who might have stood in the way. He wanted Muggles to openly know of magic and to be scared witless of it. In Grindelwald's perfect world, wizards would have ruled all and Muggles would have lived at their mercy.”

“True enough,” said Dumbledore, “but he hadn't counted on just how powerful Muggles really were. It wasn't until 1939 that he saw personally what the Muggle armies could accomplish – what sheer devastation they could deliver upon their enemies. He was frightened by it. He charged his infiltrators inside the German Muggle government to find ways that its armies could be used to do Grindelwald's work, even as he himself delved into ever darker and more powerful magic. It was his desire to create a magic that would exceed the power of the greatest and most terrible forces that the Muggles could bring to bear.”

“And that's when he made the same mistake that a dozen wizard leaders and probably that many Muggles made before him,” Marchbanks said. “He went after the Russians. Bad business, that was.”

“Simultaneous to that, Grindelwald's western forces followed the German Muggles against the British,” Dumbledore went on. “Many ships were sunk, supplies were destroyed, and small bands of his followers conducted raids on British soil. The worst of these was in 1940. The German Muggles launched an attack on London itself, using their flying machines, and a group of Grindelwald's wizards supported the attack from the ground; most of the Muggles were unaware of this, of course. Because of this, the damage was far greater than the worst that the Muggles could have delivered. The young daughter of the English king, Princess Elizabeth, was killed and the king himself wounded. Several well-known London landmarks were damaged or destroyed. The Ministry for Magic repaired many of them on the very night of the attacks, as a measure of good will toward our countrymen. Professor Flitwick and I took charge of the reconstruction of Big Ben. The two of us completed the job in less than six hours – which was no mean feat, if I do say so myself.”

Hermione's eyebrows rose nearly to her hairline. “B-Big Ben was destroyed?” she gasped.

Dumbledore nodded. “Yes, as well as Westminster Abbey, Windsor Castle, the London Bridge, Kew Gardens... it was a horrific night, Miss Granger. It took the combined efforts of scores of witches and wizards to undo even a portion of the damage. Our focus was on the true landmarks of Britain and on those things that the Muggle community could not have repaired on their own. Ask Professor Sprout about the restoration of the Gardens if you are so inclined; her parents were noted herbologists and thus in the thick of it. Our own Marquis de Maupassant arrived before the dawn and mobilised a group of goblin miners and masons to replace and reposition a goodly part of Stonehenge. Unfortunately, the circle at Avebury was too badly damaged to completely restore. Some of Britain's ley lines shifted position as a result, which disrupted Floo service for nearly two years.”

“Why don't you tell them what they did to Golders Green?” Anthony Goldstein said bitterly. “They didn't stop with buildings, did they?”

“No, Grindelwald's raiders did not merely destroy buildings. The three largest raids all affected

the families of persons in this very class, as a matter of fact,” Dumbledore said. “I confess that I know the least about the Golders Green affair, amongst the three. A raid upon Hogsmeade left several dozen dead and wounded, and destroyed nearly half the buildings therein. Amongst the dead were several of Professor Marchbanks' extended family, as well as Mr. Weasley's grand-uncle and Miss Brown's grandmother -”

“The second started as an attack on agriculture,” Marchbanks said. “Those blasted Cissies set afire more than half the wizarding farms in Britain, and then set to killing the farm families. Mr. Goyle, I know that your family suffered greatly in those attacks.”

“Lost everything that mattered,” Goyle said in a dangerous voice. Harry was surprised at how angry he seemed about something that had happened forty years before he was born.

Professor Croaker appeared at the door to Covelli's office. “She'll be right as rain in a day or so,” he announced.

“What can you say about Golders Green?” Dumbledore asked him.

Croaker looked for a moment as though all the air had gone out of him. “A horrible thing, Albus. What possessed you to bring that up?”

“We were discussing the atrocities of Grindelwald's raiders, and Mr. Goldstein raised the point,” said Dumbledore.

“Are there Mystics in your family, Mr. Goldstein?” Croaker asked.

Goldstein's eyes hardened. “There were,” he said.

Dumbledore sighed. “Ah, yes – the Hebrew purges. This was an area where Grindelwald's influence weighed upon the German Muggles in catastrophic fashion.”

Croaker settled his girth against the edge of Covelli's desk. “I may not do this justice, Mr. Goldstein, so I will allow you to interject if you feel the need to do so,” he said. “There is a small magical community amongst the Hebrew people. I know that this community has a Hebrew name, but I don't know it; I'm not certain that any outsiders do. You'll find little mention of it in any libraries, even those as extensive as our own here at Hogwarts. Those few mentions will refer to the leaders of this community as Mystics. Stop me if I speak wrongly, Mr. Goldstein...”

“That's accurate,” Goldstein allowed.

“There is a religious component to the practices of the Mystics, and I shan't speak on that as I'm thoroughly unqualified to speak of it and thus quite likely to put my foot in it, as it were,” Croaker continued. “The rest of the Hebrew magical community has typically consisted of traders and merchants, and in many places they were the main link between the magical and Muggle communities. I imagine that some of you can see where this is headed?”

“They sound like the sort of people Grindelwald would have wanted to kill,” Lavender said.

Dumbledore nodded sadly. “Two points to Gryffindor, I am afraid to say.”

“Much of this community went to ground in the 1930s, and Grindelwald encouraged the German Muggles to purge their Hebrew communities in hopes of catching the wizards unawares,” Croaker said.

Goldstein shook his head. “That would have been a spark in a flaming cauldron, Professor,” he said. “Hitler didn't need any help to hate Jews; he got there on his own.”

“As I said, I am no expert on the matter,” Croaker said. “I am aware of what this Hitler fellow went on to do, and can only tell you the prevailing wizarding view – which is that Grindelwald pressed the issue. With respect to Golders Green, this was one circumstance where Grindelwald's men didn't wait for the German Muggles to do their work. They rounded up more than a hundred Hebrew wizards and witches, and executed them in the middle of a major thoroughfare. It was a gruesome message to the British Ministry that doing business with the Muggles would no longer be tolerated.”

The room went deadly silent; even Malfoy looked aghast. Goldstein's voice cut through the room. “Now You-Know-Who's at it,” he said. “It's starting again, and no one's going to do anything about it.”

Dumbledore folded his hands and said gravely, “Mr. Goldstein, I am very sorry for your loss. Your father was a brave man, brave enough to refuse Voldemort's business. If he had sought protection from the Ministry, it would have been given -”

Goldstein's knuckles were white, Harry noticed. “With all due respect, sir... bollocks. You-Know-Who's trying to wipe out the old magics; my father said so. You're right that he was a brave man, but he didn't die over a shipment of cauldrons. He died for what he believed.”

“Your choice of words is forgiven, Anthony; these are most trying times,” Dumbledore said in a quiet but commanding way. “If your family should need anything...?”

“The Ministry won't lift a finger,” Goldstein snapped, then added more calmly, “but thank you for your concern, sir.”

“Then you will come to me directly, young man, and it shall be done,” said Dumbledore in a tone that brooked no argument.

“My mother wants the head of the wizard who killed my father. Is that something you can arrange, Headmaster?” Goldstein said boldly.

Dumbledore's brow moved ever so slightly; he said, “Alas, no. If you should desire to absent yourself from the remainder of this session, both Dr. Covelli and I would understand your reasoning.”

“No thank you, sir,” said Goldstein. “I shan't hide from the truth; that's the Minister's job.”

“Five points to Ravenclaw,” Marchbanks declared.

Dumbledore's eyes widened. “Griselda!” he protested.

Marchbanks gave the slightest of shrugs. “It was an honest appraisal, Albus. Let's move on to the meat of this, shall we?” she said.

Croaker shook his head at Marchbanks, but turned his attention to Goldstein. “The killings at Golders Green finally stirred the Ministry. It was the first time they realised that Grindelwald might actually be capable of taking the country. However, a new roadblock replaced the old one: the International Confederation of Wizards.” He gave Dumbledore a sour look.

“The Confederation has done much good work over the years, but they very nearly cost us the whole of Europe,” admitted Dumbledore. “Wizarding governments have been prohibited from raising armies for more than three hundred years. Grindelwald had clearly raised an army, but he refrained from calling it such. His men were organised under the auspices of an ancient magical order called the Knights of Walpurgis. They were supported entirely by Grindelwald's coffers, of course. The Confederation decided that Grindelwald had not raised an army, and therefore prohibited any organised effort on the part of other wizarding governments to oppose him. It was foolhardy and absurd. The Supreme Mugwump of the day, a wizard named Althorp from South Africa, wanted to open talks with Grindelwald and establish new permanent borders in Europe. Several countries threatened to pull out of the Confederation; I am sorry to say that our own was not one of them.”

The Marquis emerged from Covelli's office. “Ahh, you are speaking of our blind colleagues, yes?” He gave a Gallic shrug. “There is much you can do without the governments. You must have enough of the gold and, ehh... *avoir des couilles* ? Yes, yes... you must, ehh, have the balls.” Dumbledore pressed his hand to his forehead and winced, even as Marchbanks scowled and most of the class coughed or howled and both Seamus and Dean bowed and scraped to the Marquis.

“What, is this not so?” the Marquis pouted.

Marchbanks banged her cane against the lectern to recapture the class. “Tactful as always, Alex,” she said. “With the Marquis' gold and... considerable fortitude... behind us, we pressed ahead on our own and established a network around the world to monitor Grindelwald's forces and eventually to take them on in well-planned circumstances.”

“By 1945, there were thirteen of us,” said Dumbledore. “In addition to myself, the Marquis, Professor Marchbanks, Professor Croaker and Professor Flitwick, we were joined by Tiberius Ogden; Kanzan Yatsusana, a Japanese exile and grandson of Flamel's apprentice Takeda Yatsusana; David Narrandarrie, an Australian colleague of Kanzan; John Bear, who was the attaché to the American consul in London; Telma Sigurdsdottir, a war witch from Iceland; and two young apprentices: Lucia Greengrass, who was my apprentice and is now your History instructor, and Oscar Pomfrey, who is Madam Pomfrey's brother and was apprenticed to Professor Flitwick.”

“There was also Vladimir Karensky,” Professor Croaker added. “He was the grandson of another of Flamel's apprentices, Boris Karensky. Vladimir worked for the Russian Muggle government – the Soviets – and he was our man on the eastern front. Kanzan kept an eye on Grindelwald's Asian allies; he was based in Tibet at first, and then the Philippines. David went back and forth from south Asia to the Pacific. John went back across the pond to put a stop to a wizard named Joshua Warren, who was a Grindelwald sympathizer of some influence in two of the American governments. Telma, Tiberius and I were responsible for developing an answer to Grindelwald's magic, and Lucia eventually ended up working with us. Pomfrey and Flitwick were infiltrators; they spent most of the last two years of the war in Germany and Switzerland. Griselda here was our liaison to the ministries and the Confederation. It took until 1944 to get the Confederation to loosen the rules on armies, but then Britain and Iceland and the Scandinavian countries hit with a vengeance.”

“What were you doing, Headmaster?” Pucey asked Dumbledore.

“If you remove the head of a beast, the body dies,” Dumbledore said. “When I wasn't teaching here at Hogwarts, I was attempting to assassinate Grindelwald.”

Pucey's eyes grew wide, and Goyle said what everyone was thinking: “Bloody hell, you were out tryin' to off him on your own?”

“One point from Slytherin, Mr. Goyle,” Croaker said; “I know that it's rather shocking, but do try to mind your language.”

“I led a group of Hit Wizards in several attempts to track Grindelwald, isolate him and either bring him to justice or kill him,” Dumbledore said. “We were under no illusions that he would be subdued.”

“Eventually, we did develop a counter to Grindelwald's new magics -” Croaker began.

“How did you manage it, Professor, if Grindelwald was seeking something as powerful as Muggle weapons?” Hermione asked.

“One point from Gryffindor; raise your hand to be acknowledged, Miss Granger,” said Croaker; he went on, “It wasn't a simple matter, and unfortunately it didn't come in time to save the city of Dresden from Grindelwald's firestorms.”

“But that was from a Muggle bombing...” Hermione said uncertainly.

“The Muggle flying machines did drop explosives that day, but nothing on the order necessary to devastate an entire city,” said Dumbledore. “The Confederation used the Muggles as a means to cover Grindelwald's actions. You see, Grindelwald was so disenchanted with the ineffectiveness of the German Muggles that he began to destroy them himself. He was quite mad at the end.”

“I assume that the atomic explosions in Japan were caused by the Muggles...?” Hermione asked.

“Indeed they were,” Dumbledore said. “Kanzan and I visited one of the affected regions in the winter of 1945. I do not recommend it, even today. The echoes of death are in the very air; it is unbearable.”

Goyle raised his hand. “So, Headmaster, you and your Hit Wizards, you got 'im in the end?” he asked.

Dumbledore appeared unsteady for a moment, enough that Harry was prepared to leave his seat. “Grindelwald was completely imbued with the magic he had sought,” he said at last. “The countering ritual had to be applied directly to him. I defeated him in single combat, but we knew he could never be contained; the power within him would have continued to grow until something was consumed – either Grindelwald himself or the rest of the magical world. It took all thirteen of us to subdue the magic.” There was another lengthy pause before he declared, “Pray that you are never required to act as we did. I will say no more on this.”

The signal for the end of the session sounded, but Dumbledore motioned for the class to remain. “With regard to your assignment -” he began, to considerable grumbling; “Oh yes, I'm afraid you won't escape that. You will complete four feet of parchment on the relevance of the war with Grindelwald to today's wizarding world, with attention to politics, business or magical practice; you may choose one or all three areas of attention – it matters not to me. You will submit your assignments at the next class session. I will be grading your work personally... I believe that I've earned that right.”

Dumbledore stopped Harry as he was following the students into the corridor. “This was your first lecture on the fall of Grindelwald,” the Headmaster said; “I suspect it will not be your last. Please complete the assignment and submit it to me at our next meeting.”

October 12

Harry had thought Dumbledore would assign him one of the rooms set aside for the times when a Gryffindor served as a Head Student. A small part of him had hoped for it, in truth; he would have lived in the room once occupied by one or both of his parents. Instead, he had been given the suite of rooms intended for the Gryffindor Head of House. Professor McGonagall had moved to rooms nearer to the Great Hall and overlooking the grounds upon her elevation to Deputy Headmistress thirteen years prior; before that, the Slytherin head – a fellow called Slughorn – had held the post.

He had his own bedroom and washroom, a nicely appointed study, a public office, and a spacious sitting room with a dining table for four in one corner. His view from the sitting room was of the courtyard, and he could see the lake and one end of the Quidditch pitch from his bedroom. There was even a balcony of sorts (Covelli called it a ‘loggia’) just off the sitting room. He'd been sorely tempted one afternoon to step out and lob something at Malfoy, but had thought better of it.

The entry to his rooms was one door beyond the Gryffindor portrait hole and down a short corridor, and he often encountered his old housemates. He was hopeful that he wouldn't encounter anyone just then, as he walked stiffly up the stairs. Detheridge had shown him no mercy whatever in an exceptionally fierce fight – the Defence professor had called it a ‘contest’ as

opposed to a duel. For his part, Harry had called it painful.

He waited a moment for the small portrait beside the door to acknowledge him and then stumbled inside. As soon as his satchel was on the table, he doffed his shirt and began to painfully stretch his shoulders.

Small pops were becoming so commonplace to Harry that he scarcely noticed anymore. “Does Professor Potter be needing a healing draught?” asked a squeaky voice.

“I’m not a professor, Spat,” Harry said wearily.

“Does Not-Professor Potter be needing a healing draught? Spat returned.

“I’ll be fine,” Harry grumbled.

“Not-Professor Potter surely needs a butterbeer after being thrown about by Professor Detheridge?” Spat went on.

“Yeah... wouldn’t mind a butterbeer,” admitted Harry.

Spat went still for a moment and then said, “Spat will fetch two butterbeers and treacle tarts.”

Harry was perplexed. “Two butterbeers?”

Spat gave a sharp nod. “She-Who-Once-Knitted approaches your rooms as we speak,” he said.

“I told you not to call her that,” Harry snapped.

“Not-Professor Potter told Spat that he could no longer call She-Who-Once-Knitted by the name of She-Who-Knits,” said Spat proudly.

Harry groaned; he demanded, “You will call her by her given name – is that understood?”

“Spat is chastised, Not-Professor Potter,” said Spat.

Harry sighed. “My name is Harry – *Harry*,” he said. “How do you know she’s coming, anyway?”

Spat gave a loud sniff. “Vanilla, Number Six India Ink, and cat,” he said. “Spat shall return with butterbeers and treacle tart for Not-Professor Harry and Miss Hermione Jean Granger.”

“You’re a right pain... oi, Hermione doesn’t like treacle tart!” Harry said, but the house-elf had already popped away.

Spat re-appeared beside the table with two bottles and two plates. “Double portions of treacle tart – enjoy!” he said, and promptly disappeared.

“I know why they assigned you to me, Spat – no one else would have you!” Harry grumbled to the

empty room. He heard light rapping on his door and moved to open it.

“I wanted to see you before you met with the Board of Governors,” Hermione said. “I wanted you to know that... um...”

Harry's brow furrowed. “Hermione...? You wanted to know what, exactly?” Hermione's expression had gone from concerned to dazed, and Harry didn't understand the reason.

Hermione burred, “I... that is to say... support, you know? That I support you, and...”

“When are you off to meet with the old toads?” Ron called out from the end of the corridor.

“In a half hour,” Harry returned, and then asked more quietly, “Hermione, what's wrong?”

“Nothing... nothing! Why would you think something was wrong?” she said.

Ron came up behind her and draped his arm over her shoulder. “It sounds like you're broken, 'Mione. Harry... mate... you might want to slip on a shirt, eh?”

“I'm not broken,” Hermione said absently. “Did Professor Detheridge hurt you? You're reddened right there... just below the collarbone... um...”

“I'll be right back,” said Harry as he hurried to his bedroom.

He heard Hermione through his door as she said to Ron, “Wait a moment... did you call me 'Mione? My name is Hermione, Ronald, and I'll thank you to never call me that again!”

Harry fished through his wardrobe in search of the proper clothing for an inquisition. As he looked in the mirror and held shirts against himself, it finally sunk in that Hermione had been distracted because he was shirtless. He found himself thinking of Hermione without a shirt – something he'd not consciously contemplated before – and was very quickly as distracted as she had been.

“Did you fall asleep in there? You're going to be late!” Ron shouted. “Ooh, treacle tart... all right if I have some of this?”

“Go for it,” Harry called back.

“For the life of me, I can't understand the attraction to treacle; it's ghastly,” said Hermione.

Harry heard the scraping of a plate across the table before Ron asked, “How do you think this is going to go? You aren't worried, are you?”

“I suppose I'm not,” Harry said. “I can't really change what happens, right? I figure that if I'm sacked, I'll end up training with the Order or something.”

“You won't be going alone, then – you know that, don't you?” Ron said. “It might not be until the first of March, but I'll be there.”

“Harry's not going anywhere,” Hermione said firmly.

“I hope not,” said Ron. There was silence for a moment before he added, “Gah! That's the worst tart ever! Where did you get this – from the kitchen leavings?”

Harry finished dressing, opened his bedroom door and shouted, “Spat!”

The house-elf popped into the sitting room. “Not-Professor Harry needs something from Spat?”

“Take those treacle tarts away!” snapped Harry.

Spat looked to the table and then to Ron, who was scraping his tongue with his fingers. He said, “Spat did not bring the tarts for Not-Professor Harry's friend Mr. Weasley.”

“Take them and get out!” Harry roared.

“Harry! There's no need to shout at him!” Hermione insisted.

Spat bowed his head slightly. “Miss Hermione Jean Granger is too kind to Spat, despite the foulest of food... Spat is chastised,” he said, and disappeared with the plates of treacle tart.

“Those were for me, weren't they?” sighed Hermione.

“I have to go or else I'll be late; that wouldn't be the best idea, would it?” Harry said.

Ron gruffly patted him on the back. “I know it isn't Sunday, but why don't you sit with us for supper, eh? Then you can tell us all about the old goats -”

“Didn't you say that they were old toads?” Hermione chipped in.

Ron wagged his finger at Hermione. “Shush, you!” he said. “Better yet, Harry, we could get in some flying; there's no telling how long this weather will hold out.”

“I'll see you later,” Harry said. He wondered if they would just show him the door if the meeting went against him, but decided to stay positive.

Hermione waited until Ron disappeared down the short corridor, and then took Harry's face in her hands and kissed him soundly. “You'll be remaining here,” she said afterward.

“You can't promise that and neither can I,” Harry countered.

“That's true, but I've already planned for that,” said Hermione. “My things are packed, everything save Crookshanks. If they're foolish enough to force you out, then I'll be leaving with you. We could go to wherever my parents are. You've enough gold to hire tutors, and I'm sure that the Headmaster would go out of his way to help -”

Harry pulled her into a hug. “It won't come to that,” he said.

Hermione laid her head against his shoulder. “You'll find me afterward?” she asked.

He brushed her hair away from his mouth and said, “I promise. You're keyed to the portrait outside, by the way. I thought, er, that you might like somewhere to study other than the common room...? The balcony - or loggia or whatever it's called... it's nice out there, and not as noisy as I would have thought. This room isn't bad either.”

“I'd like that,” she said. “I suppose you do need to go.”

“Wait here if you like. I don't know how long it will be, though,” Harry said. “Do you suppose it's better or worse if it goes quickly?”

“Just go, would you?” she said, and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. He left with a warm feeling inside, with a sense of assurance that no matter what happened he would be all right. It wasn't a familiar feeling, but he liked it all the same.

The Board of Governors meeting was to take place in the anteroom to the Great Hall. Harry arrived ten minutes before it was scheduled to begin, but no one else was there. The normal furniture had been moved aside and was replaced by a long and massive table. Fifteen places were set with desk blotters, inkpots, quills and fresh parchment. Three of the chairs usually found in the room had been set against one wall. Harry took a seat in one of them and waited; he tried not to fidget.

The Board entered as one, followed by the Headmaster. Dumbledore cast Harry a very formal look, almost of a solemn quality. Harry acknowledged him with a sober nod. He hoped that this was an act, as Dumbledore's upbraiding of him before Lockhart had been. Madam Bones took the seat at the head of the table and the Governors filled in the sides. The opposite end was left for Dumbledore. One side had six places and the other seven; the seventh seat, the one closest to Dumbledore, was left empty.

“Mr. Potter, please take your seat at the table,” said Madam Bones. Harry silently walked to the empty place and seated himself.

“By your leave, Madam Chair...?” said Dumbledore.

Madam Bones set her monocle in place and nodded to the man on her right, who took up quill and parchment. “This is the one thousand nine hundred and ninety-ninth meeting of the Board of Governors of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, operating under the Charter of 996 between the Founders and the Village of Hogsmeade, whose assigns are the Ministry for Magic of Scotland and England and the Irish Magical Republic. Do all present agree that the official meeting taken today, the twelfth of October, nineteen hundred and ninety-six Anno Domini, shall satisfy the terms of the Charter? Signify by saying 'aye'.” The man with the quill took note of the acclamation.

“As the first order of business,” Madam Bones went on, “the Chair reports that two petitions for public attendance were submitted prior to this meeting, both of which were submitted in the

proper form and within the proper time. Neither petitioner, however, possessed standing for attendance. The first petition was received on the twenty-fourth of September from Mr. Gilderoy Lockhart, Esq., whose stated reason for attendance was to provide comment regarding the advisability of Mr. Harry James Potter's in-residence apprenticeship with the Headmaster. Mr. Lockhart was informed by the Secretary that he would be permitted to submit a letter for attachment to the meeting record if he so desired, and he declined to do so. The second petition was received on the twenty-sixth of September from Mr. Keith MacLeish, whose stated reason for attendance was to appear in support of Mr. Potter. Due to his status as a member of the press, Mr. MacLeish's attendance would be in violation of Board Administrative Rule 3,027. He was so informed by the Secretary, and did submit a letter for attachment. With that, the Secretary will offer introductions by way of recording our attendance. Mr. Secretary...?"

"Persimmons Westerley, a wizard of self-made means and residing in Northumbria, and the appointed Secretary of the Board, is recorded as present," the Secretary said; he stopped to mark the parchment before him.

"Amelia Susan Bones, a witch in the employ of the Ministry for Magic of Scotland and England and residing in Dorset, and the appointed Chair of the Board, is present," Madam Bones said.

A man with thinning hair and a pug nose to Madam Bones' left cleared his throat and said, "Edward Parkinson, a wizard of pure descent and accumulated means and residing in Berkshire, and the appointed Vice-Chair of the Board, shall be marked as present."

To Parkinson's left, an elderly witch wrapped in a grey fur stole smiled kindly at Harry. "I am Eldegard Trestle, young Mr. Potter, and I was well acquainted with your grandmother Elisabeth. After all these years, I believe everyone knows who I am and where I am from and such?"

Westerley took a slow, deep breath. "For the record, Madam Trestle...?" he said.

"Oh, bother," said Trestle. "Eldegard Trestle, a witch of self-made means and retired herbologist residing in Norfolk. As I am sitting here at this very table, would you please mark me as present, Perky?"

Westerley's cheeks burned red. "Madam Trestle... that was my childhood nickname," he said. "Having attained the age of seventy, I would really rather that you call me by my given name...?"

Trestle waved her hand dismissively. "When you attain one hundred, you won't care so much," she said.

A man in dark blue business robes with greying mutton chops shook his head at Trestle. "Llewelyn Ajax... I'm a wizard residing in Carmarthenshire and a stonemason, and I'm present here today," he said.

To his left was a small witch with a large hat. "Gwynn Edevane, a witch in the employ of St. Mungo's Hospital and a resident of Cornwall, is present," she said quietly.

Next to Edevane was a wide-faced man dressed in black robes with an emerald-coloured cap. "Iarlaith Madden's the name," he said; "I'm an enchanter by trade, residing in Cork since 1946. I finished my schooling at Hogwarts in 1937, as a proud member of Hufflepuff House." He looked to Westerley and added, "I'm here, a' course."

The woman seated next to Harry had a long, weathered face and wore leathers beneath her robes. "Wilna Clarsach, witch and Potions Mistress and resident of the Isle of Skye, declares that she is present," she said briskly.

All eyes turned to Harry. Dumbledore reached out and patted his hand; "Why don't you introduce yourself at this time?" the Headmaster said.

Harry cleared his throat and hoped that his voice wouldn't crack. "Er... Harry Potter... wizard and apprentice to the Honourable Albus Dumbledore. I'm residing at Hogwarts right now, but my permanent home is in... Berwickshire...? I'm attending the meeting as a guest," he managed to say.

The Headmaster gave Harry a small smile. "Albus Dumbledore, a wizard and Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, currently residing in Perth and Kinross, is in attendance as an ex-officio member of the Board," he said.

Everything about the man on Dumbledore's left appeared dark. "Lethibridge Mallory, a wizard and collector of antiquities, making his residence in Nottinghamshire, is present," he said.

The rosy cheeked witch to Mallory's left had a smile that left Harry slightly uncomfortable. It occurred to him that he was reminded of Umbridge. "Hester Halloran, a twelfth generation witch and publican residing in Galway, is present," she said with a lilt.

Next came a stern witch in a tartan who struck Harry as a heavier-set version of Professor McGonagall. "Erskine Faraday, a witch and wildcrafter residing in Fife, is present and ready to conduct business," she announced.

The last witch on the Board had long, fiery red hair pulled back into a complicated plait. She appeared younger than the rest of the members, though she was most likely older than Harry's parents would have been. "Melisende McIlvaine, a witch of independent means from Aberdeenshire, is present," she said.

Harry recognised the man to the Secretary's right. "I'm Niall Pucey, and I suspect I'm the next order of business," he said amiably.

"Mr. Pucey is correct," Madam Bones said. "Due to the dismissal of Mr. Malfoy from the Board, we have been left with a vacancy. Six applications were received for the open position. Two were disqualified due to encounters with the law enforcement wing of the Ministry in violation of the Charter. Two withdrew from consideration upon entry of the fifth applicant, Mr. Rutherford Carrows of Wiltshire. As you may be aware from recent editions of the *Daily Prophet*, Mr. Carrows finds himself under review for possible financial irregularities. This leaves us with the sixth applicant, Mr. Pucey. Speaking in favour of Mr. Pucey will be Mr. Westerley. Speaking in

objection will be Madam Halloran. You have the floor, Persimmons.”

“Thank you, Madam Chair,” Westerley said. “Mr. Pucey completed his Hogwarts education in 1971, having resided in Slytherin House. He is a solicitor and barrister admitted to the magical law societies of Scotland and England, Ireland, France and Iceland, who has worked in independent practice since completion of a three-year clerkship with former Minister Bagnold. Mr. Pucey is the current chair of the Magical Law Society of Scotland and England, and is the only living solicitor to file suit and win judgment in goblin arbitration against Gringotts Wizarding Bank itself. His youngest son, Adrian, is currently the Hogwarts Head Boy; his eldest, Randall, completed studies in 1992, and his daughter, Estrella, completed in 1993. Mr. Pucey is qualified to fill an established Slytherin seat on the Board, and is possessed of impeccable professional and personal credentials... it wouldn't hurt to have a solicitor at hand, either.”

“Reginald Gazump has been good enough for this Board for seventy years,” Llewelyn Ajax scoffed. “We've no need of contrary advice, thank you.”

“Mr. Westerley has the floor, Mr. Ajax,” said Madam Bones.

“Reggie Gazump has forgotten more about the law than he may have known in the first place,” Mr. Westerley said. “I deal with him more frequently than the rest of you, and I must say that the man might as well be a portrait for all the value he brings.”

“Our representation is not on the current agenda,” Madam Bones noted. “Do you have anything more to say as advocate, Mr. Westerley?”

“Mr. Pucey's credentials speak for themselves,” said Westerley.

“Madam Halloran, the floor is yours,” Madam Bones said.

“Mr. Malfoy was not merely a Slytherin, Madam Chair,” Halloran said. “He represented an increasingly put-upon segment of our people: those of long standing. The Malfoys have been figures of stature in the English wizarding community for at least fourteen generations; Madam Malfoy was of the Black family, which was even more established. Families of long standing stir the cauldrons of our economy and society. Mr. Pucey is obviously a man of some accomplishment, but he is only the third Slytherin in his family line and only two generations removed from manual toil. Mr. Carrows was a reasonable replacement for Mr. Malfoy. If the campaign to impugn his name has caused him to withdraw his application, then I must respectfully recommend that the two applicants who withdrew to his favour should be contacted again. Failing that, the opening should be reposted. We must ensure that all the value that Lucius brought to the board is present in his successor, not merely the superficial qualities.” With that, she sat down.

Harry clenched his hands beneath the table as she spoke, and finally opted to sit on them. Dumbledore was as implacable as ever, but it was obvious that more than one Board member was smouldering. That was enough to hold Harry's hand until he realised that he had been about to prove his instability to the Board.

Madam Bones took note of hands, and said, “Madam Trestle?”

“Thank you, dear,” Madam Trestle said in the way of a friendly grandmother. “I do not think it wise to tiptoe around Mr. Malfoy's criminal behaviour. This Board let itself be run roughshod by that man, and there are persons at this table who were favoured with Galleons.”

“Madam Trestle! This is not a place for wild accusations!” Lethibridge Mallory snapped.

“Mr. Mallory -” Madam Bones began.

“There's no need,” Madam Trestle said; “Let them spout on about the Malfoy virtues, even though they are wasting their breath and our time. I knew Abraxas Malfoy quite well, dearies, and Lucius was not an improvement on his father. This Board does not need to reproduce Mr. Malfoy's sparkling character; that is the last thing needed, in fact. Call the question, Amelia.”

“The question is called,” Madam Bones said before Mallory or Halloran could speak up. “Mr. Pucey, would you please wait outside?”

“Come, Niall; let me share your son's latest exploits,” said Dumbledore; he led Mr. Pucey into the Great Hall.

Madam McIlvaine raised her hand and said quietly, “I request a recorded vote, Madam Chair.”

“A recorded vote is requested,” said Madam Bones. “Mr. Westerley, accept the votes, please?”

“Please raise your wands to signify your vote, be it 'aye' or 'nay',” Westerley said. One after the next, the members raised their wands and cast faint glows.

The parchment before the Secretary glowed briefly as well. “Six votes were cast in favour, and five against,” he said.

“A majority of the whole is required, Madam Chair,” Parkinson said.

“That's true, Madam Chair,” said Westerley.

“In addition to breaking ties, I am allowed a vote when a vote of the whole is required, Eddie,” Madam Bones said. She raised her wand and cast a green light. “My vote is 'aye'.”

Westerley wrote on the parchment for a moment, and then said, “With seven votes in favour, Mr. Pucey is appointed to the Board pursuant to the Charter.”

Mr. Pucey was brought back to the room and took an oath supervised by Madam Bones and Dumbledore. Madam Bones allowed some polite banter for a few minutes and then announced, “We do have a full agenda, and there are several unexpected budget items. We shall move to the second item on the agenda, which regards our guest. Under the terms of Mr. Potter's dismissal as a regular student, the Board authorised Headmaster Dumbledore to use the full means of Hogwarts to find a suitable alternative for Mr. Potter's continued education. The Headmaster subsequently

offered Mr. Potter an in-residence apprenticeship for a period of not less than two years and not more than three years. As Mr. Ajax has strenuously argued, it was the intention of the Board to see Mr. Potter removed from Hogwarts facilities on the grounds that his presence might pose a risk to the safety of other students. Therefore, by initiation of Mr. Ajax and Madam Clarsach, the Board shall review Mr. Potter's educational performance since the first of September as well as his scholastic disciplinary record. Professor?"

"Madam Chair, that is not exactly what I had in mind," Ajax said. "I intend for the Board to consider all of Mr. Potter's activities since the Board issued his dismissal, whether those activities occurred at Hogwarts or otherwise. His actions and behaviour reflect upon this institution."

"Only Mr. Potter's actions in his capacity as an apprentice are relevant," Madam Edevane said. "Who speaks in favour of Mr. Potter?"

"I must recuse from the debate and any subsequent votes, due to my fiduciary responsibility to Mr. Potter," Madam Bones said. "It goes without saying that I support his continued residence at Hogwarts."

Mr. Parkinson nodded in formal fashion. "Thank you for your disclosure, Madam Chair. In that event, I shall govern the proceedings. Is there a speaker who has familiarity with Mr. Potter, other than the Headmaster? You will of course be given the opportunity to comment prior to any judgment, Professor... no one...?"

"If no one wishes to speak as an advocate, then each member in turn receives the opportunity to make comment," the Secretary said.

"I am aware of the rules, Westerley," Mr. Parkinson said snappishly. "Madam Trestle, you have the floor."

"He's a powerful young man, Mr. Potter is," said Madam Trestle. "I, for one, would rather have him here at Hogwarts than elsewhere. We know that You-Know-Who is afraid of the Professor, and it stands to reason that he's probably unnerved by Mr. Potter as well. Who else has gotten the better of that monster so many times? Should we keep a watchful eye on him? Perhaps. Should we eject him from the premises? Certainly not!"

"It's precisely that power that endangers Hogwarts," countered Mr. Ajax. "Frankly, even without the issue of uncontrolled magic and behaviour, I think that the boy endangers this school. Yes, the Dark Lord is interested in him. Why, pray tell, would that keep him away? More likely, it will draw him here. He has to go, and none too soon."

Madam Edevane said, "This is a waste of our time and efforts. Mr. Potter is the Headmaster's apprentice. We empowered the Headmaster to find a solution for Mr. Potter's education, and he did so. Mr. Potter has done no harm to Hogwarts. May I remind my colleagues that we were the ones who approved Gilderoy Lockhart's hiring as a Defence professor at this institution? May I also remind my colleagues that Mr. Lockhart was a failure and an embarrassment? The man even now acknowledges his crimes; it is merely his long-term stay at St. Mungo's that stilled the hand

of law enforcement. I fail to see how Mr. Potter's behaviour toward Mr. Lockhart was anything more than the rashness of youth, coupled with the abominable actions of a man who should have known better.”

“Gwynn's said it for me,” Mr. Madden told everyone.

Madam Clarsach peered down her nose at Harry for a few moments before she spoke. “I am largely in agreement with Mr. Ajax. However, I do believe we have an obligation to assure that alternate arrangements for Mr. Potter are appropriate and safe. We should acknowledge that he is at some risk of harm, and act accordingly.”

Dumbledore steepled his fingers beneath his chin. “My feelings on this matter should be abundantly clear to all,” he said.

“You put your foot in it, Dumbledore,” Mr. Mallory said with a scowl. “You knew very well that this decision on your part flouted the will of the Board. It's unfortunate that Mr. Potter will pay for your transgression, but the Wizengamot decided he's to be treated as a man... so I say to Mr. Potter: best wishes and thank you for your service to Hogwarts. I don't believe he should be here on the morrow.”

Madam Halloran gave a thin lipped smile to Harry. “I do believe you mean well, boy, and you certainly did our world a service sixteen years ago – however unwittingly. Nonetheless... once a rule breaker, always a rule breaker. I'm a publican by trade; as such, I bear not a little affection for rogues. There's no room for it in a school, however. It's enough that you've run roughshod in your staff selections this year, Headmaster – but this? If you want to master Mr. Potter, then I suggest you resign your post and take your apprentice to somewhere more appropriate for the task.”

“Half of the people in this room are cowards, and half are dark – some very near to the point of evil,” said Madam Faraday. “Unfortunately, it's for the most part the same half.”

“Madam, you will keep a civil tongue!” Mr. Parkinson huffed.

“Which half are you, Eddie?” she demanded. “Let's not mess about, fellow members. Mr. Potter and the Headmaster stand between us and the ruin of our world. Even those of you who support that monster's aims should know that your lives won't be worth a tinker's damn in the end -”

“Madam Faraday!” shouted Mr. Parkinson. “No one at this table rises in support of You-Know-Who!”

“Of course not,” Madam Faraday returned; “Why rise when one can pass Galleons under the table?”

Mr. Parkinson leapt to his feet. “That's quite enough!”

Madam Bones said, “I quite agree. Are you finished, Erskine?” Madam Faraday replied with a harsh nod.

“Mr. Potter should remain here, where the school may benefit from his skills, the students may benefit from his leadership, and the community may find reassurance in his presence and continued training,” said Madam McIlvaine.

“This is... enlightening,” Mr. Pucey said. “I don't have anything to add just now.”

“Nor do I,” said Mr. Westerley.

“The motion on the agenda is to order Headmaster Dumbledore to remove his apprentice, Harry James Potter, from the buildings and grounds of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry effective immediately,” said Mr. Parkinson. “I call for a recorded vote, with the members identified by vote in the public record.”

“Please raise your wands to signify your acceptance of Mr. Parkinson's call for a recorded vote with the members identified by vote in the public record, be it 'aye' or 'nay',” Westerley said. Again wands were raised and again the parchment glowed. Six were in favour and five against.

“Please raise your wands to signify your vote on the following: that Headmaster Dumbledore be ordered to remove his apprentice, Harry James Potter, from the buildings and grounds of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry effective immediately,” Westerley said. Five wands quickly lit green and five red glows joined them.

Mr. Pucey raised his wand, and said, “I have a larger stake in this than many of you. My son is the Head Boy, as you all know. Knowing that this was to be on the agenda, I sought his opinion on this matter. Adrian has a keen eye for the truth of any matter, both on the surface and beneath. I trust his judgment.” His wand lit red, and he added, “I, for one, expect that we shan't be revisiting this unless there's a very good reason...?”

“Ajax, Clarsach, Halloran, Mallory and Parkinson vote 'aye'; Edevane, Madden, McIlvaine, Pucey, Trestle and Westerley vote 'nay',” Mr. Westerley reported; “The motion has failed.”

Shortly after that Harry was ushered out of the room. Madam Bones and those who voted in favour of Harry all shook his hand; he was clapped on the shoulder and hugged by Madam Trestle and trapped into sitting for photographs with Madam Faraday and Mr. Madden. Madam Halloran and Madam Clarsach engaged in pleasantries with him as well, and even Mr. Parkinson gave him a friendly handshake and said that he was just fulfilling his responsibilities. Neither Mr. Mallory nor Mr. Ajax bothered with pretence; they clearly wanted nothing to do with him.

Mr. Pucey caught Harry at the door. “Mr. Potter,” he whispered, “Adrian can take care of himself, of course... but he's taking some risks that give me pause. I think he's in the right to take control of his House, but still... This may seem odd to you, but I wonder if you might keep an eye on him? I'm not asking you to befriend him or cross house boundaries or anything of that sort, but I would sleep better at night knowing that someone without an agenda was watching his back.”

“I'm an apprentice, Mr. Pucey; there aren't any house boundaries for me,” Harry said. “I don't know him well, but Adrian seems a good sort.”

“I wish he'd keep his head down, but he's an ambitious young man,” said Mr. Pucey.

“There's nothing wrong with that,” Harry said. “Besides, if a Slytherin's willing to play fair on the Quidditch pitch then I have to stick up for him – it's only right.”

Mr. Pucey grinned for a moment, and then noticeably straightened. “The Potter family has embodied its reputation for courage and honour in its dealings with my family across the generations. The House of Pucey will never stand against you,” he said in very formal fashion.

Harry wasn't certain what to say and settled for inclining his head in a slight bow, which Mr. Pucey returned. He resolved to enquire with Ted Tonks about Mr. Pucey's reputation. A Slytherin ally would hardly be a bad thing, he figured, but the last remarks made him wonder if the man was simply paying off some sort of debt by voting in his favour.

October 19

“It's an interesting place to hold a meeting,” Harry said to Dumbledore as they neared the Whomping Willow.

“The Shrieking Shack has the advantage of its reputation,” Dumbledore said. “Of course, we've enhanced that somewhat; I am not averse to releasing the occasional frightening sound or an apparent spectre.”

Harry laughed. “I suppose the Shrieking Shack does have to shriek now and again,” he said.

“Quite so,” said Dumbledore. “I take it that you can disable the Willow? I am afraid that I do not move as fast as was once the case.”

Harry rolled beneath the flailing limbs and struck the proper knot. Dumbledore shuffled to the concealed entrance and followed Harry into the tunnel that led to the Shack.

“This seems... cleaner,” Harry observed.

“All the better for we aged sorts to make the journey,” Dumbledore returned. “I am also grateful to the Weasleys for all the changes that they made to the interior. Not only is the Shack an acceptable place to meet, but also to house persons who may prefer to remain unseen.” He leaned heavily on his walking stick for a moment, and then added, “This is a greater distance than I had recalled.”

“Should we stop for a bit?” asked Harry.

“Only for a moment,” Dumbledore answered; “We must not keep the others waiting.”

They were met at the entrance to the Shack by Lupin; Shona Malloch stood behind him. Lupin strode forward and pulled Harry into a fierce hug. “You did your best for Heather – you did your absolute best,” he said unevenly.

Shona traded places with him. “At least yeh popped that bastard,” she said.

“It wasn’t enough,” Harry said firmly. “How is she? Is she at all better...?”

“You have some people to meet,” Lupin cut in, his voice still shaking. “Would it be all right if we were to talk afterward?”

“Of course... that is, if the Headmaster agrees?” Harry returned.

“The portion of the meeting that concerns you will last a very short time,” said Dumbledore; “I would take it as a favour if you were to remain with Remus and Miss Malloch.” Lupin nodded warmly, but there was no warmth in his eyes - nor was there anger, Harry thought. His eyes were deadened, and that left Harry with an unsteady feeling.

Dumbledore led Harry into the room where his birthday party had begun; it seemed much longer than two-and-a-half months since that night. There were fourteen chairs in a circle, and two remained unfilled. Most of the dozen people who waited were sitting quietly. When they entered, all conversation ceased.

“I had not thought that a time would come when we would all gather again,” Dumbledore said into the silence, “yet here we are – all save one. It is time to meet the reason we are assembled. This is Harry Potter.”

Covelli gave a small wave; she still seemed tired from whatever had happened to her in the classroom, but otherwise unharmed. Detheridge and Flitwick were present, as were Croaker, Marchbanks and the Marquis.

A man who appeared close in age to Croaker and Marchbanks stood slowly. “I am Tiberius Ogden, young man. I knew your great-great grandfather Roger, as well as your grandfather Alexander from his days on the Wizengamot. Never became closely acquainted with Zebulon... he was a testy fellow. In any case...”

Ogden moved forward and took Harry’s hand; Harry was so shocked that he didn’t react. He peered closely at the scar on the back of Harry’s hand. “I was informed of this, Mr. Potter. Shocking business, that is. I knew Madam Umbridge would be nothing but trouble, and my suspicions were borne out.” He released Harry’s hand and then shook it. “It is a pleasure to meet you. There’s a fair bit of Roger in your features.”

“You may not remember me,” said the next man; “I am John Bear.”

“Of course I remember you, sir,” Harry said immediately. Bear had made a strong impression upon him at MacLeish’s gathering. “I still hope that the Headmaster will let me visit your school,” he added.

“I hope that will come to pass,” said Bear.

“One never knows, Harry,” was all Dumbledore would say.

“I may need your assistance in solving a mystery that affects my kinsmen,” Bear said. “It pertains to tribal lands – some hunting grounds and a ritual site. Would you be willing to lend your aid?”

“Er... I can’t imagine how I would help, but I’ll try,” said Harry.

“Good man, Mr. Potter,” Bear said. “We will talk more, I’m sure.”

Dumbledore stepped forward and introduced the man seated next to Bear. “This is David Narrandarrie,” he said; “He was one of the people whom you contacted as a prospective tutor.”

“Oh, you’re the expert on dreamtime!” Harry said.

Narrandarrie was a short man, not so much as Flitwick but several inches shorter than Harry. He had dark weathered skin that crinkled deeply around his eyes when he smiled. “No one is truly an expert,” he said in a high, soft voice. “I have lived with the dreamtime all of my life, even in the times when dreams were unwelcome things. That which you would ask of me is a difficult path to walk. I will help you find the path in the springtime, and you will decide whether to walk upon it.”

“Er... yes, sir,” Harry said. He reached to shake Narrandarrie’s hand, but instead received a peculiar bow.

“Some of Master David’s words are spoken for effect,” the next man in the circle said to Harry. “Take the ideas seriously, young Potter, but the man himself should not be taken in the same way.” He rose and performed a crisp bow. “I am Kanzan Yasutsana.”

Harry turned to Dumbledore. “I thought you said you hadn’t warned off the people I contacted for tutoring,” he said. “You said that Mr. Yasutsana was very hard to reach, didn’t you?”

“I did say that Kanzan is booked years in advance,” Dumbledore confirmed.

“My old friend is most persuasive,” Yasutsana said with a toothy grin. “I had hoped that we would not see another dragon rise, but it was not to be... and so we in turn rise again from the ashes.”

There was a woman to Yasutsana’s left. Harry couldn’t guess her age; she could have been anywhere between forty and one hundred, he decided. She had flaming red hair that was streaked here and there with white. It fell to the small of her back. She was about Harry’s height and wore unusual robes that had no sleeves. Her arms were considerably more muscular than Harry’s own. “I am Telma Sigurdsdottir,” she said. “I will teach you to wage war.” With that, she sat down.

The last man who Harry didn’t know seemed very unassuming in contrast to the others. He wore a black robe and a black shirt with grey trousers beneath. It wasn’t until the man shook his hand that Harry noticed that the man’s unusual shirt collar.

“My name is Oscar Pomfrey, Harry,” he said. There was something oddly calming about the man’s voice. “Yes, I’m a relation of Poppy – her brother, to be precise.”

“You’re dressed like a vicar, aren’t you?” said Harry.

“That would be because I am a vicar,” Pomfrey said with a chuckle. “I was ordained in 1953, and led parishes for forty years. These days I’m merely the rector for the Chapel of Saint Columba; it’s a chapel-of-ease located about ten miles from here. Nearly all of my congregants are Muggle-born wizards, actually.”

“Forty-three years of stuff and nonsense, Reverend – it’s an amazement to me,” said Croaker.

“And after all this time, you can’t simply leave it alone, Algie?” Ogden growled.

Pomfrey gently shook his head. “Mr. Croaker refers to me as the Reverend Pomfrey. He means it as a term of derision, but I’m honestly not bothered by it – it’s accurate, after all.”

Dumbledore held up his hands. “If we could put aside the bickering for the moment, gentlemen...? You all know that I would not have brought us together casually. Even as the severity of the war with Voldemort grew in the 1970s, I did not call upon some of you.”

“You would not bring us together merely to help instruct your apprentice,” Yatsusana said. “It is clear that Mr. Potter is to play a role in Voldemort’s demise.”

“It is more than that,” said Dumbledore. “Harry, may I have your permission to share Madam Trelawney’s information?”

Harry gave a shrug. “I can’t imagine anyone who helped to defeat Grindelwald would betray us. Besides, it’s almost for certain that Voldemort has all of it now.”

“That’s not exactly true, Mr. Potter,” Bear said. “There is one not among us, and it’s no accident – is it, Albus?”

“It is true that I do not believe Vladimir can be trusted,” Dumbledore admitted.

“...and well you shouldn’t, Albus. It’s almost certain he’s tried to kill more than one of us over the years,” Marchbanks said with her customary bellow.

“Merciful Merlin, Griselda!” said Ogden. “I understand that hearing charms have improved a good deal; perhaps you should try a new one!”

“Now then, to the reason we are gathered:” Dumbledore cut in. He spoke the entire prophecy and the room went quiet.

“Your birthday is at the end of July?” Bear asked Harry.

“July the thirty-first,” Harry replied.

“Clearly your parents must have defied this wizard thrice?” confirmed Yatsusana.

Harry said, “So did Neville Longbottom’s parents, but –”

Sigursdottir finished, “– but you bear the mark. It is a rune of strength set against evil.”

The Marquis broke another period of silence. “I was one hundred and forty-three years of age on the day I killed Trampuso. Albus, he was more than one hundred years of age when we faced Grindelwald. Lucia, she was perhaps twenty in those days? The Darkening nearly broke her – and I do not say this to offend, dear girl. I retreated from the living for fifteen years after Trampuso.” He looked to Harry. “Monsieur Potter, you will not yet be twenty when you face this Voldemort, and you are the one to do the killing. This is not the burden for one so young. This is why I fell to the madness and let Albus bring me to his Hogwarts, yes? Albus needed the twelve. There are thirteen here, Monsieur Potter, and your own will come to you in time. We do not come together... ehh... casually. We are old, most of us, but we will do what we are able.” He rose to his feet, embraced Harry, and kissed him on each cheek. “We will do what we must.”

“Well spoken, Alex,” boomed Marchbanks. “It’s good to see that you can still rise to the occasion.”

The Marquis raised his head imperiously. “I assure you, Madam that the Marquis de Maupassant can always rise to the occasion,” he declared.

“I have no expectation that all of you will remain until the fateful day comes, not even those who are now teaching at Hogwarts,” Dumbledore said. “I do hope that even if you cannot bring yourselves to assist me, you will nonetheless choose to assist Harry when and how you are able.”

“You would not have asked and we would not have come if it were not so,” said Narrandarrie.

Sigurdsdottir stood from her chair. “We will fight. It is our way,” she said. Within moments, it was clear to Harry that Dumbledore’s team would help as they could.

“So, Professor...” Harry said mischievously to Dumbledore, “if my mum and dad and the rest from the first war with Voldemort were the ‘old crowd’, then what’s this group?”

Dumbledore pulled a wry grin and said, “This would be the old-old crowd, I imagine. Why don’t you go to Remus now?”

After a round of handshakes and solemn promises, Harry left the room to look for Lupin. He found him, along with Shona, in the open area at the foot of the stairs.

“Are they going to stand with you?” Lupin asked.

“It looks that way,” said Harry. “How is Heather doing?”

“Yeh cut right to it, don’t yeh?” Shona said. “She’s forgotten so much, she... och, you tell it, Remus.” Her eyes squeezed shut and she let out odd hiccups; Harry realized that she was trying not to cry.

Lupin's expression went cold. "Lockhart didn't direct the oblivation in the way that should have been done. It's a wonder that those musicians weren't affected as badly, but I suppose Heather was spelled first. She hasn't only forgotten the events of that evening; she's forgotten a fair portion of the past several years. There are bits and pieces there, but each time she tries to recall it... each time it's the same: she descends into the same sort of madness. St. Mungo's certainly didn't serve her well." Harry felt a rush of seething anger from Lupin; he quickly took the steps to clear his mind.

"That effin' place... and what sort o' saint is Mungo – can yeh tell me that?" Shona snapped. "They knew that magic was no good fer Heather, but did that stop 'em? No! One of those healers of yours, she was tired of listening ta Heather screaming, so she tried ta put her out with a wand. It took *three days* ta settle Heather again, and that healer's lucky ta be in one piece."

"Heather's mind magics lashed out, and she had absolutely no control," Lupin explained. "They were ready to turn her over to the Department of Mysteries, Harry – I firmly believe that. As soon as she was calmed enough, we spirited her away."

"Where is she then...?" Harry asked. "She's here, isn't she?"

Harry started toward the stairs, but Lupin stopped him. "Harry, it took her two days to recall who Shona was. I can't imagine she'll remember you at all. She... she's taken to calling me her d-dad, and that would never have happened..."

"If yeh want ta see her, yeh'll have ta leave yer wand with Remus," Shona said. "I don't want yeh looking in her eyes fer long, neither – is that understood?"

"I understand," Harry said. He drew his wand and placed it in Lupin's hand.

"Are yeh sure yeh want ta do this?" Shona asked him gravely.

"I have to see her," said Harry.

Shona pointed down the small corridor that started beside the stairs. "Second door on yer left," she said.

Harry knocked on the door. "Er... may I come in?" he said.

"It's open," said a voice from the other side. It didn't sound like Heather's voice, he thought; there was something hollow about it.

Heather sat on her bed in night clothes, with her arms gathered around her knees. Her hair was neatly brushed but seemed dull. There were dark circles beneath her haunted eyes. She looked to him with a too-quick movement and studied him intently. "I don't know you... but I know you," she said.

"I'm... I'm Harry," he said.

“I’m Heather,” she said.

“I know that,” he returned.

She laughed softly and said, “I suppose you do. Mum and Dad talked of someone named Harry, so you must be him. That must be what I remember... but I remember more than that. I do know you, but I can’t put it together...”

“Don’t try to remember,” Harry told her. “I’m, er, something like a cousin, I suppose. Remus was a good friend of my dad and mum, almost a brother. He would have taken me in when they died if it had been allowed.”

“So you could have been my brother,” she said. “I like that idea: a brother. I wonder what it’s like to have a brother? You don’t have one, do you?”

“That’s right,” he said; “How would you know that?”

Heather rolled her eyes. “You said that Dad would have taken you in. If you had a brother, you’d have said that he would have taken the both of you in. I’m not stupid; I just can’t remember anything to save my life.” She patted the edge of the bed and added, “You can sit, if you’d like. I don’t bite... not much, anyway.”

Harry laughed. “That sounds like the Heather I know,” he said.

One corner of her mouth curled upward. “Really? That’s good, then.”

“Have they told you what happened?” he asked.

Heather’s eyes drifted away from Harry. “They told me about magic, if that’s what you mean,” she said. “I’m supposed to know that I’ve forgotten things, but I’m supposed to try not to remember them – how mad is that?”

“It sounds mad, doesn’t it?” Harry agreed. “Was it hard for you, being at St. Mungo’s?”

Her hands twitched. “I don’t want to talk about that place,” she snapped.

“Then we won’t talk about it,” Harry said. “Where are you going to go? Has anyone said anything about that? You aren’t staying here, are you?”

“No, we’re not staying here. That’s a good thing; it’s a drab place, don’t you think? I don’t know where we’re going. I don’t think my mum and dad know, either,” she said. “Do you like my mum and dad? I know you said you might have lived with Dad, but that doesn’t mean you like them?”

“Yeah, I like them,” he said. “Shona’s... interesting.”

“That’s a nice way of putting it,” she chuckled. “I remember her a little, but it’s from a long time ago. I... I don’t remember Dad at all, really. He really seems to care about me – I guess that’s

enough, right?”

“He does care about you,” Harry said.

“They seem lost, don’t you think. I know I’m more than a little lost... I guess we’ll all be lost together,” she said. “I think they want to leave the country, but Mum owns a restaurant and Dad is worried about his work or something like that.”

“You’d be safer outside Britain, I think,” he said.

“I got the sense we’re in some sort of danger,” said Heather. “Is it that man who did this to me? Do they think he’ll come after me again?”

Harry hesitated and then said, “It’s something like that.”

“It’s all frightening, really,” she admitted. “Should I be frightened?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I’ve... I’ve been worried about you, you know? All I knew was that you had been hurt; I didn’t know how badly. I didn’t know if you remembered anything at all, if you were just lying in a bed somewhere...”

“It’s not that bad, not as long as I keep from thinking too much about what happened,” she told him.

Harry was struck by an idea, an idea that just seemed right to him. “Do you like the countryside?” he asked.

“The countryside? Fields, trees, gardens, that sort of thing?” she asked in return.

“Right in one – do you remember that sort of thing?” he wondered.

“I remember things like that, yeah. I like the countryside all right,” she said.

“I can take you somewhere, all three of you. It’s a bit isolated; there are only two other people there, and two house-elves,” he said. “Do you know what house-elves are?”

“Are those the little green men, the ones who fall all over themselves trying to be helpful?” she asked. “I saw them once or twice at... at that place.”

“Those were house-elves,” Harry confirmed. “There aren’t any people your age; is that a problem?”

“Harry, I don’t remember anyone but Mum, not really. I think I might recall you, but I’m not sure of it. I’ll be fine wherever we go,” Heather said. “Is there a nice house there – nicer than this, at least?”

“Oh, yes,” Harry said with a smile; “No worries there.”

“Why don’t you call for Mum and Dad? We can see what they have to say on it,” Heather said.

Remus and Shona came when called. Shona gave a small smile when she entered the room. “Yeh look better than this mornin’, Heather; it’s good to see,” she said.

“Harry’s had an idea,” Heather said.

“I have somewhere for you to stay, somewhere safe,” Harry told them.

“Harry... that’s very kind of you, but we’ll work it out somehow,” said Lupin.

“I’ve the restaurant ta think of,” Shona added.

“What it is worth – the restaurant, I mean,” Harry asked.

Shona’s eyes narrowed. “What’s it worth...? Och, yeh’d better not be thinkin’ what I think yer thinkin’.”

Harry pressed, “It can’t be worth more than a million pounds, can it?”

Shona broke into coughing, and Lupin frowned; “I understand what you’re doing, but you must know how I feel about charity,” he said.

Harry sighed. “Do you understand? Do you, really? Look, I’m partly responsible for this. I didn’t wave the wand, but you know what I mean, Remus.”

“You’re hardly responsible for this, Harry,” Lupin snapped; “I think we’re all quite clear on who the responsible party is.”

Harry turned to Heather. “I never meant to hurt you. I’m going to make this right.”

“Remus said yeh’ve got a lot of money, but yeh need ta think of yer future, boy,” Shona said.

“Please, Remus... let me take the three of you there. If you don’t like it, I’ll bring you back and we can figure out something else,” Harry said. “Shona, if you decide to leave the country, then I’m going to buy L’Oiseau Chanteur. You can help me find a new chef if you like, or recommend someone, or I can just give the place over to The Greek – whatever you think is best. I want to do this. I need to do this.”

Shona let out a long breath. “I don’t like it, but it can’t hurt ta look. Remus... what do yeh think?”

“All right, Harry,” Remus said; “I’ll give in that much, at least. How do you plan for us to get there? I can’t imagine Albus will let you be away for long, if at all.”

“I’m going to try something,” Harry said. He turned to Heather and added, “Don’t be afraid, all right? I promise that nothing will hurt you.”

“I believe you; I don’t know why, but I do,” she said.

Harry called out, “Fawkes? Could you come here, please?” He had no idea what would happen, if anything. A few seconds later, the brilliant red phoenix appeared at the centre of the room in a blazing flash.

“Lord in Heaven above... what is it...?” Shona whispered.

Heather scooted backward until she was pressed against the headboard. Fawkes landed on the end of the bed and slowly walked forward. “It won’t hurt me?” she asked in a small voice.

“He won’t hurt you,” Harry assured her. “Fawkes is a phoenix.”

“A phoenix... he’s named after another animal?” she asked.

“No, it’s not Fox; it’s Fawkes, like Guy Fawkes,” Harry said.

“He’s named after someone who wanted to blow up Parliament, eh? I guess I *have* to like you,” Heather said.

Fawkes cocked his head to one side and closely regarded her. Without warning, he flapped his wings once and landed atop Heather’s knees.

“OH!” she shrieked.

Fawkes responded with a long, high trill.

“Oh... oh, my!” Heather said to Fawkes. “You sing! I used to sing, Mum says, but... but I can’t remember how to do it. I mean, I can still carry a tune, but she says I did a bit more than that. I remember being on stages, and street corners when I was really young, but I can’t hear it in my head.”

Fawkes trilled again; the pitch rose and then fell.

“Fawkes, could you take us somewhere? I know that it’s probably up to the Headmaster, but I thought that I would ask you first,” Harry said.

Fawkes let out something that was more chirp than trill, and hopped from Heather’s knees to Harry’s shoulder.

“I believe your answer is ‘yes’, Harry,” Lupin said with a smile.

Harry said, “Listen carefully, right? Brucewood is a manor house that sits on twelve hundred acres of gardens and forest on the west-central coast of Victoria Island in British Columbia.”

Lupin blinked hard twice. “Brucewood... didn’t that belong to your grandmother’s family? I’m sure that I remember James speaking of it, or perhaps it was your grandfather...?”

“That’s right,” Harry said.

“British Columbia? That’s in Canada, right?” Heather said.

“How do you remember that, but not...?” asked Lupin.

“It’s like amnesia, they told us,” Shona said.

“You can’t remember that it’s amnesia?” Heather asked, and then started to laugh.

Fawkes squeezed his talons and Harry jumped. “I think he’s ready to go,” Harry said. “Shall we do this in one trip or two, Fawkes?” Fawkes tugged Harry toward Heather.

“I’d say that’s two trips, wouldn’t you?” Lupin laughed.

Harry motioned for Heather to stand. He said, “All right, wrap your arms around me – tightly – and then close your eyes. I promise that it’ll be all right.” She held him tight but it was awkward; it felt nothing like before, Harry thought. In an instant, they were bathed in warmth and hurtled through darkness. By the time Heather drew a sharp breath, they stood at the edge of Brucewood’s wards. He allowed Heather to pass through, and they walked through the trees until the gardens and the house came into view.

“Oh!” she gasped. “Will you look at that? It’s unbelievable...”

“Do you think you’d be able to stay here? It might be a long time, Heather – a year or more,” Harry said.

She looked at him in disbelief. “Are you joking? Oh yes, this will do! I can’t wait to see the house.”

Harry returned with Remus and Shona a short time later, and they were eventually won over by Heather’s enthusiasm and the Grangers’ welcoming tone. Mr. and Mrs. Granger seemed genuinely happy to have company, however extended, and both Dobby and Winky were eager to have more people to serve. The wards and the Fidelius charm didn’t seem to have any negative effect on Heather, and Harry was glad for that. He took a small package from the Grangers for Hermione and then returned with Shona to the Shrieking Shack. Harry promised to invite Ted Tonks the next day to see about the restaurant, and Shona resolved to begin making arrangements for leaving St. Ebb.

Dumbledore and his old colleagues were still in the upper room, talking and laughing and apparently making plans. Harry was welcomed back into the room. “You borrowed Fawkes, I understand?” the Headmaster said.

“I’ve made arrangements for Remus and Shona and Heather,” Harry said.

Dumbledore’s brow rose. “Is that so? Will they be leaving the country?”

“Yes, and I can’t say anything more,” said Harry.

“You cannot or will not?” Dumbledore asked.

“I can’t say,” Harry confirmed.

“An inspired choice,” Dumbledore said with a smile. “Do you require any assistance?”

“I’ll have to see Mr. Tonks tomorrow – will that be a problem?” Harry asked.

“I would imagine it is a matter of estate management,” Dumbledore answered. “Will you require anything else?”

“I have a question, actually,” Harry said. “How would I go about hiring a healer?”

“You would like to hire the exclusive services of a healer to treat Miss Magruder?” Dumbledore asked. Harry nodded.

Dumbledore clapped his hands to gather the attention of the others in the room. “Mr. Potter has need of a healer – no, no, not for himself. He wishes to hire a healer exclusively to care for a friend who was given a faulty obliviation.”

“This would be the young girl in the *Daily Prophet*?” Flitwick asked.

“That is correct. I can imagine that the term of employment might be twelve months or more,” said Dumbledore.

“That will be most expensive,” Yatsusana said.

“Where would this take place?” asked Bear.

“I... can’t say,” Harry returned.

“Can you say on which continent?” Bear countered.

“North America,” Harry said.

“I’ll have some names for you by the end of next week,” Bear told him. Harry’s shoulders lowered noticeably and he let out a long breath.

Dumbledore let his hand rest on Harry’s shoulder. “Why don’t you return to the castle, Harry?” he said. “Marcus will walk with me when I return.”

Harry nodded, even as his shoulders fell further. He wandered down the stairs and then out the stable doors to the ward-concealed patio that the Weasleys had left behind. Hogsmeade was busy, as it was an open weekend for the students. He thought he saw Dean and Seamus strolling down the high street. He didn’t see any distinctive red hair. He hoped that Hermione had stayed in the

castle, perhaps even in his rooms. It was a hard thing for him to admit to himself –a very unaccustomed thing – but he needed her just then.

*Next: **Chapter Forty – Les Chevaliers de Saint-Pierre***

Harry Potter and the Years of Rebellion

Les Chevaliers de Saint-Pierre

Chapter Forty

LES CHEVALIERS DE SAINT-PIERRE

November 11

“Ron, take your feet off the table,” Harry said idly.

Ron snorted, “Are you turning into my Mum?”

Harry looked up from the thick tome he was poring through. “Only if you keep your feet on the table,” he said.

“Crikey, you’re an irritable one!” Ron protested. “See? My feet are flat on the floor – are you happy now?”

“It’s not my furniture,” Harry explained.

“That’s what a good cleaning charm is for, Harry,” Ron sighed; “Are you going Muggle on me?”

Neville slammed his book closed in disgust. “If Detheridge asks for a spell, wouldn’t you think it would be in one of the books he’s referenced?” he fumed.

Harry set aside his book and capped his inkpot. “I’m picking up a fair bit from him,” he said to Neville; “What’s the spell?”

“Detheridge said that there’s a healing spell specially crafted for scratches and small cuts, but I can’t find anything other than *Episkey*,” Neville complained.

“He must mean *Consanescio*,” Harry said immediately.

Ron put down his Muggle Studies text. “Consa...huh? What’s this about?” he asked.

Harry went to the table in the corner of the informal study hall that his sitting room had somehow become. “Budge over, Finnigan,” he said.

“A fellow might think you own the place, Potter,” Seamus laughed.

Harry pulled up his sleeve and set his forearm on the tabletop. “Now, *Consanescio* feels a bit twitchy,” he explained. “The tip of your wand actually needs to touch the cut, because it’s not a wide area spell like *Episkey* .”

Neville, Ron, Seamus, Lavender, Parvati, Katie Bell, Terry Boot, Susan Bones and Ernie Macmillan all crowded around as Harry ran his wand along his arm and silently cast a spell that left behind a shallow cut. Most of them winced as blood welled up.

Harry told them calmly, “It’s a different sort of grip... Watch what I’m doing, right? *Consanescio* .”

“I’ve, er... never seen a wand held like a quill before,” Susan managed to say.

Parvati was less affected by the sight; she said, “You hold your wand that way for cosmetic spells used around the eyes.”

“I’ve never used any eye glamours,” Susan said.

“Are you thinking of colour charms for the eyelids, Parvati?” Lavender explained. “You know, this is probably the best way to hold a wand for any sort of fine work...”

“Two points to Lavender,” Harry muttered as he closed the last portion of the cut on his arm.

“I can’t see where the cut was, not a trace of it,” said Ron.

“That’s the idea,” Harry said. “I can’t see how it would be useful in a fight, but it does keep scars from forming... takes a bit out of you, though.” He flexed his wand hand gingerly.

“Brilliant... *consanescio* ... Thanks, Harry,” Terry said.

“You’ve still got it, mate,” said Seamus; “So when are you taking over the Duelling Club?”

“Taking it over? No thank you – I’m happy to leave it to Tonks and Bill,” Harry said.

“I like Tonks well enough, but she isn’t half the teacher that you are,” Katie countered, just as the door from the corridor opened hard.

Hermione stomped inside and threw her book bag to the floor in disgust. “Tonks is twice the teacher that Professor Croaker is – he’s a horrible man!” she fumed.

Ron gaped at her. “You threw your books!”

“You’re not taking Runes this year; why do you have Professor Croaker?” asked Terry.

“Professor Dumbledore assigned me to him as part of my independent tuition. This fellow Ogden

that's working with Croaker, he's little better. Between the two of them... it was simply awful. I left early," Hermione said. "I can't believe I did that, but I couldn't take another moment!"

Harry's brow furrowed. "What did Croaker do?"

Hermione exploded. "He dismissed two months' work – *two months* ! – and said that I could have saved myself the trouble if I'd known the first thing about wizardry. He foisted a children's book on me, of all things, and he had the nerve – *the unmitigated nerve!* – to tell me that this book presented the basis for scientific enquiry! That man couldn't find the scientific method with a point-me spell if he thinks that silly book has anything whatever to do with science!"

"What book was it?" Neville asked.

Hermione's nose wrinkled. "It was called *Pursilla Pepper and the Persnickety Pygmy Puff*," she snapped.

"Of course," Susan said matter-of-factly; "I should have guessed as much."

"I hate to say this, Hermione, but the Professor did have something of a point," Ernie told her. "I admit that it's childish, but the point of the book is to teach science."

"You see magic at work, you find a pattern in what you see, you create an incantation, and then you keep casting until the incantation matches up with the pattern – even I know that," explained Ron. "That's how science works: you see the magic at work and then bind it into a spell."

"But... but... what if the spell's incorrect?" Hermione huffed.

Ron looked at her blankly. "If it works, then how could it be wrong?" he asked.

"That's not science – that's... that's *tinkering!* " she insisted. "It's no different than what your dad did in his shed, Ron!"

"It certainly is science!" Ron fired back. "Just because Dad's the only one who wants to apply it to Muggle things doesn't change things!"

"Science is about finding the universal from the particular," Ernie said calmly. "That's rather basic knowledge for wizards... well, the ones who make it to Hogwarts, at least. I take it that Muggles have a different view?"

"So if you and Ron and Harry and Neville hang your brooms by the handle, then all teenaged wizards hang their brooms by the handle?" Hermione asked Ernie.

"Of course they do – how else would you hang a broom?" Ernie scoffed.

"If all the cauldrons in the Potions classroom are black, then all cauldrons are black?" Hermione pressed on.

“You’d have to look around a bit more, of course,” said Ernie.

“How much more?” Hermione demanded.

Ernie rolled his eyes. “Apply some common sense, Hermione; you’re making this far too complicated.”

Hermione clenched her jaw and took sharp breaths before she asked Terry, “Help me! You have to know about the scientific method...?”

“I’m not exactly a scientist, you know?” Terry said. “Sure, I was raised in a mostly Muggle household and I attended a day school, but science was mostly about weather and toads – at least that’s how I remember it.”

“Do you know what deductive logic is? Hypothesis testing...?” Hermione asked with not a little desperation.

“Oh! Now I understand your point,” Terry said. “Wizards do induce things, don’t they? Hmm... that explains quite a lot; I hadn’t thought on it before. That’s why there are no actual theories of magic...”

“Of course there are theories of magic; there are laws of magic, as well!” Ron said. “You’re all wet, the both of you!”

“The laws of magic explain what appears to work and what doesn’t work. There’s not a hint of why that’s the case, just a handful of observations,” Hermione countered. “The theories of magic aren’t theories; they’re schools of thought. That’s philosophy, not science.”

Ron’s neck reddened. “So it’s the entire wizarding world that’s wrong? I’m glad to see you’re not full of yourself!”

Ernie held up his hands in a peaceful gesture. “Come now, we’re splitting hairs here – it’s nothing to fight over.”

Hermione advanced on Ron. “The fact that you’re all wet, *Ronald*, says nothing about wizards in America or Japan or anywhere else,” she returned. “You’re making another false assumption – but that’s hardly a surprise.”

Ron shot up from the sofa and made for the door. “I don’t need this right now, thank you very much,” he snapped.

“Ron, wait!” Lavender said. She collected both of their sets of books and dashed after him.

“Well... that’s it for study period,” Neville said. “It’s off to classes, or dinner, or what have you...”

“That’s right – move along, nothin’ to see here, mind the gap,” said Seamus with a small smirk.

“Thanks for the spell, Harry. Hermione... um... here’s to better days...?”

In short order, everyone left Harry’s chambers save Hermione and himself.

“That bad, was it?” Harry asked.

“Croaker actually despises me,” Hermione huffed. “I was so close to hexing him, Harry. I can’t understand why Professor Dumbledore would assign me to that... that... *oooooh* !”

Harry couldn’t hold back a rueful chuckle. “So, you’ve been ordered to work with someone who can’t stand the sight of you? Welcome to my fifth year. Would you like me to speak with him – Dumbledore, I mean?”

“It’s my problem to resolve,” she said sharply; “It’s not as if Professor Dumbledore will be swayed. He seems to think that this is for my own good.”

“Croaker’s making you start from the beginning, then?” Harry asked.

“He may as well; he found fault with the underpinnings,” said Hermione. “He did call out two legitimate errors in my calculations, but the rest... he’s wrong, Harry. I have a hypothesis for what happened in 1981 and it can be tested. Croaker wants me to give him a rationale for the test by induction, but that’s just nonsense and it’s not as if he’ll accept the results anyway. What Croaker calls science is just an excuse for him to control enquiry. If that’s how the Department of Mysteries works, it’s no wonder that there hasn’t been any legitimate advancement in the understanding of magic since the seventeenth century. Who knows what knowledge they’re hiding down there?”

“Erm... that sounds a touch... um...?” Harry started.

“I sound paranoid, don’t I?” admitted Hermione. “It’s difficult to stay clear of it, honestly. I can’t understand how wizards as influential as Croaker and Ogden can actually believe this nonsense!”

Harry gave a shrug. “Look, I don’t understand half of what you’re going on about –”

“I don’t claim to be a Muggle scientist,” Hermione said, “but these are basic concepts.”

“Even if I can’t follow this theory business,” Harry went on, “the solution seems rather simple. Keep on with what you’re doing and just write up what Croaker wants, right?”

“But that dishonest... isn’t it?” she stammered.

“What’s the problem? You’re certain he’s wrong?” he asked.

“It will take much longer to do things his way, and he’s much more likely to be wrong in the end,” she said.

Harry gave her a challenging look. “What are you going to do, then – try to change his mind?”

“It would be the proper thing to do,” she returned.

“Will it work out?” he asked.

She sighed and said, “Doubtful, isn’t it?”

“It’s not as if this would be your first go at breaking the rules for the right reasons,” he pointed out.

“I suppose it wouldn’t. You don’t care for Croaker, either,” she observed.

He said, “I don’t trust him. There’s something off about him, but he isn’t dodgy like Detheridge.” After a pause, he added, “I think he’s dangerous. Take care around him.”

“Dangerous? Harry, that might be a stretch, don’t you think?” she said. “He’s an old man who’s set in his ways... irritating as anything, but dangerous?”

“I know my hunches aren’t always spot on, but there’s something about him,” said Harry.

Hermione looked to her book bag. “Oh, I do hope I didn’t break an ink bottle! I can’t believe I threw my books... would it be all right if I did some revising?”

“I have some papers to mark for Detheridge, anyway,” Harry said. “Are you coming to Duelling Club?”

“I don’t know...” she hesitated. “Professor Detheridge is still wary of me practicing. At any rate, I’m beginning to wonder if I have an aptitude for it.”

“What? That’s mad – of course you can do it. You’ve had great marks, and not just on the theory,” insisted Harry. “I’d prefer it if you’d come... I’d rather you kept it up, that’s all.”

She nodded and then went to fetch her books.

* * * * *

November 15

Croaker looked up from Harry's work with a scowl. "You need to stop thinking and start memorizing, Mr. Potter."

“Stop thinking...?”

"You're trying to problem-solve without a thorough understanding of the rigor behind the calculations and design – quite like your little friend Granger in that respect," Croaker said disparagingly.

It was hard for Harry to keep from rising to Croaker's near-constant baiting. "That's Miss

Granger," he said.

"Yes... well... *Miss* Granger seems to think that arithmetic and spell calculations are one and the same. Only a Muggle-born would spout such stuff and nonsense."

"You say that like arithmetic is a waste of time," said Harry.

"Not at all, Mr. Potter, not at all," Croaker returned. "I have more than a passing understanding of Muggle maths. If I wish to know how high I might construct an unsupported wall, then I'll turn to my maths. If I wish to know why the wall must be a certain length and thickness in order to sustain wards, then Muggle maths won't do. I imagine it requires extensive maths for a Muggle to fly, but the most elegant calculus cannot explain the simple levitation of a feather from desk to ceiling.

"The girl is modestly clever and rather diligent but hopelessly naïve. She wasn't offering a novel idea, you know? Modern wizarding has been around for a thousand years; I assure you that others have tried to apply Muggle mathematics in order to answer the great magical questions." He made a mark on Harry's paper with his quill and added off-handed, "I expected you would rise to her defence several days ago. Surely she ran to you in the throes of adolescent angst?"

Harry's shoulders tensed. "I don't like your tone," he said.

Croaker made another mark on Harry's paper, this time in red ink. "How unfortunate for you," he said as he scribbled a lengthy note in red letters, and then added, "She's not a genius, you know?"

"Pardon?"

Croaker didn't bother to look up. "I said that she's not a genius. Granger's strength is persistence - she's a plodder, a grind. The rest is the product of what I must admit is a superior memory. There's little originality in her work; it is pedantic, derivative, and often mere recitation. That makes for brilliant performance on controlled examinations, but does not translate into brilliant witchcraft. She will only be as great as the writers and theoreticians from whom she borrows. She simply hasn't the gift for it, which is typical for those of her heritage."

"She told me you didn't like her – that's rather obvious, isn't it?" Harry accused.

"I do not dislike the girl per se, Mr. Potter; her problem is that she doesn't understand her place in the order of things," said Croaker.

"Her 'place in the order of things'? What's that supposed to mean?" demanded Harry.

Croaker wiped his face with his hand in frustration and shook his head sadly as though Harry was a small child asking a foolish question. "Muggle-borns are critical to the wizarding world," he said; "Without them, the bloodlines would stagnate and our world would be gone within a few generations. Some pureblood lines deny that truth, and it is to their peril. Even with controlled infusions from muggle-borns, too many of the lines have crossed too frequently. Many hundreds

of years ago, this was clearly understood. Salazar Slytherin is often accused of believing that Muggle-borns should not have a place in the wizarding world. That is inaccurate. Slytherin advocated that Muggle-borns be brought into the wizarding world and raised with their birthright, rather than allowing eleven years of confusion and the creation of bonds in a world where they simply did not belong. That was common practice in the days of the Founders, even though the other Founders cast Slytherin out over a related argument.

"Raising Muggle-borns in the wizarding world, together with the application of suitable marriage laws, kept the wizarding heritage fresh and strong for more than three hundred years. It was also better for the Muggle-borns themselves: they had a better understand of wizardry, and advanced much farther than is the case today. It was the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff descendants who put it asunder. The Wrights and the Molyngtons were your forebears, and they were part of the movement that changed the old ways. They were wrong; worse, they were hypocrites. The primary role for Muggle-borns is to strengthen wizarding bloodlines through intermarriage - which should, in my view, be planned and coordinated - and to make modest contributions to wizarding that do not excessively disrupt the established order of things."

Harry gaped at Croaker for quite a while, unable to find the right words; he finally blurted out, "You're joking, right?"

"Certainly not," said Croaker; "We live in a world predicated upon the absolute need for secrecy. Such a world cannot tolerate sudden and uncontrolled change – there is no place for such risks."

"So you're saying that Hermione is actually right, but you're just standing in her way?" Harry asked.

"Oh, no, no - her work is misdirected," Croaker replied. "I am discouraging her stridency, as it will gain her nothing. There are limitations to what she can achieve in our world. I do not say that out of smugness or hatred or anything other than a clear-headed observation of how the wizarding world functions. The truth is that your own status as the son of a Muggle-born will only be circumvented because of your relative wealth, the prominence of your paternal line, and the cache that will come from defeating Voldemort - which you *will* do, make no mistake. We cannot allow it to be otherwise."

"I don't have to listen to this -" Harry started.

Croaker cut him off, "I told Albus fifteen years ago that it was foolishness to have you raised in the Muggle world. You're proving my point famously... or... is it that you have more than a child's fancy for your little Muggle-born friend?"

"I'd take Hermione over ten Malfoys any time, Croaker," growled Harry.

"That's *Professor* Croaker, Mr. Potter, and in that we agree. Not only does the Malfoy line infuse their magical practices with malice that borders on evil, but they have also failed to recognize the risk of continual inbreeding. The Potters, on the other hand, have faithfully sought Muggle-born wives for the primary heirs every three to four generations since the days of Bowman Wright. Do

you see why I think your ancestors hypocrites? They fought to abolish the old ways and then continued to follow them for more than six hundred years. Your father was the most recent participant in the tradition, but only two generations after your great-grandfather's marriage. This is why you should not consider a Muggle-born for any other role in your household beyond that of a concubine. It poses an unacceptable risk to the strength of your lineage," Croaker instructed him. "I suspect that if you seek it out, you'll find that your father - or perhaps your grandfather - made suitable arrangements for you. It wouldn't surprise me if you were betrothed in the olden form."

"There are no betrothals - that's what the goblin's records say, and I wouldn't go through with one anyway," Harry said.

"If it was done in the olden form, in the way of the marriage laws, then you would have little choice," Croaker explained. "The old betrothals were a vow that transcended generations; they were made under pain of magic itself. I wouldn't trust the goblins on this one, young man; they always have an agenda of their own. They would care little if you lost your magic, if as a result they gained what they sought. It is also possible that your father broke a betrothal in order to marry your mother - had you considered that? If so, then that obligation may extend to you. In any case, a thorough search for a betrothal might right your thinking on this. I can think of four young ladies approximately your age who have not crossed the Potter lineage for several generations; in fact, it would be the same four I've recommended to Neville and Augusta -"

Harry started, "Laws like you're talking about are gone, and good riddance to them. Besides, my mum would have found a way to break any arrangements -"

Croaker cut him off once more. "And how would you know that? Perhaps your mother was made to understand the proper role of a Muggle-born - even for one as brilliant as her reputation suggested? If she understood the potential implications of two consecutive intermarriages, then she might have welcomed such an arrangement on your behalf."

"This isn't why I'm here," Harry fumed; "You've no business teaching; you're worse than Snape." The books on Croaker's shelves began to rattle.

Croaker said calmly, "Albus assigned Miss Granger to me for a reason, Mr. Potter. He did so because he knows his own weaknesses. I do not share Albus's fascination with Muggles, nor do we agree on the role of Muggle-borns. He does know, however, that there are both social and natural limits on just how far a Muggle-born can progress in this society. Perhaps that's why you are here as well?"

"You might be right about England; you can't speak for the rest of the world," Harry countered.

"That is true, after a fashion... I can, however, cite a list of wizarding communities who failed to keep a balance and subsequently failed. If you're thinking of our friends across the pond, then I ask you to check back in a few decades. America is an experiment, just as is Australia; both are the products of rebels and felons who railed against Mother England. The Americans haven't even managed a unified government. After three centuries, they're nothing more than a loose collection of four factions who barely tolerate one another. Like other such experiments throughout

wizarding history, they *will* fail - allow them enough time to show their true colours," Croaker said with certainty.

"So, let's just sit back and enjoy the ride, eh? Let's hold the Muggle-borns in their place. Long live the purebloods! Is that it?" Harry snapped.

"That's not what I said -" Croaker started.

Harry stood angrily. "Why don't you just put on a mask and say 'mudblood' instead of Muggle-born?" he spat.

Croaker swept his quill, Harry's paper and most of the items of his desk onto the floor with an angry swat. The shelves shook violently and a number of books fell to the floor. He stood, shaking, with his palms pressed against the cleared desk top and said coldly, "I - am - *nothing* - like - those - vile – creatures. You will never accuse me of that again, is that understood?"

Harry was shaken but stood his ground. "You're a bigot, and I'm through with you; Hermione should be through with you as well. I thought you were no better than Snape, but it's worse than that. You're no better than my Uncle Vernon. That's my fat, lazy, good-for-nothing, bigoted, prejudiced Uncle Vernon – the *Muggle* ," he said; the air crackled with his anger.

"Do you know what the Department of Mysteries is, Mr. Potter? Do you honestly know?" Croaker asked.

"No, and what does that have to do with anything?" Harry shot back.

"Of course you don't, and that's my point. Some things shouldn't be meddled with. Muggle-borns often disregard that to their detriment. Consider that before you decide that I've set out to harm your little friend. I'm doing quite the opposite, but you're too young and impetuous to see that," said Croaker.

The temperature in the room dropped sharply. "I'm not stupid, Croaker. You're saying that the Ministry will hold things back for its own interests – that it'll quash anyone to protect itself and its friends. I've already learnt that lesson, but thanks for the warning," Harry said. His breath condensed in the sudden cold.

"I can play parlour tricks as well, Mr. Potter. Put away your magic before you hurt yourself," said Croaker. The sconces on the walls flamed high, and the temperature in the room soared.

"You're dangerous, Croaker. I knew you were dangerous - I've told people so, and I was right from the start. I won't take back what I said: you may as well be a Death Eater!" Harry shouted at him.

Croaker closed his eyes and took a long, slow breath. "You misunderstand me," he said at last, "and you are clearly incapable of putting aside your petty biases in order to see the truth of things. Get out, Mr. Potter. Get out, and do not darken my door until you are prepared to face reality. When you do decide to return, I expect to see either betrothal papers or evidence that they do not

exist. If nothing else, I will see that you shed some of the naiveté you share with Miss Granger."

Harry turned toward the door. "Leave her out of this, Croaker - it's between you and me," he said as he grasped the handle.

"How I conduct independent tuition with my assigned student is my business," Croaker said as Harry stepped through the doorway. "Granger will know the truth of things before I've finished with her... you have my word on that."

Harry's neck twitched and he felt as if he was on fire. He turned slowly; Croaker's wand was drawn but not raised. It felt to Harry as if he was trying to force flames from his mouth, but he managed to say thickly, "If you ever hurt her - if you ever hurt any of my friends..." His right hand came across in a slashing motion. Croaker's desk separated into a mass of tiny bits that collapsed and spread across the floor of the office.

Croaker visibly flinched, but then slowly tucked away his wand. He and Harry cursed each other with their eyes for several long seconds. At last, the old wizard - the former Unspeakable - said with Snape-like silkiness, "The qualities of your magic are unlike mine, unlike Albus... I'm reminded of Grindelwald, but your magic is purer... it is hotter. Then again, much of Grindelwald's power came from a decade's worth of dark rituals. My former colleagues are most interested in how you came to be, in how you survived, in how you retained any magic at all, and not merely because of your potential to defeat He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Despite what Albus thinks, it would be best for everyone if Miss Granger were never to find the answer to that particular mystery."

Harry said nothing; he turned and left. Croaker's voice trailed him into the corridor - it was too quiet for anyone else to make out but somehow felt as if it was slicing into Harry's head:

"Oh, Mr. Potter...? My obligations to Albus demand that I tell you this: *Never* perform wandless magic of that calibre in the presence of an active member of the Department of Mysteries. If you do, then Voldemort or no Voldemort, you'll never again see the light of day."

I'll show him, Harry thought, *and Hermione will show him, too*. The remarks about marriage contracts weighed on him, and he resolved to set Ted Tonks onto the matter. He looked forward to shoving Mr. Tonks' reply down Croaker's throat.

* * * * *

LIGHTNING ATTACKS BY YOU-KNOW-WHO's MEN!

In an hour-long spree reminiscent of You-Know-Who's darkest days, six families were attacked in a swath that ran from Winchester to Dover. Independent observers reported the Dark Mark above at least four of the six residences. Unidentified sources within the Department for Magical Law Enforcement report that the Unforgivables and other highly destructive curses were used in abundance. At least nine persons lost their lives, and no fewer than twenty persons were received at St. Mungo's Hospital. The same DMLE sources told this reporter that

one Auror was amongst the dead and that two additional DMLE officers were amongst those taken to hospital.

Speaking at Minister Fudge's behest, Ministry official Percy Weasley said that neither You-Know-Who nor his associates have been confirmed as the attackers. "The Ministry for Magic will not tolerate acts of this kind, no matter who may be responsible," Weasley said. "Minister Fudge has asked Director Bones and the DMLE to pursue all available information so that the perpetrators of these dastardly acts may be apprehended and put to justice." Minister Fudge was unavailable for further comment. The names of the deceased and wounded have not yet been made available.

- The Daily Prophet , November 16

* * * * *

November 20

Tonks gritted her teeth, and then shouted, "Stop... stop... OI! WANDS DOWN!"

Bill started, "The silent casting is coming along, but on the whole your accuracy –"

"THAT WAS THE MOST PATHETIC DISPLAY I'VE EVER SEEN! IF YOU WERE AURORS, YOU'D BE SENT PACKING! I WAS WONDERING FOR A MO' IF ANY OF YOU LOT HAD EVER SEEN A WAND BEFORE!" Tonks screeched.

Bill said with a shrug, "I don't know if it was quite that bad..."

Harry crossed his arms and leant against the wall. He said, "Ernie, you looked like you were half-asleep out there. Justin, you should have easily disarmed him. Susan, Hannah... embarrassing. Harper, Collins, Stanley, Townshend... with aim like that, I wonder if I should check the corridor to see if anyone's stunned. I want all four of you back to working on your aim. All of you... mind what you're doing! If you don't want to be here, then shove off!"

"Harry... we're just sparring..." Ernie said tentatively.

"There's no such thing as sparring anymore – people are dying out there. Do *you* want to be next?" Harry snapped.

"All right, you lot," Bill cut in; "It's swordsmanship for the next hour, so let's clear the floor now... that's it. The toughest thing about wand wielding in a duel is to keep the body calm and the senses sharp all at once. It'll come – just be patient. Harry, help me set up?"

As the students collected their things, Bill opened a supply cupboard and pulled Harry just behind the door where neither could be seen. "Are you and Tonks trying to scare them all away?" Bill whispered forcefully.

"This is serious business," objected Harry; "You've seen the *Prophet* – it's starting."

Bill shook his head. “This is student practice,” he said; “Most of these kids are here to raise their marks in Defence, or so they can tell their mum and dad that they sparred with Harry Potter –”

“That’s a fine reason for them to be here, isn’t it?” Harry growled.

Bill shook his head and said, “They’re students – that’s exactly why they should be here. These aren’t soldiers... they aren’t even your study group from last year.”

“Tonks gets it,” Harry said.

“Tonks is just Tonks,” Bill laughed, and then added as an aside, “Besides, it’s that time of the month.”

“Keep it up, *Weasley* , and it’ll be time for you to *beg* !” Tonks growled from the other side of the room.

“Tetchy, isn't she?” Harry muttered.

“I heard that, *Potter* ; the next time we spar, your arse is mine,” Tonks snarled, still twenty paces away.

Bill levitated the rack of swords free of the cupboard and placed it against the wall. He gave his wand a complicated wave and the soft mats on the floor were replaced by hardwood, and then said sweetly, “I’ll see you later, Tonks – let the victims in, would you?”

As the students filed in, Bill’s demeanour changed. It was obvious from the start that Bill took the swordsmanship group much more seriously than the ordinary duelling club meetings, and certainly this session would be no exception. The students lined up against the far wall without being prompted.

Bill waited for a minute or more after the last student entered, and then waved the door closed. “Present yourselves for the roll,” he said. “Abbott, Hannah...”

“Present, Master-at-Arms,” Hannah returned quickly.

“Betancourt, Elston.”

“Present, Master-at-Arms,” said the seventh year Slytherin; he was apparently Adrian Pucey’s closest friend and a quiet sort.

“Bones, Susan.”

“Present, Master-at-Arms.”

“Bruce, Holly.”

“Present, Master-at-Arms...”

Bill stopped and snapped, “That was tentative, Miss Bruce – *again* .”

“*Present* , Master-at-Arms!”

“Better... Cadwallader, Robert.”

Rob Cadwallader was a seventh year Ravenclaw of whom both Flitwick and Detheridge spoke highly. “Present, Master-at-Arms,” he snapped off.

“Entwhistle, Kevin.”

“Present, Master-at-Arms,” the seventh year Hufflepuff said.

“Finch-Fletchley, Justin.”

“Present, Master-at-Arms,” Finch-Fletchley said. Justin had been a dab hand with a foil from the start, having been trained in fencing from an early age.

“Goldstein, Anthony.”

“Present, Master-at-Arms,” Anthony said blandly.

“Goyle, Gregory.”

“Present, Master-at-Arms, sir,” Goyle said. His voice was as harsh and thick as always, but Harry couldn’t deny there was something quite different about Goyle’s manner this year; his performance in History of Magic was only one indication. He wasn't pretty with a blade, but made up for it with sheer force.

“Greengrass, Daphne.”

“Present, Master-at-Arms,” said Daphne. As always, she was dressed differently than the rest: rather than her school uniform, she wore tightly cuffed trousers, a shirt that was tight at the collar and loose in the sleeves, and short flat-heeled boots.

“Longbottom, Neville.”

“Present, Master-at-Arms.”

“Malfoy... Draco,” Bill said with an edge to his voice.

“I am here and prepared to duel, *Master* Weasley,” Malfoy said lazily. The response was an acceptable but archaic form; Malfoy was, of course, keenly aware of that. He stood comfortably and with grace, however grudgingly Harry had to admit it.

“McDougal, Morag.”

“Present, Master-at-Arms,” she said; after a pregnant pause, she inclined her head toward Malfoy and added, “Is the pretentious prick allowed to answer that way, sir?”

“McDougal –” Malfoy started.

“You will address your peers in the proper form, Miss McDougal,” snapped Bill.

“My apologies, Master-At-Arms; I was referring to Mr. Prick,” McDougal said without missing a beat.

“Noted... and do put it to rest,” Bill said evenly. Malfoy bristled but said nothing as the roll continued with, “Pucey, Adrian.”

“Present, Master-at-Arms,” said Pucey, with a respectful bow of his head.

“Weasley, Ginevra.”

As with all the previous sessions, Ginny flared red at her formal name – though it was now mostly confined to her neck. “Present, Master-at-Arms,” she said with slightly clenched teeth. Harry didn't have much sympathy for her, though; she had been the one to wheedle her way into what was supposed to be an upper-form-only group, having appealed all the way to the Headmaster.

“Weasley, Ronald.”

“Present, Master-at-Arms,” Ron said. Harry had wondered how Ron would fare with his brother as instructor, even in an unofficial capacity; it had gone much better thus far than he would have expected.

“Zabini, Blaise.”

“Present, Master-at-Arms,” the sixth year Slytherin said smoothly. Like Finch-Fletchley and Malfoy, Zabini had been raised with a blade in hand.

“Potter, Harry.”

“Present, Master-at-Arms,” Harry said. Bill insisted on the same formalities from Harry, and Harry had agreed immediately; if he was to be a participant as well as an assistant, Harry figured that he needed to show the others that he was willing to follow the rules.

Bill gave them all a quiet and cool appraisal before he observed, “There are fewer of you than at our last meeting. We began with fifty-one, and now we’re down to seventeen plus Mr. Potter.”

He paced the room as he continued, “This is a demanding art. At Durmstrang, swordsmanship has been part of the duelling curriculum since the school's founding. All students are required to duel, but none can advance to sixth year Duelling Arts without achieving excellence with a blade. By seventh year, only twelve students remain in their duelling program, and all of these participate on the Junior European circuit. Beauxbatons has similar requirements, and also advances twelve

students to the circuit. Hogwarts hasn't offered formal duelling instruction for sixty years, and since then only three students have qualified for the junior circuit. Of those, two were admitted to participate.” Harry noticed the briefest flash of anger cross Bill's face, and wondered if perhaps he had been the third student.

“So you're trying to get us on the circuit?” Malfoy asked.

“Any Hogwarts student of age who wants to join the circuit should have that chance,” said Bill. “After... some debate... the Headmaster has agreed to allow a twelve-member Duelling Team, styled the same as Beauxbatons. Professor Flitwick and the Marquis de Maupassant will sponsor the team. Professor Flitwick will evaluate your skill with the wand, and the Marquis and his assistant will conduct the swordsmanship evaluations.” He paused to let the students settle, and then added, “Professor Flitwick was, of course, a four-time European champion in wand duelling as well as the World Champion twice in the 1930s. What you may not know is that the Marquis won ten consecutive European duelling championships with the sword as well as three World championships, and six European and two World championships in mixed duelling.”

“I wonder when... the Stone Age...?” Pucey muttered.

“You're only allowed four European championships and two Worlds; after that, they retire you,” said Zabini; “How could the Marquis have won that many times?”

“The limit was ten and three until 1834, and six and two until 1855. I think you can guess why the limits were changed,” Bill said.

“So it was in the Stone Age,” Pucey chuckled.

“The Marquis has probably forgotten more about duelling than you lot will ever know,” Bill returned; “The man's a hundred years older than Dumbledore, and he beat me nine times out of ten last month. It would have been ten of ten if he hadn't been toying with me.”

“Do you think there'll be a circuit at all next year, with everything that's happening?” Cadwallader asked.

“The schedule is set, and we'll be training toward the certification matches in May. There's no way of knowing for certain, of course,” Bill said. “Any other questions?”

Malfoy crossed his arms and asked, “What about Potter?”

“As a member of the staff, Harry can't qualify for juniors,” Bill said.

“I won't have time for competitions,” Harry added.

Justin gave his rapier a quick swish, and said, “Twelve spots for seventeen, then? I'm game for it.”

Bill gave a curt nod and said, “The Marquis will be here to observe this session two weeks from today. I do not expect to be embarrassed.” He clapped his hands sharply and added, “Take your

positions!”

* * * * *

COWARDLY ATTACKS CONTINUE

For the third time in ten days, wizarding families were attacked in the dead of night. This time, the terrorists struck in four different locations spread from Inverness to Bristol. The Dark Mark was spotted above all four attacks. Five deaths have been reported, with eleven persons received at St. Mungo's Hospital. Amongst the dead was one Auror, according to unidentified Department of Magical Law Enforcement sources; this brings the ten-day toll to four Aurors, or nearly seven percent of the currently active force.

In an unscheduled appearance on the Wizarding Wireless Network, Minister Fudge urged the Wizengamot to approve an immediate increase in funding for the DMLE. Later in the same broadcast, former Minister Millicent Bagnold observed that even with increased funding, there would be no significant impact on the number of available Aurors until 1999. Three Auror candidates are currently in training, according to the Ministry's Office of Information; two will be available for service in 1997, and the third in 1998.

The Ministry may have to rely on outside sources to bolster its forces should these attacks continue, according to Dark Forces Defence League associate director and spokeswizard Gilderoy Lockhart. “The League is prepared to stand in substitute for Ministry security services at Hogsmeade, the Ministry, St. Mungo's and other public sites, just as we have done at Diagon Alley. Ministry security professionals would then be available to support the Auror force in defending the British citizenry against these cowardly attacks,” Mr. Lockhart said.

DMLE Director Amelia Bones asks that any citizens with information regarding these attacks or the wizards responsible for them please contact the Ministry as soon as possible; information will be received in confidence. With regard to Mr. Lockhart's comments, Director Bones said, “It is regrettable that eight consecutive years of funding cuts for the Auror Corps have left us in this position. We will of course consider offers of support from any qualified and legitimate sources.” Minister Fudge was unavailable for comment due to a previously scheduled trade meeting with Bulgarian and Albanian officials, according to the Office of the Minister.

- The Daily Prophet , December 8

* * * * *

December 10

“Lemon sherbet?” Dumbledore asked.

Harry hesitated and then gave a shrug. “Why not?” he said.

Dumbledore's eyes lit; "Truly?" he asked.

"Come to think of it, I've never actually seen you take one... they aren't from Fred and George, are they?" Harry wondered.

"Certainly not!" Dumbledore laughed. "Honestly, I do partake of them. Shall we both make a go of it?"

Harry took the round golden sherbet from Dumbledore and let it sit in his mouth for a while. "Not bad," he decided.

The Headmaster smiled broadly. He said, "Unlike many of our fellows, I am not particularly fond of chocolate, or anything powerfully sweet for that matter. Algernon favours crystallised pineapple – can you imagine?"

"I can imagine a lot with Croaker," Harry said flatly.

"And thusly we commence our business," said Dumbledore. "I had intended to bring up the matter of Professor Croaker, had you not first done so. I await your version of events."

"My version? Here it is in one: he's a right bastard," Harry said.

"Harry! I won't have such language, and certainly not with respect to colleagues!" Dumbledore chided him.

"You weren't there. The things he said..." Harry returned.

"The Professor seems to believe that he was offering a reasoned view on the way of things in wizarding Britain. He also allowed that his views on Miss Granger were presented, views which differ from my own," said Dumbledore.

"As far as he's concerned, Hermione is just... I don't even know what the right words are... breeding stock, I suppose? The only reason I'm a real wizard is because my family was wealthy," Harry said; "Everything's about blood with him."

"That doesn't make Professor Croaker a Death Eater – we've discussed this before with regard to others," Dumbledore pointed out.

"I suppose not, but people like him make it easier for Death Eaters to get what they want," Harry protested.

"I imagine the Professor would argue that by making his own views clear, he helps provide those who believe in pureblood ideals with the opportunity to be something other than Death Eaters," Dumbledore countered.

Harry shook his head and said, "You shouldn't make excuses for him. I'll say the same to you as I said to him: he's a bigot, plain and simple."

“He says as plainly that you are ignorant and that Miss Granger is misguided, and that the both of you are arrogant,” said Dumbledore.

“He's done with me, and I'm done with him. Hermione should be done with him, as well,” Harry fired back.

Dumbledore let out a pained sigh. “Algie presents the scientific take on the prevailing pureblood sentiments -” he began.

“It's not science. Hermione can tell you what science really is, and what she says matches up with what I know,” Harry cut him off.

“Ah, but you are not referring to wizarding science,” said Dumbledore; “Wizarding science is by necessity different than the science practiced by today's Muggles. I imagine it bears more in common with Muggle science from many hundreds of years ago, when maths and measurement and such things lacked precision and when the view of the physical universe was phenomenological rather than rational.”

“I don't pretend to understand that; most of this is like sitting through an hour with Binns, honestly,” Harry admitted, “but if what you're saying is right... then how do we ever really *know* anything?”

Dumbledore let loose a bit of the eye twinkling that grated on Harry, and responded, “That is a question asked by wizard and Muggle alike since time immemorial, albeit in different ways and under differing circumstances. It is a question with no certain answer.”

“If that's true, then why are you putting Hermione through this?” Harry asked.

The Headmaster gave a small smile. “I do like that you jump to your friend's defence, Harry, I truly do. Nonetheless, Miss Granger needs to learn how to interact with people who do not share her views, and even with those who reject her views entirely. This is a critical tool for accomplishing that which she so strongly – even desperately – wishes to accomplish. Without learning this, any achievements that she might make will be despite herself.”

“Sometimes you have to take a stand, though. Some things are right and some things are wrong,” Harry argued.

“Oh, quite right – quite right,” Dumbledore agreed at first. “Good and evil, right and wrong: these are manifest truths. I ask you, however, when should one take a stand? In what way should one take a stand? Is the purpose of taking a stand to encourage change, or simply to be correct? Can one effect real and lasting change without first understanding the true state of things and the reasons why that state came to be? Can one effect real and lasting change without the involvement of those who are to be changed, or at the very least some measure of agreement that change should occur? Good and evil are real; right and wrong are real; and very few people, very few situations are unequivocally one or the other. It is wrong to kill, Harry... except in defence of self or others, of course. It is wrong to steal... but what if that theft robs an evildoer of a weapon to wield?”

“It sounds like there aren't any standards at all,” said Harry.

“That is certainly not the case,” Dumbledore assured him. “Some standards of behaviour are eminently sensible, and most of the world's peoples agree upon them. Do not kill or steal except in the defence of others. Respect one's parents and elders. Keep one's oaths, both to self and to others. Engage in charity for its own sake. Avoid envy and jealousy. Leave things better than you find them. Love one another. Do unto others, as you would have them do unto you. Honestly, this is not as complicated as philosophers would from time to time have us believe.”

“Those things aren't always easy,” Harry said.

“We must do what is right rather than what is easy... but I know that I've already shared that bit of wisdom with you. You're a good person, Harry, and your actions are generally well meaning. Miss Granger has her own life lessons to master, and she possesses the intelligence and goodness of heart to muddle along. Look after her if you wish, but don't fret just yet. Have another lemon sherbet,” said the Headmaster.

* * * * *

MURDER MOST FOUL!

Bagman's body found on Knockturn Alley

Ludovic “Ludo” Bagman, former head of the Ministry's Department for Games and Sports, was found dead last evening on Knockturn Alley. Reluctant witnesses from the vicinity of the Alley described Mr. Bagman's body as 'slashed', 'hacked' and 'a right mess'. One anonymous observer commented that the injuries looked to be from a blade rather than from spell fire. The DMLE offered no further information at this time, citing the need to protect information as an investigation is mounted.

Mr. Bagman, aged 46, was a notable figure in the world of Quidditch in the 1970s and early 1980s. He was the best-known – and most notorious – player for the Wimbourne Wasps during their League-winning campaigns of 1977 and 1980. He also captained the English side at the 1982 World Cup.

Mr. Bagman left his Ministry headship last year under a cloud of allegations that he had placed wagers on League matches and other Ministry-regulated sporting events. The strongest allegations centred on the 1994 Quidditch World Cup final, during which he was believed to have incurred large losses to a goblin gambling syndicate. When asked for comment, a senior Gringotts official bared his teeth and soundly shut an office door in this reporter's face. Darker activities were alleged over the years. Mr. Bagman was accused of having involvement with You-Know-Who's cause in the early 1980s, and those rumours rose again in the wake of You-Know-Who's re-emergence. However, no charges were ever brought.

Mr. Bagman leaves behind a string of jilted women, numerous creditors, and his crup, Bennie.

[Picture 1 – caption] Mr. Bagman and his Wimbourne mates, at the 1980 League final

[Picture 2 – caption] A pale and paunchy Bagman, seen at a Daughters of the Goblin Wars charity event earlier this year

- The Daily Prophet , December 14

* * * * *

December 15

The only similarity between Croaker and Tiberius Ogden was their stoutness, as far as Harry could tell. Where Croaker gave off a sense of bitterness, Ogden was at times as jovial as the Fat Friar. Where Croaker seemed not to have a good word for anyone, Ogden went out of his way to see the best in everyone and in every situation – even when it was a lost cause, to Harry's mind.

“You must understand the world in which Algie and I were brought up,” Ogden insisted. “If you find us backward today, imagine where things stood in the 19th century! To our eyes, Muggle-borns were ill-mannered, scruffy interlopers. They had the arrogance to think that they could be self-made men, when we surely knew better. They brought their ideas of meritocracy straight into a medieval world – madness, we thought! The difference between the magical and Muggle experiences was far greater then than is the case today, hard as that might be for you to believe. There was no question in the minds of most Muggle-borns then: they were going to drag us into modernity, and the pox upon anyone or anything that stood in the way. It was something that needed to happen... but it would have been better to take it in degrees, don't you know? We haven't come far enough, mind you – your young lady shouldn't be held back from her full potential, but I can't deny that there is a fair chance of that.” “It sounds like you've changed, so why can't he?” Harry fumed.

“Well, I've never been quite so hard-headed as Algie,” Ogden laughed.

“He is that,” Harry agreed.

Ogden settled heavily behind a desk littered with papers and books and scrolls nearly to the point of collapse. He was using an old classroom as a place to work – on what exactly, Harry was uncertain. After a prolonged sigh of satisfaction, the old wizard said, “Young man, I've learned a thing or two about human behaviour over the course of a very long life, and this much is true for wizard and Muggle alike: we all see what we want to see. I prefer to see the positive in life; it's not always easy, mind you, but worth the effort. Algie seeks order above all else, and he has a rather well developed viewpoint on the order of the universe in general and wizarding in particular.”

“We're not exactly in fine order, what with Voldemort running about?” Harry said with a snort.

“Algie and I have seen dark wizards come and go. For him, this is part of a normal pattern in wizarding – an orderly one, if you will,” Ogden returned. “That is not a view we share. This one –

Voldemort – he's something altogether different. He's not acting out of some sort of ethic, some twisted sense of morality. In a way, he's like the one Flamel was pitted against.... yes, rather like Racine. This is all about him, about seizing power for its own sake. It's a game to Voldemort. In truth, I wonder how he might respond to victory; he might have no idea what to *do* with power if it were in his grasp.”

Harry pressed to the point. “So what do I do about Professor Croaker?” he asked.

“Do? I'm not certain there's anything you can do,” said Ogden. “What do you want to accomplish, young man?”

“I want him to stop treating Hermione like she's something to be scraped off his boots,” Harry fired back.

“He *is* harsh to the poor girl, but I've not yet seen anything worthy of that description,” Ogden protested.

Harry couldn't resist adding, “She doesn't seem fond of you, either.”

Ogden steeped his hands and remained silent past the point of comfort, before he said, “I don't want to say anything hurtful, Harry, nor do I want to seem as though I don't like young Miss Granger, because that is not true. She is energized by her studies, she is insightful, she brings a perspective to magic the likes of which I've not seen or even contemplated, and she can be charming when it suits her. She might have been the greatest Slytherin of the age, if she had come from other than Muggle parentage – and that is *not* a criticism, it is a compliment. I am a product of Slytherin House, and I despise much of what I see in the last two generations of students.

“Algie, on the other hand, is the quintessential Ravenclaw, for good or ill. He pursues knowledge for its own sake, but he also believes that some knowledge is too dangerous for the eyes of mere wizards. He would have invented the Department of Mysteries if it hadn't already existed. A place where arcane knowledge is locked away from the eyes of all but a handful of wizards worthy of the privilege... yes, Algie couldn't help but aspire to such a place. Miss Granger – rather like myself – understands that knowledge is too often used by the powerful to control and subjugate the weak. Neither she nor I think that is anyway to achieve a just and good society. She takes it a step further, I think; she seems to believe that knowledge should be completely unregulated in order to prevent abuses. Miss Granger lacks access to most forms of power by accident of birth, you see? Thusly, the idea of being held at wand's length from knowledge... well, I imagine that is quite an affront to her sensibilities.”

“And you – what do you think?” Harry asked.

Ogden said, “With regard to knowledge? I agree with Algie that some knowledge is indeed dangerous. I disagree with him that there is some special standard of worthiness. You're being tutored by a number of very capable wizards, Harry. They teach you by building upon what you already know. They expose you to complex spell work piece by piece, and stagger that complexity by subject. In doing this, they prepare you for more advanced work. It wouldn't be right to start a

first year in the seventh year curriculum, would it? This should be no different for Miss Granger's independent studies. She needs to learn enough in the way of fundamentals to safely take on some of the magic she's exploring. Highly advanced magic can pose any number of dangers... from spell backfire to chaotic discharge to... well, the oldest of magics often levy permanent changes on those who attempt to use them. It happened to us – the thirteen of us who faced Grindelwald in the end – and it could happen to your friend if she should proceed without a care. At this point in her development, she is rather like a firstie who has decided to sit for her NEWTs. She hasn't yet mastered the foundations for the knowledge she seeks. Can you understand why I have asked that she measure her pace?"

Harry nodded and said, "Thank you for that. Have you explained all of this to her?"

"I have tried," Ogden said; "For her sake, I will continue to try. Perhaps Algie and I should separate our tuition? I'll discuss that with Brian."

Harry's brow furrowed. "Er... who is Brian?"

Ogden looked startled for a moment and then began to chuckle. "Oh, dear... well... ehh... the truth is that Albus didn't care for his name as a young man, so he went by one of his lesser names instead. I didn't know his given name was Albus until he sat for his NEWT examinations, and he was quite well known during his school days. If Martha – Martha was his wife, you see – if she hadn't said that she actually liked his name... well, I dare say that Brian Dumbledore would be the Headmaster of Hogwarts," he said.

"Oh, that's brilliant," Harry said with a smirk.

Ogden said quickly, "You didn't hear it from me. If it should come up, I trust you'll blame Algie?"

"That's more than a little Slytherin of you, isn't it?" Harry snorted.

A smile spread across Ogden's face. "I do have my moments," he said.

* * * * *

December 17

Harry was on his way from the staff reading room in the Library to a late meal in his quarters, when Anthony Goldstein stopped him in the corridor.

"Do you have a few minutes?" Anthony asked.

"We can talk in my quarters, if you don't mind watching me eat," said Harry.

Anthony shook his head. "There are things you need to see," he said.

"And this important?" Harry asked.

"Very important," Anthony returned, and the look in his eyes bore testimony to that.

Harry said, "After you, then."

Anthony led him to a room in the lowest reaches of Ravenclaw's tower. They actually had to enter the tower and climb to the alcove just outside the Ravenclaw Common Room, and then take a recessed spiral staircase three levels down in order to reach it. He waved Harry back from the closed door.

"It's been re-warded. Can you take these down?" Anthony asked him.

Harry closely examined the door and its frame for runes or runic engravings. This was at the outer edge of his competency, he knew, but he decided to make the attempt. Anthony seemed to be playing it straight with him, and the Ravenclaw's seriousness on the matter was palpable. He found a tiny rune set just to one side of the door handle.

"This is Hermione's," he said automatically.

"Have you seen this before?" Anthony asked.

"No... I just know it's hers," said Harry.

"You're right about it," Anthony admitted; "She's been using this as a workroom."

Harry's eyes narrowed slightly. "Why do you know that?"

Anthony said, "She's been behaving strangely - very strangely. Surely you've noticed? Frankly, I was wondering if she was under some sort of compulsion. Look... the muggle-borns have been meeting regularly. They've kept it close so far, but you must understand why they're concerned? I've fallen in with them, because I'm concerned about the same things..." He stopped for a moment, as though he was saying too much.

"You're from Golders Green, right? Hasn't your family been magical for a long time?" Harry asked.

Anthony's eyes darkened. "The *purebloods* around here don't care about my heritage. My mother's family have been stewards of magic for twenty-eight centuries, Harry. They were mages when Warrington's forebears lived in rude huts and had no written language. But to *them*, we're blood-traitors at best and sub-human at worst. They can't tolerate the idea that we put our faith in something - in someone - greater than ourselves and our own magic. They're arrogant enough to believe that somehow we make our own magic, that it wouldn't exist without us - can you imagine? We're nothing to those people. My father wouldn't bow to them and they slaughtered him - they *slaughtered* him, Harry - like he was a bit of common livestock -"

Harry choked out, "Slaughtered...? When did this happen? I mean... your family? Is the rest of your family all right? Do you need anything, is there anything I can do...?"

Anthony sagged. He said, "It happened while we were on the Express, on our way home at the end of last year. My mother is living with my aunt and her family now. My brother is running the family business, and I've been taking care of the rest of our interests. I... I appreciate your concern, Harry, truly I do. I suppose you would understand, wouldn't you? You understand this sort of thing, what has to be done to set things right?"

"This is why you've been so serious about the Defence Club, isn't it?" Harry asked.

Anthony nodded. "Never again," he said.

"You're right, I do understand that," Harry said, and then asked, "So how does Hermione fit into this?"

"Right, right... so the muggle-borns have been meeting, and that means I've seen her weekly for quite some time. She's changed. It's hard to put my finger on it, or to give you a specific instance, but I've found it worrisome," Anthony said.

"She *has* changed," Harry admitted.

"Anyway, I noticed that she was in the area of our Common Room regularly, but then she would disappear. It was more than passing strange... and I freely admit that we Ravenclaws are a curious lot. That's when I discovered this room," Anthony said. "Yesterday, I saw her at the spiral stairs and decided to ask her about all of this. When I reached here, she was nowhere to be found but the door was open. I... well... you really need to see this."

"I'm not keen on breaking into her workspace," Harry objected.

Anthony frowned. "I'd rather it be you than Professor Flitwick or the Headmaster, truthfully. This had to be reported to the staff, and I'm not exaggerating. If it was anyone other than Hermione, and if you weren't involved with her... this really needed to be reported, Harry. It's for her own good."

Harry let out a frustrated sigh and returned his attention to the rune set. "There's something similar to a Notice-Me-Not... and an alarm... and... all right, that would hurt... I think the best bet is to just overpower them and then recharge the runes afterward."

Anthony's brows rose. "You can do that?" he asked.

Harry shrugged and said, "I don't see why not. Wards are all about intent, really. She wanted to protect the room, of course, but she wouldn't set out to hurt me or anyone else who cares about her. On the other hand, she'd probably burn Croaker to ash."

Anthony said with surprise, "Really? He's a prickly fellow, but obviously well qualified."

"Talk to him about blood sometime, and then tell me what you think of him," Harry shot back.

"I'll have to do that," Anthony said, with noticeably less warmth in his voice.

Harry returned to the warding on the door. "My point is that the wards probably aren't intended to kill or even hurt me in particular. In turn, my only intent is to make sure that Hermione's safe. I don't care to interfere with what she's doing unless that can't be helped. Another thing in my favor is that I can tell these are hers. If I recharge them afterward, I can make them just like hers because I understand her intent."

"Er... I can't say I've ever heard warding explained in that way..." Anthony said hesitantly.

"Spend a few days with an Icelandic war witch sometime - it's enlightening," Harry threw out, as he touched his wand to the rune set. A sharp tingling shot up his arm and then down to his feet. It was as though energy drained from the door, through him and into the stone floor. The door opened with an audible click.

Most of the room was taken up by bookshelves and cabinets, brimming with papers and scrolls and tomes. A small potions work station sat in one corner, surrounded by ingredient binds and a few things that Harry couldn't identify nor did he care to. A table sat in the middle of the chaos, loaded to near-breaking with books that sat in a semi-circle around a stack of parchment, an inkwell and quill, a goblet filled with biros and three Muggle notebooks.

Anthony drew Harry immediately to the table. "See? See? Look at some of this stuff! De Praestigiis Daemonum... the Steganographia of Trithemius... Le Veritable Dragon Rouge... München Handbuch der Magie der Dämonen! She has the Munich Manual of Demonic Magic, by all that's holy!"

"That sounds bad," Harry acknowledged.

"Bad? It's more than bad. You don't know what these are, do you? These didn't come from the Restricted Section, I can tell you. Le Veritable Dragon Rouge... The True Red Dragon... that's for summoning a demon. Have you ever heard of 'making a deal with the devil'? You'll find the instructions in there. Vodou practitioners swear by it," Anthony explained. "And this one, this is the Codex Gigas, the Devil's Bible! If you look at the illuminated letters - the big, fancy capital letters - they're full of magical text. It's Transitus Fluvii, and even some Muggles know what that is. Don't look too closely, though, unless you *like* to be possessed. The Munich Manual... that one's outright illegal. And these are some of the more pedestrian things in here."

He led Harry to a nearby shelf. "This is the Ghayat al-Hakim fi'l-sihr. Non-believers call it the Picatrix. We use this in our... um... well, it's enough to say that we use it. The thing is, we have two millenia of experience with this sort of thing. If you were to mess about with some of the rituals in here without applying the proper magical seals - seals which require more than simple instructions to properly apply - I don't want to think about it. All of the ones on this shelf... and about half of the books on the table... are alchemical tomes. The Book of the Sacred Magic of Abramelin the Mage... The Black Pullet... this is some of Flamel's work, and I don't think it's of the published sort. Harry, she's mucking about with alchemy. Does this look supervised to you? It doesn't look supervised to me."

Finally, he held up a book teetering on the edge of the table. "And this... we call this one the

Lesser Key of Solomon. The few wizards who would recognize it would call it the Lemegeton. This is all about spirit evocation. This first section, it tells you how to make a brass container that will hold an evoked spirit in place. And in the fourth section... that's about how to make an almadel, so you don't just evoke spirits but conjure them instead! Harry, there's enough stuff in here to send Hermione to Azkaban for two or three lifetimes, but set that aside for a minute - "

"Set it aside?!" Harry snapped.

"Even if that wasn't an issue, there's enough stuff in here to get her killed or worse," Anthony said. "If she's doing this on her own, someone has to stop her. If someone's helping her do this, then they've earned a visit from the Aurors - but If you ask me, it should be from the Hit Wizards."

"What in hell is she doing with all of this?" Harry wondered aloud.

"Are you going to deal with this, or not?" Anthony demanded.

Harry debated over what to say. Finally he offered, "Hermione is working with the Headmaster on a really serious project. Even I don't know everything about it, but I do suspect that it could be dangerous. It's possible - and I'm not making excuses - but it *is* possible that she has these books for a reason."

Anthony said sharply, "I love books, Harry. I love learning; I love knowledge for the sake of knowing. I can tell you, though, that some things shouldn't be known. Other things shouldn't be known unless you're completely prepared to know them. Still more things shouldn't be known unless you're completely prepared to put them to use. It's dangerous to even *read* some of these books, let alone use any of the contents."

"And why do you know so much about them, then?" Harry returned.

"Remember: two millenia of experience. Some of this is only safe if you believe what's contained inside, and I mean if you *truly* believe it and are committed to not merely using it but protecting it. Do you know the story of Pandora's box? Actually, it would have been a clay jar... but that's not the point. The point is, you're standing inside the box right now. If Hermione opens this box on her own, she won't be the only one to suffer."

"I'll talk to her. I'll talk to Professor Dumbledore," Harry said.

"I'll hold you to that. Do it before the Yule break is over, or I'll go to him myself," Anthony promised.

* * * * *

December 18

Harry stayed at least twenty paces behind Hermione as she made her way through the castle. He was Disillusioned, his footsteps were silent, his scent was masked, and his Invisibility Cloak was

at hand in the event that all else failed. It hadn't been easy to free his entire day - Detheridge was going to make him pay for it in a hundred small ways, he knew - but he had to know what she was doing.

She made for the Ravenclaw tower, but then turned down a little-used corridor and onto stairs that Harry had never before used. He strayed behind even further in hopes that she wouldn't spot his footprints in the dust. The stairs ended somewhere beyond Dungeon Seven, deep in the bowels of Hogwarts. She turned to the right and shortly stopped to knock on a nondescript door. He heard a ragged cough from the other side of the door. It opened to reveal the last person Harry expected to see.

"Granger," Severus Snape said evenly.

"Mr. Snape," Hermione returned.

"Your services are no longer required," said Snape.

Hermione said, "You're welcome."

"It is... true that I have benefitted from your efforts," Snape barely acknowledged.

Hermione barely reacted to him; instead, she said, "This isn't about my services. It's about yours."

"You are most persistent. In other circumstances, I would bring a quick end to your persistence," Snape said in the cold tone that Harry knew so well.

"Yes, well, you've really no choice in the matter," said Hermione.

Snape gave her a haughty look and said, "Less and less a Gryffindor each day, aren't you?"

"And you've no reason to care about that anymore," Hermione fired back.

"Touche, Miss Granger. One hundred points to perfidy," Snape said in his silkiest tone.

"Whose perfidy: yours or mine?" Hermione asked.

"That was reminiscent of wit," came Snape's reply; "Fetch my bag, then. We shall use Dungeon Nine today." He then broke into a hacking cough.

"Have you run out of potion?" Hermione asked.

"I am quite capable of making my own," said Snape.

Hermione pursed her lips and said, "I see... and you're hands aren't shaking anymore, is that correct?"

"Fine - eight more doses, then, and you will reduce the lacewings over a medium flame, *not* a high

flame. It should have been you who noticed the difference in quality, and not me," Snape hissed.

"You're welcome," Hermione said once again.

"There are limits to my obligation - you do realise that?" Snape grumbled.

"I'll gladly let you know when we bump up against them," Hermione said; "Do you need an arm?"

"Yes, *I require your assistance* - does that satisfy you?" roared Snape.

"Honestly, no, it doesn't. I'd prefer that you were well," said Hermione.

"And alas, the Gryffindor returns... or is it the Hufflepuff?" sneered Snape.

Hermione took Snape's arm and led him into the corridor, where Harry had his first clear look at his old classroom nemesis. He was pale and stooped, and one of his hands constantly shook. His eyes were rheumy and his robes appeared quite loose. His gait was unsteady and it seemed as if his bravado diminished with each step. After two hundred paces, Hermione had her shoulder beneath Snape's armpit to brace him, although he stubbornly continued to walk. He leant against the wall at the entrance to Dungeon Nine and breathed heavily.

"I'll finish the potion this afternoon," Hermione said. "You're not still overdosing with Pepper-Up, are you?"

"As if I'd tell you, Granger," Snape tried to sneer, but another fit of coughing seized him.

"You'd better not die until June," Hermione said.

Snape laughed, and Harry could barely keep his feet with the shock of it. "Your warmth overwhelms me. Yes... a Hufflepuff to the core," he managed between coughs.

"Shall we?" Hermione asked.

"I trust your *Sectumsempra* curse will at last meet my expectations?" Snape retorted.

"It exceeded that Death Eater's expectations at the Goblin Hunt," said Hermione darkly.

"Nonetheless, I have yet to see tangible evidence," Snape insisted. The door to Dungeon Nine closed with a loud squelch before Harry heard her reply.

Harry collapsed against the corridor wall. He was still virtually paralyzed when Hermione and Snape exited the dungeon nearly two hours later. The two exchanged words as Snape stumbled back to his chambers under Hermione's care, but Harry didn't take any of it in. He recovered enough to follow her back toward Ravenclaw's tower and down the spiral stairs.

Hermione stopped at the warded door and let out a long sigh. She said aloud, "I imagine there's an even chance you're here, Harry. I know you took down my warding and put it back again. It was

well done, but I know it's your ward. It just feels that way. If you're here, then we may as well have a talk. If not... then I'm talking to myself."

Harry allowed himself to reappear. "Why?" he asked flatly.

"That's my question, isn't it? Why did you break into my workroom? Why did you find it in the first place? Why are you here now?" Hermione fired back.

"Why are you studying with Snape?" Harry growled.

"You've been following me," Hermione said coldly.

"I shouldn't need to do it, but there you are," said Harry.

Hermione moved her wand in a complex sequence and the workroom door briefly shone with a bluish light. "Come in, then. Obviously you know where to take a seat," she said.

They sat at the table and stared at each other for a long while after the door once again sealed. Hermione broke the silence. "I found Snape lying in a dungeon corridor, in a pool of his own vomit," she said; "Dumbledore did nothing! You did nothing! You cut the man off from an addictive potion and then you left him alone. Don't you *dare* to lecture me about what I've done for him!"

Harry was again stunned. "I... uh..."

Hermione said quickly and angrily, "Don't make excuses to me, because the whole thing is inexcusable. Dumbledore deserves most of the blame - and yes, it's Dumbledore, not Professor Dumbledore, not Headmaster Dumbledore. I was fool enough to think that he actually cared about me, but not anymore. Snape is one of the more vile people I've ever met, but Dumbledore discarded him like a Chocolate Frog wrapper when it suited him. I asked Madam Pomfrey for help, and she told me that her instructions were to leave Snape to his own devices, as he was no longer a member of staff. She did end up providing me with ingredients, but I think that was just a means to satisfy her Healer's Oath. I chose to keep you clear of this, because you would have no desire to help him and because there's nothing you could possibly say to justify the situation - *nothing*."

Harry crossed his arms. "You're right, I wouldn't go out of my way to help him," he said; "Snape's a right bastard, and I'm not all that sorry he's suffering. With that said, do you really think I would have left him in his own spew? Look, it never occurred to me that he'd need any help. If the Headmaster left him that way on purpose, then you're right: there's no excuse for it."

"All right, that's a start -" Hermione began.

Harry cut her off, "Now, then: why are you letting that, that *thing* teach you curses? Why are you reading these books? Are you casting anything from these? I know what they are."

"Who came with you?" Hermione asked.

"Who says anyone did?" Harry snapped.

"You wouldn't know any of these books," she said confidently.

"Well, thanks for that!" Harry groused.

"Almost no one could identify more than one or two of the books on this table," Hermione returned. "Who came here? It wasn't Dumbledore, or I'd already have been in his office. Was it Croaker?"

Harry said immediately, "No! Croaker's an arse - I'd never involve him in something like this! He'd probably be thrilled to have you arrested."

Hermione nodded and said, "You spoke to him, then?"

"I talked to Ogden, too," Harry told her. "I think he's trying to do right by you; he made some good points. Croaker, though... Merlin! I wanted to choke the life out of him!"

"We agree on something, at least. That's good, isn't it?" Hermione said.

Harry returned to the topic at hand. "These books are dangerous," he said.

"Many of them are," she admitted. "I'm only using three of them, if that helps you. The rest are references."

"I'm told that some of them are even dangerous to read," he said to her.

She rolled her eyes and said, "Most of those tales are myths."

"Who told you that?" Harry asked.

"It's so obvious; anyone could see through the inconsistencies," she assured him.

Harry was far from convinced. "Are you certain?" he asked.

"There's very little risk," she answered.

Harry picked up The Lesser Key of Solomon and asked her, "Spirit conjuring?"

He set it down and then picked up The Black Pullet. "Alchemy? Didn't Lucia muck about with alchemy on her own?"

He replaced that with the Codex Gigas. "Are you planning to make a deal with the devil?" he asked her.

"There is no such thing," she said flatly.

He repeated his earlier question: "Are you certain?"

"I don't need to be, because I'd never even consider a ritual like that," she answered.

He sat back in his chair. "Back to it, then. Why?" he asked.

"It's to confirm my work... well, that's what most of it is for," she told him. "I have the answer, I think. I know what happened in 1981."

"You know...? You think you've figured it out?" Harry spluttered.

"I'm almost certain of it," Hermione said.

"I need you to be safe," he said.

"I'm cautious," she said.

"Bill Weasley had to fix your arm in the Black Library," he pointed out.

"I'm more cautious now," she said.

"The person who came with me... he'll turn you in if he isn't convinced that you're putting a stop to this," he said.

"That's none of his affair," she sniffed.

"He thinks it is," he countered.

"Most of these aren't mine," she said; "Most are to be returned before the Yule break."

"Good," he said. "Where did they come from?"

"That's really not any of *your* affair," she said.

"It is my affair if you're putting yourself in danger. I work here, Hermione," he reminded her.

"You're the one crashing wards by overpowering them, and you think *I'm* in danger?" she responded.

"Stop training with Snape," he said.

"You don't own me," she returned dangerously.

"It's no good for you," he said.

"I'll be done soon. He's already turning me over to a duelling partner," she said.

"You're taking his advice on a duelling partner?" he asked.

"It was good advice," she said; "Stop training with the war witch."

"I have to do it," he said.

"It's no good for you," she said.

"It's not the same thing," he complained.

"So you say," she allowed.

He took a slow breath and then said, "This is getting us nowhere."

"You're right," she agreed; "What do we do now?"

"We find a way to trust each other?" he offered.

"I'll return most of the books," she said.

"Er... I won't break into your workroom?" he ventured.

"You're right - you won't," she growled.

"I won't follow you around?" he said.

"That's a start," she said.

"Uh... I'll rub your feet while you revise?" he said.

"Hmm... that's a reasonable offer," she said with a smirk.

"It's dark in here. Let's go somewhere with some light," he said, and she agreed. It wasn't settled, but there was a measure of peace.

* * * * *

December 20

"Come in, Monsieur Potter, come in!" the Marquis said brightly.

"Thank you," Harry said; "Erm... this is a nice office."

The Marquis gave a Gallic shrug. "It suits me," he said.

'Nice' was an understatement. 'Opulent' was closer to the truth. There was no doubt that the Marquis had expensive taste, and Harry knew through the castle grapevine that the Marquis had rejected nearly every furnishing Hogwarts had to offer. Virtually the entire contents of the south tower were ultimately transported from the Marquis' chateau.

"Did you need something from me?" Harry asked.

"Non, Monsieur Potter. It is you who need something from me," the Marquis announced. "Mme. de Flandres, please join us."

The Marquis' apprentice joined them in the office. Harry had for the most part avoided her since making a referral to Mr. Tonks. She was too forward for his taste, and he was still unsure whether she was purely interested in a business partnership. Once seated, she remained silent.

"I have asked M. Potter here today so that he may learn of the, ehh, travails of the hero," said the Marquis. "Apprentice, what is it that the heroes have in common? I speak of those who have come in the times since my birth."

"Each of them had a group of close supporters, Your Grace," Mme. deFlandres said immediately.

"Quite so, quite so - well spoken," the Marquis said. "M. Potter, it is Albus' group that you have met: the ones you have named the, ehh, 'old-old crowd', yes? Some of these were of my group before that, as I was of Nicolas' group before that. Apprentice, what is my age?"

"Two hundred and forty-one years, Your Grace," she answered.

"Yes, yes... two hundred and forty-one years. You will not speak of this, M. Potter. Some think me to be three, four, even five years younger than this, and I am grateful for the illusion of youth," the Marquis said; Harry had to stifle a chuckle. He went on, "I was born two years to the day before my cousin Marie-Joseph. He is a rather well-known fellow in his own right, for the Muggles in America. They know him as the Marquis de Lafayette. Why do I say these things, you are asking, yes? It is because of this: it will not be Albus who wins the war that is coming. It will not be this 'old-old crowd' that tries to train you, even in the face of the curse. Alas, it will not be me, though I would gladly suffer the victory, and the riches and fine women and fine cognac that would come my way. It will be you, M. Potter, and it will be your companions. Some will be older, some will be of the same age as yourself. For another hero, some would be younger, but when one is as young as you, then not so much."

"That does make sense," Harry admitted.

"Of course it does; I would not tell you this if it were otherwise," said the Marquis. "And thus, it is time that the hero begins to assemble his group. The rules, Apprentice?"

Mme. de Flandres hesitated for a moment before she asked, "The rules, Your Grace?"

The Marquis huffed, "Yes, of course: the rules. The rules by which the hero, he forms the successful group - those rules?"

"Are you referring to the Rule of Thirteen, Your Grace?" she asked.

"Among others, yes," the Marquis said. He turned to Harry and explained, "Your group - your, ehh, team, if you like - should consist of yourself and twelve others. There is to be thirteen in total, not twelve and not fourteen, but thirteen. You will see this again and again and again in the

history. Even the Muggles have the best and biggest example, you know? The Christ, he had the Twelve, yes? Not the first to do this, and not the last. Continue, Apprentice."

Mme. de Flandres said quickly, "Yes, Your Grace. The twelve should be sworn to service in an order determined by lot, such that neither they nor you know the order in which the oaths are sworn. The last to swear is the most likely to either die in your service or to commit betrayal, but many believe that this is self-fulfilling. Therefore, it is best that the order remains unknown to all."

The Marquis nodded approvingly. "Well stated, Apprentice," he said. "The team - the, ehh, order, if you like - she must be sworn around the common object... the ring, the pendant, the watch... the sword is nice, yes? And then there is the name - the name, she is very important. She must be fitting, she must be strong, she must be noble. In this modern age, I am told that she must fit on the, ehh... what is the word? The, ehh, tee-shirt - she must fit on the tee-shirt." Harry couldn't hold back a snort on that, and even Mme. de Flandres' expression broke for a moment.

"Enough of the humour. Apprentice, bring forth the cases, would you?" the Marquis ordered. Mme. de Flandres briefly left the room and then returned with thirteen long cases levitating three feet above the floor.

Harry put it together quickly. "Swords, sir?" he asked.

"Quite so, M. Potter," said the Marquis. "Kanzan, he will not return to this place. In his stead, he offers these to you. You will find thirteen identical blades, engraved with the sign of House Potter and the sign of Hogwarts and the sign of Britain. These shall be the common object for your, ehh, order."

Harry cautiously opened one of the boxes. "It's brilliant," he said quietly.

Mme. de Flandres stood and asked, "May I?" Harry put the blade in her hands. She gave a few slices and then slid fluidly into a duelling pose.

"Your impressions, Apprentice?" the Marquis asked.

"The grip is supple and the weight is superb, Your Grace. They are subtly but powerfully charmed," she said. "These are remarkable blades. Anyone would be honored to bear them."

"Kanzan, he is the greatest living craftsman of the blade," said the Marquis; "I would expect nothing less. He took these from the metal rods to the magical blades by his own hand and wand, M. Potter. These were not left to the journeyman or the apprentices."

"How can I ever pay for these? I can't even imagine the value..." Harry wondered aloud.

"There is no paying," the Marquis told him. "The payment, it is to rid the world of this Voldemort of yours. The name, she is what remains before us. She must be noble, she must be worthy of a chevalier such as M. Weasley, and she must be worthy of the clothing, yes? And so, I, Alexandre,

the Marquis de Maupassant, shall grace you with the perfect name, the name that will forever mark your, ehh, noble order in the annals of the history. Les Chevaliers de Saint-Pierre, this is the name."

Harry felt run over. He managed to say, "I appreciate, erm, what you're doing... Les Chevaliers de... I'm sorry?"

Mme. de Flandres explained, "The Marquis says this in French, of course. The name which he has provided you is said in English as 'The Knights of Saint Peter'."

"So you've been calling Ron a knight?" Harry asked.

"This is correct, M. Potter. M. Weasley, his place is to be the hero's knight," said the Marquis. "It goes without saying that M. Weasley will be a part of your order."

"And Hermione, of course," Harry added.

"Non, non. Mme. Granger, she will not be such," the Marquis pronounced.

Harry's eyes widened. "Pardon?" he asked.

"Ahh, this is not to say that Mme. Granger is unimportant, not at all. The goblins, they have already spoken on her place. Sataaja, they said to us all. Mme. Granger, she is your guide. She is, ehh, soror mystica for your noble quest," the Marquis clarified. "In this way, she is more important than this order you will swear to your service. That which is between you and she, this is already sworn, yes?"

"I suppose it is," Harry said quietly.

"So, it is finished, yes? We have the number, we have the blades, we have the name, and we have the first chevalier," the Marquis said with great satisfaction.

"Er... not that I'm ungrateful... because certainly I'm not..." Harry began.

"Ahh, yes. My Apprentice, she is of course at your service, Her skill with the blade, it is legendary. Her mind, it is in the same realm as the sataaja. Her courage, it is that of the chevalier," the Marquis declared.

"It would be an honour, Your Grace," Mme. de Flandres said immediately.

"Eh... that's... that's great. I'll... once all this is organised, we can speak about that..." Harry managed.

"You were breathless with the question, M. Potter - please continue with the thought," the Marquis said.

"Oh, right, yes... uh... about the Knights of Saint Peter? What's behind that name, exactly? I'm

afraid I don't follow," said Harry.

The Marquis nodded knowingly and said, "I see, of course... the hero, he must know the whys and wherefores of the name, for it is part of the heroic tale, yes? The Knights of Saint George, they have a history in your country, and the Saint George, he is the patron saint. This means no for the Saint George. The Saint Patrick, this would be a possibility if you were of Ireland but you are not. The Welsh names, they do not flow from the tongue, so even though the hero's family lived in Wales... no. But then there is the holy Saint Peter. He is the first saint, the most important, the right hand of the Christ. He speaks of power, yes? But... *but* ...! He is also the patron saint, yes? Saint Peter, he is the patron saint of many, many things. The thing that makes sense, though...? The thing that gives us the noble name? Saint Peter, he is the patron saint of potters. Thus the name, she is settled."

"Patron saint of Potters... that's great... brilliant, actually... er... can't tell you how much help this has been... eh..." Harry babbled.

The Marquis grinned madly. "It comes naturally to me," he said. "Now is the time when we toast with the cognac and tell the stories of the oats we have sown..."

Harry went from rattled to positively uncomfortable. "Erm... oats? Does that mean...?"

The Marquis' eyes widened. "Ehh, let us step back from that! It is easy for me to forget your young age. You have not sown the oats. Perhaps you have not found the oats, although you have found the sataaja, and thus the oats are close at hand... unless you seek different oats entirely..."

"Perhaps another line of conversation is in order, Your Grace?" Mme. de Flandres ventured.

The Marquis raised one eyebrow. "But of course... oh, my. How shall I say... M. Potter, it is possible that the sataaja, she is not the right sort of oats?"

"I'm really confused about the oats..." Harry offered.

The Marquis stared intently at Harry and asked, "You are not the, ehh... pederaste? Not that I sit in judgment, of course -"

"Your Grace!" Mme. de Flandres squeaked.

Harry sat back in his chair, alarmed. "You're not asking...?"

"M. Potter favours women," Mme. de Flandres said without hesitation.

Harry stood quickly and shook the Marquis' hand. "Thank you for all the advice. The swords are great. I'll remember the rules and I'll think on the name. Have a wonderful day," he blurted out in a single breath, and then left the office as quickly as possible.

Ron stopped him in the corridor, which he was moving through as quickly as possible without running. "What's happened? You're pale as Sir Nick!" he said.

"Met with the Marquis - he thinks you're a knight - gave us some swords - wants us to start an order - I gotta go," Harry bit out.

"Swords are cool," Ron said to Harry's retreating back.

* * * * *

December 22

Long after the usual gaggle of visitors faded away, the packet from Ted Tonks still sat on Harry's desk. Every time that he walked away from it, Hedwig let out a sharp cry and fixed him with an unforgiving stare. The fact that Mr. Tonks had sent a packet at all left open the possibility that Croaker had been right: that Harry was under some sort of marriage contract, or betrothal, or whatever it was actually called by wizards. Not for the first time, Harry recognized how little he truly knew about the world in which he lived.

He barely noticed when the tray holding his half-eaten dinner disappeared, nor did he hear Spat return until there was a firm tug on his sleeve. "Not-Professor Potter needs something more potent than his usual butterbeer...?" the house-elf said.

"Why would you think that?" Harry asked.

Spat immediately answered, "The Not-Professor is not his usual crabby, growly and easily annoyed self."

"Charming," Harry said with a grimace.

Spat put on an expression that passed for a smirk, and remarked, "The Not-Professor still puts up with Spat despite Spat's constant offenses. Spat thinks that the Not-Professor is the only wizard strange enough for Spat's liking. Spat also thinks the Not-Professor is afraid of the papers on his desk. Spat asked the Johtaja what to do for the Not-Professor, and the Johtaja reminded Spat that the Not-Professor is the head of House Black. This means the Not-Professor is the rightful owner of all the things that Professor Nasty Portrait packed away."

Harry let out a sharp laugh. "Professor Nasty Portrait? Do you mean Phineas Black?"

Spat nodded furiously. "Spat means the very same, and so Spat brings you Professor Nasty Portrait's hidden refreshment." With a flourish, he made a very dusty bottle and a glass pop onto the desk.

"What is this?" Harry wondered as he brushed at the dust.

"Spat presents a bottle of Dunwoody Single-Malt Firewhiskey from the year 1832," Spat said. "The Johtaja told Spat that this would strip paint from the Not-Professor's insides." His big eyes opened wide, and he added hesitantly, "Has the Not-Professor been eating paint? Is this why the Not-Professor picks over his meals?"

Harry said, “It’s just an expression. Er... this isn’t the first time I’ve heard about the Johtaja. Who is that, anyway?”

Spat began, “The Johtaja is the One-Who-Leads-From-Behind. One must lead, there has to be one who leads, but...” He broke into fidgeting, but went on, “To lead, the Johtaja must **lead** . It is... difficult for us... there are those who... some think that only one who is not right in the head would be Johtaja.”

“And what do you think?” Harry asked.

“Spat thinks that it would be an honour to serve as Johtaja. Other house-elves think that this proves their point. Spat’s clan thinks that Spat spends too much time serving the Johtaja. Spat’s mother thinks that Spat is young and stupid and going through a phase of thinking he is greater than his station,” the house-elf returned.

“Well, Harry Potter thinks that Spat’s all right, for what it’s worth,” Harry said.

Spat bowed with a flourish and said, “Spat is pleased to serve the head of the great Houses of Potter and Black. Spat has decided that Not-Professor Potter is to become a great and barmy wizard like the Headmaster. Spat is ceasing hostilities with the Not-Professor’s Miss Hermione Jean Granger. Miss Hermione Jean Granger treats Spat well, though Spat has made himself undeserving.”

“That’s, erm... gracious of you,” Harry said, and then he asked, “If I ask a favour of you, Spat, are you allowed to give it?”

Spat’s brow crinkled. “Spat’s place is to serve the Not-Professor in all things that do no harm to Hogwarts and do not stand against the orders of the Headmaster or Johtaja. Spat does not need to give favours, and Not-Professor does not need to ask them of Spat.”

Harry nodded in understanding. He said, “Three things, then. First, this Not-Professor business has to stop; my name is Harry. Second, if you’re really finished with your row, then you should refer to Hermione by name as well. Third... I need you to keep watch over her. There are some people who think she’s dabbling in some magic that’s best left alone. I need to know if she’s doing anything dangerous. Be sure that she doesn’t see you.”

“Spat will obey within the bounds of his oaths,” the house-elf replied.

“Oh – two more things?” Harry added.

“Harry Potter, sir, does like to draw things out,” Spat said blandly.

“You’re permitted to appear in my quarters whenever needed; I don’t care if you’re seen by anyone who might be visiting,” said Harry.

“Spat has already gathered that,” the house-elf said; “There was one more thing, Harry Potter, sir...?”

“Right, then. I’m not much for servants. Dobby thinks for himself, and Winky... well, at least she doesn’t grovel. Even if you’re a little irritating, I don’t want you to change yourself for me. Do what you do best... though I’m not quite certain what that is,” Harry said.

Spat nodded furiously, and promised, “Spat will be the house-elf he is meant to be, Harry Potter, sir. Spat’s clan says that Spat is the most disagreeable house-elf at Hogwarts, and that Harry Potter’s Dobby is the only one more strange. Spat assures Harry Potter, sir, that no self-respecting wizard will ever accept Spat’s services.”

“Er... if that’s what you want...?” Harry managed.

The house-elf disappeared for an instant and then reappeared with a steaming cup of tea. He dribbled some of the firewhiskey into the cup. Harry’s eyes burned from the fumes. “Spat will leave Harry Potter, sir, to quail at his scary papers,” he announced as he disappeared a second time.

Harry took in a long breath, let it out slowly, and tore open the large Muggle envelope in a single go. There were at least a hundred pages of papers within. A single sheet of Ted Tonks’ stationery topped the stack.

Harry,

I’ve enclosed the information you requested, as well as your monthly statements.

The wizarding economy is going through a spot of turmoil. Apparently the Swiss gnomes decided to peg the florin to this new Muggle currency that the European Union is sorting out, but told the goblins that they were going to use the thaler as the benchmark. The goblins called a banking conference, where the nissens from Norway (they’re a bit like gnomes, but never tell them that) in turn decided to ignore the Euro altogether, which broke the agreement that all the banking communities had previously negotiated. The chupacabras from Brazil (nasty business, those) crawled away from the proceedings entirely, and the zombie bankers from New Orleans apparently left behind a limb at the negotiating table. That’s a tremendous insult, of course, notwithstanding the stench. Never cross the zombies, by the way, as they are the most relentless debt collectors you could possibly imagine.

The result of all this kerfuffle is that the wizarding currency markets are arse-over-teakettle. Only the Americans and our friends in Oz seem to be doing well at the moment. You’ll see some losses in your principal holdings, in addition to all the approved expenses.

Your generosity is admirable – for example, making good on Diggle’s dealings in St. Ebb, and the victims’ fund, and the potions research you’re sponsoring – but both Madam Bones and I must advise that you take a more conservative position in your financial dealings. I know this is in poor taste, but it’s true that Dark Lords are bad for business. It took Britain five years or more to recover from the last war. If this currency contraction heralds the beginning of a wartime economy, then we’re right to worry about your accounts.

By contrast, your Muggle holdings are doing quite well. The Ministry is encouraging Gringotts to stiffen the limitations on currency conversion, and one of my contacts believes that they may soon impose a new tariff on conversions. It is worth considering the conversion of additional Galleons to sterling. A recurring scheduled transaction would yield the most ready cash under limitations without triggering tariffs, whether old or new.

Most of your request for information was handled by the General Recording Office at the Ministry. Modest unscheduled fees were assessed in order to guarantee confidentiality. I located the rest of the material among the various Potter family records that we have gathered and catalogued on your behalf. If you have any questions about the information, Andromeda would be the one to ask. I'll be in Hogsmeade on the weekend, and will be available to meet with you upon request regarding your accounts.

Kind regards,

Ted

The first thirty-seven sheets of parchment each contained a formal proposal for marriage or betrothal, extended to the Head of House Potter after the death of Harry's parents. Some names were familiar: Abbott, Bones, Brocklehurst, Bruce... Hargrove... Turpin... Vane... All of these were labelled as "decision to be made within five years of installation of a new Head of House". As he looked closer, Harry saw that more than twenty had been withdrawn by the family in question; all of those withdrawals had taken place since 1991. Some had been betrothed to others, and it occurred to Harry that perhaps these proposals were extended to several families at once. He saw one from Niall Pucey, and it took him a few moments to realise that it referred to Adrian's older sister; she had finished Hogwarts after Harry's third year. That one had been withdrawn in 1994, when she had become engaged to someone whose name Harry didn't recognise.

The next twelve sheets were labelled as "rejected by conservator on minor wizard's behalf". These names were familiar and the reason for their rejection was clear to Harry. Nott, Parkinson, Gamp... it was a Death Eaters' Who's-who list. In this instance, he was very pleased with the Headmaster's meddling.

The final sheet stopped Harry cold. He read it through a second time, and then a third.

On this, the Twenty-Third day of December, in the Year of Our Lord 1980,

Melisende Mhairi McIlvaine and Connor Bruce MacPhail,

Mistress of the Original Noble House of McIlvaine and her consort,

Do pledge the troth of their daughter,

Dierdre Jehanne MacPhail McIlvaine

to Harry James Potter

Son of James William Potter and Lily Evans Potter,

Head of the Most Noble and Courageous House of Potter and his consort.

Either of the betrothed may negate this agreement of their own volition and without penalty between the eleventh anniversary of the birth of Miss McIlvaine, on the Ninth of October, 1990, and the seventeenth anniversary of the birth of Master Potter, on the Thirty-First of July, 1997.

The parents of the betrothed may negate this agreement only under the terms established in the Year of Our Lord 972 by the Founding Council that predated the current Ministry for Magic. As a condition of the Agreement, House McIlvaine shall allow Miss McIlvaine to accept an invitation to attend from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry at such time as it is received, provided that Master Potter accepts same.

Should this agreement remain in force on the First of August, 1997, the betrothed shall marry within five years and shall sire an heir or heiress within ten years of marriage. The first son borne to the betrothed shall be designated as Heir Presumptive of House Potter. The first daughter borne to the betrothed shall be designated as Heiress Presumptive of House McIlvaine and shall bear the surname Potter-McIlvaine. Should the marriage produce no female issue, the first son borne to the betrothed shall be designated as Heir Presumptive of House Potter and Regent of House McIlvaine, and shall pass Heirship of House McIlvaine to his first daughter. Should that first son produce no female issue, then the second son of the betrothed shall be named Regent, and his first daughter shall be named Heiress Presumptive. Should that second son produce no female issue, then the first son of the betrothed's first son shall be designated as Regent of House McIlvaine, and a similar progression shall be followed until such time as a valid Heiress Presumptive of House McIlvaine may be named.

Such monies and assets as House McIlvaine may possess following the natural death of the Mistress shall pass to Miss McIlvaine, excepting a designated residence and lifelong stipend for the consort of the Mistress. Fifty percent of the monies and assets shall be retained as the property of House McIlvaine until such time as they may be passed to a valid Heiress Presumptive following the natural death of Miss McIlvaine. Fifty percent of the monies and assets shall be provided to the betrothed to do with as they will. In the event of an unnatural death, all House McIlvaine assets shall be frozen until the legal disposition of said death is established. All magical artifacts and the House Grimoire are designated as the property of House McIlvaine. The lawful Head of House Potter shall always be permitted to read the McIlvaine House Grimoire, and may practice the spells and rituals therein with the consent of the Head of House McIlvaine at that time. This Grimoire arrangement shall be reciprocated.

House McIlvaine and House Potter enter into a perpetual relationship upon execution of this betrothal. Each House shall work for the preservation and protection of the other; shall share or expend such assets as may be required in order to assure such preservation and protection; and shall extend protection and comfort to such Houses as each respective House may have previously joined in a reciprocal relationship.

In the event of the death of the Master of House Potter and his consort prior to the execution of

this Agreement, House McIlvaine shall grant Master Potter houseroom and protection. In the event of the death of the Mistress of House McIlvaine and her consort prior to the execution of this Agreement, House Potter shall grant Miss McIlvaine houseroom and protection.

Both of the McIlvaines and both of Harry's parents had placed their signatures and a single drop of blood at the bottom of the document. Harry traced his fingertips along first his father's signature and then his blood; he gave an involuntary shudder. An addendum was written in the remaining inch below the signatures.

This Betrothal Agreement is negated under the terms established by the Founding Council, on account of the death of Deirdre Jehanne MacPhail McIlvaine.

Signed on the Twenty-Second day of October, in the Year of Our Lord 1981, by

Melisende Mhairi McIlvaine

Mr. Tonks had clipped a half-sheet of typing paper to the back of the parchment, with a hastily scribbled note:

Madam McIlvaine appeared before the Wizengamot in November 1981 and offered to fulfil the Agreement made with your parents by offering houseroom, protection and a reciprocal arrangement between the houses. This was no small gesture given the history of House McIlvaine. The McIlvaines can be traced to the pre-Founders era, you see. Dumbledore informed the members that you had already been placed with Muggle relatives. I believe that this was the first occasion at which Dumbledore publicly acknowledged your placement. One of my clients who sat on the Wizengamot at the time insists that Dumbledore referenced your parents' will in order to quell the uproar. Either Dumbledore or my client is being dishonest with me. I think it's Dumbledore, but you're well aware that I don't trust the old man.

I understand that you've already met Madam McIlvaine, though a Board of Governors hearing was not the best sort of introduction. In our limited experience, Melisende is an honourable witch. She may be a useful ally in what is to come. I suspect she would be pleased to receive your correspondence.

TT

Harry had no idea what to think, what to say, what he might write in a letter, or who he would – or even could – seek out for advice. His parents had betrothed him. He could scarcely take in the idea, nor could he put it away. He recalled Madam McIlvaine from the Board meeting, and his mind conjured up a girl his own age with long and wavy reddish-brown hair and an enigmatic smile. *Deirdre Potter*. It was what might have been and what could no longer be. It dawned on him that Deirdre had died in October, 1981. Harry didn't have to think long about why she might have died, or at whose hand.

She tried to take me in , Harry thought. She could have taken me in - my parents wanted her to take me in - and he stopped it.

“Fucking Dumbledore!” he growled. He snatched up one of the wooden chairs at the table in his personal common room. He swung it hard against the stone wall and let forth a ragged shout.

“Fucking Voldemort!” he lashed out. He picked up the largest piece of the chair and gave it another swing, and then he reduced another piece to glowing ashes. He looked at a shattered chair leg and saw a hint of a red eye; in a flash, the chair leg joined the first pile of ashes.

It was one more thing he had been denied, and there was one more person who had paid the price for the snake-faced monster's misdeeds. Harry resolved two things with little effort. First, Voldemort would die by his hand, and it would be sooner rather than later. Second, he was finished with waiting for what he wanted in life. Voldemort could very well snuff out the good things in Harry's life before he even knew they existed. He certainly wasn't going to let the things in his grasp slip away. He wondered why he'd ever allowed that in the first place. The third resolution came shortly thereafter. He would ally with Dumbledore, he would even trust that the Headmaster's intentions were noble, but he would never again trust that the Headmaster was actually looking out for his interests. This was one example too many. His mind raced onward. It occurred to him that if this was true, then there was no good reason to believe the Headmaster was working in Hermione's interests either. What had Ted Tonks said once – that the Headmaster loved everyone but no one in particular? He finally understood what Mr. Tonks had meant.

“Not a chance,” Harry snarled aloud; “I won't let it happen.” The rest of the chairs at his table crumbled, and the table itself collapsed.

“Harry, what on Earth...?” Hermione gasped from the doorway. He opened his arms and she moved hesitantly toward him.

“Thank God you're here,” he mumbled into her shoulder.

She eased him back with her hands so that she could look him in the eyes. “What's happened? Are you all right? What can I do?” she asked in quick succession.

He took a ragged breath and crushed his lips to hers. She stiffened for a moment and then seemed to realise that this was Harry's answer to her question. The kiss was returned with a fervor they hadn't shared before. It was passionate and needful and on the edge of desperate.

Hermione pulled free to catch her breath. "Not that I'm complaining, not at all, but -"

"You're mine, and I'm yours," Harry growled.

Hermione's brow furrowed. "I'm not something to be owned," she protested.

"That's not it. No one's going to take you from me, not Voldemort, not Dumbledore, not Krum -"

"Viktor?" Hermione laughed.

"Not the whole sodding Ministry," Harry said seriously.

"Harry... what...?" Hermione gently asked.

"Don't ever leave me," he said. "I won't let it happen."

"I... I'm not going anywhere..." she said.

"I'm not trying to tell you what to do, I just wanted you to be safe," he said.

"I returned the books, honestly," she said.

"I'm glad. You can't take those kind of chances," he said.

"You need to understand that I won't be controlled, Harry. I won't have it, not anymore. In doing all this research... I think I may have discovered something, something about the nature of magic itself. I'm not certain yet... it may take some time to be sure... but if I'm right, it's going to turn their whole world upside down. Croaker, Fudge, Malfoy, people like that - they'll try to stop it, but I won't let them. I won't let them stop me," she said.

"I won't let them, either -" he said.

"I know," she said.

"- and they'll have to come through me first," he finished.

"That kiss... what was that about, really?" she asked.

"It's because you're mine," he said.

"No, you're mine," she smirked.

"That's bloody well right," he grinned.

"Harry, language," she chided him.

He kissed her again, with as much need as the last.

"What do you want, Harry?" she whispered.

"You," he said.

She stammered, "I... I'm not... er..."

"What do you want?" he asked.

She buried her face in the crook of his neck and said, "More than we've had."

He took her hand, led her toward the sofa and said, "Then show me."

"Maybe we should set this aside until Christmas?" she teased him.

"Or maybe not," he said as he kissed her once more.

"Or maybe not," she agreed.

Harry Potter and the Years of Rebellion

Death Takes No Holidays - draft plus outlines

DEATH TAKES NO HOLIDAYS

December 25

Harry sat facing the windows of the Black tower's grand hall, with a cup of cider in his hands and the churning grey sea visible in the distance. Mrs. Weasley had outdone herself, he thought. Not only had she made it a good Christmas, but she had made it *his* Christmas – his first Christmas in a home of his own. Despite that, he was even-tempered at best.

Point the first, Croaker had been right in one thing, despite being so wrong on all others. The idea of admitting that to Croaker was intolerable. Point the second, it seemed that Dumbledore had failed spectacularly not once, but twice: not only had he kept Harry from Madam McIlvaine back in 1981, but he obviously hadn't done anything to secure the McIlvaine's safety. Surely he had known about the agreement, if the McIlvaines were as prominent a family as Mr. Tonks had hinted in his note. The betrothal agreement sat at his bedside, creased at the sides from his handling of it. Point the third, Voldemort was surely on the move. His Death Eaters were seemingly everywhere. Harry's guess in the summertime that Voldemort was down to fewer than fifty supporters seemed far off the mark.

Point the fourth – at least with respect to Harry's mood – was Hermione's visible unhappiness. He couldn't recall a time in years past that Hermione had profoundly missed her parents. Perhaps it was because she had been making a choice to stay away in the past but this time was prevented from seeing them, he thought.

Mr. Weasley stopped next to him. "Rather gloomy out there, isn't it?" he said.

"I've never seen the sea in winter," Harry said. "Is it always like this?"

"It's far stormier here than in the south of England, to be certain," said Mr. Weasley. "May I sit?"

"Please," Harry said absently.

Mr. Weasley sipped at his own cider. "Molly outdid herself for you," he said.

Harry nodded, but then sat up sharply. "Oh! Absolutely, yes – she knows I appreciated it, doesn't she? I mean, I could have said more –"

Mr. Weasley chuckled and said, “Easy, Harry! No one could suffer any doubts there. She loves you as a son, whether you like it or not.”

“I like it most of the time,” Harry said lightly.

“So what’s troubling you, then?” Mr. Weasley asked.

Harry gave a wry grin. “Cutting right to it...”

Mr. Weasley returned the grin. “Despite appearances, I do see what’s happening around me. Hermione’s out of sorts, but that’s to be expected under the circumstances. You, on the other hand...? I’ve seen you with some correspondence. Did you receive unpleasant news?”

Harry let out a slow breath. It occurred to him that Mr. Weasley might understand, or at least have a sympathetic ear. He also knew that the man had kept his confidences in the past. “I found out that I was betrothed,” he said.

“Is that so? Well... it’s uncommon in this day and age, at least for we common folk. You do come from a prominent family so I suppose it’s possible,” Mr. Weasley told him. “I gather that there’s something in the terms that allows for a way out? If it were binding, I’d expect you to be far more unsettled.”

“It’s already been broken, actually,” Harry said.

Mr. Weasley said, “Ah. That’s good, isn’t it?”

“She’s dead. That’s why it’s broken,” said Harry.

“Oh. I see,” said Mr. Weasley, and then he said nothing for a while. They sat there, cups of cider in hand, and watched the gale come in to shore.

Eventually Mr. Weasley cleared his throat and said, “I can’t think of any witches your age who have died recently... not since you’ve started Hogwarts, actually. Were you betrothed to someone on the Continent?”

Harry began, “Her name was Dierdre McIlvaine. She was —”

Mr. Weasley broke in, “Truly? I hadn’t known there were any McIlvaines of your age. Isn’t the last of the McIlvaines on the Board of Hogwarts?”

“Madam McIlvaine was her mother. Dierdre died just before my parents,” Harry said.

Mr. Weasley nodded and said, “Ah... and you’re just finding this out?” When Harry’s lips thinned, he added, “I see we’ve come to the problem.”

“Dumbledore made a mess of things,” Harry said.

“That’s been a theme these last few months,” Mr. Weasley observed.

“It’s not just that,” Harry said; “It’s hard to explain...” Mr. Weasley went quiet again and Harry was left to think on an explanation.

“I lost something. Strange, since I didn’t know it was there to lose,” he said at last.

“Are you angry over it?” Mr. Weasley asked.

Harry looked to the cup he held in his hands. “I suppose I am,” he admitted, “but there’s something different about it. These last few months, when I’ve been really angry, it’s been... hot, I suppose. This feels different. It’s cold somehow. It doesn’t go away...” He looked up at Mr. Weasley with a penetrating gaze. “I’ll never lose something like this again – not ever. If it’s in my reach, I’ll take it and I won’t let go. I don’t care what that stupid prophecy says about not being able to live.”

Mr. Weasley nodded sagely. “There are a dozen ways one could read that part, Harry,” he said. “I might see it one way, you might see it another. Professor Dumbledore had his own view on the matter, of course. I honestly think he took it at its word. But now...? Well, your godfather certainly did upset the kettle, didn’t he?”

“He did that, all right,” Harry agreed.

“I’m going to indulge myself for a moment. I’ll ask that you listen to me and then you can set your own opinion. Will you do that much?” Mr. Weasley asked.

“I’ve always listened to you,” Harry said honestly.

Mr. Weasley put on a half-smile at that. He told Harry, “It’s like this... the best things in life are so easily broken. All you need do is hold onto them too tightly. We’ve learnt that the hard way, Molly and me. Seize the best when it comes along, Harry, but take care that you make it last.”

“Thank you,” Harry said quietly.

“I’ll see about freshening that cider, then,” Mr. Weasley said. He gave Harry a pat on the shoulder and collected the cup from Harry’s yielding hands.

* * * * *

YULE-KNOW-WHO!

Yule itself has been overtaken by the spectre of terror. The death’s-head-and-serpent mark rose above three more homes overnight, resulting in two deaths and six persons taken to hospital. The attacks were widely dispersed, once again causing difficulties for the DMLE.

Ministry Aurors did reach one site while an attack was under way. One of You-Know-Who’s men is believed to have been severely injured prior to escaping the scene. Dark Force Defence League

volunteers reached another of the sites as an attack concluded, but did not land any spells on the enemy.

The Ministry has continued its practice of withholding the identities of those attacked. “We will not at this time release any names, as the knowledge is of no benefit to the wizards and witches of England and may in fact give aid to those who seek to terrorize our citizens,” said Ministry spokeswizard Percy Weasley. This newspaper maintains its position that the Ministry is illegally withholding this information, absent a specific ruling by the Wizengamot.

The Daily Prophet , December 26

* * * * *

December 28

“Now, boys, Ginny is going to have a young man calling on her today, and I expect you to be on your best behaviour – yes, I’m glaring at you, Fred and George,” Mrs. Weasley announced as breakfast wound to a close.

“A gentlemen caller!” Fred said in his poshest voice.

“I do believe you’ve got it, old bean!” George returned.

Ron said between bites, “Sounds stuffy to me.”

“I think it sounds sweet,” Hermione protested. Harry rolled his eyes and Hermione backhanded him for his trouble.

“Sounds like something Perce would arrange,” Charlie said off-handedly.

The room went quiet for a long second before Fred piped up in the same affected voice, “I take it that we’re prohibited from demonstrating our wares to the gentleman?”

George chimed in, “Oh, please, Mater! It would be tragic were we to deny our trade to such a fine and upstanding –” Ginny, who was already nicely reddened, hurled a banger at George and caught him between the eyes. She matched the throw with Fred before either could react.

“Oh, dear! Violence! That just won’t do!” George drawled.

“Ginevra Molly Weasley!” Mrs. Weasley shrieked.

“If either of you bother Tony, I won’t hex you into next week. I’ll get a Time-Turner and make sure that you’re drowned at birth,” Ginny ground out.

Ron gave her a gimlet eye. “Tony?”

Hermione’s eyes widened. “Do you mean Anthony Goldstein? You’re seeing Anthony?”

“I was going to visit him in London, but his brother was injured and we decided it was better if he came here. I expect I’ll be right about that?” Ginny snapped. The twins looked at each other and began to smirk.

Tonks sat back in her chair and casually buffed her nails against her shirt, then made a show of looking them over. “I’ve had a lot of practice the last few months,” she said; “It’s amazing how much a girl can pick up, even after three years of Auror training and three in the field. I’d be happy to demonstrate that, boys... interested?”

“That’s big of you, Tonks, really it is,” Fred said slowly.

“Don’t mind us, Tonksie. We’re just, erm, high-spirited blokes,” George added.

Bill slipped his arm around Tonks. “You should see Ron and Harry,” he said, “or Ginny, for that matter. They’re practically up to an Auror’s standard. Ginny’s the best under-age mixed duellist I’ve ever seen, and Harry could go on the men’s circuit today. Ron could take either of them in a sabre-only duel.”

“You’ve been teaching them how to use a sword?” Mrs. Weasley said sharply.

Tonks didn’t take the hint. “Bill’s a great teacher,” she burbled. “Working with the students has been absolutely brill! I mean, I’d like to think I’ve held my own in the sessions when it comes to wand work, but put a sword in Bill’s hands and it’s poetry in motion. Even the Marquis de Maupassant was impressed and he’s seen every major duellist in the past two hundred years. Why, Bill put that apprentice of the Marquis on the mat in less than a minute, and she’s been ranked in France for the last three years.”

Mr. Weasley’s expression was slack. “I didn’t know you were taking that up again, Bill,” he said.

“I figured that since I’m as skilled as anyone in Britain – and that’s an established fact – then I might as well pass along what I know, since I never had the chance to put it to use,” Bill said. No one missed the hint of acid in his voice.

“Professor Dumbledore hasn’t been supportive of sport duelling in the past,” Mr. Weasley said.

Bill told everyone, “Hogwarts is fielding a team for the next junior circuit.”

Mrs. Weasley’s jaw clenched and then she began, “Ronald and Ginevra, you will –”

“– do whatever you like, in this case,” Mr. Weasley cut her off firmly. “If that means either of both of you want to follow the duelling circuit for the upcoming summer, then so be it. Ginny, if you’d prefer to do something along the lines of your music, then we’ll support your arrangements. Bill, Charlie... I like to think we’d do some things differently, if we had it to do again. Fred, George... well, you’re doing what you always hoped for, so there’s nothing to second-guess, is there?”

“Er...” Charlie managed.

Mrs. Weasley squeaked, “Arthur!” just as Bill began, “Dad –”

Mr. Weasley broke into a jaunty smile. “I think that everything has been said. Harry, be a good lad and pass me the *Prophet* , would you?” he said.

Harry dumbly handed off the paper. The twins’ mouths opened and closed in silence. Ginny’s hands were folded in her lap and she worried her lip. Hermione looked utterly lost. Half a slice of bacon fell from Ron’s mouth.

Mr. Weasley glanced at the paper below the fold. “I’ll be switched – the Cannons are only two points back from Puddlemere! Marmalade, anyone?” he asked.

“I’m sure there’s more bread in the kitchen,” Mrs. Weasley said absently. With that, everyone at the table burst into as much conversation and as little eye contact as they could manage.

* * * * *

DECEMBER 28: ANTHONY GOLDSTEIN’S VISIT TO THE BLACK TOWER

Work in details on Anthony

Considered Muggle-born by Wiz World despite 2000 yr history of magic in the family Mother not pleased by idea of him dating a shikseh; told her that he’s visiting Harry and Ron At least one reference to Anthony being in the swordsmanship group A remark or reaction re: wizarding prejudice? Too early to bring up death of Anthony’s father? Not seen as a proper or full member of his own community either because of ‘foreign magic’ – unable to perform some of the community’s magical rituals, possibly because of being capable of wandless magic ---- probably too complex for scene Have Bill reveal that the Marquis has taken on a student; be non-specific about who or for what (let swordsmanship assumption float out there) Let out that Ginny and Anthony have been seeing each other since October; reference their ability to keep secrets Have Anthony comment favourably on Ginny’s music; maybe a bit of support/swooning from Tonks and Hermione A bit of crap taken, probably from the twins, but quickly put aside Drop in a reference to Anthony’s knowledge about old/ancient magic

* * * * *

DECEMBER 28: HARRY/HERMIONE INTERACTION AFTER ANTHONY LEAVES

Hermione guesses that Anthony is the one who got into her workroom, hits Harry with the guess A bit of a fracas – don’t ratchet it up too much Shift to Hermione’s frustration about being so far from her parents Harry has a ‘duh’ moment, asks why she isn’t glued to her mirror Hermione has a chastened moment, wondering why she didn’t think of that Hermione confirms to Harry she has returned most of the dark material in her workroom Hermione leaves to contact her parents; after end of conversation, Harry’s inner monologue is that he’s fairly sure she’s not telling him the truth

* * * * *

DECEMBER 30: ATTACK ON THE PUCEY FAMILY - AFTERMATH

Contact from Dumbledore – Floo? Patronus? Niall Pucey and his family were attacked, need place to gather family and figure out what to do next. Harry agrees to host, on account of interaction with Niall at Board meeting and growing respect for Adrian. Weasleys are a little skittish (the Slytherin thing) but it must be OK since Dumbledore suggested it What Harry doesn't count on is the scope of the group that arrives: Puceys: Niall, Octavia (wife), Adrian, Nessa Claymore (older sister of Adrian), Edwin Claymore (husband of Nessa) Dumbledore, Moody, Shacklebolt Percy Weasley and Carl Budgette (a Fudge under-underling, responsible to Percy – recent Hogwarts grad and known to the Weasley twins as “Fuss-budgette”) Rufus Scrimgeour, Gawain Robards Harry is less than pleased, but handles it maturely Nature of the attack: Percy assures that it couldn't have been Death Eaters as they don't attack pure bloods and he didn't see the Mark personally Robards reports that the Auror response team did see the Mark The Claymores are pressed into admitting that they did see one of the attackers, but claim that it was too dark and they can't identify the person Adrian says the voice of one of the attackers was familiar Dumbledore tacitly offers assistance of Order; Scrimgeour gives same response as in CH 2: can't support vigilantism, if Order doesn't enter the fold like the DFDL then there is no cooperation with DMLE; begins to upbraid Dumbledore about being at the scene at all, until Dumbledore reminds S. that he is the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot and thus a legal official. Niall Pucey begs off, citing that Octavia is exhausted and he took a stunner, says it's time to make arrangements until they can survey the house Harry immediately offers house room, cites the statement of friendship after the Board meeting; takes Octavia and the Claymores by surprise

* * * * *

ATTACK ON PROMINENT MIDLANDS FAMILY

A copycat crime, or retribution for attacks on the Muggle-born?

The home of prominent barrister Niall Pucey was burnt to the ground last evening. None of the Pucey extended family, to include son-in-law and law partner Edwin Claymore, were seriously injured. The DMLE was unable to reach the Pucey's Nottinghamshire estate in time to face the attackers. Family members reported that three to five persons in dark cloaks breached the house wards immediately prior to the attack. Although one of the responding Ministry Aurors reported seeing You-Know-Who's mark, Ministry officials who arrived five minutes later did not see evidence of the mark.

Given that the Puceys are a long-standing wizarding family, and that the recent spate of attacks have been entirely directed at newer and first-generation families, there is some speculation that this may have been the work of a copycat. An anonymous official suggested that this could have been a misdirected reprisal against You-Know-Who's so-called 'pure blood' supporters, but offered no evidence to that effect. According to Mr. Pucey, the family will relocate to London whilst they consider whether to rebuild.

CELEBRATIONS TO CONTINUE AS SCHEDULED

Organisers have announced that English and Scottish wizards will ring in the New Year as they have for centuries. The 387th annual New Year celebration at Diagon Alley is scheduled to begin at half ten this evening, with fireworks provided by Alley merchants. “We didn’t stop when the Muggles were throwing explosives around in the ‘40s, and we didn’t stop the last time You-Know-Who was about, and we’re certainly not going to stop now,” said Diagon Alley celebration chairman Florean Fortescue.

Many Scottish wizards participate in Muggle New Year celebrations, particularly those in the vicinity of Edinburgh. The village of Hogsmeade will host wizarding Britain’s oldest continuous New Year observance, which began as a simple Yuletide festival in 926 but has been called Hogmanay by Scots for several hundred years. Iain Macandra, chief of Hogsmeade’s village council, echoed Mr. Fortescue’s sentiments and promised that this year’s Hogmanay bonfire would be the largest in many a year. The Hogmanay celebration begins at noontime today and the village bonfire will be lit at half eleven.

Gringotts officials announced yesterday that they will participate in Diagon Alley’s New Year parade for the first time since 1797. Gringotts will also provide a site for St. Mungo’s aid station as well as goblin holiday refreshments for those wizards of sufficient bravery. When asked for comment, a Ministry spokesperson said that she was “agog” and “frankly, hadn’t the slightest idea what the sneaky buggers were planning”. Dirk Cresswell, who directs the Ministry’s Office of Goblin Liaison, provided a more coherent response. “Wizard-goblin relations have thawed over the last handful of years, not as much in an institutional sense but noticeably at the personal level,” Cresswell said. “Frankly, some of that may accrue to the goblin nation’s own concerns about You-Know-Who’s return. The goblin leadership also recognises that a healthy and happy Diagon Alley is good for business.”

December 31

Dumbledore settled back into his conjured armchair. “I do wish you would reconsider, Harry,” he said; “While it is true that your confinement at Hogwarts has ended, that is no reason to assume needless risk by such a highly visible public appearance.”

“Appearances, actually,” Harry corrected him.

“You say that as if it somehow improves the situation,” chided Dumbledore.

“Honestly, I said it to irritate you,” Harry returned.

Dumbledore repeated more firmly, “I ask you to reconsider your plans for the evening.”

Hermione entered the Head of House's study without knocking. Harry had disabled the security ward for the duration of Dumbledore's visit, and in any case had forced Phineas Black's portrait to weave her into the ward permissions.

“Good afternoon, Headmaster. Tea?” she asked. Dumbledore amiably declined.

“We'll be at Diagon Alley – mostly around Gringotts – from ten until eleven, and then at Hogsmeade until the New Year. I've never been to a wizarding celebration before,” Harry said. Dumbledore winced and Hermione took on a small but satisfied smile.

“I am sorry for that, but the security reasons for why that is the case have changed very little. If anything, they are now intensified,” the Headmaster finally countered.

“I can handle myself. If I can't, then a Death Eater skirmish is the least of our worries,” Harry shot back.

“Miss Granger, a word on this matter if you please?” appealed Dumbledore.

“We'll be with an armed contingent of goblins in Diagon Alley. At Hogsmeade, we're an apparation away from the castle gates, we'll have Harry's motorbike, and also an emergency portkey to return us here. We can also go through the Shrieking Shack, and I think Harry has a fifth option as well,” Hermione said.

“I see you will not be dissuaded,” Dumbledore sighed. “Will you at the very least consent to attend a brief meeting of the Order this afternoon? We shall be arranging some discreet security coverage for the two locations as a fail-safe for Ministry precautions.”

After an interminable and – to Harry's eyes – ineffectual Order meeting; two hours of revising; and lingering stops at the Gower Street Waterstone's (as Hatchard's was already shut for the evening) and a Euston Square curry shop, Harry and Hermione made their way to the Leaky Cauldron. The security queue for entering the Alley snaked into the pub itself, and it looked as if Tom was taking full advantage of the large crowd. The wizened innkeeper caught Harry's eye for a long moment and then gave a nod in the direction of a particularly surly-looking group. Harry recognised three current and recent Slytherins amongst them; he gave Tom a respectful nod in return and manoeuvred Hermione deeper into the queue.

“It's mostly half-bloods and muggle-born here,” Hermione noted after a quarter hour's wait.

Harry let his eyes rove the crowd, and asked, “How do you know that?”

Hermione observed, “Look at the robes people are wearing: they're mostly casual, and you can see that a lot of people are wearing Muggle clothing beneath – Muggle clothing that could actually blend into a crowd outside the Alley,” observed Hermione. “Pure-bloods carry themselves in a

certain way, as well. Not in a haughty way like Malfoy; that's not what I'm getting at. Honestly, I think many pure bloods are uncomfortable in a crowd. That makes sense, when you think on it. The only time I've ever seen a large crowd of wizards was at the World Cup, and that hardly counts."

"This is a prime target for an attack," Harry muttered.

"I can understand the Headmaster's concerns," admitted Hermione.

The DF DL security wizards were actually weighing wands, which explained the slowness of the queue and which was a great surprise to Harry. "Who's keeping the results, I wonder?" he said pointedly as they passed through.

"Quiet, you," one of the security wizards grunted.

"That certainly gives a sense of confidence," Hermione sniffed as she followed Harry toward Gringotts.

The Gringotts parade float appeared to be under wraps adjacent to the bank entrance. Although it was well past the bank's public hours, the goblins had set up a money-changing booth outside to service the muggle-born. A phalanx of security goblins was very visibly stationed on the marble steps, which would give pause to any remotely sensible attackers. As the Prophet had noted, a table of goblin refreshments was set out for brave revellers.

"I see the betting pools are going strong," Harry chuckled. A huddle of grinning goblins watched the table closely as wizards fought to hold down a variety of delicacies.

"Are you going to show them how it's done?" Hermione asked.

Harry smirked, clawed the air with his hand, and said, "Meow!"

"Prat," snapped Hermione.

Harry watched the table with crossed arms for a long moment and said, "A spot of tea wouldn't hurt."

An older goblin, dressed in the manner of a Gringotts teller, nodded to Harry and said, "What can you stomach, wizard?"

"I'd like a cup of Itsemurha, please," Harry said casually.

The huddle of goblins went still for several seconds, and then erupted in a flurry of betting. The older goblin walked away and returned with a teapot bubbling so actively that its lid was shaking. From it, the goblin filled a thimble-sized cup with a steaming something-or-another that was the colour and thickness of paste.

Harry frowned and said harshly, "Are you insulting me? That's no cup." The huddle gave off a

chorus of hisses and the older goblin gave the slightest of shrugs. A teacup of normal size appeared and the goblin filled it to the brim.

“Bloody hell...” one of the wizards waiting to sample an unappetizing appetizer said.

“You’re not going to ask me how I take it?” Harry hissed.

“I hadn’t planned to ask,” the goblin admitted.

“Two drops of Makea and one drop of Aloittaa, please,” said Harry. The huddle of goblin onlookers burst into another rush of betting. The goblin before Harry raised one eyebrow, but said nothing; he merely placed the requisite drops into the cup and took three paces back.

While Harry had demonstrated knowledge of goblin cuisine, none of these goblins knew that Harry had previously downed several cups of Suicide Tea with their financial and political leadership. He took the cup in both hands, put his nose to the cup and drew in a lungful of fumes, tipped his head back, and poured the tea into his mouth from a height of several inches. The trick was in the inhaling of the fumes and the exposure to air as the cup was poured into the drinker’s mouth, according to Grishtok and the other clan leaders Harry had met. Just as at the goblin hunt feast, the tea tasted rather like a strong curry. His ears and nostrils belched heavy smoke for a few moments, and then the heat and the taste subsided.

Harry sat the cup down next to the teapot, licked his lips, and said casually, “It’s a bit weak, isn’t it?” The goblins as one beheld him with wide eyes and gaping mouths; one amongst the huddle stumbled and fell. As soon as they recovered themselves, most of the goblins threw slips of paper at the ground in disgust.

Hermione slipped in next to Harry and they watched two half-pissed wizards ask for ‘what he had’. One failed to breathe the fumes in advance, and finally plunged his head into a conveniently placed barrel of water to quash the smoke. The other breathed the fumes but put the cup to his lips and drank it down, and it was quickly apparent why the older goblin had taken three paces back after providing service.

One of the goblins in the huddle remained behind. In the shadows, it was only clear that the goblin was both wide and relatively tall, and wore a heavy and brightly patterned winter cloak. Hermione took an unconscious step closer to Harry.

“Greetings, *Mister Potter*,” the goblin rumbled.

“Greetings, Director Fliptrask, and congratulations on your winnings,” Harry returned.

“Well spotted,” the goblin said after a guttural chuckle; “Will you ask for your share, or shall I just hand it over?”

“I’m only taking a share because your honour requires it. The look on the other goblins’ faces was enough... and it was rather funny to bait those wizards into trying it,” said Harry.

Hermione's brow rose. "This was a set-up?" she snapped.

"Naturally," Fliptrask snorted.

"This is why you came here?" Hermione asked sharply.

Harry said, "We came here because neither of us has ever been to a wizarding festival, in case you forgot. It's just convenient that Fliptrask was able to get one up on these fellows."

Before Hermione could fire back, Fliptrask said, "Mr. Potter seems to understand what gaming means to us. He also understands the meaning of position. For me to disadvantage my betters – as happened at the Feast – was unwise. For me to take advantage of Glassjaw and the tellers is most wise. For Mr. Potter to willingly involve himself... this will be a well-told tale until the equinox if not longer. It also reminds my brothers that not all wizards are like Bagman-the-thief."

Hermione looked past the food table toward the goblins preparing for the parade, and asked, "May I go over there for a few moments? I see some of the goblins attached to the Volvar."

Fliptrask nodded and barked a command toward the food table. One of the unoccupied goblins scuttled over, muttered an honorific, and took Hermione by the elbow.

As soon as she was out of earshot, Harry dropped all pretence; he asked, "Did your people get rid of Bagman, then?"

Fliptrask broke into a wicked smile and said, "You are the first to ask. Ragnok will be pleased. He placed one galleon on the possibility, at knut-to-galleon odds."

"That doesn't answer my question," said Harry.

"Gringotts is pleased that Bagman-the-thief paid for his crimes. Gringotts did not administer justice. Gringotts did not pay to have justice administered. Gringotts did not ask for justice to be administered. No goblins participated in the administration of justice. No goblins planned the administration of justice," Fliptrask responded.

Harry paused to think before he said, "Gringotts knows who did it, and a goblin gave that person information about Bagman."

"You are not yet a true businessman, nor a member of the legal profession," Fliptrask observed, "but you do have some understanding of wordplay. Nurturing this will help you in your dealings amongst the wizards."

"And also my dealings with goblins?" Harry returned.

"Budding skills, indeed," said Fliptrask.

"Is this person who offed Bagman... or people, I suppose... is he a danger to me?" Harry asked.

“Not an inherent danger, no,” Fliptrask said without hesitation.

“Will you help this person again?” asked Harry.

“I have never helped the individual or individuals in question,” said Fliptrask.

“Will this person receive more help from goblins?” Harry tried again.

Fliptrask said, “I cannot say. It may be so, or it may not be so.”

“Should I be concerned about this person?” Harry asked.

“You should pay close attention to any wizard or faction of wizards whose actions change or challenge the balance of power in Britain,” said Fliptrask.

“Bloody hell, this is like talking to Dumbledore,” Harry grumbled.

Fliptrask snorted, “There is no need to be insulting, Mr. Potter.”

Harry mentally picked his way through another question, and eventually asked, “Does this person threaten my interests, specifically the fight against Voldemort?”

Fliptrask pursed his lips for several seconds before he said, “In my expert opinion, the wizard or faction of wizards in question does not intend to threaten those interests, and may in fact intend to aid them. However, in my personal opinion, I see the possibility that the continued actions of the wizard or faction of wizards in question could endanger the interests you have stated.”

“Are you unable to answer me directly because you're oath-bound?” Harry asked.

“No,” Fliptrask said.

“Is it because of a matter of honour?” Harry continued.

After a hesitation, Fliptrask said, “Yes.”

Harry nodded and said, “I'll stop asking questions, then.”

Fliptrask broke into a toothy and slightly frightening smile, and then said, “I enjoy doing business with you, Mr. Potter. You are worthy of my valuable time. I tell you this: where I am not thwarted by oath or honour, I will protect and advance the interests you have stated. I tell you this also: there are many goblins who would not say the same. There are some goblins who would actively work for the opposite end.”

“Lovely... I wish it wasn't so hard to know who to trust,” sighed Harry.

Fliptrask said, “I will not ask for your trust, Mr. Potter, though it is an item of value. Continue to develop your skills at wordplay. Put them to use. Engage in wordplay with me. See it in the words

of others. We have a lucrative relationship, you and I, and it is to my benefit and to the ultimate benefit of Gringotts and the clan that I maintain and strengthen that relationship. Where I am able, I will offer advice and counsel. It will be for you to decide whether this is an item of value. You can expect the same, albeit to a lesser extent, from Gringotts Chief Ragnok and from Clan Chief Grishtok.”

After a long pause, Harry said, “I shouldn't expect it from others.”

“Your words; not mine,” said Fliptrask.

Harry took a glance toward the parade preparations. He saw Hermione in close discussion with three goblins clad in tall headgear and ornate cloaks. “Who are they?” he asked Fliptrask.

Fliptrask squinted hard and then answered, “They are dressed in the finery of the Volvar's personal attendants. There is a rumour that the Volvar herself will be here. If that's true, I would expect her to be in the viewing gallery with Ragnok and Grishtok.” He gestured to a long balcony high above the main doors to Gringotts.

Harry followed Fliptrask's gesture and then returned to Hermione and the three goblins. He thought he could see another figure to one side, clad in a dark cloak, but it was hard for him to see clearly amidst the bustle of several dozen goblins making last-minute preparations. He did see Hermione open her bag and exchange several things with one of the finely cloaked attendants.

“Who can you really trust?” Harry muttered.

“It is difficult with mates,” Fliptrask said.

Harry snapped back to attention. “I'm sorry...?”

“It is difficult with mates,” Fliptrask repeated. “In most ways, they are the most trustworthy of all – the only whom we can truly trust, in fact. Because they know us so well, they can also challenge our trust more harshly than the worst enemy. Keep in mind that when they deceive, it is usually to protect.”

“Are you married?” Harry asked.

Fliptrask said, “I am contract-bound. This is deeper than the normal mating rituals of wizards. For wizards... it is something like a contracted formal betrothal. It is more than this, but something like it. You should know of this. Your family contracted you with the McIlvaine wizards from Scotland.”

Harry was gobsmacked. “*You knew about that?* Why didn't it come up when I took over the estates?”

Fliptrask's mouth tightened into a thin line for a long second before he said, “Dumbledore has much for which he should answer. I should not assume that you have been instructed or even informed with respect to your heritage or any expectations thereto.”

“For the most part, I don't know a damn thing,” Harry huffed.

“That is something you must change,” Fliptrask returned.

“I'm working on it,” said Harry.

Hermione returned and Harry decided to say nothing about her exchange with the Volvar's attendants. They made a brief visit to the Weasley twins' shop, greeted a few Hogwarts students and their families, but decided to leave for Hogsmeade before the actual Diagon Alley celebration began. Hermione said she was more interested in the historical significance and lore surrounding the Hogsmeade event. For his part, Harry was uncomfortable in the crowd – there were too many people in motion and too many places for people to hide. Hermione never seemed to notice the half-dozen security goblins who followed them, but Harry was glad for the extra eyes and ready swords.

After an especially lengthy bit of spinning, their goblin portkey left Harry and Hermione reeling on the path between Hogwarts and Hogsmeade, about a hundred yards short of the village. Neither of them had expected a seat at the Three Broomsticks, but Madam Rosmerta somehow magicked a small table in the far corner. It was a brisk night and the hearth was roaring. They talked about nothing of consequence for what seemed like quite a long while, until the doors opened and a number of patrons rose from their chairs.

“What's this about?” Harry wondered aloud.

A wizard from a neighbouring table hissed, “To your feet, boy – 'tis the Compact Families!”

Hermione took on a perplexed expression, and asked, “And the Compact Families are...?”; she drew glares from the few who heard her.

Half a dozen elderly wizards and witches made a stately entrance and gave formal waves to those standing. They were closely followed by two somewhat younger wizards and a witch familiar to Harry.

Madam Rosmerta stood on a chair, smoothed her skirt, and then called out, “In pride and gratitude, we welcome our brothers and sister of the Compact. Soon they will lead the saining of the households, as they have done each Yule since the days of the Norse. But for now... Lilibet, pass the ale, dear... now wait for it...”

Harry and Hermione found themselves each with a flagon of ale in hand amidst a buzz of excitement neither of them understood. Madam Rosmerta was replaced on the chair by the witch who Harry recognised: Madam McIlvaine. She raised a flagon of her own, and sang in a clear voice:

Here we come a-wassailing among the leaves once green,

Here we come a-wandering so fairly to be seen.

Now is winter-time, strangers travel far and near

And we wish you and send you a happy New Year.

We hope that all your plantings will prosper fine and grow,

So that you'll have plenty and a bit more to bestow.

We hope your wethers they grow fat and likewise all your ewes,

And where they had one lamb we hope they will have two.

She took a sip of ale and raised her flagon again, and as one the rest of the patrons did the same. Harry took a hesitant sip; the ale stung at the back of his throat but he managed to hold back a cough. Hermione let out a tiny choking sound and grimaced. Madam McIlvaine stepped down to hearty applause.

Madam Rosmerta took her place and shouted, “All right, you lot, sing with me!

Wassail, wassail, all over the town,

Our bread it is white and our ale it is brown;

Our bowl it is made of the green maple tree;

In the Wassail bowl we'll drink unto thee.

Come, butler, come fill us a bowl of the best;

Then I pray that your soul in heaven may rest;

But if you do bring us a bowl of the small,

May the Devil take butler, bowl and all!

Then here's to the maid in the lily white smock,

Who tripp'd to the door and slipp'd back the lock;

Who tripp'd to the door and pull'd back the pin,

For to let these jolly Wassailers walk in!

Cheers!”

She took a long pull on her flagon and a chant grew with each second she continued; she didn't stop until it was emptied to loud cheers and whistles. With that, people began clinking together their flagons. Madam Rosmerta stepped down and led the visitors around the bar and out of view.

“That was interesting,” Harry deadpanned.

“I've never seen anything like it,” admitted Hermione.

Lilibet – who was one of Rosmerta's bar-maids – sauntered up to their table and told Harry, “Madam Rosmerta is asking for you; she's upstairs.” Harry took Hermione by the hand and followed Lilibet up the stairs, past Detheridge's rooms and to the open door of the garret flat.

Rosmerta met them there. “Happy New Year, Harry – oh, and I see you brought Miss Granger. Nice that you can join in the festivities. Harry, this is – ”

Harry moved past Rosmerta and said, “We've already met... hello, Madam McIlvaine.” He extended his hand.

Madam McIlvaine took it firmly. “I am pleased to see you under better circumstances, Mr. Potter,” she said; “Who is your companion?”

Harry motioned for Hermione to enter, and said, “Madam McIlvaine, this is Hermione Granger. She's the top student in our year – probably in the school – as well as my... erm... girlfriend. Hermione, this is Madam Melisende McIlvaine from the Hogwarts Board of Governors.” Hermione quickly shook Madam McIlvaine's hand, eyes narrowed.

Madam McIlvaine laughed softly and then added, “That would be the same Melisende McIlvaine who voted against both Mr. Potter's suspension and eventual dismissal. As for you, Miss Granger, I am well aware of your academic standing. You have featured in a fair few reports from both the Headmaster and the Deputy Headmistress.”

Hermione's expression relaxed, but Harry could see that she was still coiled for a fight. “Thank you, Madam. Perhaps you might explain why you've summoned Harry?” she said flatly.

Madam McIlvaine was quiet for long than was comfortable. Her gaze was focused on Hermione; she seemed to be taking Hermione's measure, Harry thought. Her eyes turned to Harry and she broke the silence. “I was informed by the goblins that you have received a certain contract. I had thought to explain the matter, and to answer your questions if needed,” she told him; “I could arrange a meeting between the two of us at a later time, if you prefer,” Madam McIlvaine offered.

Harry shook his head, and said, “No, no... this is fine. I'd asked for it, after all... just caught off guard by the timing of it. Hermione stays; she'd know the story of it eventually.”

“If you're certain...? I should think it awkward,” said Madam McIlvaine.

“It wouldn't be my first awkward moment,” Harry returned, which brought a smile to both women. He gestured to the dining table, as the disassembled sofa had not yet been replaced and there was only one armchair remaining in the sitting area.

Madam McIlvaine took a seat. She waved her hand casually and the door to the stairs closed. Then she took her wand and drew glowing rune sigils in the air; Harry was reminded of Tom Riddle's

glowing anagram. The first set of runes shot across the room and affixed themselves to the door and its frame. The remainder moved to the windows and did the same. Hermione's lips pressed together and Harry almost expected her to raise her hand.

“Runic protections are far more secure than room warding spells, provided one has time to work the runes,” Madam McIlvaine said. “Now then, are either of you familiar with the Compact Families? No? I suppose this should not come as a surprise; you, Harry, were raised by Lily's Muggle relatives, and you, Miss Granger, are the first of your family to be graced by magic. This will require explanation, then...

“Twelve hundred years ago, there were two distinct groups of wizards. The first group could trace its roots from the Celts and their forebears. They practised what are now called 'old magics', although they were generally able to use wands. Their magic incorporated many rituals and was practised both individually and as a community. The second group were almost entirely wand users whose magical roots were from the Roman tradition. However, over the centuries since the Romans had retreated from our land, their practices had been passed on through an oral tradition. Their magic was spell-bound and it was more a tool than a practice. The two groups were mostly disconnected from one another, because the second group tended to draw undesirable attention from those not graced by magic.”

“This old magic... is it practised in Iceland?” Harry asked.

Madam McIlvaine raised a delicate eyebrow. “You know Icelanders?”

“I'm receiving tuition from an Icelandic war witch,” said Harry.

Madam McIlvaine said, “Is that so? You may be learning some of our magics. It is ironic that a foreign witch may teach you, yet I am forbidden to teach the same magics on British soil.

“The first wizards to invade the Isle were Norsemen, and Icelandic practices come from the same source. Those Norse mages were not unlike the first group, but they did use certain spells that made travel more palatable: food preservation, ship repair, and such. More importantly, the Norse brought a strong emphasis on runic magic. Over the next hundred years, the first group – the Old Magic group, if you like – adopted many of those Norse practices.

“In 966, a group of Norse mages recently arrived on our island attacked a settlement of Roman mages – the second group to which I referred. In retaliation, the Romans slaughtered three nearby families. Two of those families were Norsemen, unrelated to the attackers. One family was from the Old Magic group. The conflict quickly spread.

“Five years later, an army of the Roman mages attacked the largest of the Old Magic communities. By way of defence, the village elders summoned a demon – a giant boar. In the confusion, the elders failed to affix all of the seals for the summoning and the demon broke free. The attack ceased, as all present were now in terrible danger. Four came forward to confront the demon.

“The second-in-command of the attacking army took on the demon directly in a blaze of spells and swordplay. A Norman mercenary who accompanied the army chased the demon away from the village with a phalanx of transfigured wolves and a dozen conjured serpents. The daughter of one of the village elders together with a Norse rune mistress set grand wards to contain the demon atop a hill in the centre of the great forest that bordered the village. The eruption of the wards and the demon's banishment consumed everything for half a mile save the four mages; a goodly part of the forest was gone and the remainder took on part of the demon's shade.

“The second-in-command of the attacking army proceeded to defeat his own commander in single combat, and went on to declare the end of hostilities. The now-barren hill was named Hogwards Hill to commemorate the great event. The Norman mercenary took charge of the Roman mages with the new commander's consent and proceeded to rebuild the village. Norse, Roman and Old Magic elders were summoned and a peace was negotiated. The three groups agreed to a common law and in 972 the commander of the Roman mages sealed the agreement by entering into marriage with the daughter of the village elder. He vowed to turn swords to ploughshares and took up residence in the village, which was renamed Hogsmeade. The Norman mercenary and the Norse rune mistress also remained, and each began to take magical students. Twenty years later, they began construction of a magical castle on Hogwards Hill, and seven years after that they began to board students.”

Hermione let out a slow breath before she said, “That's not at all how the Founding is described in *Hogwarts: A History* .”

Madam McIlvaine said, “I'm not surprised at that. History is written by the victors, after all. Now let me tell you the rest of the story:

“The four mages soon began to disagree on which qualities were desired in a student. The Roman commander – Gryffindor – naturally favoured bravery of the sort seen on the battlefield. The rune mistress – Ravenclaw – was a scholar by inclination, and her work in the classroom only strengthened that. The mercenary – Slytherin – was also a scholar but of a different sort. He was fascinated by rituals, something that was unfamiliar to him before he encountered the Old Magic community. He was also quite frightened of non-magical people. On the other hand, the Old Magic communities had long known the proper wardings and rituals to keep the non-magical at bay. In fact, it was the village's daughter – Hufflepuff – who placed the base wardings on the castle. As one who was raised in a community of magic with rituals that required the cooperation of all, Hufflepuff was appalled by the idea of any sort of exclusion. Thus she would accept any that the others would decline.

“Over time, Hufflepuff became concerned by Slytherin's distortions of ritual magic. With the support of the Old Magic community, she demanded that Slytherin cease teaching ritual magics. He in turn demanded that any students borne of non-magical parents be removed from their homes entirely, so that the school would remain insulated from all persons non-magical. Gryffindor agreed with Slytherin, and so Hufflepuff reluctantly agreed in order to stop Slytherin's teachings. Ravenclaw's view on this has been lost to the ages.

“Some say that Slytherin was banished from the school. Others say he left of his own accord.

Some say that he became more and more radical about the so-called Muggle-born, until the other three could no longer tolerate him. Our histories say that Slytherin left because he wanted to continue his pursuit of ritual magics and Hufflepuff thwarted him at every turn. Whatever the case, he had left the school by 1028. Gryffindor and Ravenclaw, however, demanded that Slytherin's house – his community of learners – be allowed to remain under the leadership of one of Slytherin's apprentices, a young mage named Peverell. The Peverell family and others continued Slytherin's explorations into ritual magic, at first openly and later in secret.

“A few decades later, the second invaders came: the Normans. Their mages came along with William the Conqueror's armies. They were already aligned with Roman magic and many of them quickly gravitated to Slytherin and Gryffindor's way of thinking. Both were still alive at that time: Gryffindor as headmaster of what was then still called Hogwards School, and Slytherin as the head of an exclusive magical order that delved deeply into the arcane. Like their non-magical counterparts, the Norman mages eventually prevailed. They came to dominate English magical society and magical thought.

“Eventually... two hundred and seventy years after the last of the school founders – Hufflepuff – had passed on... the Normans managed to forge a unified magical government with limited fealty to the English and Scottish monarchs. In so doing, they codified part of the agreement between Hufflepuff and Slytherin. Ritual magic would be forever excluded from the school curriculum. The Roman style of magic would be advocated and managed by the new government. All would be prohibited from starting another magical school without approval of the government. The Old Magic families would be prohibited from taking on apprentices who were not of the Old Magic families by either blood or marriage. At the same time, the Old Magic families would be protected by the government and would receive large grants of land and treasure. Old Magic community rituals would be enshrined into public festivals and major acts of the government.

“The Old Magic community was implicitly threatened by force – explicitly in some cases – and they capitulated. The Compact went into force in 1407, and from then forward the Old Magic families were referred to as the Compact Families. In one stroke, the Normans managed to effectively ban the old magics from English society. How could we send our children to a school that couldn't teach our style of magic? How could we participate in a government that for the most part didn't recognise our magic as legitimate? Some Old Magic families crossed over in those days. Few Roman families wanted to lose their children to Old Magic, and it became harder and harder to bring new blood into our communities.

“One generation after the Compact was signed, there were two hundred and thirty-eight Compact Families. Today there are nine. Before You-Know-Who's first rise, all nine families were robust. In recent times, we had some successes in bringing Muggle-born mages into our families. Three of the families became polygamous in order to raise their birthrate.

“Twenty years ago, he began killing our heirs –”

Hermione gasped, “Voldemort killed your children?”

“In our family's case, there was a single child – my daughter,” Madam McIlvaine said.

“Regrettably, the McIlvaines intermarried too often. Despite the fact that my husband Connor was a second-generation mage from Canada, I was only able to bring Dierdre to term. I miscarried four times previously.”

Hermione rose to her feet and took Madam McIlvaine's hand. “I'm so sorry,” she said.

Madam McIlvaine squeezed her hand and said, “Thank you; that is most kind. I fear your sympathies toward me are about to change, however.”

Hermione's brow furrowed and she said, “Unless you're about to tell us that you've become a blood purist, I doubt that very much.” Madam McIlvaine released Hermione's hand but Hermione held firm.

“How did you meet my parents?” Harry asked.

“I met them at a Quidditch match, actually. Connor was a rabid fan and it was a guilty pleasure for me; my parents disapproved of sport. James was a reserve Chaser for Puddlemere at the time, freshly out of school. He went into the match in the sixth hour and proceeded to score sixteen consecutive goals. Portree had to pull their Keeper and in the end their Seeker took the snitch and the loss just to end the match. Rather than go to his mates, your father instead flew directly to your mother. I remember saying to Connor, 'Now that's someone worth meeting',” Madam McIlvaine answered.

“Why did you decide on the betrothal agreement?” asked Harry.

Hermione was absolutely pole-axed; she spluttered, “Be... betrothal?”

“I did say your sympathies would change,” said Madam McIlvaine.

“I didn't know about this until the end of last term,” Harry told Hermione, “and obviously it's broken now.”

“But... but some betrothals are between families and they follow on until someone is eligible –” Hermione started.

Madam McIlvaine frowned; “A loathsome practice,” she said, “and one I'd not be a party to,” she said.

Hermione visibly slumped in her seat and said, “Thank goodness for that... Harry? Is this why you've been so different?”

“I've been different?” Harry asked.

Hermione said with a slight blush, “I think you know what I mean. You've been... 'clinging' is the wrong word, since I haven't been bothered by it in the least... er... let's say that you've been adamant about wanting me close.”

“Oh, my...” Madam McIlvaine said, and she closed her eyes intently.

“It's not like that,” Harry said quickly.

Madam McIlvaine's eyes snapped open, and she said, “I'm not a prude. The both of you feel quite close to one another, and you're of age or nearly so. I warn that you should be betrothed or handfasted in the proper forms before your relationship is consummated. There is a power within you bursting to be released, Mr. Potter. You're not lacking in power yourself, Miss Granger. Some of the power I feel in this room... I've never before encountered its like outside of our community. Proper rites of betrothal and bonding can release or enhance abilities, and you wouldn't want to miss that opportunity; it only comes once, after all.”

“Are you referring to soul bonds?” Hermione asked.

Madam McIlvaine broke into an almost musical laugh. “*Soul bonds*? Oh, my! I'm afraid that there is no such thing. Soul bonds are something for those penny dreadfuls at Flourish and Blotts,” she managed to say.

Hermione caught Harry's questioning look, and grumbled, “Mrs. Weasley reads them.”

Madam McIlvaine laughed again and patted Hermione's hand. She said, “You don't need to be ashamed. They're good fun, really. 'Oh, Thurston! Now that we are truly soul bonded, we can share each other's thoughts and feelings!' Can you imagine hearing all of your lover's thoughts? I should think it would be more pain than pleasure. If my Connor was any example – and I believe he was a better man than most – then it's a sure thing that all young men are perverted.”

“Oi!” Harry protested.

Hermione said, “Carlotta and Thurston *are* ridiculous, aren't they?”

“Er... you read those books?” Harry ventured.

Hermione snapped, “Oh, honestly, Harry! A girl can read something besides schoolbooks, can't she?” Harry looked suitably cowed, and she smirked at him.

Returning to the matter at hand, Madam McIlvaine said, “You know about the betrothal, but are you aware of the offer I took to your Wizengamot?”

Harry nodded. “My solicitor – he's a wizard called Ted Tonks – wrote to me about it. Dumbledore wouldn't let you take me.”

“You tried to take Harry in?” Hermione confirmed.

“I've met Mr. Tonks; if he is as he seems, then you've made a good choice,” Madam McIlvaine said before she answered Hermione, “I offered to carry through with House McIlvaine's portion of the betrothal agreement: to give Harry house room and protection, among other things. The Headmaster was unwilling to support me in this, and I didn't expect any true backing from the

other governing wizards. Many of their ancestors were responsible for the Compact. To them, my community is powerful and unpredictable and outside of their understanding – three things that those in power dislike in others. As a sop, the Headmaster awarded me a seat on the Hogwarts Board. The Compact offered that to our community, but no one had ever taken it up. I had hoped to have some influence on your schooling. I didn't count on sharing the floor with some of You-Know-Who's followers.”

“So... do you really think you could have protected me?” Harry asked.

“Yes, I believe so. We have an affinity for warding that the Roman ways can not imitate, and You-Know-Who could not have countered them without bringing one of our own to his side. Our wards were sound. I wouldn't have lost my daughter and husband if not for arrogance. We should have remained on the ancestral grounds until You-Know-Who was well and truly gone,” she answered.

“His name is Voldemort, you know,” Harry said firmly.

“Names are not trifling things, Mr. Potter; they are used with intention in rituals and oaths. Names should be used wisely and not unnecessarily,” Madam McIlvaine returned. Hermione looked thoughtful at that; for his part, Harry stayed silent.

“Madam McIlvaine, may I ask why you decided to make an agreement outside of the Old Magic families? Wouldn't that have kept Harry from going to Hogwarts? I assume that's why this Compact was so successful in keeping a divide: the larger community didn't want to give up their children,” Hermione said.

“Well spotted,” Madam McIlvaine said approvingly, “but there is one significant difference between House McIlvaine and the other remaining Old Magic families. The rest of the families adopted the Nordic family structures – they are patrilineal. We were and have remained matrilineal. Although my daughter would have joined Harry in marriage, she would have remained Heir to my House. She would have been wife to the Heir of House Potter and he would have been consort to the Heir of House McIlvaine. This allowed us a novel loophole in the Compact, but one which we had not before exercised with English wizards – after all, what English House would be willing to offer their own Heir to sire the Heir of another house? My grandmother said that her ancestors believed a geas was invoked on the other families to make them give up matrilineage. Our House Heir in those days was already an adult yet was not present at the Compact signing; she was nine months pregnant at the time.

“As for why we decided to strike an agreement with the Potters...? Firstly, they weren't put off by our requirements. Mr. Potter's father wasn't bothered by the idea of binding his first granddaughter to House McIlvaine, and I do think that Mr. Potter's mother would have hexed him had he objected. Secondly, they weren't interested in our wealth or possessions, nor were they trying to change us. Thirdly, we liked them and they liked us. The idea that we would get on well with the parents of our daughter's consort was very appealing. Fourthly, they didn't seek to tightly bind the agreement. Mr. Potter, both you and my daughter were given the freedom to break the agreement before coming of age. The four of us hoped that at the least you would each find a lifelong friend from the bargain, but all of us found repugnant the idea of forcing a marriage. But most

importantly, the agreement allowed Mr. Potter's father to access the McIlvaine grimoire.”

She turned to Harry and took his hands; he flinched for an instant, but she held tight and said to him, “Mr. Potter, we knew that there was a prophecy that involved both yourself and... that horrible creature. We didn't know the whole of it, but it was obvious that you were key to getting rid of him and that you needed extraordinary protections. Your mother was a serious scholar of magic, and she wasn't put off by the differences between Old Magic and the Roman ways. She had an exceptional mind. The world lost much by her death – and your father's as well; don't misunderstand me. She had deduced that Old Magic would offer the best alternatives for her purposes. Your father entered the McIlvaine grimoire with your mother's instructions, and returned with a ritual I had never before seen and that I didn't entirely understand. I can only say that she was very excited, and I suspect that the ritual had something to do with your survival.”

“That's why Croaker couldn't balance the bridging equation... he didn't recognise that there was a ritual component...” Hermione said in a near-whisper.

“Are you talking about your project for Dumbledore?” Harry asked, even as Madam McIlvaine asked, “Croaker... are you referring to Algernon Croaker?”

“Yes, and yes,” Hermione said.

Madam McIlvaine gritted her teeth. “Algernon Croaker attempted to have the Compact repealed, in exchange for giving his... his merry band of *demon spawn* access to the Old Magics. He actually succeeded in gaining some support from your Wizengamot. My grandmother threatened to banish him to Tartarus, or so my mother claimed. He understood that to mean 'no' and the issue was never broached again. I am surprised that he is still alive.”

“He must be about one hundred and seventy,” Harry said.

“His demon spawn...?” Hermione asked.

“Your so-called Department of Mysteries: the ones who would own magic – as if it can be owned,” Madam McIlvaine spat.

“I don't know what the Department of Mysteries does, actually, not even after seeing it. I do know that Croaker might very well be a demon – a nasty one, at that. He hates Hermione, that's for certain,” Harry said.

“As I said before, those sort dislike things outside of their understanding,” Madam McIlvaine said.

Harry straightened in his chair, and said, “Thank you for everything you did. Just because things didn't work out doesn't mean you didn't try to help me. If I'm understanding this rightly, you actually saved my life. If the House of Potter can ever do anything for you, it'll be done.”

Madam McIlvaine's eyes filled with unshed tears. “Thank you, Harry,” she said. “That's related to

why I wished to see you. I would like to revive the agreement.”

“Er... revive the agreement?” Harry asked.

Hermione sat bolt upright and demanded, “I thought you said this wasn't entailed! You aren't seriously considering marrying Harry, are you?”

Madam McIlvaine's eyes widened and she stared at the two of them for several seconds before she said, “Marry?” She chuckled and then broke into full-on laughter. “Be married to Mr. Potter? Oh – oh, dear! The looks on your faces!” she gasped.

Harry cleared his throat and asked uneasily, “What did you have in mind, then?”

Madam McIlvaine took a moment to compose herself before she said, “I have no desire to marry again – and certainly not to you, Mr. Potter. Without an heir, House McIlvaine and all that pertains will revert to one of the remaining Old Magic families. I propose that House Potter agree to provide House McIlvaine with an heir at some future date. Should anything happen to me, then you would serve as regent until you produce a daughter. In return, House McIlvaine will provide house room if needed, protection if possible, and access for the Head of House Potter to the McIlvaine grimoire. Perhaps something from within the grimoire can help you destroy that monster once and for all time?”

Harry sat dumbfounded by the idea. It was so far outside his experience that he struggled to think of all the consequences. He would be promising that a future daughter born from a future wife would take over a House about which he knew little or nothing. He didn't understand Old Magic – wasn't even certain what it entailed – but he did know that Voldemort was afraid of it. If Madam McIlvaine wasn't on the good side of things, he figured that his parents would never have considered a betrothal or friendship.

“Do it,” Hermione said abruptly.

Jarred from his thoughts, Harry said, “Pardon?”

“Do it,” she repeated. “There could be something in there as powerful as the ritual your mother used. You need to do this.”

“It's not a small thing,” said Harry.

“What, providing an heir?” Hermione asked.

“Well... yeah,” Harry admitted.

“Harry, anyone who really loves you will understand. It's not as if someone would show up and take away your daughter, after all,” Hermione said.

Harry startled at the mention of *his* daughter aloud, but Hermione's point did leave him more comfortable with Madam McIlvaine's request. “Can I think on this? Not long, but a day or two?”

he asked.

“I agree with you that this is no small thing. It is right to give this careful consideration. Your owl and no other will be able to find me, should you send a reply. Now then... it is nearly time for the saining,” Madam McIlvaine said. When she stood, she first clasped Hermione's hands for a moment, and then drew Harry into a gentle hug.

“Someone said that before... what is a saining?” Hermione asked.

“The saining is a house-blessing for the new year,” Madam McIlvaine explained; “Each head of house lights a branch from the village bonfire. The hearth of each house is lit by its branch, and then we use the branches to inscribe runes for growth, strength, health and protection on the lintel of each house. At the end, the branches are returned and put into the bonfire.”

“That sounds lovely,” said Hermione.

Harry said, “I'd like to do that for the Black Tower sometime... maybe next year?”

“It can be performed on the new year, or on the winter solstice itself – that's when we bless our own homes,” Madam McIlvaine said; “I'm not allowed to teach you the rite, but nothing prevents you from learning by observation.” She moved aside and added, “I don't wish to be impolite, but I do need to join my brethren.”

Madam McIlvaine removed the runic protections and Harry held open the garret door for her. He and Hermione followed her down the stairs, but at a slower pace. By the time they left The Three Broomsticks, she had already disappeared into the crowd that surrounded the great bonfire.

* * * * *

A SAINING GONE HORRIBLY WRONG

Harry and Hermione are surprised to find Ron amongst the crowd. He is with Lavender Brown, whose grandparents' home is in Hogsmeade. Hermione and Lavender are civil to each other, if not exactly warm. Adrian Pucey is also in the crowd, along with Cho Chang. It seems that the Puceys have been regular revellers in Hogsmeade for years, but Niall and his wife stayed in London this year; the attack on their home took its toll on their nerves. Ginny is also present, in the company of Anthony Goldstein:

“Happy New Year, Harry,” Ginny exclaimed. Her cheeks were pinked from the cold, and she was arm-in-arm with Anthony Goldstein.

“Happy New Year, Ginny,” Harry returned; “Good to see you again, Anthony... or is it Tony?”

Anthony's lips pursed for a moment before he said, “Whichever you like, I suppose. I admit that it sounds better coming from Ginny than from you.”

Harry smiled and said, “Anthony it is, then.”

Anthony turned to Hermione and said, “Happy New Year, Hermione. You're looking rested, much better than during the term.”

“You shan't need to talk with Dumbledore,” Hermione said with a sharp edge.

Anthony gave a slight nod before he asked evenly, “Did Harry tell you, or did you suss it out on your own?”

Hermione was only slightly less sharp than before. “It was on my own, with the help of some unintended hints. There was a rather short list of potential suspects, you know?” she said.

Ginny cut in, “Have you ever seen anything like this? All the people and the decorations, and the fire...!”

“It's great,” Hermione said flatly.

Anthony said, “We used to come for this every year... I thought it would be a good way to remember, you know? There's always been a bit of kinship with us and the Compact families, being third-class citizens and such.”

The saining begins with a mass gathering around the bonfire at the centre of the village. The members of the Compact families place runes and perform an unfamiliar incantation that makes the bonfire grow to ten times its previous size without the corresponding heat. Harry notices that one of the members seems to be chanting differently than the others; the same man lingers over his set of runes. Harry recalls Snape's countercursing at his first-year Quidditch match, and wonders what the man is up to. He manages to catch Madam McIlvaine long enough to find out the man's name – Laurence Lochsley; she says that Lochsley is an experimenter and may have been twiddling with some family magics. Harry remains suspicious. The heads of each household in Hogsmeade collect their lit branches and begin a procession back to their homes. Harry notices that there are more cloaked wizards than before, and that they are lingering at the edges of the crowd. He takes Hermione by the hand and starts looking for Aurors. She looks for Ron as they move along. The bonfire starts to grow again as the residents of Hogsmeade move back into their homes. Stragglers in the crowd turn and begin moving toward the bonfire. Harry feels a strong impulse to walk toward the fire but stops himself and wraps his arm around Hermione before she can change direction. He starts a measured move toward the bonfire, careful to guard his thoughts. He finds Scrimgeour near the bonfire, frantically signalling for the rest of the Aurors on scene. Apparently, Fudge ordered the bulk of the force to cover Diagon Alley rather than Hogsmeade, and Scrimgeour only has five other Aurors at his command. He asks Harry point-blank if he has seen anyone casting the Imperius curse. Harry relates the impulse he felt a few moments earlier. Hermione kneels and opens her pack; several heavy books tumble forth. When Harry gives her a dark look – as it's now quite clear that she's getting her dark books from the goblins, and hasn't stopped – she snaps at him and begins flipping pages rapidly. She moves from the books to her own books filled with notes and diagrams. At some point, she's joined by Anthony Goldstein. People continue to mill toward the bonfire. Scrimgeour and Harry are horrified to see two of them walk straight into the fire as though it was nothing; the two people are consumed almost instantly. Scrimgeour attempts to stun two more approaching, but his spells curve away from their targets

and into the flames. Harry tries to force his “rogue” magic (the sort he's been experiencing in relation to Hermione) and manages to fling one person away from the fire, but finds himself dragged toward it several feet before he can stop his slide. Madam McIlvaine races toward them, stops a few feet short of the fire, and uses her wand to begin burning runes into the ground. She, Hermione and Anthony have a rapid conversation that Harry can't follow – and in any case, he and Scrimgeour are too busy physically knocking people to the ground for him to pay a lot of attention. Adrian Pucey attempts to help them; he succeeds for a while but in the end has to ask Harry to stun him before he's drawn to the flames. Their attention is stolen again when one of Hogsmeade's larger homes erupts into flames. With Scrimgeour and his fellow Aurors engaged in literally knocking people out, Harry heads alone toward the burning home even as a second bursts into flame. He encounters two Death Eaters; he stuns one, and returns fire from the second with a Reductor curse that destroys the Death Eater's lower leg. The Death Eaters have sealed the residents into their homes. Harry looks through the windows of a third home in horror as their burning branch catches an interior wall on fire and the residents calmly walk into the flames. Harry returns to the two incapacitated Death Eaters. He binds them and demands to know how to unseal the homes. The one whose leg is destroyed speaks little English. The other is young and sounds Scottish. Harry drags him by the cloak toward the burning home; the Death Eater, thinking that Harry is going to cast him into the flames, relents and gives Harry the counter-curses. Harry stuns him again and begins racing from home to home. Harry finds Ron pounding on the windows of the Brown home, which is already afire. Half of the family has already marched into the flames, but Lavender is at the sealed window – the room is mostly smoke-filled. Harry casts the counter-curse and she opens the window. There is a loud sucking sound as air rushes in, and the fire explodes outward. Harry and Ron are thrown more than twenty feet, and a severely burned Lavender falls nearby. Ron shouts for help and tries to cast the few healing charms that a sixth year knows. Harry tells Ron to pick her up and proceeds to pop Ron and Lavender to the Hogwarts infirmary and a shocked Madam Pomfrey. Harry runs out of the infirmary door and pops back to Hogsmeade, where he continues his dash from house to house. Once the houses are liberated, there is an equally large problem as people promptly begin flowing toward the bonfire. Harry finds Croaker with Madam McIlvaine and Hermione; Hermione apparently summoned him with a Patronus. Croaker identifies the flames as the Fire of Prometheus, which Madam McIlvaine knows as Demon's Fire. The fire will draw out all things magical within the boundaries of its summoning, which appear to surround the entire village. They argue vehemently about what to do. Goldstein points out that there appears to be a hole in the ritual seals for the fire, which may allow it to escape the village and enter the Forbidden Forest. Scrimgeour states the obvious: that this would allow it to head unimpeded toward Hogwarts itself. The argument is broken by the growing effort needed to force people away from the growing fire by whatever means necessary. Croaker announces that he's off to bring a group of Unspeakables. Madam McIlvaine and Goldstein realise that Hermione has already initiated a ritual; too late to interrupt, they scurry to help her bring it off properly. A whirlwind appears next to the bonfire and begins to suck in the magical flames. A noxious smell fills the village as first the bonfire and then the flames within each home are drawn into the whirlwind and apparently sent to nothingness. Hermione struggles to contain the whirlwind, but succeeds in sending it away after Madam McIlvaine fails. The Unspeakables arrive with Croaker just as Hermione, Madam McIlvaine and Goldstein are closing the ritual. One of the Unspeakables is Mr. Whyte, whom Harry met briefly at MacLeish's party and who was identified there as the Head Unspeakable. He accuses Hermione of engaging in banned practices by

summoning a Whirling Dervish. Madam McIlvaine stares Mr. Whyte down and declares that she performed the summoning but required the assistance of the two students to complete the ritual. The Unspeakables continue buzzing about Hermione's involvement and their desire to know more about how she did it. Harry coldly interrupts and points out that they should be more interested in who started the magical fire in the first place. Chastened, the Compact family members other than Madam McIlvaine are brought to the Three Broomsticks and questioned by Scrimgeour, observed by Mr. Whyte, Croaker and Harry. While the two youngest are willing to speak, the next called forth refuses to say a word until Whyte and Croaker are dismissed and the room swept for any monitoring devices they might have planted. When they show no willingness to comply, Harry ushers the two men out. Mr. Whyte makes vaguely threatening comments to Harry; Harry responds by casually pointing out that while the Dept. of Mysteries is independent of the rest of the Ministry, its funding is not. Mr. Whyte leaves; Croaker berates Harry for making an enemy of Mr. Whyte and the Unspeakables; Harry dismisses Croaker entirely. One of the elder Compact family heads – Lochsley, the one who Harry watched suspiciously at the outset – is evasive while questioned. The man manages to cast a wandless confounding ward unrecognised by everyone (Madam McIlvaine concludes later that it was a specific family magic), and escapes along with three of the four captured Death Eaters. Scrimgeour, at a loss for how to proceed, summons Madam Bones – who was on duty in Diagon Alley per the Minister's request. Bones, in consultation with Scrimgeour, Madam McIlvaine, the village chief Macandra, Harry and others, concludes that it is for the best to assign responsibility to the Death Eaters, until or unless the involvement of the Compact family head is found to be of his own free will. Dumbledore, who arrives quite late, agrees – and further agrees that Minister Fudge should receive an expurgated report of the event. Adrian Pucey is unable to find Cho Chang. It is eventually confirmed that she perished in the fire. Before the evening is done, it is determined that forty-six people were consumed and fifty-three injured; two Death Eaters died and four were captured. Scrimgeour and his Aurors, with help from Harry, Adrian Pucey, Anthony Goldstein and others, kept as many as eighty people from walking into the fire. Madam Rosmerta, her barmaids and Ginny Weasley held dozens inside the Three Broomsticks. Harry and Hermione return to Hogwarts. On the way, she tells him that two of Scrimgeour's Aurors had flanked her to prevent the Unspeakables from attempting to spirit her away; they had done the same for Anthony Goldstein until it was clear that the Unspeakables had little or no interest in him. H and H arrive at the Hospital Wing to a distraught Ron and the two remaining (and injured) members of the Brown family. Lavender died from her burns, despite Madam Pomfrey's best efforts and the summoning of healers from St. Mungo's. H and H attempt to comfort Ron, who is convinced that he somehow killed her. Ginny arrives with Anthony Goldstein and Adrian Pucey. Everyone is shaken, although Harry notices that Goldstein seems to be holding up better than the rest; chalks it up to him being further removed than the rest (even though Cho was his housemate). Unlike Ron, Adrian Pucey is angry rather than distraught. Harry prevents him from making a magical oath to avenge Cho, and makes him promise to meet with Harry before he does anything rash. Family members begin to trickle in. H and H take the opportunity to leave. Exhausted, they both go to Harry's quarters. Without prelude – no cleaning up, undressing, etc – they fall asleep in his bed.

* * * * *

FOLLOW WITH JANUARY 1 DAILY PROPHET ARTICLE

Fudge in serious difficulty, over his decision (“based on excellent intelligence”, according to F) to concentrate Auror resources at Diagon Alley DFDL broke up a Death Eater raid in Cornwall during the New Year events; with commitment of Auror forces, DMLE never even responded
Uncertainty over how Hogsmeade was saved; rumours that it was through the invocation of arcane and Dark magic, but no complaints to be found from the villagers

Harry Potter and the Years of Rebellion January & February 1997: The Lions In Winter

HARRY POTTER and the YEARS OF REBELLION

JANUARY & FEBRUARY 1997: THE LIONS IN WINTER

* * * * *

MASSACRE AT HOGSMEADE!

Were Death Eaters responsible, or taking advantage?

Compact Family scion held as “person of interest”

Controversy over Auror assignments

The Chosen One and Hogwarts students saved lives

What was supposed to be a blessing turned into a nightmare in Hogsmeade, shortly after the New Year broke. The Hogmanay bonfire was corrupted into a magical fire that somehow drew revellers willingly into the flames. Many residents were trapped in their homes when branches lit from the fire burst into the same magical flames. St. Mungo’s Hospital received thirty-seven casualties and sixty-two injured. Several of the most severely injured were received at the Hogwarts infirmary along with at least two casualties. This was the largest terror attack to occur in Britain since the so-called Battle of Diagon Alley in 1980, where ninety-four wizards and witches lost their lives and hundreds more were injured.

The fire in question is so rare and dangerous that its existence is classified by the Department of Mysteries. Anonymous sources referred to it as “The Fire of Prometheus” and “Devil’s Fire”. It proved unquenchable until the head of one of the Compact Families used an ancient ritual to invoke a whirlwind. Madam Melisende McIlvaine, Mistress of the House of McIlvaine and member of the Hogwarts Board of Governors, required the assistance of upper-form Hogwarts students to carry off the ritual. One observer said that the magic “was on par with Dumbledore’s best”. An expert amongst the revellers reported that it had been at least 300 years since similar magic was publicly performed.

In the immediate aftermath, two Wizengamot members from old-line families suggested that Madam McIlvaine should be held for trial under the terms of the 1407 Compact. Ministry officials quickly quashed the idea. Rufus Scrimgeour, Head Auror and DMLE commander on the scene, said that hundreds more might have died had Madam McIlvaine not taken action. Scrimgeour also dismissed suggestions that the students who provided assistance to Madam McIlvaine should be expelled and have their wands snapped. “It was all we could do to keep people from jumping into the fire, let alone trying to put it out,” Mr. Scrimgeour said. The Head Auror also gave quick credit to Harry Potter – the Chosen One – and several Hogwarts students who joined the small company of Aurors in protecting residents and revellers.

Mr. Potter deflected the praise and pointed to Adrian Pucey, Hogwarts Head Boy and an accomplished conjurer in the making. Mr. Pucey, clearly tired and distraught, told reporters, “The Dementor’s Kiss is too good for whoever did this. They deserve to suffer.” Miss Cho Chang, Mr. Pucey’s steady companion and Hogwarts Head Girl, was amongst those who perished.

Mr. Ronald Weasley, Mr. Potter’s close friend and well known for heroics in his own right, saved at least two families from the flames. He also joined Mr. Potter in subduing several apparent Death Eaters. ‘Bloody Harry’ and his friends took down three of the terrorists permanently, an act for which this reporter and many others give thanks. It is unknown at this time whether the Death Eaters were responsible for starting the cursed fire, but their numbers at the scene give one pause. Mr. Weasley, who also lost his steady companion to the flames, directed attention to those most affected. “We (the Weasley family) lost everything last summer, so I know what it’s like. There are a lot of houses completely burned. Hogsmeade needs help,” Mr. Weasley said.

Professor Albus Dumbledore, who was heading abroad in his capacity as ICW Supreme Mugwump just as the disaster occurred, has temporarily opened Hogwarts to those without homes and has asked upper-form students to consider returning early in order to assist with salvage and reconstruction. “Britain has not seen a tragedy on this scale in nearly twenty years, and we must do all we are able to provide comfort and assistance,” Mr. Dumbledore said. In ominous fashion, he added that he feared this was the first attack of its kind rather than the last.

In the aftermath, questions have been raised about Minister Fudge’s order to place more than three-quarters of on-duty Aurors at Diagon Alley and only six Aurors at Hogsmeade. Not only was Hogsmeade woefully unprotected, but the Minister’s order left just four Aurors free to address other emergencies across England. The Office of the Minister offered no comment on the matter.

Thankfully, the Dark Forces Defence League was on high alert in support of the DMLE. Aurors responded to two other incidents last evening, one of which may have been a Death Eater attack. DFDL regulars responded to four minor incidents and also assisted healers from St. Mungo’s in two emergencies.

DFDL spokeswizard Mr. Gilderoy Lockhart told reporters that five DFDL regulars were on hand in Hogsmeade, but the DMLE’s Mr. Scrimgeour said that they failed to make themselves known to Aurors on site and that he did not know whether or how they lent assistance. Madam Amelia Bones, director of the DMLE, nonetheless thanked the DFDL for its efforts. “Coordination has been a bit ragged, but we’re glad for the League’s support at a time when the need for policing is

high and Department staffing is at a historic low,” said Madam Bones.

The DMLE took Mr. Laurence Lochsley, scion of the House of Lochsley, into custody at the scene as a ‘person of interest’. Madam Bones said that Mr. Lochsley was not suspected at this time of committing any crimes. She indicated that Mr. Lochsley would remain in custody while receiving attention from healers. No further information was available at press time.

List of the deceased **A2**

The scene at Hogsmeade, as described by survivors **A4**

A disaster, in pictures **A5-A8**

DFDL to step up its efforts in support of the Ministry **A9**

Did diviners predict the massacre in advance? **A9**

Curse experts speculate on “The Fire of Prometheus” **A10**

What is the 1409 Compact, and why does it matter? **A12**

Goblin leaders ‘appalled’ by loss of life; prepared to offer unprecedented aid **B14**

For national coverage, see **B1**

For seven-day weather and other divinatory predictions, see **B2**

For full Quidditch coverage, see **B3-B8**

For coverage of your locale, see **B9-12**

Arithmancer’s Corner: Centaurs say Mars is exceptionally bright **B13**

– the Daily Prophet , January 1, 1997

* * * * *

January 2, 1997

“You should try to sleep,” Hermione called out.

“Can’t... too much on my mind,” mumbled Harry, though he knew she wouldn’t hear him. He rose up from a chair on the veranda of his quarters and stretched. His shoulders pulled painfully and for some reason his feet were quite sore.

Hermione’s hand came down on his shoulder from behind. “Sharing a bed once was enough for

you?” she whispered into his ear.

Harry’s mouth quirked into a half-grin and he said, “You *do* keep the bedcovers warm... quite pleasant, really. I wonder how long Dumbledore will let us get by with it?”

She squeezed his shoulder firmly and he gave a yelp. “You’re one giant knot, aren’t you?” she sighed.

Harry slowly rolled his neck. “I don’t know why; it’s not like it was physical work,” he said.

“You were casting continuously for over nine hours. No one casts continuously for that long, not even Professor Dumbledore. I honestly thought you wouldn’t stop until you fell unconscious,” Hermione said.

“There’s just so much... so many people... I can’t stand it, Hermione! All these people suffering, and I’m the only one who can put a stop to it in the end, and I *can’t* – not yet, at least,” said Harry.

“Things can’t be set right in one day, or two, or a week. I doubt Hogsmeade will be totally rebuilt for months, or years perhaps. You can’t fix everything – no one can,” countered Hermione.

Harry rubbed at his forehead – it felt tight, almost burned, and his temples were throbbing. “Bugger... I think it’s getting worse,” he said.

Hermione started, “A headache? How long have you had a headache? I could have fetched a pain potion –”

Harry cut her off, “I don’t think... AUGGGHH!” His knees buckled and he collapsed. He tried to open his eyes, and was rewarded by a stabbing pain so intense that he nearly bit through his lower lip. He heard Hermione shouting, “Harry!” but she was miles away, or maybe underwater...

He was absolutely furious – the sort of fury where the tendons of the neck stand out and the face reddens and the corners of the mouth dampen with spittle. Part of him wanted to take one of his most senior servants and expel the man’s entrails in full view of all of his assembled chosen. The rest of him, however, understood that the inner circle was already dangerously small; that this failure was atypical of the man as he once was; and that it was necessary to motivate as well as to punish.

It was curious to him that his fury was more controlled within this body and mind – just as clear, just as deep, but without the intemperance that had plagued him within the ritual-borne shell. He was no longer the Lord Voldemort of 1995, but more the Lord Voldemort of 1975: brilliant, persuasive, tactical in his thoughts and deeds, and able to put anger to good use.

He crossed his arms with visible displeasure and fixed a sharp gaze on each of his followers in turn, even though they couldn’t see his face within the darkness of his hooded cloak. None but Pettigrew and Bellatrix met his eyes; one was enraptured and the other insane, and there were

days when it was hard to know which description was most apt.

“The events of the New Year did not turn out as expected,” he said, almost casually; “This merits a thorough review. Rabastan!”

“Yes, my Lord!” his minion said immediately, and knelt before him.

He said, “There was no confusion at Diagon Alley, no urgency, and most importantly, no diversion of any kind. Explain.”

Lestrangle began, “There were two dozen Aurors in the crowd, and twice that many from the Defence League –”

“Do not be concerned about the League. Leave them to me,” he said calmly.

“Y-yes, my Lord. There were also goblin warriors stationed at most rooftops. We could not place any of our men in high positions. From low positions, the crowd blocked our sightlines –”

He cut Lestrangle off, “Yes, yes, enough. Your assessment receives full marks. I am pleased that you returned with your men intact and able to fight another day. Still, you could have withdrawn most of your force and left two or three to set fires, break into storefronts. The goal was to sow confusion, Rabastan, and the goal was not achieved.”

“I – I did not think of leaving behind a small number, my Lord,” Lestrangle said, his head hung low.

He let the room sit silent for half a minute before he said, “You failed, Lestrangle... but by avoiding a situation in which you could not win, you left the possibility of redeeming yourself in my service. Let it not be said that Lord Voldemort is without mercy. Rise, my faithful servant.”

“M-my Lord is most merciful,” Lestrangle said.

He nodded and said, “We must return to the days of my successes. Recall how much damage could be done, how much fear could be stirred up by small numbers of men? You and the others who served me in better days: you must be the ones to teach my newer servants what it means to be a true Death Eater. You must think, Rabastan! You have shaken off the shackles of Azkaban, and now you must shake off the shackles of a weak and idle mind. With each journey amongst the unworthy, each deed performed in my service, you must send a message: Lord... Voldemort... is... back.”

“I am grateful for your teachings, my Lord – you are indeed returned,” said Lestrangle.

He smiled within the shadows of his cloak, and declared, “To those of you who were under Rabastan’s command, fear not: there will be further opportunities to serve. You were unseen and well organised. You followed orders. In this, you performed well. Rabastan, take your men and celebrate this success. Tomorrow, you will step up their training and begin to rotate them amongst the household sorties under Rodolphus’s command.”

Lestrangle stood tall and barked, “Yes, my Lord! May you reign for a thousand years!”

His hidden smile grew and he said, “Indeed.”

Lestrangle turned to face his men, who made up the centre third of the gathered audience, and shouted, “Hail Lord Voldemort!” The men returned his shout, and left in an orderly manner.

He allowed another long silence before he said, “Do you see? Rabastan remembers the way things once were, and shall be again. Rodolphus, come forward.”

“Yes, my Lord,” said the other Lestrangle brother.

He said, “Rodolphus, since the outset of my household sorties, you have lost thirteen of mine by death or capture. Did any of those captured possess information of value?”

“No, my Lord. Only the leaders of each sortie are given the full mission information, and they are instructed to lead from the rear position. They also hold the primary escape portkey,” Rodolphus reported.

“How many households have been struck?” he asked.

“Forty-seven,” Rodolphus said.

“Casualties?” he asked.

“As best as we are able to tell, my Lord, there have been eighty-eight killed, twenty with long-term injuries, forty-one with short-term injuries, and sixty-three who successfully fled,” said Rodolphus.

“Of the forty-seven, how many properties were destroyed?” he asked.

“Twenty-two were levelled, of which four were cursed according to your instructions. The other twenty-five were all damaged, some of them severely,” Rodolphus said.

“How many of your men have gone out on more than one sortie – of those who are still with us, of course?” he asked.

“There are seventeen sortie groups, my Lord, so all the men have been on multiple missions. Group Alpha has conducted six missions and has lost only one man, that being on the first sortie,” said Rodolphus.

“Outstanding, Rodolphus. The leader of this Group Alpha... what would you say of his potential?” he asked.

“He is skilled, my Lord – skilled and quite clever... and ambitious,” Rodolphus returned.

“I will meet this Group leader tomorrow – see to it,” he ordered.

“Yes, my Lord.”

He said, “This Group Alpha leader of yours and all of his men are to receive bonuses, Rodolphus. You are paying per sortie?”

“Yes, my Lord.”

“Double their compensation, retroactive to... the second sortie. Lord Voldemort will not reward the initial failure,” he said.

“You are most generous, my Lord.”

He said, “Yes. Yes, I am. You are dismissed, with the appreciation of your Lord. Lord Voldemort extends his appreciation to all those under your command.”

“Hail Lord Voldemort!” Rodolphus’s men said in unison without prompting.

His hidden smile returned. “Excellent! Rodolphus, I will grant you a boon. Think carefully on this; we will discuss it next week. Continue with your work.”

“Yes, my Lord!” Rodolphus said, with a hint of relief in his voice that only his lord could hear; he and his men promptly left the chamber.

“Antonin, come forward,” he snapped.

“Yes, my Lord,” Dolohov responded.

“Hogsmeade was a disaster,” he said flatly.

“Yes, my Lord,” Dolohov returned; there was the slightest tremor in the man’s voice. It was delicious.

“Do you still insist that it is wise for us to recruit beyond our own land and other English-speaking countries?” he asked.

“M-my Lord, it served us well in days past... English, it is not my mother tongue...” Dolohov managed.

He said in a low voice, “Good... very good. I’m glad to know that your years in Azkaban did not rob you of your spine. You are correct that our recruitment should span far and wide. Lord Voldemort seeks to build a worldwide movement. I would not have any concerns in this area, Antonin... had you bothered to order the casting of proper TRANSLATION CHARMS!”

“The squad leaders, my Lord, they were charged with –”

“ENOUGH! The failure is yours – accept it!” he hissed.

“Yes, my Lord,” Dolohov said, even as he fell to his knees.

He extended his arm and swept the room with his hand. “Is this your entire company?” he asked.

“Yes, my Lord.”

“How many did you lose?”

“Eleven, my Lord.”

He steepled his hands and sat quietly for several moments, and then rose abruptly to his feet.

“Eleven. You lost eleven men. The Daily Prophet reported three dead. Eight were captured?” he asked.

“F-five were captured, my Lord. Three men, they died in the flames. Potter, he killed the other three,” reported Dolohov.

“How many squad leaders participated in the mission?” he asked.

“Five, my Lord. Four returned,” Dolohov said.

“Who was the best of the five?” he asked.

“The one who died, my Lord,” said Dolohov.

“And the worst...?”

“Schmidt, my Lord. He did not follow orders. I will punish him for this.”

He walked slowly, deliberately past Dolohov. “That is neither your place, nor your decision to make. Who is Schmidt? Stand, now!” he commanded.

A tall, blond-haired man with aristocratic features rose from his knees and stood at attention. “I am Karl Schmidt, my Lord,” the man said in English coloured by a crisp accent.

“Does Antonin speak the truth, Schmidt? Did you disobey his orders?” he snapped.

“I did, my Lord. I offer no excuses and accept the consequences of my actions,” said Schmidt.

He paused for a moment and then said, “How... unexpected. What orders were disobeyed?”

Schmidt said evenly, “There are two orders in question, my Lord. The first was with regard to the casting of six spells, one each upon the men under my command. Commander Dolohov said that no magic was to be used within the village until he ordered it so. When the fire became uncontrolled, I cast a confundus charm upon the men to prevent them from responding to the flames. The second was with regard to the Granger woman, my Lord.”

“Continue,” he said sharply.

“The commander ordered that the Granger woman be apprehended and brought to him. I believed that this was in violation of your own order, my Lord. You ordered that the woman was to be left not only unharmed but untouched. The manner in which the commander issued his order led me to believe that the woman was to be taken for purpose of retribution,” said Schmidt; “Nonetheless, I violated the orders of my direct commander and accept the consequences of my actions.”

He was taken aback by this man, and decided to continue. “You speak as though you come from a military background. Where did you complete your magical education?” he asked.

“Durmstrang, my Lord. I studied under Herr Volkov and completed in 1983,” said Schmidt.

“Ahh, so you left before Karkarov assumed the headship,” he said.

“Herr Volkov was a scholar and a gentlemen; I believe he will be unmatched in my lifetime. As for Karkarov... I have little regard for traitors, my Lord,” Schmidt said.

He said, “Well spoken, Schmidt... and your bearing? Surely you did not gain this from German or Russian Aurors?”

Schmidt explained, “I am what the English consider a full-blood, my Lord. The line of my mother extends fourteen generations. My father is the son of... forgive my English... a ‘squib’? My grandfather was the fourth son of Herr Klaus Schmidt –”

He cut the man off, “Klaus Schmidt was the cultural minister under Lord Grindelwald, was he not?”

“That is correct, my Lord,” said Schmidt.

“Continue.”

“Yes, my Lord. Herr Schmidt was instructed by Lord Grindelwald to enlist my grandfather in the German army. Lord Grindelwald was interested in Muggle military tactics and determined this to be a suitable place for a squib. Because of the outcome of the war, my grandfather was the only survivor of the line. He required my father to also serve in the army following his time at Durmstrang – the Austrian army, my Lord – and the same was required of me. I quit my commission in 1993 to work as a journeyman at Gregorovitch, and was not pleased by the current state of wizardry. I was recruited in October by Commander Dolohov,” Schmidt finished.

He turned to Dolohov and snarled, “Antonin, you recruited a man who understands how to organise soldiers and whose family has a history of allegiance to Lord Grindelwald himself, and did not inform me of this?”

“He did not prove himself to my satisfaction, my Lord,” Dolohov said.

“Why did you seek to apprehend Miss Granger?” he demanded.

Dolohov began, "It was my intention to bring her to you, my Lord, so that she would learn the proper place –"

"Was there any ambiguity in my orders? Were you somehow confused?" he asked.

"No, my Lord, I..."

"Rise, Antonin," he said; "Rise, and look into my eyes."

Dolohov said, "My Lord, I..." before he screamed and shook violently.

He tore his eyes away and hissed, "So... she is the one who escaped you in the Department of Mysteries?"

"Y-yes, my Lord..."

"You couldn't tolerate the idea of having been bested by a school girl, an unqualified witch."

"N-no, my Lord... I..."

He crossed his arms and paced for more than a minute, before he said, "Herr Schmidt, join me."

"Yes, my Lord," Schmidt said.

"Look me in the eyes. It will not be so... abrupt as what Herr Dolohov experienced," he said.

After several moments, he withdrew and said, "You speak without guile. You are loyal to your chain of command, and will disregard a command only in the event of a conflicting order from a higher authority or when the mission is in jeopardy. You have served my cause faithfully for three months without benefit of a mark of service. I am pleased."

"Thank you, my Lord," said Schmidt.

"Herr Schmidt, remain here if you would. Antonin, remain standing. As for the rest of you, come off your knees and be seated," he said. With one wave of his wand, three-dozen comfortable chairs appeared.

When the assembled were seated, he began to pace again and said, "It is rare that I have the opportunity to teach. At one time, I had hoped to join the faculty at Hogwarts. When a new order has been established and we are at peace under my leadership, perhaps I shall lecture there on occasion. In fact... it may be for the best that I directly instruct those who are new to our brethren. I shall meditate on this.

"For today, I begin by asking which of you has more than passing experience amongst the Muggles. Raise your hands, if you please... there is no incorrect answer, so do not fear to raise them. Ahh... it is as I expected. Of thirty-five, only four have meaningful experience with the Muggles. You there... yes, with the thick shock of hair. What is your name?"

“I am called Warden, mein Lord – Franz Warden,” the man said in a rough voice.

“Describe your experience with the Muggles,” he ordered.

“We are farmers for eight generations, mein Lord. We trade with the Muggles when needed. They are rude and cruel and one tried to force himself on my sister. The Muggles, they are no good,” the man replied.

“Would you say that the Muggles are dangerous, then?” he asked.

“Ja, mein Lord. They hunt animals with their loud, smoking weapons, and they drive the automobiles that frighten the chickens, and they cheat and steal, and the one with my sister carried a knife,” the man said.

“And what did you do to him?” he asked.

“I cast the Cruciatus curse on the swine, mein Lord,” said Warden.

“Very good, Warden. You may sit,” he said, and then he reached into his robes; “Herr Schmidt, identify this device.”

“It is a pistol. From here, I would say that it is a Walther P88 semiautomatic. By your leave, my Lord?” Schmidt said as he reached forward.

“I grant you my leave,” he said.

Schmidt held the pistol up, pointed it away from all those assembled and sighted down the barrel, checked the magazine and the firing action, and then said, “It is fully functional, my Lord. Shall I leave the safety disengaged?”

“I assume this ‘safety’ would prevent the weapon from firing?”

“Yes, my Lord.”

“Leave it, please.”

“Yes, my Lord.”

He took back the pistol and held it loosely. “This is a firearm – a pistol, as Herr Schmidt called it. The pistol releases small projectiles called bullets at a speed of several hundred miles per hour. It is a rather destructive weapon at close range. The Muggles have millions of such weapons, and far, far worse. This is a trifling sample of why the Muggles are dangerous to us. There are very real and compelling reasons for the separation between the Muggles and us. We must soon establish more than today’s thin separation, as their capabilities for self-destruction are several orders of magnitude greater than in Grindelwald’s time and are continuing to grow.

“Now, then... bullets move more rapidly than spell fire. A shield can block them, but a Muggle

with some expertise will in most cases hit a wizard with the bullet before a shield can be raised. Let me demonstrate –”

With no warning, he pointed the pistol at Dolohov’s leg and pulled the trigger rapidly. Three bullets pierced Dolohov’s calf before the man reacted.

As the senior Death Eater screamed and rolled on the floor, Schmidt said calmly, “The P88 is a good pistol: reliability combined with superb accuracy.”

He said, “Noted. Get up, Antonin.”

“I... I can’t, muh... my Luh... Lord...” Dolohov gasped.

“Pity,” he said flatly.

“May I give aid to my field commander, my Lord?” Schmidt asked.

He said, “Your loyalty does you credit, Herr Schmidt. I deny your request,” and then made a show of skilfully inspecting the pistol and re-setting the safety. Schmidt surely received the message directed toward him: never assume that the Dark Lord’s knowledge has any bounds.

He was also certain that all those assembled recognised the insult to Dolohov. He had punished his Death Eater not only in full view of the recruits but also with a Muggle weapon. The point to all assembled was simply: Dolohov’s crime was so vile that he wasn’t worthy of magical punishment. A quick glance around the room confirmed his certainty.

Dolohov reached a shaky hand toward his wand and asked, “Muh... may I h-heal muh... my...”

He shook his head and said, “Casting a healing charm would be a rather bad idea, Antonin. I’ll explain in a moment.” With a flick of his wrist, a tourniquet formed just below Dolohov’s knee. He continued, “Now then, my servants, let us discuss the concept of pride. Those who pollute their minds with religious ideas refer to pride as a sin. In a sense, I grant that they are correct. Herr Warden, what is the problem with pride?”

“W-we try to, ehh, satisfy it, my Lord?” Warden offered hesitantly.

“You’re on the right track, Warden – partial marks for that,” he said; “Can any of you build upon that thought? Yes – you in the third row. Your name?”

“My name ist Gruber, mein Lord,” the man said; “When a leader’s pride is more important than the mission, the soldiers are put in danger.”

“Full marks, Gruber,” he said.

“If I may, mein Lord, this was learned from Herr Schmidt. We ist alive today because of him,” Gruber said.

He nodded slightly and said, “And Herr Schmidt succeeded because...? It was because he put the mission first. Some of my elder servants are still suffering weakened faculties from their time in Azkaban. I promise that you will not share a similar fate. Soon, Lord Voldemort will be able to recover his servants from Azkaban at will.

“Returning to the lesson... Herr Schmidt, a question: if I ordered you to kill your father, would you do so?”

Schmidt said, “My father is an honourable man from a family that has long supported the advancement of wizardry and the greater good that Lord Grindelwald proclaimed. I would ask my Lord’s favour to seek another way to prove my worth. However, if my Lord ordered such an action to further the greater good, then I would carry out that order.”

He said, “I am not ordering you to kill your father, Herr Schmidt. Firstly, Lord Voldemort begins with encouragement before resorting to punishment. Secondly, it would not make for a very productive mission, would it? My servants, I award full marks for this answer to my question.”

Dolohov groaned in pain, so he returned his attention to the fallen Death Eater and said, “Now, Antonin, I will explain to you why it was best to refrain from casting a healing charm on your rather grievously abused lower leg. The bullets contained within this pistol were soaked in Manticore venom.” He paused for the chorus of gasps from his audience and then went on, “Even now, the venom is spreading. I believe you will find Healer Penfold at the far end of the main corridor. If you make it to her tender mercies in the next ten minutes, she will most likely be able to salvage your leg. In fifteen minutes, I expect that it will have to be removed below the knee. In twenty minutes, you will likely lose the entire leg. In twenty-five minutes... well, let’s not fret about that. Go on with you, Antonin. Make your way to the healer.”

“Buh... but my L-lord... I cannot walk...” Dolohov mumbled.

“You have two arms that function. You have one leg that will support you. You have a wand. I am confident that you can manage this on your own,” he said nonchalantly.

It took Dolohov nearly four minutes to splint his leg, conjure a staff, and clamber to his feet. It was another two minutes before the Death Eater reached the doors that connected the audience chamber with the main corridor. The silence – punctuated only by Dolohov’s groans and moans – was excruciating for his other servants, and he knew it. As soon as Dolohov left the chamber, the large doors closed of their own accord.

He strode slowly back to his chair atop its dais, lowered himself into it, and sat silent for nearly two minutes before he said, “The bullets were not coated with Manticore venom. You see, the most powerful engine of fear lies within your own minds. Even now, Mr. Dolohov’s fear of amputation or death is causing him as much pain as any curse. The greatest warriors have always understood how to use their enemy’s own fear as a weapon.

“Mr. Dolohov was punished today because of his pride. A young woman bested him in battle. I ordered that this young woman is to remain unharmed and untouched – and I remind you all that

this order remains in effect. He set out to defy my order so that he could satisfy his pride. A subordinate who remained true to the mission thwarted him. Since his return from Azkaban, Mr. Dolohov's greatest victories for me thus far result from his greatest failures... such a delicious irony, wouldn't you agree?

"All of you will be reassigned to other tasks based upon the reviews and deliberations of my senior Death Eaters. This lecture is concluded and you are to leave my chambers at once. Pettigrew, take the men so that they may tend to their wounds and their appetites. Bellatrix, go and see that Antonin makes it to the infirmary. Herr Schmidt, attend me."

The first thing Harry saw when he recovered his sense was the inside of a conjured bucket. This immediately invoked what Oliver Wood had once called the First Rule of Spewing: the sight and smell of spew begets more spew.

"Dumbledore," he choked out.

Hermione babbled, "Harry... oh, thank God! I didn't know what else to do, I was afraid you'd choke, so... I'm so sorry, I should have sent a message to Madam Pomfrey or --"

He lifted his head slowly while holding his breath. As soon as he was clear of the bucket, he managed to say, "Get to Dumbledore... have to get to Dumbledore."

"Was it *him*?" Hermione asked.

He nodded weakly and said, "Never like this... he didn't force me out... not sure he even knew I was there. I saw it all."

There was a catch in her voice as she asked, "What did you see? "

"A meeting... he wasn't happy about Hogsmeade... he shot Dolohov," Harry said.

She looked at him like he'd gone 'round the twist. "Shot him? With a *gun*?"

He said, "He was making a point. He's different now."

She said, "A *gun* ... I don't understand. It's such a Muggle thing, you know?"

"That was the point," he said.

Hermione began, "You said he's different. I know you've mentioned his voice before, the way his hands are different --"

"Not that sort of 'different'," Harry said; "I actually think he's more dangerous now."

There was nothing she could say to that.

* * * * *

January 4, 1997

Harry shuddered away the sensation of being squeezed through a tube, even as the Headmaster released his arm and moved away to offer condolences. He walked in the opposite direction until he came upon a rise that overlooked the entire area.

The Brown family and friends were gathered around a stone circle – like pictures he’d seen of Stonehenge, Harry thought – in a greening meadow surrounded by undulating winter-struck pastureland for as far as the eye could see. Clearly there was some sort of weather ward placed in addition to Notice-Me-Nots and such. Dumbledore had the advantage of knowing and being known by everyone in attendance, and the Headmaster was always comfortable with that, at least to Harry’s eye. For his part, there was still some of the silent wallflower in Harry. He was comfortable in anonymous crowds, but not amongst people who knew or thought they knew him. It didn’t help that he was woefully unprepared for what was about to happen.

A large hand came down on his shoulder and he returned to attention; “Sorry...?” he said.

The hand belonged to Reverend Pomfrey – Madam Pomfrey’s brother and one of the Headmaster’s old-old crowd. “Feeling a bit out of your depth, lad?” the Reverend asked.

“Professor Dumbledore taught me all the parts of a Sending – all the incantations, the rune sets, the casting – but... well, I’m not sure what I think of it, honestly,” said Harry.

The Reverend smiled and said, “I like an honest answer, especially when it comes to matters of faith.” He directed Harry’s attention toward a clutch of very old black-clad wizards gathered just outside the circle, and went on, “Those are the old guard of the Brown family. I imagine the patriarch would be the grandfather or great-grandfather of your classmate – may God grant her eternal rest. To them, a Sending might be seen as a necessary step in getting your friend’s soul to the next life, the Great Beyond, or what have you. It is literally a sending of the soul, so they believe. For others, even of that age, the Sending is the pureblood equivalent of a funeral pyre. The younger the wizard, the more likely that they view this as being merely tradition, a family ritual of sorts.”

“What do you think?” Harry asked.

“Please understand that as a called rector and a believing Christian, I take a somewhat different view of the soul than most of my fellows here,” the Reverend explained. “Do I think that the Sending is the means by which a wizard’s soul is sent back into the care of God? The answer is no, naturally. Beyond that... well, I’m a bit twisted around on the matter. Perhaps a Sending sends a wizard’s magic to join the soul? We are different than Muggles in some manner that transcends

the physical body, and I can't honestly say what happens to our magic when we die. Part of that comes down to whether we ourselves are magic or are simply using the magic around us as a tool, you know? Is it our magic at all? That's an entirely different question to struggle over, of course. The point, Harry, is that I can't say what it is exactly that a Sending *sends*. I know what I have seen in the act of a Sending, but as with almost anything, there's more afoot than we can capture with mere mortal eyes. Perhaps, Harry, what we make of a Sending is matter of one's own beliefs and faith? At the least, it is a funerary rite. It doesn't involve communing with spirits or demons or a pagan god, so - in my eyes at least - it doesn't conflict with that which I believe. At the most...? Who knows? I'm not privy to God's plan for the universe, only the basic elements that have been shared with us. What do *you* think?"

"Er... an honest answer?" said Harry.

The Reverend chuckled and said, "I lost you, didn't I? Ahh, well... these aren't simple matters, and I do tend to over-think on all matters temporal and spiritual. I didn't even enquire on what your beliefs might be, as I should have."

Harry shrugged. "My relations talked a good game, wrote their cheques to the church, went there sometimes - or at least they left the house for it; I suppose I can't really say whether they went or not. It was all a show for them, I think. It was like keeping up the garden: something they did for the neighbours more than anything. Things went all right for them anyway, even if they didn't really mean any of it. They took me to services one Christmas. I sang better than my cousin, so they didn't feed me for two days," he said.

The Reverend closed his eyes and let out a sigh. "Good heavens... hardly exemplars of Christian behaviour, were they? Now, this naturally raises the question of why bad things happen to those who are good, and good things to those who are bad. You've probably given that some thought on account of your circumstances. Well, I'm not here to ply you with religious tracts, and you're not here to listen to an old man's ramblings... well, not this old man, at least. I'll say this much to you: if you're ever plagued with questions such as these, my door is always open to you. I'm but a few miles from Hogwarts; Albus knows the way. As for today...? Albus isn't asking much of you, as I understand it. Follow along as best you can; I'll nudge you if it appears that you're in need of a good nudge; and allow yourself to be sad, to grieve over this. I have no idea how close you were to the young lady, but I do know she was in your house and your year. There's inevitably some loss on your part - even if it hasn't yet struck you. I understand she was your best friend's girl. He'll need your support, then, and he'll need it even more two weeks from now than he needs it today."

Harry was puzzled. "I'd think he needs it today," he said.

"Trust me on this," the Reverend assured him. "Today, everyone present is awash with the loss. Two weeks from now, people at a distance will have moved on. Even some of those closer to Miss Brown will have moved forward. Perhaps your friend will be one of those, or perhaps not. It's more difficult to grieve later, because people who are already over-and-done-with-it believe that everyone else should do the same. People sometimes begin to question whether a mourner is of healthy mind."

Harry thought on that for a long while. It was Dumbledore who brought him back to the present. “Come,” the Headmaster said, and Harry complied.

Dumbledore was resplendent in his ornate robes. They weren’t gaudy as was often his custom, but instead were almost regal. Harry’s robes bore the same trim but were otherwise a plain off-white colour. They were stiff and rather uncomfortable, in truth. The Headmaster had explained earlier that in this setting he was not Headmaster or Mugwump or Warlock, but Grand Sorcerer; as such, Harry was an Adept rather than Apprentice, and was to be clothed accordingly. The Reverend wore a robe similar to Harry’s, but also a silken stole that made him look more like a vicar than a wizard. Madam Marchbanks ambled along behind the Reverend. Last in their group was Tiberius Ogden, who was relaxed and seemed somehow comfortable with this place and circumstance.

A series of complex runic patterns were engraved into the earth within the stone circle. They began at a round raised platform situated in the centre, and extended outward in concentric circles that were joined by a spiralling line. The nearest runic circle to the platform was interrupted by four smaller circles at the compass points, each just large enough for one person to stand inside. The mourners began to assemble on the large runic circles. The surviving family members were led to that innermost circle: Lavender’s aunt, along with her husband and small children; two uncles who looked to be in late middle age; a ten-year-old girl who had turned out to be Lavender’s young sister; three elderly witches and a stooped wizard; and a very tall and very old wizard who was probably the patriarch that the Reverend had mentioned.

Harry followed the Headmaster toward the platform and then took his place inside the small circle that indicated West. Ogden, Marchbanks and the Reverend took up the other three. The remaining mourners followed; they assembled on the ever-larger runic circles but left clear the space around the spiralling line where it crossed each circle. Harry turned and realised that this was to allow room for the bier.

The bier was open, like a wheel-less cart with handles on its sides. Atop it was a human form fully draped by rune-adorned cloth. It was hard for Harry to accept the fact that bubbly, giggly, friendly Lavender Brown was reduced to that. Six people bore the weight: Ron, Neville, Parvati Patil, Mandy Brocklehurst, Ernie Macmillan, and – to his surprise – Hermione.

Harry had at first expected that the bier would simply be levitated into place rather than carried. He realised that there was something primal in watching the six wend along the spiralling line, coming into close contact with most of the mourners. There was something raw about their brief struggle to lift the bier atop the stone platform. There was something in the act that bound all those assembled more tightly than a mere charm or oath. When they were finished, his former year-mates joined the innermost circle along with Lavender’s family. Dumbledore stood behind the bier and folded his hands together – a simple movement that somehow conveyed a dignity Harry wondered if he could ever master.

The Headmaster began by saying, “We gather here to celebrate and honour the life of Miss Lavender Brown... to share in her magic and to rejoin it with those who have gone before her. It is a sad day indeed when a family loses its youngest so long before her time. Miss Brown’s parents are unable to be with us today as they are recuperating at St. Mungo’s Hospital. It is difficult for

most to imagine the depth of their loss, and I urge all of you to seek them out in the days and weeks to come, in order to convey your sympathies and to aid them in whatever fashion you are able. I have performed this ritual twenty-nine times for students of Hogwarts. It has been thirteen years since I have done this, and each time I hope that it is the last. It is a sad day when Hogwarts loses one of her own, one filled with promise for the future and now gone from us.

“Some gathered here tried most valiantly to save Miss Brown, and they may feel as though they have failed – that they did not try hard enough, did not do everything that could have been done. To those, I say that this is not your fault, and your efforts were not a failure. What you accomplished that evening was far beyond anything that could have been asked of you. Your actions show us all that humanity and compassion still live in our darkening world.

“Because Mr. Brown and Madam Brown are unable to join us, the family has asked that remembrances and testimonies be held until a gathering of celebration at a later time. It may be several weeks until such a gathering can be organised. As Headmaster of Hogwarts, I will allow leave to any student who wishes to attend.

“Madam Brown’s parents – Miss Brown’s grandparents – worship at St. Columba under the auspices of the Church of England. As such, I have asked my esteemed colleague and the vicar for St. Columba, the Reverend Doctor Oscar Pomfrey, to offer a blessing. Reverend?”

“We offer blessing for the life of Lavender Isadora Brown,” the Reverend began; “She was one of God’s children, and we ask intercession for her immortal soul...”

Harry felt a coldness in the pit of his stomach. This was Lavender Brown’s immortal soul he was talking about! Lavender – the girl who could be counted on to say something silly in the midst of tension, who doused bangers in some sort of absurdly hot sauce that her mother owled once a month, who painted her toenails red and gold before Quidditch matches, who had turned out to be surprisingly good for Ron. It was Lavender Brown... the girl who was dead because madmen thought nothing of attacking innocents.

“...oui vivis et regans in asecula saeculorum. Amen,” the Reverend finished. He drew his hand through the air in the form of a cross and added, “Requiem aeternam dona eis Domine.”

Several people present muttered something; some of the mutterings were in Latin, but he heard Hermione whisper, “And let perpetual light shine upon her.”

“May you rest in peace, dear girl,” the Reverend concluded.

“Thank you, Reverend Doctor Pomfrey,” said Dumbledore. He nodded to the Brown family and then turned his attention to the rest of those who were gathered. His hands rested on the edge of the bier. It looked almost as if he were standing before the ornate podium at the head of Hogwarts’ Great Hall, ready to share a few inscrutable words after the Welcoming Feast.

Dumbledore began, “Many assembled here have never before participated in a Sending. The Ritual of Sending dates back to the times before Hogwarts, to the days when there was no division

between wanded magic and what we now call the ‘old magicks’. In fact, this is one of only two rituals of old magic still publicly performed.

“I would ask those who have knowledge of this ritual to assist those who do not. I will first invoke the ritual. I will then call out each circle, one at a time, from outermost to innermost. When your circle is called, I ask that you place your left hand on the right shoulder of the person to your left; and your right hand on the right shoulder of the person in front of you. When all in your circle have done so, I will say an incantation and you will all repeat it after me. You may feel a moment of weakness, especially those of you who are still blessed by youth. This is actually a bit of wandless magic you will be performing today, and so you may feel a moment of weakness at the end of the incantation; this is particularly true for those of you who have not yet reached adulthood. Leave your hands in place, however.

“As the circles will grow smaller, you will reach a point when two or more of you are reaching forward to the same wizard or witch. That is normal, and do not be bothered by it. You may feel a small shock or observe blue flickers in the inner circles; this is perfectly normal and nothing to be going on about. Those in the innermost circle have already received instruction for their part in the ritual.” Harry relaxed and let his mind focus on the call and response of the ritual until Dumbledore abruptly jerked him to attention.

Dumbledore continued, “I will be assisted today by my adept, Mr. Harry Potter. Mr. Potter was a housemate of Miss Brown for five years. He is also a most extraordinary young wizard, and will add an unexpected element to the final incantation of the Sending, I am sure. Madam Pomfrey will take your place, Harry... come forward, would you?”

Harry’s feet felt as though they were stuck in place. He managed a stiff nod and trudged forward, nearly managing to stumble on the edge of the platform. Once he was beside Dumbledore, he placed his hands on the edge of the bier to match the Headmaster’s posture.

Dumbledore said very quietly, “There’s a good lad. Now, you will speak the olden incantation and I will follow with the English translation.”

“I’ve never done this! What if I bollix the incantations?” Harry whispered forcefully.

Dumbledore responded, “Nonsense, Harry. If you can drive off a hundred Dementors with a single charm, and can successfully place both Unplottable and Fidelius charms on your first attempts, then you can certainly do this. Old magicks – all magic, really – is less about the words and more about intent. The intent here is quite clear. This was your friend, Harry. You can do this for her. And, if all else fails, read it from the notes.” He then slipped a small card into Harry’s hand with the incantations on it, phonetically spelled out. Harry couldn’t help but give a small grin at that. Dumbledore nodded one at a time to the Reverend, Madam Marchbanks, Madam Pomfrey, and Mr. Ogden. He then raised his hands, and nodded to Harry. Harry held the card in his cupped right hand. Just as the first time he had read the ritual, he thought that the incantations were oddly goblin-like.

“Tama on meidan sisar... ole hyva ja vie hanet jaamaan taivaaseen... anna hanen loytaa rauhan

kunnes me liittyya hanen myohemmin... anna lohdata niita jotka ovat jaaneet taakse... parantaa haavat luotu kuoleman meidan sisar... karkoitus pimeydessä meilta kaikilta... jata taakse oleellisinta sisar niin etta han edelleen asuu muistomme,” he incanted.

Dumbledore followed, “This is our sister before us. Please take her to stay in the next life. Let her find peace until we someday join her there. Give comfort to those who are left here. Heal the wounds created by her death. Banish the darkness from all of us. Leave behind the essence of our sister, so that she will live on in our memories.” The four members of the old-old crowd then repeated Harry’s incantation as one.

Harry raised his own hands – somehow it felt as though it was the right thing to do – and called out, “Ensimmäinen ympyra!”

Dumbledore said, “The first circle – that would be the outermost circle...? Now, Harry is going to say the olden incantation here, and then you’re going to repeat after him. If it doesn’t want to come off your tongue, then the English equivalent is ‘send her on’ – that will do in a pinch. Harry, if you would...?”

“Laheta hanen edelleen!” incanted Harry.

He heard mostly the incantation repeated back, with a smattering of English around the edges. He saw... something. It wasn’t exactly a flash of light, but the light within the circle seemed somehow changed.

“Toinen ympyra!” he went on.

Dumbledore said, “The second circle... if you would...?”

Harry once again said, “Laheta hanen edelleen!” and awaited the response. This time it was more something heard than something seen... a humming, buzzing thing... in truth, as much felt as heard. He pressed on: first “Kolmas ympyra!” and then “Neljas ympyra!” Each time, there was a little more of *something*, still lingering just outside his senses. It was part feeling, part sound, part sight, and even part smell... like the scent of a lightning strike, he thought. Now they were close to the platform, and he at last saw the bluish flickering that the Headmaster had described.

“Ympyra perheja todistajia!” he called out.

Dumbledore said, “It is time for the circle of family and witnesses. Come forward and place your hands on the acolytes in as equal numbers as you can... five each to Madam Marchbanks and Mr. Ogden, and four each to Madam Pomfrey and Reverend Pomfrey, I should think.”

Harry looked up from the card and met Hermione’s eyes. There was a sense of wonder there, and something else that he could feel... recognition of some sort? Her hands were alive with bluebell flame and her hair flickered and shifted as if it were a living thing. She placed her hands on Reverend Pomfrey’s shoulders but her eyes never left Harry.

“Ympyra pappisluettelo!” Harry called.

Dumbledore intoned, “The circle of acolytes.”

Lavender’s family and her friends who had borne the bier all returned, “Laheta hanen edelleen!”

Marchbanks, Ogden, and the two Pomfreys appeared to burst into blue flame, at first so intense that it made Harry blink back tears. The four moved slowly to the platform, their steps in unison. Harry found himself ever-so-slightly frightened but he mercilessly shoved the fear down and then forced it out.

This time he was not the one to deliver the incantation. Instead, as the four placed their hands on Harry’s shoulders, they called out, “Lahettajan!”

Dumbledore said, “The Sender,” and a column of blue flame and light erupted from the platform. Harry felt the hands leave his shoulder more quickly than he had expected. He looked down at his own hands, which nearly shone blue. For an instant he felt as though he could do anything... but he didn’t want to do anything. This power, this gathering of magic, whatever it was – the point was for him to send his friend to wherever she was going next.

Dumbledore had never described anything like this to him. He felt almost outside of himself, almost as though his body was acting of its own accord. He knew that he was supposed to place his hands on the bier and call out the final incantation. His arms reached down and he gathered up Lavender, still wrapped in the sheet. Her covered head came to rest against his shoulder. There was a feeling within him that was so powerful, he didn’t know what to do with it: cry, scream, laugh...

Instead, he said in a gentle voice that somehow carried over the light and the flames, “Lahettaa.”

The blue light spread from his hands and his arms and dappled across the white sheet, and grew more and more intense until Harry had to close his eyes. There was a rushing sound and he forced his eyes open again. There was no sheet to be seen, only a cloud of light in his arms and a sense of something familiar. The light shot free of his arms and skyward along with the column of light, and a wind blew outward from the platform and caused many of the mourners to take a step back.

Harry found himself panting in shock. The only remaining trace of the blue flames or light was on his hands, which were still alive with bluebell flickers. He heard Mr. Ogden say, “My word...” but didn’t respond.

His legs moved of their own accord toward the patriarch of the Browns. He clasped the old wizard’s hands and somehow remembered to incant, “Mita meidan sisar jatti jalkeensa annetaan teille.” He had no idea where the card had gone.

In the background, Dumbledore said, “What our sister left behind is given to you.”

The old wizard bowed his head and said, “Han on lahetettava parempi paikka”; it wasn’t

something Dumbledore had taught him, or ever mentioned at all. Some of the blue flickers spread from Harry's hands to the patriarch. The old man didn't move, but tears ran down his face.

Harry moved on, first to each of the family members and then to his friends who had carried Lavender to the platform, and repeated the same incantation. Each reacted differently, but all the reactions were powerful and raw. The whole thing was beginning to erode Harry's control over his passive legilimency; he was awash in emotions not his own, but he couldn't yet stop and do one of Covelli's exercises.

Hermione was the last. Her hands were sweating – oddly, they felt warmer than the flames. The flickering began to creep onto her hands before he managed to say a word. Her emotions were overwhelming, too potent for him to comprehend. He somehow bit out the incantation.

She looked into his eyes and said, “She is sent to a better place.”

“W-what?” he managed.

“She is sent to a better place: that's what Lavender's great-grandfather said to you,” she explained.

The flames faded away from both their hands, and Harry stumbled forward. Hermione kept him from falling, and Neville was there in a trice. Ernie Macmillan immediately conjured a chair and helped Neville lower Harry into it.

Neville said in a tentative way, “Harry, I've been to these before. This isn't what happens. It... it's not like this. I mean, the whole blue flickering and the disappearing bit, yeah, but not the... not the lights and the wind and, and the *whoosh* ! And *definitely* not the afterward... I mean, only really close family are supposed to feel that sort of thing. After they're finished... with the rest of us, it's just a lot of handshaking, more or less...”

“Lavender and me... we were close, of course, family gatherings and all that, but... I didn't realise...” Ernie murmured.

Parvati's hands were shuddering. She knelt before Harry's chair, and began, “I don't... I... I don't know what to say... there are no words...” With that, she began to sob uncontrollably and pitched forward into Harry's arms. Not knowing what else to do, he patted her on the back and stroked her hair until Padma made her way to the front. Some words were exchanged – Harry was still so stunned that he barely noticed – and then Parvati left, still sobbing, with her sister and a clearly shaken Mandy Brocklehurst.

Harry looked at his hands for a long time. When he looked up, he found himself facing the senior member of the Brown family. “Can I help you, sir?” he managed to say.

The man's lips quirked and he gave the slightest of snorts. “I think you've done that already, Lord Potter. May I sit?” he asked.

“Of course,” Harry said, and he gave a negligent wave of his hand; a slightly worn armchair appeared next to him.

“Good gracious, young man... this has turned out to be a very unexpected day, indeed,” the man said.

“Have to agree with you there,” Harry murmured, “and please call me Harry... not very comfortable with this ‘Lord’ business.”

“My name is Bertram Blake, and I am the Head of the House of Blake. Lavender was my great-granddaughter,” he introduced himself.

“I’m sorry for your loss, sir,” said Harry.

The old man bowed his head slightly and said, “Thank you, Harry. You know, one of the great weaknesses of the Ritual of Sending is that the Sender cannot himself partake of the ritual. You were the bearer of my great-granddaughter’s essence but not its recipient. Have you ever attended a Sending, or have you only conducted them?”

“This was a first for me all the way around,” Harry said.

Mr. Blake’s eyebrows quickly ascended. “Do you mean to say that you’ve not only never attended but have never before *conducted* a Sending?”

Harry said, “Until the Headmaster called me to the front, I didn’t know I was going to do it today, either.”

Mr. Blake leant forward in his chair and said, “Perhaps I should explain to you why your friends were reacting so strongly?”

Harry managed a small smile and observed, “It’s pretty clear things didn’t turn out as expected.”

Mr. Blake nodded and explained, “It is customary for those very close to the one who has passed on – spouses, parents, children, the closest of friends – to feel a... modest sense of closeness upon clasping hands with the Sender. I recall being quite taken aback at my wife’s sending. It was as though she was near, almost as if there was a hand upon my shoulder. Now, I am rather fond of my two great-granddaughters; our family joins together for the solstices and such. I would like to think that I was close to Lavender, but the truth is that I have seen her no more than a dozen times since she left for Hogwarts. Mr. Potter... Harry... I know how she thought of me... I know how worried she was for her parents, how worried she *still is* for them... I know that she is worried about her sister attending Hogwarts next year. In eleven decades, I have had no experience by which to compare. It is... it is as though you were a messenger from the grave.”

“I don’t know what to say,” Harry offered.

Mr. Blake took a long, slow breath before he said, “You are still radiating magic, even now. I am somewhat sensitive to that sort of thing, but still... it’s remarkable. You have the magical

presence of Mr. Ogden over there, of Madam Marchbanks, of something akin to Dumbledore – at sixteen! That is why Dumbledore and his company are running about right now, Obliviating nearly everyone who stood beyond the inner circle. They’ll be intercepting your other friends and returning them here, so that we can decide what to do about this.”

“Obliviating? But –”

Mr. Blake cut him off, “But nothing, young man. No one else must know what happened here today – it’s too dangerous. I imagine you don’t care for this ‘Chosen One’ label; you don’t strike me as being that full of yourself. Still, after what I’ve seen here, it’s hard to maintain any doubts. You’ll be the one to face Him, and I’m inclined to think that you’ll win. He has enough advantages, and we’re not going to be the ones to give Him still another. No one must know.”

Ron looked to be completely devastated, and given the bit of a deathwish his friend carried, Harry was glad to see that Hermione was looking after him. Harry looked around the circle more intently and realised that Mr. Blake was right. This wasn’t the sort of experience a person would be able to keep quiet, and there was no telling what Voldemort would make of it were he to find out.

“There has to be a way for everyone to hold on... you know, to what Lavender had to say... it wouldn’t be right to take that away. She gave that to all of you, right?” Harry said.

Mr. Blake gave a genuine smile. He said, “That’s a very honourable thing for you to offer. Wizards like Dumbledore or Tiberius Ogden can work some very selective magic. For that matter, I suspect you could manage it with a little training. Why don’t we discuss this with Dumbledore? Are you able to stand?”

“Have to do it eventually,” Harry sighed.

Hermione dashed over to help him, with Ron in tow. Ron tried to say something but broke down before he could get it out. Harry knew that this whole experience had to be awfully hard on his friend, but he hadn’t counted on ending up in a fierce embrace with him.

“This can’t be for nothing – it just can’t be,” Ron managed to bite out.

“It won’t be, Ron. Look... we’ll talk about it later,” Harry said, even though it was likely that Ron, Hermione and probably everyone else save Dumbledore and he would soon remember a very different experience.

* * * * *

MINISTRY OFFICIAL SLAIN

Long-time Transport official killed near pub

Jonathon Runcorn, assistant director of the Department of Magical Transportation and former professional Quidditch player, was killed last evening in Wigtown. The body was found just steps from The Biting Fairy, a popular pub for sportsmen in the area. Mr. Runcorn is believed to have left the pub shortly prior to closing. Some witnesses reported that he left in the company of a woman, but others disputed that claim.

In addition to evidence of one or more curses, an unnamed source from within the DMLE told this reporter that Mr. Runcorn had been stabbed several times with a large blade. “Unlike Ludo Bagman's death, which may have been caused by a Muggle, a wizard was definitely involved here,” said the unnamed source.

Mr. Runcorn had overseen the Office for Apparation since 1988. He was part of the team that developed the Ministry's transportation tracking system in the 1970s, which was used to great effect by Aurors during the war against You-Know-Who and which remains a powerful tool for the DMLE to maintain order. A reserve chaser for the Wigtown Wanderers during their title runs in the 1960s, Mr. Runcorn was a lifelong resident of the area. He was a member of the Board of Overseers for St. Mungo's Hospital from 1982 through 1994 as well as the chief organizer for the Hospital's various development schemes throughout the 1980s, most notably the two expansions funded by the now-disgraced Mr. Lucius Malfoy. Mr. Runcorn's ties to Mr. Malfoy in the 1970s came under investigation in 1982, but were ultimately judged to be legitimate.

Mr. Runcorn leaves behind a wife and three children, the youngest of whom is an upper-form student at Hogwarts. In lieu of flowers or other commemorations, the family requests that mourners contribute to the St. Mungo's Fund for Sporting Injuries.

- the *Daily Prophet* , January 4, 1997

* * * * *

January 16, 1997

Harry quietly took a seat at the back of the History of Magic classroom. Adrian Pucey stood at the lectern and surveyed the room. The school's prefects and Quidditch captains trickled in. Some tried to sit at the rear but Pucey glared at them until they joined their fellows in the front. The group sat in silence and the Head Boy continued to wait. Shortly, the six seventh-years who had been sixth-year prefects entered as a group.

“Let's come to order. I know this was on short notice, so thank you for attending,” Pucey began.

Morag McDougal raised her hand and said, “This is about Cho, isn't it?”

Pucey closed his eyes for a moment before he said, “That's mostly it, yeah. Look... I'm as full of myself as the next bloke -”

“Got that in one,” said Rob Cadwallader – the seventh-year Hufflepuff on the duelling team. Pucey managed a small smile, and Harry recognised that Cadwallader had neatly lowered the tension in the room.

“Thanks for agreeing with me so quickly,” the Head Boy said; “Here's the thing: Cho... well, she's gone now and I... what I mean to say is that I'm not so thick as to think I can manage this on my own...”

Beatrice Kennewick, Pucey's year-mate in Slytherin, said matter-of-factly, “We need to decide what to do about a Head Girl, then.” Pucey said nothing but gave a sharp nod.

Alyce Tilton, the other seventh-year Hufflepuff, broke the long silence that followed. “Honestly, I was relieved not to be appointed,” she admitted; “It's enough just keeping up with class work and revising for the NEWTs. I've even quit Gobstones.”

Katie Bell, the third of the seventh-year girls, said, “I have a problem with the idea of replacing Cho. We weren't mates or anything like that, but she was named Head Girl for a reason. I won't take her place, and I don't think anyone should. It just seems... I don't know – disrespectful?”

“I can't argue with that,” Kennewick said; “As much as I'd like to list that title on my propers, I don't want it because someone died. It's unseemly. Still, that leaves Pucey with twice the work.”

“Can we divide it up?” Katie offered.

“I'll take on a third of it, but not half,” Kennewick returned.

“You're asking if I'll take on a third of the hours? And the same for patrols?” Tilton asked.

“Scheduling patrols could be sticky,” Katie admitted.

Pucey started to pace across the front of the room. “Everyone will have to step up a bit. You don't realise how much of a commitment the Headship is until you're in the job a while,” he said.

“I'll take some patrols,” Cadwallader offered.

“I'll do the same,” said Kenneth Bennet, Cho's Ravenclaw counterpart. He added, “I appreciate everyone honouring Cho this way. It'll mean a lot to our House. I think... I think her family will be pleased.”

Several pairs of eyes bored into Cormac McClaggan, Katie's fellow seventh-year Gryffindor. “What?” he finally snapped.

“We'll just appoint seventh-year prefects – easy enough, as we're already trained in,” Katie said.

“That is the sensible way to go,” Kennewick agreed.

“I put in my two years,” McClaggan protested.

“Bloody hell, McClaggan – it's one patrol a week, and the girls are doing the real work. It's time for you to man up,” Cadwallader snapped at him.

“Fine. One patrol a week, and that's all,” McClaggan fumed.

“We should vote on this,” Pucey said.

“Make a motion, then,” said Kennewick.

Pucey nodded and declared, “I move that last year's sixth-year prefects be named seventh-year prefects for the remainder of this year, and that the seventh-year girls will divide Cho's office hours. All those in favour, signify by saying 'Aye'.” He received a chorus of 'Aye's.

Bennet stood and added, “I move that we affirm Cho Chang as Head Girl for the whole of the '96 and '97 school terms.”

Pucey's jaw twitched, although Harry doubted most would have caught it. He cleared his throat and said, “All those in favour...?” There was another chorus of 'Aye's.

“I have a good hand. Why don't I write it up as a proclamation that we can all sign? It's something we can give to Cho's family,” McDougal said.

Pucey nodded to her; Harry was painfully aware how much effort the Head Boy was expending to remain composed. “I'll report our decisions to the Headmaster,” Pucey announced.

“Bell and Tilton and I will do it,” Kennewick countered; “That way the Headmaster will know we're committed to this. It also affirms the proclamation. We should have the Headmaster and Heads of House sign it as well – it would be a nice touch.”

“Do it,” Pucey said immediately.

Ron, who was seated with the other Quidditch captains, stood up. “Did you say there was more, Pucey?” he asked.

Pucey shook himself as though he was trying to wake up from an unpleasant dream. He said, “Right... right... the Headmaster asked me for any suggestions I might have regarding student security, given everything that's happened. I've already given him my own recommendations. If you have any to offer, get them to me and I'll pass them along. That's it.” He headed back to the lectern and shuffled some papers as though the meeting was at an end.

McClaggan asked, “What did you recommend, then?” Pucey stopped moving. Harry saw that his shoulders rose and tightened, and he could feel a rise of anger.

“My recommendations?” Pucey confirmed.

“Yeah, I think we have a right to know what you told the Old Man,” McClaggan blustered.

The papers in Pucey's hands crumpled under his grasp. He snarled, “Sure, Cormac, I'll tell you exactly what I had to say -”

Kennewick stood immediately, her hands clasped behind her back. She said, “Pucey... Adrian... it's no secret how close you were to Chang. Everyone feels badly for you and I can scarcely imagine how angry you must be. So, I think everyone here would guess that your recommendations were... *harsh* . I recommend that we take a few weeks to let matters cool and think about what steps could be taken to improve security, as well as how we could put them into place. We should schedule another meeting in February, to assemble a proposal that comes from all of us.”

“Let's give it some time,” Katie said gently.

Pucey pounded his fist hard against the top of the lectern. “There were people at the First of Term Feast who were smiling when the Headmaster mentioned Hogsmeade – they were smiling! My family's home was burnt to ashes over the break. There's no room for neutrality anymore – we are at *war* ,” he snarled.

“I understand that, Adrian, but going about this in anger could encourage the worst sort of behaviour, especially between the houses,” Tilton said.

Cadwallader turned in his seat and asked, “Do you have any thoughts on this, Potter?” It was clear that most of the prefects hadn't seen Harry, as they turned en masse to face him.

Harry took a few moments to think before he said, “I think Kennewick has the right idea. Pucey, I know how you feel about this. Ron's house was sacked over the summer. At least a dozen students lost parts of their families over the break, and...” He looked to Ron and finished, “Cho isn't the only one who died.”

“Something needs to be done about it,” Pucey said firmly.

“I agree,” Harry returned, “but if we're going hunting, let's do it with clear heads, right?”

Cadwallader stood and said, “Until the next meeting, I'd appreciate it if everyone would keep this quiet.” He faced Pucey and added, “The last thing we want is for you to be under siege in your own common room.”

“Let them come,” Pucey said coldly.

Harry shook his head and said, “Rob's right on this. If we start talking about improving security, the first thought in everyone's heads will be that we're in immediate danger. If I hear any of this being spread around – and especially anything that suggests the Head Boy's feelings on the matter – then I'll figure out who's responsible and pay a visit. You won't enjoy it.”

“Aye-aye, sir,” McClaggan said.

Katie smacked him hard on the chest and snapped, “Piss off, Cormac.”

“All those in favour of Cormac pissing off...?” Kennewick asked.

Pucey shook his head, but a smirk was blossoming on his face. He said, “Thank you all; we're adjourned.”

Harry walked down the far aisle toward the front of the classroom. “Ron, Pucey, McDougal, Zabini, Cadwallader: would you stay for a moment, please?” he called out.

As soon as the rest had filed out, Harry spelled shut the doors and windows, checked the room for Extendable Ears and other listening spells and tricks, and forced the paintings out of their frames.

Pucey sat against the edge of the professor's desk and crossed his arms. He said, “That's a lot of trouble for a simple discussion. I've never even seen half of what you just cast. What's this about, then?”

Harry took a seat atop one of the front row desks. “I asked all of you to stay behind because you're not only prefects but members of the Duelling Team. You're smart, you're capable, and you're leaders.”

“I don't know if I'd go that far,” Zabini said quietly.

“Bollocks – people look to you, they follow your opinions. When they don't follow your opinions, they stay clear of you. You and Goyle and maybe Greengrass look to me like the neutrals in your year, and Goyle's only able to stay neutral because Pucey's standing behind him,” Harry returned.

Cadwallader said, “That sounds about right.”

“You've kept your eyes open this year, Potter,” said Pucey; “Now get to the point.”

Harry said, “We've a third thing in common: each of us was on the side of the Aurors in Hogsmeade – and I saw you, Zabini, so don't bother denying it.”

Ron nodded. He said, “I saw you too, Zabini... it was a good thing you did.”

“Is the world to end shortly? Weasley speaks well of a Slytherin?” Zabini said in an exaggerated posh tone.

Ron's jaw clenched for a moment but then he slowly released his breath and shook his head. “There's not four sides in this, Zabini,” he said; “You were on the right side of things, and if you're on the right side of things, then your house doesn't matter for much... 'cept for Quidditch, of course. That's completely different.”

Zabini muttered, “If that doesn't confirm we're at war, I suppose nothing else will.”

Cadwallader rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “There might not be four sides in this, but I have the feeling there are more than two,” he said.

“You're right; there are at least three,” McDougal agreed.

“It's not as though you're recruiting for the Ministry, Potter, given how often they've shat on you,” Cadwallader continued.

“I'm *no one's* minion, Potter,” warned Zabini.

Harry gawked at him. “Minions? Voldemort has minions, or slaves, or whatever. I want allies who can think for themselves, thank you,” he said.

Ron gazed sharply at each of the others in turn. He said, “Between the Duelling Club and patrolling, you four can get closer to Harry than almost anyone else. For me, there's one of your security issues, Pucey. Now, I'm with Harry; I figure everyone knows that. For the rest of you, you're either with him or against him, and you'll need to make up your minds right quick.”

“I wouldn't go that far just yet,” Harry objected.

“Nor would I,” Zabini said.

“What's it mean to be 'with Harry'? It means being against You-Know-Who – that's given – but what else? No offense, but most of us don't leap off cliffs without at least a peek at the bottom,” said Cadwallader.

“And none of us jump off a bloody motorbike in mid-air,” Pucey added; “I'd say old Gryffindor himself thought you were off your nut that day, Weasley.”

Ron snorted at that. “Point,” he acknowledged.

Harry said, “I'd be happy for now just knowing that none of you are planning to run me through at the next Duelling Club.”

“Holding the wrong end of a sword seems to be catching on late,” noted Zabini; “Ludo Bagman, that Runcorn fellow, and I've heard there was another.”

Pucey said to Harry, “My father told you that our family would be on your side of things. He said it had the strength of an oath, and I've no interest in finding out what would happen to an oathbreaker. So even if I didn't already see things your way, you've nothing to fear from me.”

“You're going against the Dark Lord, then?” Zabini asked him.

“I'm certainly not going *for* him,” Pucey shot back; “Who benefits from having him in charge? You? Me? Hogwarts? Britain? The only reason to support him is to keep from being killed, and what's the survival outlook for a Death Eater? You'd have to be mad to join him of your own free will.”

“A fair number among Slytherin House would disagree with you...” Zabini pointed out.

McDougal cut in, “...and they would be wrong. Malfoy's dad? On the run and being hunted. The husband and wife... Lestrage – what about them? On the run and being hunted. The ones who went after Granger? Half a dozen dead. The ones at Hogsmeade? Dead or in jail. So why would any thinking person join them?”

“The Dark Lord *died* and he's back again. Thinking people join him because they don't believe he can be defeated,” said Zabini.

Harry's voice cut through the room like the sharpest blade: “He came after me and I *didn't* die. No one is unbeatable.”

Zabini pursed his lips and then said, “That's what I've been waiting to hear you say.”

Pucey asked Cadwallader, “Where do you stand in all of this?”

“I'm barely a half-blood *and* I'm a Hufflepuff,” Cadwallader said; “If the world's ever in You-Know-Who's hands, I'm probably better off dead.”

McDougal turned to Harry and asked bluntly, “What are your goals in all of this?”

Harry looked at her like she'd just grown a second head. “To get rid of Voldemort, of course,” he said. Inwardly he was pleased that only Zabini gave a serious flinch at the infamous name.

She rolled her eyes and said, “That's not hard to figure, Potter. What are your goals for later? So You-Know-Who is gone – now what?”

Harry stammered, “Er... uh... goals, is it? Um... the thing of it is...”

“*Gryffindors* ...” Zabini sighed.

“Oi! Getting rid of Voldemort isn't a small goal,” Harry said defensively.

“It's a fair question, Harry,” Ron admitted; “Think about what the Doctor's been telling us in History: Voldemort, Grindelwald, Trampuso, Racine, and on and on. Maybe the Headmaster and the Marquis and the rest never stopped to think about the afterward? How do you keep it from happening again, right?”

“Unexpectedly clever of you, Weasley,” Pucey said.

Ron shrugged. “The rest of this planning business is up to someone else,” he said.

“Except for Quidditch,” said Harry.

Pucey said, “That's something else entirely.”

“The best plans do avoid upsetting Quidditch,” Zabini agreed.

“Boys ,” McDougal sighed.

* * * * *

TIBERIUS OGDEN, 1828 – 1997

Dies in fall at home

Former Wizengamot Chief Warlock

Contributed to the defeat of two Dark Lords

DMLE does not suspect foul play

Mr. Tiberius Odgen died yesterday at his Cornwall home, in what Ministry officials described as a freak accident. According to Miss Michelle Wood, an Auror speaking on behalf of the DMLE: “Mr. Ogden appears to have lost his balance at the top of the stairs leading from the second floor to the first floor of his home. The stairs turn at a 90-degree angle for the final three steps, and thus the fall resulted in Mr. Ogden striking the back of his head against a wall and bending his neck to an extreme angle.” When pressed, Miss Wood indicated that Mr. Ogden had not consumed any spirits prior to the fall.

Head Auror Rufus Scrimgeour said at the scene that there is no suspicion of foul play. “It wasn't entirely out of character when compared to other slips and falls that I've seen. [Mr. Ogden] didn't make any clear attempt to prevent the fall, but he may have struck his head before reaching the bottom. It was late in the evening, the wall sconces weren't lit, and the gentleman was very old as well as being on the stout side. On the whole, it appears to be an unfortunate accident. Elder Ogden was a good man and firmly on the side of law and order. His friends and family have the Department's deepest sympathies,” Mr. Scrimgeour said.

When contacted for comment, Office of the Minister's spokeswizard Percy Weasley lauded Mr. Ogden's long service to the Ministry. Mr. Weasley went on to say: “[Mr. Ogden] went well above and beyond the call in providing me with assistance on several occasions. In the last few hours, hundreds of current and former Ministry employees have offered similar stories. Mr. Ogden will be greatly missed by those wizards whose lives he touched, and the British wizarding community is diminished by his loss.” Minister Fudge was on an official mission to Egypt and could not be reached for further comment.

Mr. Ogden, 168, served for nearly ninety years on the Wizengamot, to include three terms as Chief Warlock in the 1920s and 1930s. He resigned his seat upon the appointment by Minister Fudge of Madam Delores Umbridge to the position of High Inquisitor at Hogwarts School in 1995.

Madam Umbridge left the school under a cloud of accusations last year, but Mr. Ogden did not seek reappointment.

In addition to his long service on the court, Mr. Ogden was a member of the Auror corps from 1853 to 1882; an examination author and reviewer at the Wizarding Examinations Authority for many years; a skilled duellist who won the Mixed World Championship in 1908; and a member of the Hogwarts School faculty from 1910 through 1924. He is known to have assisted Prof. Albus Dumbledore in efforts against the Dark Lords Grindelwald and Trampuso. Recently, he was serving as a consultant to Prof. Dumbledore, reputedly on matters relating to spell research.

Mr. Ogden's wife, Madam Elena Ogden nee Irkutsk, passed on in 1937. The Ogden's remaining two children and most of their numerous grandchildren, great-grandchildren and great-great-grandchildren reside in America.

– the *Daily Prophet* , February 9, 1997

* * * * *

February 10, 1997

Harry knocked on the outer door to the Marquis' south tower suite at ten in the morning, precisely as asked; the Marquis had been quite specific, which was unusual enough for Harry to take notice. He continued to knock periodically for several minutes and was ready to summon a house-elf for assistance, when the lock clicked and the door slid open.

Mme. de Flandres ushered him in. She was dressed in a casual robe and Muggle clothing; her face was drawn and her eyes were tired. “The Marquis wishes for you to be seated in the chair immediately adjacent to his study,” she said mechanically.

“Are you all right?” Harry asked.

She said, “It was a long night.”

Harry followed her into the sitting room and stopped beside the entrance to the Marquis' study. “Is there anything I should know about this chair?” he asked. “It's an excellent place for listening without being seen,” she said, and then promptly retired to her own chambers.

Shortly thereafter, Croaker let himself into the tower, strode past Harry without so much as a glance and gave a sharp knock on the study door. The door smoothly opened of its own accord.

“Egad, Alex... you're well on your way to getting pissed, aren't you?” Croaker said.

“Il y a une excellente raison pour laquelle je bois, mon ami,” the Marquis said with a slight slur.

“It's hard to argue with that,” Croaker agreed; “What are you drinking – Ogden's?”

“Feh! I would not allow that to touch my lips if it were the only liquid at the centre of the Sahara,” the Marquis spat.

“Well, whatever it is, I'll gladly partake,” said Croaker.

The Marquis said, “When in Scotland, I say that a man should do as the Scottish have done for centuries. This is Macallan, my friend – a 1926, matured in Spanish oak for sixty years. The palate, it is dark and complicated... fitting for the times, yes?”

“I say! Yes, I'll most gladly partake, indeed,” Croaker said; “Shall we wait for Albus?”

“Absolutely not,” said the Marquis, and Croaker let forth a deep chuckle. The two men went quiet for several minutes – presumably to sip at their Scotch – before Dumbledore strode purposefully into the Marquis' suite.

He, too, walked directly past Harry without a glance or a slowed pace. “Drinking without me, gentlemen? I do hope you haven't been toasting already?” the Headmaster said.

“We were... ehh... *sampling* , Albus. A glass awaits you,” said the Marquis.

There was a pause followed by a satisfied sigh and an “Oh, my...” from Dumbledore.

“Quite,” Croaker added.

The door to the study closed itself tightly and Harry wondered how he was supposed to bide his time – or for that matter, why the Marquis had asked him to come when he was presumably unwelcome.

“Gentlemen, let us toast to the memory of our friend and colleague,” Dumbledore said. Harry nearly fell from his chair; it sounded as if the Headmaster was seated immediately to his left.

“You're up first, Alex – you're not only the oldest but you've a better way with words,” said Croaker.

“I'm an able speaker, thank you kindly!” Dumbledore cut in.

“Alex has that lord-of-the-manor quality that you lack,” Croaker returned.

The Marquis said grandly, “Thank you, Monsieur Croaker; I have always held you in the highest esteem. You are a man amongst men, a true lion –”

“I am assuredly *not* a lion,” Croaker sniffed.

“Then you are, eh, a snake in the grass?” the Marquis said teasingly.

“Perhaps Albus should give the first toast, after all?” said Croaker.

“There is not the slightest doubt in my mind, my old friend Algernon, that you need more of this magnificent Scotch,” the Marquis interjected

“The floor is yours, Alex,” Croaker said quickly, and all three men laughed lightly.

The Marquis then said, “To Tiberius, who lived up to the glory of his name in the eyes of those privileged to know him... scholar, judge, husband, father, warrior, colleague and – above all – honoured friend. Je vous salue!”

“Well said,” Dumbledore declared.

“But of course,” returned the Marquis; Harry could almost hear his Gallic shrug.

In the midst of a series of toasts, Harry heard the strangest sound. It was almost impossible to describe: a beeping, sizzling, echoing, droning thing that made him work his jaw from side to side. If it had gone on for another half-second, he doubted that he could have stayed quiet.

“Bloody sodding *hell*,” Croaker ground out; “I *hate* it when you do that!”

“Good evening, Marcus,” said Dumbledore. “I take it that Marcus' arrival was anticipated, Alex?”

The Marquis said, “Oui, our friend Marcus was able to share the why, but found that he could not share the reason.”

“Why can't you ever give us anything useful?” snapped Croaker.

“Now, Algie, that's both unfair and inaccurate” Dumbledore countered; “You know well that Marcus has saved at least three lives that would not otherwise have been saved –”

“– And that shouldn't even be possible. What I wouldn't give to drag you and Potter back to the Department for a week, Detheridge,” Croaker grouched.

“Don't worry, Croaker, you won't,” Detheridge said.

“You don't know that for certain, boy. Things have already changed,” Croaker fired back.

“I know you won't do it, because you wouldn't survive the attempt, and I'm fairly certain you won't die at my hand,” Detheridge said with an almost-smug tone.

Croaker started, “You shouldn't even be allowed here. Albus should have –”

“*Enough*,” Dumbledore said irritably; “I've made my decisions. If you can't abide by that, Algie, then you can find the front door without my aid!”

“Please, my friends – please! If you needed further proofs, you need only listen to the words coming forth from your mouths!” the Marquis said forcefully; he continued, “Marcus, I will ask if you have seen the information from the, eh, law enforcement?”

“I've seen the completed report. Scrimgeour's off the mark,” said Detheridge.

“Some more of your special information?” Croaker sniffed.

“No, just a dose of Yankee common sense. You might try some, Croaker – it'd do you some good,” Detheridge returned.

Dumbledore growled, “I said '*enough*'! Now, Marcus, all of us are on edge. Continue your report without the provocations.”

Detheridge began, “The DMLE's going to sign off on it as an accident. The physical evidence tells another story, though. It's thirteen steps from the top of Ogden's stairs to the first landing, and then three more steps off to the right that lead to the hallway below. First of all, he was turned almost 180 degrees from the stairwell when he fell –”

“Where's your proof of that?” Croaker interrupted.

Detheridge said, “The location of the head injury is your proof. For him to be facing forward and end up with that injury, he would have had to cartwheel. If he'd done that – which isn't likely for a man Ogden's size – then he would have broken his neck by either compression from the top or rapid movement forward. Instead, his neck was broken by rotation. Look, Croaker, you don't have to like me, but I was a Marshall for thirty-two years, and half of that in a city a lot larger than London and with three times as many wizards as all of England. I've seen my share of both accidents and covered-up homicides.”

Croaker said with a sigh, “I'll concede to your experience. I take it you think this was the latter then: that someone killed Tiberius and tried to conceal the fact?”

“I think it's a possibility, the most likely one given the evidence,” said Detheridge. “All right, so Ogden somehow fell down thirteen stairs with only an impact injury at the back of his head, supposedly from the collision with the wall; and a broken neck, also supposedly from the collision. He was about five-feet-nine and, what, two-seventy? A man that size doesn't fall through the air to the bottom of an enclosed stairwell; he bounces. There should have been signs of impact elsewhere on him. I would have expected bruises on the upper back if he fell backward, or maybe on the elbows; they could even be broken by it. If he went forward and didn't make any defensive moves, then he should have struck his shoulders or face, or both. The steps were splintered in places, so he should have impacted against some of those. The splintered areas were intact and he had no cuts or scratches.”

The Marquis asked, “There was no magic used against him, yes?”

“Were there any footprints? Hand or finger prints of any sort?” Dumbledore asked immediately

after.

“None of the above,” said Detheridge, “and it gets better. As far as I could tell, the impact in the wall at the bottom didn't match with Ogden's head injury. It was too deep and too narrow. But the most interesting thing that I saw at the scene –”

“At the scene? How did you manage that?” asked Croaker.

Detheridge said, “It's all in the timing. Now then, I found a bit of sawdust on one of the steps. A quick Reparo, and it was obvious that someone had used sandpaper to remove a boot scuff.”

“Sandpaper?” Croaker asked.

“It's a roughened paper that non-magicals use to rub away blemishes in wood or plaster. If a person needed to do that without leaving evidence of magic, sandpaper would be the obvious choice,” explained Detheridge. “There were also two different types of plaster flakes at the bottom of the stairs.”

“So, Marcus, you have the theory of the crime. Enlighten us, my friend,” the Marquis said.

“All right... Ogden was at the top of the stairs when he was surprised from behind. The perp twisted his head hard enough to break his neck, then grabbed him – probably by the underarms – and threw him down the stairs. Ogden's head struck the wall, but not hard enough to throw off an investigator. So, the perp –”

“Ehh, 'perp'? What is 'perp'?” asked the Marquis.

“Sorry... perp means 'perpetrator',” Detheridge explained.

“Ahh, yes. Do go on, my friend. I find myself both repelled and fascinated,” the Marquis said.

“Right, so the perp gave the wall a second blow – probably with a gloved fist or elbow, to keep from leaving plaster footprints. It was a deep blow, enough to break loose both the surface plaster and a small area of older plaster beneath. If Ogden's head had struck that hard, his skull would have fractured. After that, the perp did a bit of tidying up, probably with a non-magical kit that he carried with him, and then walked out the front or back door. Your DMLE doesn't check things like liver temperature but the report said rigor had set in, so this probably happened sometime between 10 PM and 2 AM,” said Detheridge.

“Tiberius left the castle a few minutes after eleven,” Dumbledore said.

“He was dressed for bed, so that probably puts it between midnight and 2 AM, then,” Detheridge concluded.

“So your murderer threw a man the size of Tiberius hard enough to sail down a full flight of stairs without touching the stairs themselves?” Croaker asked.

“He probably bounced against the bottom stair or two. The DMLE didn't examine his lower back or buttocks for bruising, and the outer parts of the dent in the wall were too high for his head to strike there without his body bouncing upward a few inches,” said Detheridge.

“There is another thing to consider, Algie,” Dumbledore said; “Mr. Detheridge's perpetrator could have cast magic upon his own person without later detection. This could easily be the source for the strength necessary to carry out the deed.”

“Damnation, you're right,” Croaker sighed.

“Marcus, my friend, I give due credit to your powers of, ehh, deduction. The next question of importance is, of course, the who of it,” the Marquis said.

“Tiberius's enemies are all long dead,” said Croaker. “He was fairly quiet in the Wizengamot for the last few years, and certainly not at the heart of any controversy.”

“Albus, I know it is in your mind as we speak. We are having the same thoughts, yes? The Curse, she is upon us. We do not know who the thirteenth was, but we have all thought the same on the matter,” said the Marquis.

“The Curse? You're daft, Alex. We've had several of us together a number of times over the years, and nothing happened. There is no curse – it's superstition, no better than voodoo,” Croaker insisted.

“Voudou is quite real; I have personally observed its practice,” Dumbledore countered, “and if Alex is correct, then I think we three all know who is responsible for Tiberius's demise.”

“He's not been heard from in twenty-five years; you can't even say if he's still alive,” Croaker said.

“We know of his career – if such debasement can be considered a career. It is far more likely that he broke his wizarding ties than that he was killed or otherwise passed on. Young Mr. Karensky was a very dangerous and unpredictable man, and our ally only out of convenience and family obligation. If he is here and has designs on us, then we are in great danger,” Dumbledore said.

“He is the most likely actor for the Curse,” said the Marquis.

Croaker said carefully, “If you're right – and I still believe you're wrong about this – then it's too late to undo things, isn't it?”

“For those of us who have spent considerable time at Hogwarts, yes, I should think so,” Dumbledore said.

The Marquis cleared his throat and then said, “The signs, they are there for the seeing, my friends. There are changes in us, and these changes are not only from the alchemical gift that we have all been sampling – ”

“Alchemical gift?” asked Detheridge.

Croaker said, “That explains how you've become so active, Alex. How long?”

“When the word came in *Le Monde Magique* that your Voldemort, he had returned... that was the sign. This is the final crusade for me, and a worthy one it is,” the Marquis declared.

“How much effect has there been?” asked Croaker.

“The mind, it is much sharper... the body, it is as though Grindelwald's time has returned, and still gaining the strength,” said the Marquis.

Croaker gasped, “Good God, Alex – how much have you been taking?”

“There is enough of the draft to see me through the last days of the millenium, my old friend. This old body, he will not last long once the draft is no more,” the Marquis said; “And what of you, Algie? How much has it been?”

“Er... I've been taking it in small amounts since 1973, enough to arrest any further changes. My best estimate is that I can stretch my supply to the middle of the next century. I'll come up with something else by then,” Croaker said.

“I can't imagine why you'd care to go on for so long,” Dumbledore sighed; “All great adventures do come to an end, Algie.”

“You and Alex choose to be comforted by stuff and nonsense. I see no reason to hasten the journey into oblivion,” Croaker snapped.

“What of you, Albus? How have you chosen to use the gift?” the Marquis asked.

“I have not yet turned to it,” said Dumbledore.

“Pull another one, Albus. You're as magically fit as you were fifty years ago, and there's only one way to manage that,” Croaker scoffed.

“You demand the magic to do your work. I ask it to aid me in mine. I told you long ago that your approach exacts a price,” returned Dumbledore.

“More stuff and nonsense – magic isn't some incarnate spirit that inhabits us or an energy field out there in the ether waiting to be tapped; we're apportioned it by dint of birth. Using magic is no different than using one's mental faculties,” Croaker retorted; it was obvious from the tone that this was a very old argument between the two men.

“Nonetheless, I have left the gift sequestered. I will not resort to using it until absolutely necessary,” said Dumbledore.

“Albus is the same age now as I attained shortly after the beginning of this century. His condition today, it is what I remember of those days for myself. I also think that the dismissing of the notion that magic is all around us, it is, eh, cavalier. Albus is in the right on this,” the Marquis said.

“*Humbug*,” Croaker grumbled. Harry had to jam his fist into his mouth to keep from laughing aloud.

“Alex, please remind me why I wanted Algie here in the first place?” Dumbledore said sharply.

The Marquis gave an answer to the rhetorical question: “Ehh... the contrary views, they are something that you like to hear in the one ear even as you hear the supporting views in the other ear. Is it not so?”

“So Croaker's basically on the payroll to be a pain in the ass,” Detheridge concluded.

Croaker growled, “How very droll. I suppose your role is to be the magical freak in residence?”

“Well, fuck you and the horse you rode in on,” Detheridge said matter-of-factly.

Harry heard the sound of a chair roughly pushed back, and then Dumbledore snarled, “ENOUGH! I won't have that in my organisation. Dissension is a luxury we can ill afford! If the two of you can not be civil of your own accord, then consider this an *order* .”

“Yet another sign of the curse is revealed, my friends,” said the Marquis; “If I closed these old and tired eyes, I would insist that it was 1942 and we were sipping a fine cabernet on my veranda. You are no longer the, ehh, jovial headmaster, Albus. You, my old friend Algie, have also recovered the sharp edge. Lucia, she now aids the young Mlle. Granger with explorations of the arcane rather than impeding her...”

“Griselda hasn't changed - she's been the same battleaxe for as long as I've know her,” said Croaker; “What of Flitwick?”

Dumbledore said, “He has once again immersed himself in the art of the duel. I have not seen such intensity from him in a very long time.”

“So, I must ask you, Algie...?” the Marquis ventured.

“I don't want to believe in the Curse. It violates every understanding of magic we've developed,” Croaker fumed.

“I will remind you that the ritual we used against Grindelwald was an ancient one. The Curse merely violates our understanding of magic as it has been practiced in modern times,” said Dumbledore.

“Magic is magic,” Croaker protested.

“Excepting when it is not, my friend,” said the Marquis.

There was a long pause before Croaker said, “Speaking of archaic rituals... I suppose the old goat asked for a Sending?”

“Algie, you should at least be respectful of a man's wishes,” Dumbledore sighed.

“It serves the same purpose as cremation. As long as his remains can't be plundered, I wouldn't care if Tiberius asked to be sunk to the bottom of the sea with a millstone 'round his neck. Just don't ask me to participate in the farce,” Croaker said.

“Far be it from me to suggest that anything exists beyond the tiny particles that make up the world around us,” Dumbledore returned.

“Protons, electrons, neutrons – you're right in one, Albus. Actually, the Muggles think they've happened on something even smaller... fascinating work, actually,” said Croaker.

“A first generation witch I knew back in Boston tried to explain this business to me: quantum mechanics and chaos theory and all of it,” Detheridge said; “She told me that the study of physics has reached the point where it's hard to tell the difference between science and belief. Imagine that.”

“Humbug,” Croaker said once again.

“I will notify all of you regarding Tiberius's arrangements. He opted for the traditional six-day interval, so I recommend that you clear your schedules. I will suspend the later class meetings to allow staff and upper-form students to pay their respects,” Dumbledore said.

“Can we get to the other reason for this little gathering?” Detheridge asked.

“But of course,” the Marquis said; “Albus, do I gather correctly that you agree with the conclusions of Mlle. Granger's work?”

“Her work is sound,” Dumbledore said.

“Her work rests on an untestable assumption,” Croaker countered.

“Untestable by you, perhaps, but not by me,” Dumbledore told him.

Croaker was clearly affronted. “There is no work of magic you can evaluate where I can not do the same,” he said.

“You lack the sensibilities to evaluate the old magicks -” said Dumbledore.

“- and there is no consistent means to test your so-called ‘old magicks’, hence the problem with Granger's paper. If I was applying a grade, I'd be hard pressed to justify an Acceptable,” Croaker said.

“An ‘Acceptable’, you say? I have reviewed this work for myself. Algie, my old friend, there is no kind way that I can tell you this: your words just now, they were rubbish,” the Marquis declared.

Dumbledore told Croaker, “Her theory is ground-breaking and you are well aware of this. I find

myself increasingly reconsidering Harry's opinions regarding your views on blood status.”

“If I didn't know that my opinion of that ridiculous paper was correct, I would be very offended just now. Knowing that I am indeed correct, however, takes the sting out of it,” Croaker sniffed.

“Hmm... seems to me that when it takes more work to explain the exceptions to a rule than to explain the rule, then you might need to take another look at the rule,” Detheridge said.

“You're nothing more than a constable with a spot of deductive ability and a dab hand with a wand. Confine yourself to matters where your opinion has value,” Croaker fired back.

Detheridge laughed and then said, “Croaker, you remind me of this cadet I knew back in the day: smart as hell – the guy'd forgotten more books than I've ever read – and he was absolutely sure of himself. I set up a live fire training exercise, and he spent five minutes explaining to me how the enemy couldn't have put up an anti-apparation ward because of the terrain and the relative position of the buildings and fifty other things that I didn't listen to and can't recall. He was so damn sure that I said, 'Fine, you run the engagement for your platoon.' Smart guy, but inflexible and predictable... they had their asses handed to them, of course. So, this cadet, he orders a full retreat and proceeds to apparate. At least the rest of them had the good sense not to follow him. I think it took a day and a half to completely un-splinch the idiot. All the books in the world didn't tell him the obvious thing: the enemy had the superior position and therefore had no reason to engage unless they were in complete control of the situation. Of course there was a ward in place! Not a lick of common sense... washed him out of the program the next day. You really remind me of that guy.”

The Marquis applauded vigorously and said, “Oh, this is so much fun! It is like watching tennis, yes?” There was a pregnant pause before both Dumbledore and Croaker started laughing.

“You know, I wouldn't be so prickly if someone would just pour me a damn drink,” Detheridge said.

“But where are my manners? For you, my young friend, we will break out the second bottle,” the Marquis said amiably.

Croaker snapped, “Second bottle? You never said anything about a second bottle. Holding out on us, are you?”

“For you, my old friend Algernon, nothing but the second best,” said the Marquis.

“You're a knave, old man,” Croaker shot back.

“Yeow! A knave with the best Scotch I've ever tasted, that's for sure,” Detheridge coughed.

There was another long pause – Harry assumed that the four men were quietly enjoying their drinks – before Dumbledore said, “I have asked Miss Granger to confirm two of her findings. This is why Dr. Covelli is assisting her –”

“Still won’t let you call her ‘Lucia’, will she? You really did bugger things,” Croaker cut in.

Dumbledore went on, “Yes... well... that is between the Doctor and myself. In any event, the two are following my suggestions regarding a proof. Once I have received confirmation, I intend to share the findings with Harry unless there are relevant objections.”

“Therefore, logic suggests that I am irrelevant,” said Croaker.

“In this one instance, Algie, yes. Your views on the matter are irrelevant,” Dumbledore said flatly.

“That calls for more Scotch,” Detheridge said.

“You are rather, eh... *harsh*, Albus,” the Marquis chided.

Dumbledore said, “The times call for decisive actions.”

Croaker asked, “What do you expect to gain, Albus? Is your theory going to get the boy up to speed faster? Will it improve his casting? Will it sharpen him in duels? Will it make him more studious? Honestly, I think you’re likely to cripple him with it... and if I’m honest with myself, I must admit that is part of the reason I have been so discouraging with Granger. I don’t see how this is going to help him.”

“The young Potter, he must begin the quest. Understanding the beginning, it will help him understand the ending,” said the Marquis.

Croaker sighed. “You truly think that the prophecy is alchemical?” he asked.

“ ‘One must die at the hand of the other’, she says. You and Albus know well from your time with Nicholas that death means many things. Ponder on this, Algie,” the Marquis returned.

“Well, I don’t like it. It leaves an uncertain outcome, for one. We could go through all of this, gentlemen – the situation could become as unpleasant as our worst fears – and it could all end badly because your boy missteps, Albus. Your habit of hiding things from him could make things better or it could make things far worse,” Croaker fumed.

“Yet you wish to hide from him the true nature of his survival,” Dumbledore countered.

“Touche! The tennis match has returned! This is so enjoyable... to tennis! Je vous salue!” the Marquis bellowed.

“I think you’re actually pissed, Alex! The last time I remember seeing you pissed was at that brothel in Venice,” Croaker laughed.

“It was not a brothel... there was nothing ill about its repute, I will have you know... and Madame Ribisi, she was, eh, a spectacle to behold!” the Marquis declared.

“Following the two of you around Europe was like minding two schoolboys,” Dumbledore sighed.

“It’s not our fault you weren’t interested in putting your fame to good use,” Croaker protested.

“The both of you were too old to be gadding about like that, for pity’s sake. *I* was too old for it, and you’re both old crones in comparison. In any case, my interests of that sort began and ended with Martha, and you’re well aware of that,” said Dumbledore.

“She wouldn’t have expected you to wear widow’s weeds for one hundred and ten years, Albus,” Croaker said gently.

“It wasn’t her choice to make, nor was it yours... old libertines, the both of you! Good heavens, Alex, that woman was one-third your age!” Dumbledore scolded.

“Lighten up, Brian –” Croaker started.

The Marquis laughed, “*Brian*, he says! And now who is the one who is pissed, or... ehh... what is it about shite and wind?”

“Shite and wind? It’s ‘*sheets*’, Alex: three sheets to the wind! You kill me, you really do,” Detheridge howled.

“A toast!” Croaker said sharply.

“I do like the toast, you know... was an acquired taste... it does require the, ehh, marmalade,” the Marquis mumbled.

“Not that, you old goat – a *toast*! To Brian, whose bloody sense of honour allowed me the pleasure of more beds than I can count just now. *To Brian!*” Croaker cackled.

“Aren’t we full of ourselves, Algie? I should think the fingers of your two hands would more than suffice to count your adventures. The rest, my friend, is the product of your fevered imagination and this delightful Scotch, of which I shall now have some more,” Dumbledore said.

“Well... to hell with you, then! You were too busy with your books to keep track, anyway... and we didn’t need a bloody nanny. Remember that *I* was the one that got Alex out of his chateau, and all it took was a good bit of rough,” Croaker slurred.

“There was nothing rough about Madam Ribisi... although the Madam’s husband, he was a bit rough... but not for long,” the Marquis managed.

“Only because you dove out the window. It’s a good thing the *nanny* was there to cast a cushioning charm,” laughed Dumbledore.

Detheridge said, “This is going downhill fast. Obviously I need to drink more.”

“Cheers, Marcus,” Dumbledore said, and glasses clinked together.

Just then, Mlle. de Flandres bumped Harry’s arm. “The Marquis, he provided a message for me to

pass along when I received his sign. The conversation must be... taking a turn?"

Harry took the parchment she handed to him and unfolded it. He nearly dropped it when the Marquis' voice projected from it:

Monsieur Potter, as the Scotch in the bottle decreases and the Scotch in our bellies increases, I fear that the talk may become uncomfortably ribald for your young ears. Surely you have heard whatever it was that Monsieur Detheridge wished you to hear, for if you have not, I am certain that we shall shortly be too, eh, shite to the wind to say anything of consequence. Find Monsieur Detheridge and confirm this with him. If he is unable to speak of it with you, as may be the case, then you will come to me and I will do the telling as best I can. Au revoir, my young friend!

"Taking a turn... you could say that," Harry said under his breath.

As he walked back to his chambers and thought on what Detheridge had wanted him to hear... and how Detheridge had gotten into the room at all... and what Hermione might have discovered, and how Covelli was a part of it... and what sort of quest he was supposed to begin... and some images of Croaker in younger days that he desperately wanted to eject from his brain... he ultimately decided that it was nice to know that the Headmaster and the Marquis and even Croaker were still human.

Harry Potter and the Years of Rebellion The Ides of March, 1997

HARRY POTTER AND THE YEARS OF REBELLION: The Ides of March, 1997

WHY THIS, AND WHY NOW?

With the MacLeish purchase of the *Daily Prophet* last year, wizarding Britain lost its voice. For the last several years, Britain's *Wizarding Wireless Network* has been a front for the Minister and his administration. Mr. Odd Lovegood's *Quibbler* cannot be taken seriously as a publication despite the occasional newsworthy article.

Mr. Keith MacLeish asserts that his *Daily Prophet* remains a wizarding newspaper, yet it now resembles the newspapers that one of his many businesses sells to London's Muggles. In addition to MacLeish's foreign sensibilities, there is another influence to consider.

Mr. Harry Potter is now a silent partner in the *Daily Prophet*. Few people recall that Mr. Potter's great-grandfather invented the wizarding wireless, and that the Potter family at one time owned and operated the *WWN*. Today, although Keith MacLeish does not control Britain's wireless network, his holdings do include the networks in more than twenty countries around the world. There are credible reports that MacLeish has sought the *WWN* but has thus far been rebuffed. The Potter family holdings are amongst the largest in Britain and are able to easily finance such efforts. Has the Potter family been an invisible hand upon the news for decades? Is it possible that Harry Potter now controls, whether directly or indirectly, all of the news that Britain's wizards read and hear?

At a time of great consequence for our world – facing the threat of war from both within and without, a faltering economy, a seemingly corrupt and incompetent government, and the slow but constant disintegration of our very way of life – we could no longer sit silent and beg for an occasional morsel of thought from the *Prophet* or the *WWN*.

Unlike the rest of today's press in Britain, we do not rely on the generosity of advertisers and questionable partners. This journal represents the opinions of The Gazump Family Trust, which has supported wizarding causes for eleven generations.

We are not a tool of the Ministry.

We will not bury our views amidst fanciful tales and absurd rumours.

Rest assured that we will speak the truth, and you will read it here first.

Signed,

Reginald Gazump, publisher

Barnabas Cuffe, director for publications

Tobias Elsinore, editor

The Watcher , inaugural edition, March 3, 1997

March 8, 1997

One good thing came of Harry's ongoing arrangement at the Three Broomsticks, at least: he had a private meeting place always available to him, thanks to having leased the garret for the entire year in advance. Luckily for him, the inn was one of the few buildings in Hogsmeade that had remained largely undamaged.

As was his custom on Saturday mornings, he spent at least two hours helping Hogsmeade residents rebuild. On this particular weekend – a Hogsmeade weekend for the students – he was able to cajole a dozen of his friends to join him. Some of the properties seemed to be cursed in the same way as the Burrow – the building materials just wouldn't hold together by magic. However, as one of Keith MacLeish's squib builders had pointed out to him, none of that stopped a nail. By mid-February, they had found that homes rebuilt manually on the cursed sites were safe, and magical items within the homes functioned in the expected way. So, Harry had hired builders through MacLeish and set them to work. After nine weeks, all but seven families were returned to their homes.

Detheridge joined Harry on occasion. The two had discussed the overheard conversation on the night after Tiberius Ogden's death several times. For some reason, the Defence professor was unable to tell Harry his intentions directly, but Harry eventually sussed it out: the purposes were for Harry to know that Hermione had forged some sort of breakthrough, and that at least the Marquis and Dumbledore believed that there was something alchemical about the prophecy regarding he and Voldemort. Detheridge promised that he would be able to share more in the future; in fact, he specified 'the afternoon of April 6, unless it's rainy the previous day', without further explanation.

On this particular Saturday, Harry had arranged to meet with Madam Bones and Ted Tonks regarding financial concerns. Madam Rosmerta had already admitted them to the garret by the time Harry arrived. Mr. Tonks had arrayed several stacks of parchments at the small dining table and Madam Bones was picking through her valise as he entered.

“Ah, good morning, Harry. Rosmerta left some hot cocoa at the counter. It's positively bitter out there,” Mr. Tonks said.

“Even with a warming charm, you look chilled completely through, Mr. Potter. Are you still spending time with the reconstruction?” Madam Bones asked.

Harry shrugged and said, “It seemed like everyone else started quitting on them. That doesn't mean the work is finished.”

“Very admirable,” said Mr. Tonks.

Madam Bones said, “Admirable, yes, but also terribly expensive. Mr. Potter, it's not your responsibility to pay for these squib workers to reassemble Hogsmeade. The Ministry provides assistance – ”

Harry cut her off, “The Ministry didn't offer any help until the end of last month. Were people supposed to pitch tents in the snow?”

“You can't solve every ill in our society by throwing your money at it,” Madam Bones sighed.

“She's right, Harry. Now, we could have interceded – you did enter into a contract with the workers without a sign-off from either of us – but frankly, it would have made you look badly,” Mr. Tonks said.

“And you've more than enough help with that, unfortunately,” added Madam Bones.

Harry ground his teeth at that, before he grumbled, “Yeah, *The Watcher* ... tell me about this Gazump, would you?”

Mr. Tonks said, “Reginald Gazump is an old-line pureblood. The Gazumps composed a House at one time, centuries ago. Before they could be absorbed, the heir at the time took all of the family monies and put them in trust. Mr. Gazump descends from a cadet line of the family. Somehow or another, his grandfather obtained control of the trust and started spreading largess. As for Gazump himself... he's in the neighbourhood of ninety, wouldn't you say, Madam Bones?”

“He's at least that... perhaps a hundred by now,” said Madam Bones; “Reggie is the solicitor-of-record for the Hogwarts Board of Governors, which means nothing more than a spot of prestige. I haven't sought an opinion from him in the entire time that I've chaired the Board.”

“Why would he start a newspaper?” Harry asked.

“Reggie was a part-owner of the *Daily Prophet* at one time, so he probably fancies himself a

newspaperman. The important figure here is Barnabas Cuffe,” Madam Bones said.

Harry said, “I recognised the name... he used to run the *Prophet* , didn't he?”

“Cuffe was the editor and a part-owner at the time MacLeish purchased it. Rumour has it that he didn't want to sell, but he only held about a quarter of it. You would think that MacLeish set up some sort of arrangement to prevent Cuffe from operating another paper, wouldn't you?” said Mr. Tonks.

“If Cuffe couldn't establish another paper, perhaps he wasn't kept from editing or writing? That makes for a reasonable theory: Cuffe persuaded Reggie that it would be a good thing to compete with the *Prophet* ,” Madam Bones speculated.

“Well, it certainly doesn't bode well for you, Harry. Cuffe’s always taken more pleasure in cutting people down than raising them up,” said Mr. Tonks.

“How lucky for me,” Harry deadpanned.

“One of his people has been enquiring into the Runcorn and Bagman killings. Something is about to be stirred up, that much is certain,” Madam Bones said.

Mr. Tonks reached for one of his stacks of parchment. He said, “All right, Harry, let's begin with a few items that need to be addressed in the short term. I'll warn you straight away: you'll be signing your name more than a few times. After that, I think it's high time we review your limitations on entering into contracts.”

Madam Bones nodded in agreement and summoned an expression that put Professor McGonagall's pursed lips to shame. Harry visibly winced. He hoped otherwise, but it seemed that the next hour or two were shaping up to be rather detention-like.

IS THERE A MONSTER IN OUR MIDST?

In the last three months, four well-regarded members of our community have been brutally slain. The first was the former Quidditch star Ludo Bagman, on December the fourteenth. The death of Rupert Starling, a warder for Gringotts, followed fifteen days later. Ministry official and philanthropist Jonathon Runcorn was killed on January the third. Two days ago, Leander Vaisley, a sundries and cauldron importer, was murdered near Diagon Alley.

Each of these men was killed in a similar manner. All four were stabbed with a large blade, and in two cases repeatedly so. An employee of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement shared with this writer that the blade is believed to be a sword, and some suspect that it was the same

sword in each case.

If four upstanding wizards have been killed by the same means in such a brief period, then why is the Department of Magical Law Enforcement behaving as though these were four separate crimes? Common sense suggests that there is a brazen killer in our midst, preying upon the good people of wizarding Britain. If, as that employee of the Department told this writer, the killer is almost certainly a wizard, then how difficult can it be to apprehend this butcher? How many wizards can brandish a sword? Once the leaders of noble families are excluded – as all such men are instructed in fencing as a matter of comportment, but would have no reason to engage in such horrific acts – few potential killers remain.

The Watcher urges the Ministry to take swift action, before our community is once again struck by this terrifying menace!

The Watcher , March 10, 1997

March 11, 1997

Professor Tonks stopped Harry in the corridor as he made his way toward the Great Hall for breakfast. “Ted's trying to reach you,” she told him; “It's something to do with the *Prophet* .”

“I haven't seen it yet this morning – have you?” he asked.

“No time today, I'm afraid. The third years are supposed to be testing on the concept of computers and it's shaping up as a debacle. Did you know that I had to spend two entire sessions convincing many of them that such a thing exists?” the Professor sighed.

Harry winced at that. He promised, “I'll try to make it down to Hogsmeade and give him a ring, but it might be in the afternoon.”

“He made it sound like an emergency, Harry. Do your best to reach him, all right? Oh, dear! I'm going to be late!” Professor Tonks called out, already on her way toward the north tower.

As soon as he entered the Great Hall, Hermione leapt from her seat and headed toward him, *Daily Prophet* in hand. “You need to see this,” she said.

The front page was a blaze of colour and large headlines in angry fonts:

WHO IS WATCHING *THE WATCHER* ?

WWN threatens action over 'Ministry front' accusation

Ministry accuses upstart paper of post owl tampering,

nonpayment of tariffs, and failure to file business registration

Cuffe in breach of contract with Daily Prophet ?

Flourish and Blotts turns away Cuffe at the door

WHO ARE THE REAL CRIMINALS?

Four wizards killed since December all tied to You-Know-Who

Upstart paper declares that purebloods are above suspicion in killings

“MacLeish doesn't do anything by half, does he?” Harry muttered.

“Did you know he was going to declare war?” Hermione asked.

“No. This isn't good, is it?” Harry sighed.

Before he made it halfway across the hall, he was bombarded by two owls – one with a Ministry for Magic tag – and a raven. The birds jockeyed for position to deliver their post, and the raven won out of sheer nastiness.

Mr. Potter,

Apologies for the short notice, but a significant business issue has come up with regard to the Daily Prophet. If you've followed the headlines recently, then you probably have a good idea of things.

We will be meeting this afternoon with the principals from The Watcher , and Mr. MacLeish wanted to offer you and the other partners an opportunity to attend. Your man Ted Tonks can certainly sit in your stead, given the notice and the demands of your schedule.

If you can take us up on the offer, the meeting is scheduled at the Daily Prophet offices on Diagon Alley beginning at 3 PM.

Regards,

J. Charles Royston

Vice President, Special Projects

The Vox Corporation

Harry,

MacLeish has gone off his nut. I took a call from his man Royston at six o'clock this morning. It was a warning about today's Prophet and an invitation to a meeting with Cuffe this afternoon. I'm of two minds about this meeting. You have every right to participate, but I don't know that you necessarily gain by being there. If this is the start of a battle royal between MacLeish and Cuffe, and if Cuffe sees you as being on MacLeish's side, then you'll be drawn into the muck. On the other hand, if you stay away, you lose the opportunity to influence the outcome and Cuffe probably comes for you out of sheer habit.

I will be attending the meeting. When you decide on attendance, please inform me.

Ted Tonks

Mr. Harry James Potter

Address unknown

Berwickshire, Scotland

c/o

Apprentice's Quarters

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Perth and Kinross, Scotland

Dear Mr. Potter,

This is to inform you that you have been named as a defendant in the following complaint:

Barnabas Cuffe and The Gazump Family Trust d/b/a The Watcher

v.

Keith MacLeish and limited partners of Vox Publications England d/b/a The Daily Prophet
and as a plaintiff in the following complaint:

Keith MacLeish and limited partners of Vox Publications England d/b/a The Daily Prophet

v.

Barnabas Cuffe and The Gazump Family Trust d/b/a The Watcher

We will issue instructions with regard to these actions no later than thirty days from the time of this notice.

Kind regards,

Rupert Malaprop

Senior Clerk

Wizengamot Administrative Services

The Ministry for Magic of England and Scotland

Harry gathered up the three posts and the copy of the Prophet in one hand and rubbed at the bridge of his nose with the other. “I don't need this,” he said to himself. He figured on calling Mr. Tonks at around one o'clock, after he conducted practical Defence lessons for the second year 'Puffs and Snakes and the fourth year 'Claws and Gryffindors. His head and his gut were in disagreement about whether to attend the meeting.

FROM THE NOTES:

MARCH 11 - DUMBLEDORE AND HARRY MEETING

Purpose: Harry seeks advice about whether or not to attend meeting between Keith MacLeish and Barnabas Cuffe (rival newspaper editor, used to edit the Daily Prophet)

Harry is leaning toward going to a meeting that's probably about lawsuits – he's involved because of his part-ownership in the Prophet Dumbledore plays politics with his response – tries to remain mostly neutral but comments on the merits of each side (MacLeish vs. Cuffe) Make sure to include Dumbledore comments on what Cuffe's eventual impact on the stability of the Ministry might be (likely to lead toward Fudge's dismissal and a dangerous power vacuum); could have him make a rare favorable comment about MacLeish (at least the man's smart enough to prop up Fudge in the absence of an alternative) Harry decides to go to the meeting Dumbledore is concerned about secure transportation Harry suggests that he has a secure way to get to Diagon Alley, but backpedals when Dumbledore begins to press about how Harry can seemingly come and go from Hogwarts undetected Dumbledore suggests that Fawkes might take Harry directly to the

Harry squeezed shut his eyes and was enveloped by the strange warmth of travelling with Fawkes. There was a trilling sound for a few moments and then a rush of cold air. He opened his eyes to a room of panicked wizards, two of whom were rather large and had their wands drawn and aimed.

“Erm... hello, there. I thought he'd, uh, take me to the entry,” Harry said.

The only smile in the room was on the face of a very old man with a thick moustache and bushy sideburns. He said happily, “Oh, that's smashing! Dumbledore's pet gave you a lift!”

Harry shook his head and returned, “It doesn't work quite like that. I asked Fawkes whether he was willing to bring me, and he agreed.”

Fawkes let forth a song just then. The two security wizards relaxed their postures but kept their wands at the ready. MacLeish and his man Curly Royston also relaxed. Ted Tonks took on a bemused expression. The Minister and Percy Weasley were also there, to Harry's surprise – the Minister looked to be annoyed, while Percy seemed almost wistful. Harry wondered if seeing Fawkes brought back memories from Percy's Headship. The unknown old man seemed to be on the edge of laughter. The man to his right was so bland as to be nearly unnoticeable, and Fawkes' presence seemed not to register for him at all.

The man to the old man's left had dark hair styled into a wave and the sort of dark facial hair that needed shaving by mid-afternoon. His reaction to Fawkes was a look of distaste; “Tell it to go on its way,” he said.

Harry was immediately suspicious of anyone who responded that way to a phoenix. He strode directly toward the man with his hand extended and said, “Harry Potter. And you are...?”

“I'm Barnabas Cuffe, of course,” the man huffed as he briskly rebuffed the offer of a handshake.

The bland man cleared his throat and everyone turned to him as though he'd just been noticed. “My name is Rupert Malaprop and I am the senior clerk for the Administrative Services of the Wizengamot,” he said in a voice as nondescript as his face; “I am here at the request of the Minister since everyone present at this meeting is in some way a party to two competing complaints filed with the Wizengamot. If everyone would please take a seat...?”

Far from leaving, Fawkes perched himself on the back of Harry's chair. Cuffe looked ready to rebel, but said nothing. Ted Tonks sat to Harry's right, and MacLeish and Royston took up places adjacent to Mr. Tonks. Cuffe, another man who had been partly hidden from Harry by one of the security wizards, and the old man, all took up places opposite Harry and MacLeish. The bland

fellow sat at one end of the table. The Minister hesitated for a moment, and then directed Percy to sit at the opposite end; he then seated himself to Harry's left.

Cuffe crossed his arms and said, “It figures you'd sit on that side of the table, Mr. Fudge. I'd have made you party to our complaint if I thought it would be allowed.”

“You haven't exactly gone out of your way to build a working relationship with the Ministry this time, Barnabas. What am I supposed to do when you fail to take the barest steps to legally operate this new venture of yours?” Fudge returned.

The new man seated next to Cuffe said, “So what's your stake in this, Ted? I know you've been representing Potter...”

“I'm here for Harry, Devlin Whitehorn and Roddie Burnside. All three are minority owners in the Prophet,” Mr. Tonks said.

The old man crooked an eyebrow and confirmed, “Roddie's put money into Mr. MacLeish's operation, has he? I hadn't heard that before.”

“I thought Potter was the only partner,” said Cuffe.

Malaprop placed his hands on the table, palms down, and said, “Perhaps we should introduce all of the parties?”

Cuffe blustered, “Do you have the impression that you're in charge of this meeting? If you think I'm letting one of Mr. Fudge's minions take charge –”

Malaprop cut in; he said evenly, “Mr. Cuffe, I am not a minion. I am a civil servant, and as such have no reason to take sides. In fact, it is better that I do not. I was in the employ of the Ministry before Mr. Fudge was appointed Minister, I am in the employ of the Ministry now, and I will be in the employ of the Minister after Mr. Fudge leaves the Ministry. If you know the first thing about the civil service, sir, then you surely know that I would have to lower my trousers in the Wizengamot chamber whilst singing “God Save the Bean” in order to stir up the slightest threat to my continued employment.”

“Er... 'God Save the *what* '?” Harry said quietly.

Cuffe persisted, “Fine, you're not a minion. Still, you seem a bit... ehh... how shall I put it...?”

“Bland?” Mr. Tonks offered.

“Yes, yes: *bland* – not the sort to run a meeting,” said Cuffe.

“I work in the judicial system, Mr. Cuffe, and thusly I swim in shark-infatuated waters each and every day,” said Malaprop.

“Infatuated...?” Harry muttered. Mr. Tonks caught his eye and gave a slow negative shake of the

head.

“You'll do, Malaprop,” laughed the old man.

Malaprop gestured to Royston, who introduced himself, “J. Charles Royston's my name. I work for Mr. MacLeish, as a Vice President for Vox Corporation.”

“Keith MacLeish, chairman and chief executive officer of the Vox Corporation Worldwide, and publisher of the *Daily Prophet* .”

“Theodore Tonks, QC. I am a barrister admitted to the Muggle's Honourable Society of Kendall's Inn and to the Magical Inn of Court as well as a practicing solicitor in both worlds. As I said before, I represent the interests of Mr. MacLeish's three minority partners in the *Daily Prophet* , to include Mr. Potter.”

Harry thought for a moment about how to introduce himself, then cleared his throat and said, “Harry Potter... apprentice to Professor Albus Dumbledore, 13th Head of the Most Noble and Courageous House of Potter, and 21st Head of the Most Ancient and Pure House of Black.”

The Minister was noticeably flustered by that, but quickly regained his bluster. “I am the Right Honourable Cornelius Fudge, Minister for Magic of England and Scotland,” he declared.

Percy said, “My name is Percy Weasley, and I serve as Undersecretary for Ministerial Affairs of the Ministry for Magic.”

The man who had earlier exchanged with Mr. Tonks said, “Harcourt Bellows: barrister affiliated with the Magical Inn of Court with dual practice as a solicitor-at-law. I represent The Gazump Family Trust in this matter.”

The old man smiled directly at Harry and said, “I'm Reggie Gazump, an old meddler with a bit of money and an interest in public discourse. I must say, Odd Lovegood and Wilton Asbury should be here as well if we're going to set the bounds for the media.”

“Barnabas Cuffe, director of publications for The Gazump Family Trust, and the injured party in these proceedings,” Cuffe snapped.

“Oh, please...” MacLeish scoffed.

“I would like to begin with the Ministry's position on this matter, as it speaks to issues that extend beyond the competing complaints,” Malaprop said.

The Minister waved his hand negligently and said, “Weasley...?”

Percy opened a binder, peered at a page inside, and then stated, “Mr. Cuffe and Mr. Gazump's publication, *The Watcher* , began its existence when Mr. Bellows opened a business vault at Mr. Gazump's direction in order to support the venture. Mr. Cuffe issued a solicitation for hire on January 8, let space for offices and printing equipment on January 14, received the first shipments

of equipment on January 22, and carried out a list of business activities too long to state at this sitting prior to the first printing for distribution on March 3 and distribution on that day. As of this morning, the Ministry has received no registration of business, no filing for business tariffs, no documentation of persons employed... in short, we have received nothing at all. The lease was filed with the appropriate Ministry office but did not state the name under which business would be conducted, nor the purpose of business or its ownership. Mr. Cuffe, there's no getting around it: you have failed to carry out the most basic requirements to legally engage in a business in wizarding Britain."

"Mr. Cuffe, do you care to respond?" asked Malaprop.

"I don't own the publication and I've carried out the duties of my employment. I'm not saying anything else in this setting," Cuffe said.

"You must admit that this is a rather damning list. It almost seems as if you can't see the obvious," Malaprop said. Harry snorted, and Malaprop squinted at him for a moment.

Gazump chuckled for a moment before he said, "Sounds like we really stuffed it up, eh? I haven't run a business in over forty years. For Merlin's sake, Cornelius, is there really this much to it these days? It almost sounds as if the Ministry doesn't want anyone to do business at all." Cuffe immediately grunted in agreement and MacLeish said quietly, "Hear, hear."

The Minister said, "The thing is, Reggie... did you and Cuffe skirt all of these requirements to gain an advantage? Think about how it looks! I think a reasonable person would look at this and decide that you just didn't want anyone to know about *The Watcher* until the owls went out."

Mr. Bellows said, "Don't speak to that, Reggie. There are fair competition clauses in the Ministry's business regulations. The Minister's fishing for treble fines."

"Bah," said Gazump; "If I hadn't had poor Barnabas running in circles, how much would it have cost to meet all of these requirements? Five hundred galleons? A thousand?"

"The filing fees total fifty-four galleons and eight sickles, Mr. Gazump. Fines for non-compliance are calculated on a daily basis. As of this morning, the fines totalled just under three hundred galleons," Percy announced.

"If my maths are still in working order, one thousand galleons will cover the fees, the fines, and treble damages – is that right, young man?" Gazump asked Percy.

"With about seventy galleons to spare, sir," Percy replied.

Gazump grinned and declared, "Cornelius, I'll provide you with a draft for one thousand galleons. Bellows, stipulate to everything. There, was that so difficult?"

MacLeish chuckled and said, "Now that's a man who knows how to do business."

Malaprop said, "That did go rather nicely, didn't it? It would be nice if the Administrative

Services Office weren't required to process a hearing on this situation. Perhaps you could simply indict each other to supper?"

Royston nearly choked to keep from laughing, Harry began one of Covelli's calming meditations, and Gazump let forth a child-like snicker. Malaprop eyed everyone at the table; "Pardon?" he said.

"Get on with it," the Minister ordered.

Malaprop nodded and said, "Mr. Cuffe, are you willing to state your complaint here, or shall I ask Mr. Bellows to do so?"

Cuffe's lips thinned and he began, "Firstly, the Prophet made statements both yesterday and this morning with regard to Ministry complaints against *The Watcher* –"

"– to which counsel just stipulated, Mr. Cuffe," said Royston.

"No one said a blasted thing about interfering with post owls, did they? We did no such thing!" Cuffe spat.

Mr. Bellows nodded in agreement; "Yes... what's that all about, Weasley?" he asked.

"If I may?" Mr. Malaprop cut in; "That is actually a Ministry response to Mr. MacLeish's counterclaim. It does appear that for reasons unknown, the March 3 edition of *The Watcher* was delivered via post owls owned by the *Daily Prophet*."

Cuffe's brow furrowed. He said, "We're booked with Telester's, and we only had about seventy advance subscribers – although that's already up to four hundred in a week's time. Are you implying that owls from the *Prophet* delivered our bulk drops as well?"

"We're not implying anything. We're telling you that it happened, because it did. We have the tracking charms to prove it," said Royston.

"If that's true – and we'll want documented proof – then we'll make good on the costs," Cuffe said.

"It happened again on the 10th," Royston added.

Gazump steepled his hands and said, "Isn't that fascinating? Something is drawing your owls over to our presses, MacLeish. Let me ask you this: How is it that you call in your owls? How do they know to pick up your papers?"

"They're keyed to particular employees – three of them in a descending order, so that the paper still gets out during illness or scheduled holiday. That's generally how everyone does it, at least when one owns the owls. I imagine Cuffe has something similar with Telester's," said MacLeish.

"Another question, if you'll indulge me...? Is your managing editor one of those three persons, per chance?" asked Gazump.

“The first, of course,” MacLeish said.

“Bugger,” Royston said immediately.

Malaprop looked at him askance. “Whom or what is to be buggered, exactly?” he asked.

“Curly, you can't be serious...?” MacLeish insisted.

“I doubt it was ever done. He's not supposed to be working in the trade, so I suppose they didn't consider it a priority,” Royston pointed out.

Gazump cackled, “Barnabas, you're still keyed to their owls.”

Cuffe said flatly, “Impossible. Firstly, *no one* is that big a bungler. Secondly, I'd think it would interfere with the Telester's owls, and they appeared as expected.”

“And how would you have known if they were *Telester's* owls?” asked Gazump.

“Because that's who we're doing business with, of course... oh, bugger all!” Cuffe grumbled.

“Looks as if that one's a scratch,” Mr. Tonks said.

“Agreed,” said Mr. Bellows.

“I would like to discuss the counter-complaint from Mr. MacLeish for a bit, if you please? Mr. MacLeish, what are the perpendiculars of the situation, from your perspective?” Malaprop asked.

MacLeish looked at him oddly. “The what...?”

“I'm sorry...?” Malaprop said.

MacLeish said, “You were asking me...?”

“The particulars of the situation, if you please?” Malaprop returned.

“Good grief...” Royston muttered.

MacLeish said, “First and foremost, there's the matter of Cuffe's severance agreement. He is prohibited from owning any portion of any media outlet in the United Kingdom for five years. He is also prohibited from being employed by any media outlet in the United Kingdom for three years. At minimum, he's the editor of *The Watcher* . Therefore, the agreement has been broken. Q.E.D.”

Bellows nodded. “You're partially correct,” he allowed; “Barnabas cannot own any portion of any news outlet in the United Kingdom. To the best of my knowledge, he does not. *The Watcher* is not a media outlet as defined in the severance agreement. It is the weekly official publication of the Gazump Family Trust –”

“Pull the other one, mate. Nice try,” MacLeish said.

Bellows returned, “You just told us the agreement was with regard to media outlets, but it is not. The agreement says, and I quote: 'Mr. Cuffe shall not own any interest in any outlet focused on presenting current news to the public.' *The Watcher* is a journal of opinion, Mr. MacLeish. It is so named in the masthead; it is so described within its own pages. Did you actually read Mr. Gazump's manifesto on the front of the March 3 issue? You might want to read it again. *The Watcher* is not a newspaper by your definition. Therefore, a news outlet per the agreement does not employ Mr. Cuffe. However, let us assume that *The Watcher* did, in fact, meet your definition. The Watcher does not employ Mr. Cuffe; The Gazump Family Trust employs him. He is the director of publications for the Trust. Toby Elsinore is the editor. It's there for the reading in the masthead, sir... Q.E.D.”

MacLeish crossed his arms and said, “Hmph... clever of you. We can pick that to pieces at trial and you know it. Let's move on to the string of defamations.”

Gazump held up his hand to Bellows and then leant forward in his chair. He said amiably, “Mr. MacLeish, there's been enough dancing in circles here. You believe that you were defamed. Fair enough: you're entitled to your opinion, as is The Gazump Family Trust and its members, of which there is me and myself. However, the mother country's common law thwarts you in this instance.

“Has this supposed defamation caused you a loss in trade? Even if you could demonstrate that fewer people are reading your newspaper, you would still have to demonstrate that it was solely as a result of the opinions printed in *The Watcher* . Perhaps people simply no longer care for what your people are writing?

“Has this supposed defamation caused reasonable Englishmen to think worse of you? It would be quite a trick to further damage your reputation, Mr. MacLeish. Those who don't think you evil instead think you misguided or dangerous.

“Is anything that was printed untrue? Were they views that could be attributed to a reasonable person? I believe that we could prove our statements true to the satisfaction of a Wizengamot panel. We alleged nothing.

“Even if you were to prevail, what would you gain? Do you honestly believe that you could prove malice or reckless disregard? There would be no compensatory damages. There would be no public vindication for you. In fact, I suspect you would be viewed as the heartless oligarch that most people already believe you to be. Now, you and I doubtless agree that Barnabas would not be a sympathetic defendant. Can you say the same about me, I wonder?

“I've not set out to hurt anyone. What I want is for the people of England to receive more than one point of view. I don't think that's been the case since you purchased the *Daily Prophet* . If Cornelius were to let Wilton Asbury sell you the WWN, then I *know* there would be only one voice. I meant what we printed on our first front page, Mr. MacLeish. The *Daily Prophet* suffered its biases, especially in the last handful of years before its sale. Barnabas knows of my concerns and I will be keeping a mindful watch.

“So, young man, here's what I believe is going to happen. We're going to withdraw our respective complaints. We're also going to set aside your contract with Barnabas. If you wish to discuss recovery of some portion of the associated galleons, then the two of us can *indict* each other to supper, as the gentleman from the Ministry put it. We're going to make certain that Barnabas is no longer linked to your post owls, and I trust that will be carried out today. I'm going to provide Cornelius with a draft to remedy our business errors. We're both going to continue publishing. I'm going to counter your views on wizardry, which I find extreme and which noticeably colour your reporting of the news. On the whole, the two of us are going to get along famously... unless you insist on owning the WWN. At that point, I regret to say that hostilities will commence. What say you?”

MacLeish sat very still for several seconds, obviously studying Gazump's face. Then he broke into a wide smile. “Oh, I like you! You've got style,” he said; “Curly, lift our complaint by close of business. Cuffe, watch yourself: I know your type. I'll let you throw your handfuls of mud, but if you take matters too far I'll have a warehouse of mud to drop on you.” Cuffe sneered at him but otherwise kept his thoughts to himself.

“And what about Mr. Tonks? Are your interests addressed?” Gazump asked.

“I knew you weren't as far gone as you like to pretend,” Mr. Tonks said.

Gazump grinned at him and said, “At my age, I'm not suited to practice on a daily basis. Still, I do like to think that my faculties haven't completely escaped me.” He turned to the Minister and asked, “Cornelius, do you have anything to add...?”

“If both complaints are withdrawn and the fees and fines are settled, the Ministry has no remaining interests,” the Minister said.

“I'll be certain the draft gets to your man Weasley shortly,” said Gazump; “And you, Mr. Malaprop...?”

The bland Ministry man shrugged and said, “I'm pleased that this is reaching resolution without a formal hearing... without more than a trifling of paperwork, actually. You can't imagine how many filings we receive, and most of it is suitable for nothing more than a good binning. Frivolous complaints have been deflowering our budget for years.”

“Oh, dear Lord...” Royston choked out.

“Er... you're dismissed... move along now; we've private business to conduct!” said the Minister quickly. Malaprop exited the room and as soon as the door was firmly closed, everyone present – even the irritable Mr. Cuffe – burst into guffaws.

FROM THE NOTES:

CONVERSATION: REGGIE GAZUMP AND HARRY

Gazump asks to speak to Harry alone, Ted Tonks reluctantly leaves. Gazump's temperament is generally mild although he's not afraid to be directive. Gazump is a traditionalist: not a pureblood booster per se, but generally supportive of the wizarding way of life as-is. Harry brings up the comment from *The Watcher* that the sword killer couldn't be the son of a noble house. Gazump reiterates that someone of a noble house would have nothing to gain. Harry brings up the Prophet's observation that all four men who were killed had or were suspected of Voldemort/Death Eater ties. Gazump says he knows the Starling family well and didn't believe Rupert Starling had those sort of connections on his own – basically he was two degrees of separation away. Gazump chides Harry about introducing himself as Lord Potter and Lord Black, saying that Harry needs to “behave like a nobleman if you're going to bandy those titles about.” Gazump says that he liked the Potters, especially Harry's grandfather Alexander, and that he likes Harry based on their conversation. He also says that Harry may not feel the same about him by the end of the week, but hopes that time will change that. Harry presses to find out more but is rebuffed. Gazump's last statement is to reiterate that Harry needs to begin acting like a nobleman, and adds that this starts by being cautious with one's words even in casual settings.

March 13, 1997

Harry sat on the veranda of his quarters. A handful of students were making use of the courtyard despite the early hour. Spat had brought him a light breakfast, and he nibbled at a bit of bread while paging through a text recommended by Detheridge. An unfamiliar owl swooped down and perched upon the railing. He thought that it was bearing the *Daily Prophet*, which he still didn't take regularly despite his partial ownership. The owl skittered impatiently from talon to talon, so he rose from his chair and took the paper; it flew off without waiting for payment.

Harry was perplexed. “What's this? *The Watcher*. ..?” he thought aloud. He had understood *The Watcher* to be a weekly. He unfolded it and sank back into his chair at first sight of the front page:

IS THE KILLER SWORDSMAN TO BE FOUND AT HOGWARTS?

The recent killings of four upstanding wizards have had one common element: the use of a large blade, believed to be a sword, as the instrument of murder. Setting aside the unlikely possibility

that a house-trained nobleman is responsible, where could a person find the greatest concentration of swordsmen?

Surprisingly, the answer is at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Hogwarts has this year revived the art of the sword as part of a Duelling Club. The Club is preparing Hogwarts students for the European junior duelling circuit, from which the school withdrew nearly sixty years ago.

It is no surprise to find Mr. Harry Potter at the centre of this venture, as he seems to be closely associated with most of Hogwarts' most unlikely and unusual events. Mr. Potter has been personally trained by three legendary duellists: Hogwarts own Professors Flitwick and Dumbledore as well as school's current Potions Master, the legendary Marquis de Maupassant. It is frightening to consider the damage that someone such as Mr. Potter could inflict with a blade, particularly with such expert schooling. Mr. Bill Weasley directs the Club. Mr. Weasley is a former Hogwarts Head Boy and hardened curse breaker, who was fully qualified for the masters duelling circuit a decade ago.

Consider the timing of these murders:

The first took place in the very early hours of December 14, the start of an open Hogsmeade weekend for Hogwarts students. The second and third took place on December 29 and January 3. December 29 was in the midst of the school's Yule break. January 3 was an open Hogsmeade day for upper-form students so that they could assist villagers in their recovery from the events of January 1. The most recent murder, that of Leander Vaisley, took place on March 8. March 8 and 9 were an open Hogsmeade weekend for Hogwarts students.

Could Hogwarts' new Duelling Club have trained this savage killer to wield his weapon of choice?

The Club's membership includes the scions of the Bones, Greengrass, Longbottom, Pucey and Zabini families. One of the Muggle-borns participating in the Club has ties to the Muggle's nobles, and was trained in fencing as a youth similarly to the scions of our own senior houses. As with the sons of our world's leading families, this young man seems unlikely to put his position at risk.

One would like to say the same of Mr. Potter, who heads two ancient houses by dint of birth and inheritance. However, he has killed before in the defence of persons and property. Last month, Mr. Potter told a group of Hogwarts students that "if we're going hunting, let's do it with clear heads". What or *whom* is Mr. Potter hunting?

One would also like to say the same of Mr. Draco Malfoy, who now leads the house of his birth by virtue of his father's ineligibility. Would the younger Mr. Malfoy turn to violence as a means of revenging himself? Could he be tainted by his father's recent unseemly behaviour?

Nine other members of this Club have no such history or encumbrances. We urge the Department of Magical Law Enforcement to take this possibility seriously. The members of this Club, even those who would ordinarily be above suspicion, should be thoroughly investigated. Professor

Dumbledore and the Hogwarts Board of Governors should consider whether the Club should be disbanded in order to eliminate even the appearance of complicity in these crimes most foul.

The Watcher , March 13, 1997

Harry stood at the back of the classroom next to the Headmaster. Rufus Scrimgeour stood at the lectern and said to those assembled, “Please identify yourselves as I call your names: Abbott; Betancourt; Bones; Bruce; Cadwallader; Entwhistle; Finch-Fletchley; Goldstein; Goyle; Greengrass; Longbottom; Malfoy; McDougal; Weasley, Ginevra; Weasley, Ronald... I see Mr. Potter is here... Miss Tonks, is that Mr. William Weasley with you? Detheridge, there you are... Filch, is it? Mr. de Maupassant, thank you for coming; I assume that's your apprentice? Excellent – everyone has arrived.

“As some of you know, the newspaper known as *The Watcher* printed an opinion this morning regarding the recent string of killings. They made a reasonable point about where a fellow might find swordsmen in this day and time. I decided to follow their recommendation and make some enquiries here at Hogwarts.”

He inclined his head toward a group of red-robed Aurors and continued, “These are my associates, Aurors Dawlish, Ettinger, McElvoy and Staunton. They will be conducting interviews on my behalf. Professor Dumbledore, I would like to examine all of the equipment used by the Duelling Club as well as any swords that the Club's members may have in their own possession. Would you and the castle's house elves facilitate that, please?”

“We will of course assist in your investigation,” Dumbledore said.

Scrimgeour pointed to Harry and gestured for him to come forward. As the students followed the four Aurors to other rooms and the teachers left to gather Club equipment, Harry was directed into a chair next to the teacher's desk.

The Head Auror waited until the room cleared, and then he sealed the door and glared at Harry. “Did you actually suggest to someone that you were 'going hunting'?” he demanded to know.

Harry started, “I think I know what they meant. I was talking about the Head Boy's – ”

Scrimgeour cut him off, “That's unimportant. Did you use the words, or not?”

“Something like them,” Harry admitted.

Scrimgeour pounded his fist against the desk. “Dash it all, Potter! Think of how this looks to the average wizard! You're the Boy-Who-Lived and a highly visible opponent of You-Know-Who.

You're overheard telling people that you're 'going hunting'. Then Keith bloody MacLeish does you no favours by suggesting that all four of the dead men had ties to You-Know-Who. It looks bad, Potter, that's how it looks: very, very bad.”

“May I finish now?” Harry asked tersely. When Scrimgeour waved a hand, he went on, “Adrian Pucey was going on about starting an open war with Voldemort's sympathizers in Slytherin House, and I was trying to talk down the idea. There are two dozen people who can vouch for that.”

“Obviously one of them vouched for it to *The Watcher* , didn't they?” Scrimgeour countered.

Harry sighed and asked, “So what happens now?”

“Well, this is when I ask you for your whereabouts between the hours of 10 PM on December 13 and 4 AM on December 14,” said Scrimgeour.

“I was here,” Harry said.

“Presumably you were alone or asleep,” Scrimgeour added.

“I was with Hermione – Hermione Granger – until sometime around midnight, and in my quarters after that,” Harry added.

“And between 10 PM on December 28 and 4 AM on December 29?” asked Scrimgeour.

“I was in St. Ebb... that's where I live when I'm not here. It's on the coast. I have a tower house there,” Harry said.

“Can anyone back that up?” Scrimgeour asked.

“The twenty-eighth... we had a party that night... I stayed – er – at that place – sorry, I can't say. I stayed there with Ron Weasley and Neville Longbottom that night,” Harry said.

“You're unable to tell me where this was?” Scrimgeour clarified.

“I *can't* tell you,” Harry said.

“Is this place near your home in St. Ebb?” asked Scrimgeour.

“Yes,” Harry managed to say.

“I won't press, then,” Scrimgeour said, and he stopped to scribble something on a parchment before him.

“I guess January 3 is next, then? I was here in the castle until just before 6 AM, which is when we went down to Hogsmeade and worked until 10 PM,” Harry said.

“And before 6 AM, where were you? In your quarters? Can anyone confirm that?” Scrimgeour

asked.

“Erm... Hermione can,” Harry said.

Scrimgeour raised an eyebrow. “She can account for the entire time between 10 PM on the 2nd and 6 AM on the 3rd?” he asked.

“That's right,” said Harry.

“That leaves March 8, between 6 AM and noon,” Scrimgeour said.

“I was in the Great Hall for breakfast at 7 AM, then in Hogsmeade working on the Gamp's house from 8 until 10, and then I was with Madam Bones and Ted Tonks at the Three Broomsticks until lunch,” Harry said.

“How do you wake in the morning – do you use a clock?” Scrimgeour asked.

“I used a clock when I was in the dormitory, but the house elves wake the staff. Spat must have come in at 6 that morning,” Harry answered.

“ 'Spat', you say? A specific house elf is assigned to you?” Scrimgeour clarified.

“That's right. I'm stuck with Spat, probably because I'm an apprentice,” said Harry.

“I take it you'd rather have your alarm clock back?” Scrimgeour asked.

Harry nodded and said, “I feel like a poncey git having a house elf wait on me. Besides, Spat has a bit of a nasty streak. Every time I stop him, he comes up with another evil scheme for getting me out of bed.”

“I should be able to confirm your comings and goings through the elf, then. Dumbledore can arrange that for me. *The Watcher* was right on one thing: this is likely the work of one person. Assuming your presentation holds up, I'd say it's nigh unto impossible you're that person,” Scrimgeour said.

“Can I help you with anything else?” Harry asked.

“Do you think one of your schoolmates is doing this?” Scrimgeour returned.

Harry said, “Look, I have the freedom to come and go without trouble – I pass a note to the Headmaster, and then it's out the gates. For students, though, it's quite a chore. Even on Hogsmeade weekends, it would be hard to leave the castle before eight in the morning without a faculty escort. I've had students leave the castle with me from time to time, but March the eighth is the first time since I was a fifth-year that I've gone on a Hogsmeade weekend. Usually the Headmaster has had me on watch in the castle. So, you're saying that a student has gotten out of the castle three times in the middle of the night, then made his way from here to the south of England, killed someone, tidied up or whatever, and snuck back into the castle afterward? It's hard

to imagine, isn't it?"

"It would take a lot of help, certainly – both inside and outside the castle," Scrimgeour admitted, "but I stand behind the decision to investigate."

"Oh, I'm not disagreeing with you, sir. It's as likely as anything else," Harry said.

"I will promise you this much, Potter: to the extent that I can prevent it, this won't be left to linger in the press. When we can clear someone from suspicion, we'll announce it straight away. The Ministry isn't out to get you this year... well, that applies to the DMLE, at least," said Scrimgeour.

"Glad to hear it," Harry said; "Is there anything else, then?"

Scrimgeour put on a crooked smile. "I have to ask you: what's it like to duel with de Maupassant?" he said. Harry laughed aloud at that, and the mood in the room lightened considerably.

As Harry passed the Fat Lady's portrait, he could hear a commotion from the direction of his chambers. He let his wand drop from its holster and into his hand.

Ron's voice carried down the corridor: "You've lost it, mate. Harry would never do that, not to anyone," he insisted.

"That horrible man tried to convince me that Harry had given up my name as part of some sort of conspiracy to commit those murders. I still don't know why they interrogated me: I've never even held a sword in my hands!" Hermione protested.

"Weasley, they had my comings and goings recorded. They knew things that they couldn't have. Potter's one of a pretty small number of people who could have given all of that up," Rob Cadwallader countered.

"When an Auror is making a case for not associating with someone, what's a person supposed to do?" asked Morag McDougal.

Harry wondered if the entire Duelling Club had met in his quarters. He slowed his pace and continued to listen.

Anna de Flandres, the Marquis' apprentice, returned, "These Aurors, they set out to create confusion, Mlle. McDougal. Into four groups we were divided. The interviewing, it was done one at a time, yes? M. Cadwallader, the Aurors... they could have spoken with all of us as well as all of the professors before they spoke to you."

"That's a good point," said Adrian Pucey. "Bets, did anyone come and go during your meeting?"

Pucey's friend Elston Betancourt said, "That Dawlish fellow pulled McElvoy out of the room for a bit."

"I was with Auror Staunton. Auror Dawlish interrupted my meeting, too," Neville chimed in.

Greg Goyle said, "It was Ettinger for me. Dawlish came in."

"Even you should see that there's a pattern here, Weasley," Blaise Zabini said with a smirk.

Ron shot back, "Oi! I didn't say a thing! Oh... and Dawlish broke in on my meeting as well, for what it's worth."

Harry turned the corner and leaned against the door frame leading into his quarters. "Keep in mind that Dawlish was one of the four Aurors who almost killed Professor McGonagall during the OWLs," he said. The entire Duelling Club was indeed in his living room, even Malfoy. "Fancy meeting all of you here," he added.

There was an uncomfortable silence, which was broken by Holly Bruce. "I'll ask it if no one else will. Were you spinning stories to the Aurors to get yourself out of a scrape?" she said.

"Absolutely not," he said immediately.

"Who interrogated you?" Anthony Goldstein asked.

Harry said, "I sat down with Scrimgeour for a few minutes. He asked where I was during each of the killings. The rest of it was a few questions about my apprenticeship. That's all there was."

Malfoy snorted. "Isn't it obvious? You're supposed to turn against one another. That leads to justifiable suspicion by the DMLE. Then, the Ministry can order the Duelling Club shut, thereby appearing to have accomplished something in the matter. Scrimgeour is political; he's looking for a way to jump the queue. This may be his chance to throw the Boy-Who-Lived off a cliff and then catch him on the way down. As for Dawlish, it's well known that he's dirty. He could be stirring the cauldron on his own, or for someone other than Scrimgeour. But please, feel free to draw your blades, form a circle, and plunge them into Potter. Much as I'd like to help, I'm afraid that I have prior engagements. Now, if that's all...?" he said, and then sauntered to the door.

"Thanks for the warning," Harry said evenly. Malfoy gave him a stiff nod in return and took his leave.

"Don't worry, mate – I didn't let the ferret touch anything," Ron said immediately.

Blaise Zabini shook his head. "Charming as always, Weasley," he said.

FROM THE NOTES:

QUALIFIED ALIBIES FOR THE FOUR KILLINGS: DUELLING CLUB

(“Asleep in the dorm” doesn't qualify unless this can be documented by means other than self-reporting during the time period in question)

“Persons of interest” in **bold**

Hannah Abbott: 3 of 4 (Susan; parents; Ministry examiner)

Elston Betancourt: 2 of 4 (Pucey; public setting)

Susan Bones: 2 of 4 (Madam Bones; Hannah)

Holly Bruce: 3 of 4 (roommate; Hogsmeade villagers; parents)

Rob Cadwallader: 1 of 4 (parents & family - extensive)

Kevin Entwhistle: 2 of 4 (Goldstein; parents)

Justin Finch-Fletchley: 1 of 4 (parents)

Anthony Goldstein: 1 of 4 (Christmas)

Gregory Goyle: 2 of 4 (Pucey; mother)

Daphne Greengrass: 1 of 4 (Parkinson)

Neville Longbottom: 0 of 4

Draco Malfoy: 2 of 4 (Pucey; Narcissa)

Morag McDougal: 2 of 4 (Lovegood; parents)

Adrian Pucey: 2 of 4 (Goyle; Betancourt)

Ginny Weasley: 1 of 4 (Christmas)

Ron Weasley: 2 of 4 (Christmas; Granger)

Bill Weasley: 1 of 4 (Christmas)

Tonks: 1 of 4 (Christmas)

Harry Potter: 4 of 4 (Christmas; Granger; Hogwarts elves x2)

Hermione Granger: 2 of 4 (Potter x2)

RABASTAN LESTRANGE DEAD!

Vicious Death Eater's body found on Knockturn Alley

Was he the fifth victim of the Butcher?

Azkaban escapee and infamous Death Eater Rabastan Lestrange has been killed. Lestrange's body was found early this morning behind a trash heap on Knockturn Alley. For the fifth time in recent months, a wizard has died at the end of a blade. The *Daily Prophet* has obtained heretofore unreleased details about the gruesome efforts of the so-called Butcher, the unknown person believed to be responsible for all five deaths.

In all five cases, the wizards were killed by near-decapitation. According to a DMLE source, each man was laid on his back and sliced at the neck in a sawing motion until the blade reached roughly halfway through. In three of the five cases, there were additional slicing wounds believed to be evidence of duelling; these wounds were considerable in the case of Ludo Bagman. In the cases of Lestrange and Rupert Starling, there was only the cut at the neck. In all five cases, there is evidence that the men were at some point physically tied at the wrists and ankles, apparently by a coarse rope. Three of the men – Runcorn, Vaisley and Lestrange – are believed to have been killed in locations other than where the bodies were found.

Perhaps the strangest element of these murders lies in the cryptic note left at each scene. The identical notes, produced by a Muggle device called a type-writer, list three numbers: 35, 18, and 19. The DMLE has no theory regarding the significance of these numbers.

Based upon evidence obtained from each killing, investigators believe that the Butcher is roughly the same height as Ludo Bagman or Rupert Starling – approximately 5 feet and 10 inches. The blade used to slash the wizards' throats was between 12 and 18 inches long and extraordinarily sharp. The other blade wounds, particularly those on Mr. Bagman, were likely caused by a longer and narrower weapon; investigators presume that this was a sword. The very precise nature of the killing cuts suggests to DMLE investigators that this person may engage in a livelihood where skilled use of knives is customary, such as butchering, horticulture or potions making.

There are few who will miss Mr. Lestrange, who was a scourge upon wizarding society during You-Know-Who's first rise and was known to be in his service once again. DMLE officials do not expect the body to be claimed and will provide for a pauper's funeral rite after seven days have passed. Mr. Lestrange was not believed to be married or to have children. He is reportedly survived by his infamous brother and sister-in-law, Rodolphus Lestrange and Bellatrix Lestrange nee Black.

the *Daily Prophet* , March 14, 1997

March 14, 1997

Harry winced as he slapped a murtlap poultice onto his shin. Flitwick had been particularly brutal, and even though Madam Pomfrey's ministrations took care of cuts completely and bruising to a great degree, they never seemed to resolve the lingering pain from burns. He was utterly spent, and Flitwick had been kind enough to cancel the rest of his lessons on his behalf.

“Why does Professor Dumbledore let him work you over like this?” Hermione fretted.

“It's the sort of training I need. I can handle it,” said Harry. To distract her, he added, “What is it you're doing there?”

Hermione was poring over a sheet of parchment covered with runes drawn in concentric circles. She said, “I'm trying to understand the runic construct for the Sending ceremony. The secret is in that spiral. I wish I could recall which runes the spiral crossed...”

Harry held out his hand for the parchment and said, “Let me have a look, would you?”

Hermione was dubious but reluctantly handed it over. “If you're sure...?” she said.

He followed the innermost circle of runes with his fingertip for almost half the circle before he said with certainty, “Here; it was this one... and here it is again in the second circle. I'll bet that it meets the same one all the way out. Look...” He drew his finger across the circles in a spiralling move, crossing the same rune where he met each successive circle.

“You're right...” she said quietly.

He grinned at her and said, “What? I'm not a complete idiot, you know? I'm finding that I've a pretty good memory for runes, as well... should have taken Runes instead of stupid sodding Divination.”

She reviewed the parchment and said slowly, “So... these are charging runes... which means... the ritual triggers a particular circle of runes... and directs the resulting energy through the charging runes – one sending and one receiving – to the next circle... it's a bit like building a ward to intentionally collapse but feed a second and larger ward as a result. Honestly, it's remarkable that the Sender isn't killed...”

“There was a lot of magic flying around. For a moment there at the end, I felt like I could do anything,” he admitted.

“Well, I have to admit that I still don't understand the ritual per se, but there's a lot to be learned

from this rune arrangement,” she said absently.

The door to Harry's quarters abruptly shot open and he was instantly to his feet – and instantly in pain. “What's going on here?” he ground out.

It was Auror Dawlish, with Filch skulking in the corridor behind him. “Potter, I'm here about last night. Where were you?” he snapped.

Harry eased himself back onto his chair. “Wondered when you lot would show up,” he said casually; then he raised his voice and added, “Filch, you're not supposed to open staff quarters for *anyone* without permission from the Headmaster. You could have set off the staff wards doing that. I'll be telling Professor Dumbledore about this.” The irritating caretaker grumbled under his breath and walked away.

Without invitation, Dawlish closed the entry door and sat himself in a chair opposite Harry. “Get on with it, Potter – where were you?”

“Last night? I had rounds with Professor Vector from ten until midnight, and then came back here to read until one... that's when Spat came to check on me and set a waking time,” Harry said.

“Spat? Who is Spat?” Dawlish demanded.

Harry answered, “Spat is a house elf. There's one assigned to each of the staff. They know where we are at all times. I went over this with Head Auror Scrimgeour, you know?”

Dawlish sneered, “Isn't that nice? Well, he doesn't have time for the likes of you. This elf is responsible for knowing where you are and waking you up, is it? I suppose it tucks you in, does it?”

Harry said evenly, “He performs the same services for me as he would if he served the Headmaster... or Professor McGonagall. You remember Professor McGonagall, don't you...? I suppose she was your Transfiguration instructor, too?”

Dawlish growled, “That's not your business. Someone will be checking on that elf, mark my words. Who left the castle last night? How did they do it? How have you been aiding and abetting this person?”

Harry began a calming mantra silently, even as he returned, “Head Auror Scrimgeour – you know, your superior? – he was dead certain that I'm not connected to these killings.”

Dawlish hissed, “The Head Auror likes to calculate things. People seem to like you right now. Me, I figure that just because we were wrong about You-Know-Who last year doesn't mean we had *you* wrong at all. You're an attention-seeking troublemaker, Potter, and you're a killer – that's a fact. It stands to reason a bloke like you would have no trouble offing someone like Lestranger.”

“Well, I'm not going to lose any sleep over him being dead. Are you?” Harry snapped despite his best efforts.

Dawlish's voice grew less harsh; he said, “Of course not – he was murdering scum, just like the rest of his family. Look, I can understand it. You've got a lot of reasons to hate anybody associated with You-Know-Who. And Lestrangle... well, I can understand why you might decide to help the Longbottom boy –”

“*Neville?* You think Neville Longbottom's been doing this?” Hermione said incredulously.

Dawlish glared at her and growled, “I don't recall speaking to you, little girl. If we're investigating dark rituals, though, you'll be my first stop. Don't think that I've forgotten your stunt in Hogsmeade – that Compact woman was covering for you, and we both know it.”

“I'm going to fetch the Headmaster,” she said and then stood to leave.

Dawlish drew his wand. He spat, “You're not going anywhere until I've finished with Potter. Sit down, shut up, and *remember your place* !”

Before either Harry or Hermione could react, Dawlish was pulled over the back of his chair by forces unknown; the door exiting Harry's chambers flew open on its own; and the Auror was thrown against the corridor wall opposite the door, where he remained stuck – and terribly angry. Harry stood and cast a silencing charm in Dawlish's direction and then stalked toward the trapped Auror. Just as he was about to enter the corridor, Spat popped into existence in his path.

The house elf gave a malicious and excessively toothy smile and said in a simpering tone, “Spat sees that Nasty Auror Man is sticking to the wall, Harry Potter sir. Spat thinks Nasty Auror Man needs his mouth scrubbed most thoroughly, Harry Potter sir. Just this morning, Spat overheard Nasty Auror Man talking to Smart Mister Goldstein and calling him a freak and saying that Dark Lord Grindelwald should have wiped out all of his kind... and Spat overheard Nasty Auror Man trying to make Strong Mister Goyle draw his wand and calling Strong Mister Goyle a cretin and a Death Eater in training... and Spat overheard Nasty Auror Man calling Nice Miss Bruce a mudblood... and Spat overheard Nasty Auror Man telling Not-Quite-As-Nasty Auror Man that the only reason he played nice with Noble Miss Bones is because Old Madam Bones is one mean bitch. Spat is happy to take care of the scrubbing, Harry Potter sir, as he is excellent with soap and a stiff brush... or Spat is happy to fetch the Headmaster so that Nasty Auror Man can be ejected from the premises, if Harry Potter sir prefers.”

“Do it – bring him here,” Harry growled.

“Spat wonders if Harry Potter sir might destroy Nasty Auror Man before Spat returns with the Headmaster?” the house elf mused aloud.

“Well, Spat had better make it quick, then,” Harry snarled.

“Spat sees that Harry Potter sir is making the stone wall ripple with magic, and Spat would not like to be digging Nasty Auror Man from the rubble,” Spat said hesitantly.

Harry clenched his fists hard enough to draw blood with his nails. Hermione came up from behind

and put her hands on his shoulders. “I’ll keep Harry from flattening the nasty Auror, Spat – I promise,” she said lightly.

“You’re trapped by the staff wards, Dawlish, and only the Headmaster can let you loose. The wards expel anyone who means harm to the persons keyed to the rooms. You drew your wand on us and meant to use it... and I have proof,” Harry hissed.

Dawlish gritted his teeth and tried as hard as he could to free himself, but he barely managed to shift his arms. He silently swore a blue streak as Harry drew closer; for her part, Hermione tightened her grip on Harry's shoulders.

Auror McElvoy entered the corridor from the stairs at a dead run. “Drop your wand *now*, Potter!” he shouted.

Harry calmly handed his wand to Hermione and then crossed his arms; he said, “Thank you for coming so quickly. Place Dawlish under arrest, please.”

Spat reappeared next to Harry, followed by a flash of flame that marked the entrance of the Headmaster and Fawkes. “What do we have here, I wonder?” Dumbledore asked calmly.

Harry turned to the house-elf, gestured toward McElvoy, and asked, “Spat, is this one the 'Not-Quite-As-Nasty Auror Man'?”

“This one is the very same, Harry Potter sir. He was with Nasty Auror Man and Noble Miss Bones,” said Spat.

The Headmaster said, “You can let Mr. Dawlish down now, Harry.”

“I didn't put him there, Headmaster. Auror Dawlish set off the staff wards and was banished from my quarters,” Harry said.

Dumbledore crooked an eyebrow at that. “I see... Mr. McElvoy, I am curious as to why one of my house-elves would refer to you as – ahem – 'Not-Quite-As-Nasty Auror Man'? I take it this relates to young Miss Bones in some fashion?”

McElvoy flushed at the neck. He said, “Er... Auror Dawlish may have been a bit harsh with Miss Bones, sir, although he didn't agree with me on that.”

Dumbledore turned to Spat and directed, “Young elf, please relate the circumstances under which you came to call Mr. McElvoy by that name.”

Spat scratched his head and tugged at one ear before he said hesitantly, “Spat does not understand all of the Headmaster’s words...”

Harry pointed at Dawlish and said to Spat, “Tell the Headmaster the same thing you told us about the Nasty Auror Man.” Spat nodded furiously and repeated his accusations.

Dumbledore dispelled Harry's silencing charm from Dawlish with the waggle of a finger and barked, "Explain yourself, immediately!"

Dawlish narrowed his eyes at the Headmaster, which had all the effect of a stare-down against a rock. "I followed interrogation procedure at all times," he said, with as little respect in his voice as he could give.

"Is that so? In your understanding, who sits *in loco parentis* for the students of Hogwarts?" Dumbledore asked coldly.

Harry could feel a shudder of nervousness in the Auror, who replied with much less certainty in his voice, "That would be the Headmaster, sir."

The Headmaster said, "Yes, it would indeed. So, why is it that I was first notified of your activities today by one of my house-elves?"

McElvoy piped up, "We failed to notify you, sir. I should have done that while Auror Dawlish proceeded with his orders."

Dumbledore's attention shifted palpably from one Auror to the other. "Who is the senior Auror present?" he asked.

"That would be Auror Dawlish – " said McElvoy.

Dumbledore cut him off, "Then it is Auror Dawlish's failure entirely. What were your orders, Auror Dawlish?"

"We were ordered by the Head Auror to confirm the whereabouts last evening of those students with questionable alibis for the four prior killings," Dawlish said.

"Then why were you in my apprentice's quarters?" Dumbledore asked.

Harry heard and felt the hint of danger in the Headmaster's voice, but Dawlish did not. "Potter can freely come and go from Hogwarts. He's a known killer. That makes any alibi he offers a questionable one. He's either responsible or knows who is," the Auror said.

"And does the Head Auror agree with your conclusion regarding Mr. Potter?" Dumbledore asked.

"As the Auror-in-charge of this investigation, it is my responsibility to interpret the Head Auror's orders and to implement them," said Dawlish.

Dumbledore snapped his fingers and Dawlish fell to the floor. He then let loose a pulse of magic that hinted at enormous power, and said, "Get out of my castle, Mr. Dawlish. Get out and do not return unless I give permission for you to do so. I will be in contact with Mr. Scrimgeour and Madam Bones regarding disciplinary action. Is there anything in my order that requires interpretation?"

Dawlish made a show of straightening his robes, and then took two attempts to free his wand from the stone wall. He said to the Headmaster, “You won't always be there to protect Potter, sir. He's bad business, and he'll eventually come to a bad end – mark my words.”

Dumbledore radiated so much magic into the corridor that Harry could actually feel the pressure of it. As he advanced on Dawlish, the Headmaster said in an even tone, “You would be unwise to make an enemy of my apprentice, Mr. Dawlish; he will be one of the greatest wizards of his age, if not the greatest. Also, if you ever again treat any of my students as you treated them today, then you will make an enemy of *me* – and though I am nearing the end of a long life, I assure you that I am a most formidable enemy.”

McElvoy took his shocked colleague by the arm and managed to say, “We'll be going now, Headmaster... our, uh, apologies for the disruption...”

“I had previously planned to do a bit of tinkering with the castle wards today, Mr. McElvoy. It would be for the best that you exit the building in ten minutes or less,” Dumbledore said. McElvoy merely nodded and dragged Dawlish for a half-dozen strides until he recovered his senses enough to keep pace.

Hermione squeezed Harry's shoulders and said, “Breathe...,” so he did.

“I am sorry that you were subjected to such treatment, Harry... and you as well, Miss Granger. There is no place for such behaviour in a civil society,” Dumbledore said.

Hermione shrugged. “This was nothing. I've been called a mudblood by other students for five and a half years, Professor. This wasn't the first time I've been belittled, and it won't be the last.”

“It is nonetheless cruel and entirely wrong-headed,” Dumbledore countered.

Hermione said, “I really can't be bothered with it. This is a bankrupt culture, so it's no more and no less than what I expect.”

Dumbledore took on a vaguely grandfatherly expression; “Surely you don't believe that,” he said amiably.

Hermione said, “If it weren't for Harry and for our friends, I doubt I'd be willing to take part in this war. I certainly won't do it to defend the status quo. V-Voldemort can have wizarding Britain, if it's to stay as it is.” That took Harry aback.

For his part, Dumbledore was shocked into silence. It took several seconds for him to ask, “You would leave people to such fates as they would face under Voldemort's rule?”

“England isn't the only country on Earth. My family has already left and it wouldn't bother me to follow. Anyone else could do the same,” said Hermione.

Dumbledore said, “It's not so simple as that, Miss Granger. During his last rise, Voldemort was essentially able to seal our borders.”

“Are you saying that if I were to stop using my wand, to purchase a ticket for the Chunnel, and to head across to France, that somehow V-Voldemort would make me fall from the train halfway across the Channel?” Hermione asked.

Dumbledore began, “Certainly you could avail yourself of Muggle transportation, but –”

“Then the borders weren't sealed, Headmaster – not to anyone with a bit of sense, a bit of Muggle currency, and some help from a Muggle-born,” Hermione cut him off.

“Firstly, it isn't quite as simple as all that for a wizard with no Muggle props to obtain a passport. More importantly, Voldemort's men attacked Iceland, the Faroe Islands, the Normandy coast, Belgium, and Holland during the last rise. He shan't stop with Britain, of course,” Dumbledore insisted.

Hermione said, “That was twenty years ago, and things have changed a lot in the Muggle world. He could never do that again without altogether ignoring the Statute for Secrecy, and if he does that, then the entire magical world will come for him.”

Dumbledore smiled slightly and said, “I believe you are overestimating the magical world's resolve.”

“Harry told me that the Prime Minister threatened to tell other people in the government about us. Even if my parents and me usually disagree with the Tories, there's no doubting that Mr. Lowell isn't afraid of a fight. Look at what he's done with the Irish and the Scots – do you really think he'd hesitate to take us on? My mum and dad say that the Queen's even more stubborn than Mr. Lowell. It wouldn't take long for the Muggles to deal with us. Three good-sized bombs could bring magical Britain to an end,” Hermione observed.

“And how would the people with these bombs locate us?” Dumbledore asked; “Muggles cannot identify or approach Hogwarts. Diagon Alley is Unplottable; like the house at Grimmauld Place, it is effectively outside of the Muggle world. The Ministry for Magic is at the heart of London and heavily warded.”

“Are you familiar with dynamite, Headmaster?” asked Hermione.

“I am familiar with it, yes. I have even seen a few sticks of dynamite exploded,” Dumbledore said.

“Magic interferes with electricity, but ambient magic can't interfere with chemical reactions; if it did, about half of all potions ingredients would fail to work. That means that the Floo or portkeys can transport dynamite without harming it. What would happen if a few tonnes of dynamite were exploded inside Diagon Alley?” Hermione mused.

Dumbledore blanched, but still countered, “Such a plan would require the help of quite a few wizards, and I find it hard to imagine that many would aid or abet such an act.”

“What if it were to keep Diagon Alley out of the hands of V-Voldemort? What then?” Hermione

asked.

“It is no less horrific,” Dumbledore said.

Hermione went on, “As for Hogwarts, you're thinking in two dimensions, Headmaster. A Muggle bomb would be delivered by aeroplane. All it would take is one wizard or even a Squib with his hands on the trigger. For the Ministry, the Prime Minister could call a terrorist alert and clear the area, and then bomb the building atop it...”

“... and you would condone such things?” Dumbledore whispered.

“If he were to take over and there was no other option to be rid of him, then yes, I believe that I would,” Hermione said plainly.

“Bombing Voldemort from the air has a bit of appeal, actually. If I were to push the button, would he die by my hand, I wonder?” Harry mused.

“If you were to explode a bomb atop Voldemort, you would kill one or more members of nearly every house of long pedigree. Wizarding Britain would never recover from that,” Dumbledore said.

Hermione shrugged her shoulders and said, “Then so be it. They’re the ones deciding to side with him.”

Dumbledore looked her directly in the eyes and said, “You do realise, of course, that anyone who conceived and carried out such barbaric acts would be considered the worst sort of criminal by wizards across the entire world. Such a person would be hunted down, tried and executed.”

Hermione returned without flinching, “I'm merely discussing the worst case scenario, Headmaster. Any plan should be tested by the worst case – it's no different than a scholar's writings in that way. I can't imagine that anyone would actually intend to destroy the institutions of wizarding Britain, not even V-Voldemort himself; if it happened, it would be a last resort because the war was lost. As for being hunted down...? Honestly, I think the wizarding world would be a bit preoccupied, since wizards would be more or less revealed to the world at that point.”

Dumbledore steepled his hands and stood quietly for a time that seemed endless to Harry. When he let his arms fall, he said, “Miss Granger, I believe that you and Dr. Covelli may be exploring the arcanum more deeply than is appropriate. I can think of no other explanation for such radical views, even when presented as speculation or theory. It is beyond reason that you would suggest any society deserves to be razed to the ground, no matter the extent to which you or others have been wronged by it. The overwhelming majority of wizards and witches in Britain want nothing more than to live a common life; they have little if anything to do with politics or governance or blood feuds. If we do not stand up for them, then who will?”

“If they'd stood up for themselves twenty years ago, Headmaster, then we wouldn't be facing a war; the prophecy would be moot; and Harry and Neville would have their parents,” Hermione

snapped back.

Harry finally spoke up, “Professor, if things aren’t changed quite a lot after this is all over, we’ll be back in the same place again. Are we supposed to have one Dark Lord after the next?”

Dumbledore sighed; he gave Hermione a pointed look and said, “There will always be those amongst us who will seek any means to an end, no matter whether that end is worthy or otherwise.”

“That doesn't mean we have to make it easy for the next Dark Lord,” said Harry.

Dumbledore said, “Be that as it may... Miss Granger, for the foreseeable future, rather than attending your regular research period with Dr. Covelli, you will come to my chambers. We shall spend some time exploring the dark underbelly of history – both the wizarding and Muggle varieties. If you wish to indulge such brutal end scenarios, then I prefer you do so fully informed. I also demand somewhat more respect than you have shown to my staff and me in recent months. Now then, I should see after Misters McElvoy and Dawlish, as they are not making great headway toward the exit. Alas, I may have frightened Mr. Dawlish beyond his ability to keep a good pace. Good day to you.” With that, he and Fawkes disappeared in a flash.

Harry's brow furrowed. “Dynamite...?” he asked Hermione.

“Are you upset with me?” she asked him.

“Upset? I suppose I'm not upset exactly... a bit freaked out, though. Explaining how to blow up Diagon Alley isn't exactly normal conversation,” said Harry.

Hermione huffed, “Even the Headmaster could stand to think more broadly, Harry. If I can scheme all of that, then others can do it too.”

“I'm still surprised he let you go on like that, you know? He wouldn't tolerate that much pushing from me; he probably wouldn't take it from Croaker or the Marquis, for that matter,” Harry chided her.

“...and I'll go right on pushing. I should have started in on the school itself, I'm sure he would have loved that. *Croaker's* considered a top-notch scholar, for pity's sake! What does that say about the study of magic? Have you ever stopped to think about how horrid our instruction has been, overall? Once you look beyond Transfiguration, Charms and Arithmancy, so much of it has been hopeless. Herbology's all right... Professor Sprout's capable enough, and the Hufflepuffs love her to pieces, but even she says that Neville's near to surpassing her. Professor Sinistra was a fair Astronomy teacher, I suppose, but Muggle science extends so far beyond what she knows. Honestly, sometimes I wonder how many wizards still think that the Earth is flat – ” She stopped abruptly and her eyes widened.

Concerned, Harry said, “What is it...?”

“Flat... they think the Earth is flat... it's *flat* ...” she mumbled as she dashed back into Harry's chambers.

By the time he caught up with her, she was at his table and combing over her parchment of runic circles. “Flat-Earth thinking... that's why they have to intersect the rune circles with a spiral... it's so obvious, someone has to have tried it before...” she murmured.

“Erm... are you all right...?” Harry asked.

Hermione shook her head as though to clear it, and then assured him, “No, no, I'm fine. It's just a wild hare, that's all. I should run this past Dr. Covelli, though... maybe Anthony Goldstein – he knows quite a lot about it... perhaps a post to Madam McIlvaine...?”

“Oh! I'm supposed to contact her in April, actually – she's abroad until then,” Harry said.

“Is it about her family Grimoire?” Hermione asked.

“Yeah, that's it. She's convinced I should have a look through it,” Harry said.

Hermione nodded and said excitedly, “There must be such a wealth of information in there – can you imagine? Some of the spells and rituals are well over a thousand years old!”

“It can't hurt to have a look,” Harry said; “Now, if I could figure out what to do about Gazump's stupid paper...”

“What does MacLeish have to say about it?” Hermione asked.

“Dunno... didn't really have a chance to talk to him,” said Harry.

Hermione smacked him on the upper arm. “Then send him a post! You own part of the *Prophet*, after all. I should think he'd be your ally on this,” she said.

Harry looked to a mounting pile of books to read and papers to grade. “I'll wait to see what comes out next,” he said.

Hermione rolled her eyes, but was quickly absorbed again by the circles and spirals of runes. Whatever she'd seen had completely engaged her. Harry couldn't remember seeing her quite so taken in a long time. She was radiating the intensity of revision for the OWLs, but she had a maddening little smirk on her lips that he had an unreasonable desire to kiss away except for the fact that she'd likely hex him for the distraction. He gathered up a stack of third-year essays for Detheridge, and hoped that they wouldn't be quite as pathetic as the last set he'd marked.

Longbottom's Revenge?

On the third of November, 1981, You-Know-Who had been gone for three days; magical Britain was in a state of happy disarray; and the Death Eaters were desperate to know how their leader had been defeated. Senior Auror Frank Longbottom and his family were known to be targeted by You-Know-Who, and so Bellatrix Lestrange, her husband and brother-in-law, and other Death Eaters broke through the wards protecting the Longbottom's home.

Frank and Alice Longbottom were tortured by the unforgivable Cruciatus curse for as long as one hour, according to healers at St. Mungo's Hospital. To this day, the Longbottoms are residents of St. Mungo's long-term ward. Mr. Longbottom's mother, Madam Augusta Longbottom, was severely injured by a cutting curse and required months to recover. The Lestranges were captured at the close of a lengthy pitched battle against a dozen Aurors and Madam Longbottom's great-uncle, the infamous Algernon Croaker. Several Death Eaters escaped that night.

In the midst of this chaos sat Neville Longbottom, aged sixteen months.

At the beginning of his studies at Hogwarts, young Mr. Longbottom was not much of a wizard by all accounts. There were rumours in the late 1980s that he had been rendered a Squib. Some family friends to this day suggest that he was damaged by a poorly cast memory charm on that disastrous night.

The Neville Longbottom of 1997 bears little resemblance to his 1991 counterpart. Mr. Longbottom accompanied Mr. Harry Potter and four other schoolmates to a shocking encounter with suspected Death Eaters who were holding several members of prominent families under their control. According to DMLE sources, Mr. Longbottom had his own experience with the Cruciatus Curse in the Department of Mysteries. This year, Mr. Longbottom is a member of the Duelling Club at Hogwarts. He is reputedly a gifted herbologist, and is often seen handling the most dangerous plants Hogwarts has to offer. Between the duelling floor and the greenhouse, he is obviously expert with a blade.

Like Harry Potter, Neville Longbottom lost his parents to You-Know-Who and his followers. Like Mr. Potter, he has become a potent wizard. One Hogwarts student described Mr. Longbottom as a 'brutal duellist' who 'beats carnivorous plants into submission'. Another said that students are afraid to face Mr. Longbottom in Defence practicals. Like Mr. Potter, Mr. Longbottom has a powerful incentive to despise Death Eaters, to wish them dead.

The Daily Prophet has reported that all five men murdered by blade in the last several months were intimately connected to You-Know-Who and his operations in the 1970s and early 1980s. Who knows the identities of the Death Eaters who escaped from the Longbottom house that evening? One source is Algernon Croaker, Mr. Longbottom's great-uncle, who is currently teaching at Hogwarts. Another source is retired Auror Alastor Moody, a known associate of Mr. Potter.

Could Neville Longbottom be hunting down the former Death Eaters and their associates who were responsible for the incapacitation of his parents? Could Harry Potter be aiding his revenge?

Most wizards could understand their desire for revenge, and frankly many wizards would join them in their desire.

Head Auror Rufus Scrimgeour has investigated the members of the Hogwarts Duelling Club, to include both Mr. Longbottom and Mr. Potter. The Daily Prophet reports that Mr. Potter has been cleared of committing the killings, but a source within the Auror Corps hints that Mr. Potter's actions are nonetheless suspicious. Mr. Longbottom is one of eight persons associated with the Duelling Club who remain under investigation, according to the same source.

Our very way of life depends upon keeping good order. Without it, we risk the revealing of our existence to the Muggle world. Our society cannot tolerate vigilantism, no matter the reasons and no matter the stature of the vigilantes. If Neville Longbottom is in fact avenging his parents and if Harry Potter or others are somehow aiding him, then all must be stopped and all must be prosecuted to the full extent of the law.

The Watcher , March 15, 1997

DMLE ENQUIRY INTO KILLINGS EXPANDS TO HOGWARTS

Several students already cleared, more to follow

Members of the Auror Corps, led by Head Auror Rufus Scrimgeour, paid a visit to Hogwarts on March 13 in order to question members of the school's Duelling Club. "Given that a sword or similar blade has been used in all of the killings, it was logical for us to investigate the largest concentration of accomplished swordsmen in England," according to Mr. Scrimgeour.

As part of the enquiry, Aurors spoke with Miss Hannah Abbott, 17; Mr. Elston Betancourt, 18; Miss Susan Bones, 17; Miss Holly Bruce, 18; Mr. Robert Cadwallader, 18; Mr. Anthony Goldstein, 17; Mr. Gregory Goyle, 17; Miss Daphne Greengrass, 17; Miss Morag McDougal, 17; Mr. Adrian Pucey, 18; Mr. Ronald Weasley, 17; and five under-aged wizards or witches. In addition, Aurors interviewed Club manager Mr. William Weasley, 29; and Club instructor and former Auror N. Tonks, 23. Mr. Scrimgeour also met with Mr. Harry Potter, 16; and Miss Hermione Granger, 17.

Mr. Scrimgeour reported that most of those interviewed could not have participated in one or more of the killings, and are thus unlikely suspects at best. Specifically, the Head Auror announced that among the students, Miss Abbott, Mr. Betancourt, Miss Bones, Miss Bruce, Miss Granger, Mr. Pucey and three under-aged wizards or witches were immediately ruled out as suspects. Mr. Harry Potter has also been ruled out as a suspect by the DMLE.

Mr. Scrimgeour would not confirm whether Mr. Neville Longbottom was one of the under-aged

wizards in question, or even if Mr. Longbottom had been interviewed. Mr. Longbottom is known to be a member of the Duelling Club and has been the subject of wild speculations in recent days. The DMLE expects to conclude the Hogwarts phase of its investigation in the next two weeks.

the *Daily Prophet* , March 15, 1997

(He didn't put a date on this one but it has to go mid March to mid April - AMP)

Harry reached the last step and walked out onto the top of the Astronomy Tower. Just as he'd been told, Neville was leaning against the parapet and staring off into space.

“Scared off the snoggers, eh?” Harry said.

“Looks that way,” Neville returned without turning away from the stars.

Harry said, “Er... it's a long way down, isn't it?”

“I'm not going to jump,” Neville laughed.

Harry braced himself against the parapet next to Neville. “It's pretty cold out here,” he said.

Neville blurted out, “It's better than being in there. It was like this for you during the Tri-Wizard Tournament, wasn't it?”

“It's always been like that for me. Everyone expects something from me, and they don't like it when I do something unexpected,” Harry said.

“I didn't do it, not any of it, and I don't know who did,” Neville told him.

“I never thought you did,” Harry told him in return.

“Doesn't mean I'm not glad they're dead,” Neville added.

Harry said, “I suppose I can understand that. For what it's worth, I didn't do any of it, either.”

“Never thought it, not once. Besides, you wouldn't bother with a sword – you'd melt them or blow them to bits or something,” Neville said.

“Let's go inside. We'll go to my quarters; you won't be bothered there,” said Harry.

Neville mused, “Maybe I should go and find Susie. She... oh, bugger. Now, don't you say a word,

Harry – ”

“Me? Who do you think I am: Finnigan?” Harry teased him.

“Fair enough. It's just that... I swear, Harry, just spending time with Susie sees me right! She's... well, she's perfect. I figured you'd understand, what with Hermione and all...” Neville said unsteadily.

Harry thought for a moment and then said, “I suppose I do, but I doubt it's quite the same. Hermione and me, we've known each other for such a long time... it's like... it's like she's the old cloak you'll always pull down first because it's warmer than all the rest, or... I don't know...”

“Shut it, Harry,” Neville said quietly.

Harry went on without missing a beat: “...it's... it's like she's a really comfortable pair of trainers, the kind that are all broken in and you never want to take off...”

Neville whispered forcefully, “For the love of Merlin, *shut it* !”

“She's right behind me, isn't she?” said Harry. When Neville gave an ashen-faced nod, he added, “Well... it's a good thing she knows I'm pants at talking about feelings and that sort of thing, eh?”

Hermione said, “I'm an old pair of shoes, am I?”

Harry did his best to keep his shoulders from reflexively rising. “Er... I meant it in a good way – you know that, right...?” he said cautiously.

“I do know what you were trying to say. *Honestly* , a pair of trainers...” she huffed.

“Am I forgiven?” he asked.

“I suppose so. You're like... like... oh, I don't know. I'll think of something horrid, just give me a few minutes,” she returned.

“I'm ready to go inside now,” Neville said with a sigh.

Hermione gave him a chaste hug and told him, “No one who knows you is taking this seriously, Neville. There are a few people at Harry's rooms, but they're all the right sort.”

Harry frowned; “You were there for quite a while, weren't you?” he asked her.

“I might have been. Now, let's get out of this chill,” she said.

The first person to rise from a chair when they walked into Harry's front room was Susan Bones. She quickly pulled Neville into an embrace and said, “Don't you disappear like that!” Harry quickly looked away to hide his grin; with the Marauder's Map available, it wasn't as though Neville could actually hide away in the castle.

Justin Finch-Fletchley looked up from a book and said gamely, “Good to see you, Longbottom. Don't let the jackals around here get you down, right?”

Neville eyed him suspiciously and said, “You don't think I did it, then?”

Justin set his book down on Hannah Abbott's lap – which drew a flustered harrumph – and returned, “Of course I don't – it's ridiculous on its face... not that you haven't got the will or the skill, but it's just not something you'd do. Look, I made a mistake in second year: I bought into the rumours about Harry, and look how that turned out. I'll not make the same mistake twice.”

Morag McDougal, who was poring over a series of incomprehensible parchments on the dining table, said matter-of-factly, “Whomever is killing these men is more cold-blooded than you'll ever be, Longbottom. If you'd done it, you'd be wallowing in guilt. Tony and Holly and I have been quick to jump on the rumours in our common room, and we'll keep on doing it.” With that she returned her attention to the reams of mind-boggling formulae.

Anthony Goldstein stood next to her, with one of the parchments in hand. “It's not fair you're caught up in this, Neville – you don't deserve it,” he said.

“I asked Ron Weasley to fetch your books. I don't know about you, but I'm behind on my Herbology paper,” Susan said to Neville.

Neville put on a satisfied grin. “I should be able to help you with that,” he said.

“I'll get back to marking these papers, then. Have fun with the Ravenclaws, Hermione,” Harry said with a smirk.

Without looking up from the table, Morag said, “At least we have a variety of pursuits. It's all brooms and battles with your lot.”

“Don't forget marking papers,” said Justin; “I see a lot of red ink there... whose papers are they?”

“Fourth-year Defence, and they're rubbish,” Harry said.

Anthony smirked, “You aren't exactly a scholar, Harry. They must be really awful.”

“Oi! I had the best Defence OWL score in 150 years, so I'm not the village idiot, either,” Harry protested. He vanished the student's name from the paper atop the stack and waved it at Anthony.

“What, you want me to look it over?” Anthony asked.

“See for yourself – this one's classic. I don't know if it's because they didn't learn anything last year, or if they're just dunderheads, but most of the papers have been like this,” Harry said.

Anthony quickly read through the paper, and then read it again. “Dunderheads,” he concluded.

Justin said, “Gads, you both sound like Snape! I wonder how the old bat's doing, anyway? A few

students are claiming he's still lurking around in the castle.” Harry resisted temptation and kept his mouth shut; he did cast a brief but sharp glance at Hermione.

The room quieted after that, as everyone descended into their work. Harry was putting the finishing red check marks on the twenty-second parchment from the fourth-year Gryffindors and contemplating the value of a repeat year for the whole lot, when Morag let loose a long huff of frustration.

“Granger, I actually want to give an opinion on your work, but I *can't* . I don't like to admit I'm over matched, but there you are. Ask me again when I've completed a Mastery in runes,” she said reluctantly; “Haven't you asked Croaker to review it?”

“Croaker loathes me,” Hermione said bluntly.

Morag said, “That's a problem, isn't it? Tony, you're our rank expert... can you follow this?”

Anthony sat up stiffly in his chair and said, “Yeah, I think I can, actually... I've seen some of these sequences before, but the architecture... it's unheard-of. It's so obvious, though. Hermione, if you're right about this and it works, it could change the whole practice of warding. I've got about a million questions, but you've got my attention. Is this the work that Professor Croaker made you quit?”

“It's a variation on it,” said Hermione.

Anthony looked back to one of the sheets on the table and asked, “When can I start asking questions, then?”

Hermione made eye contact with Harry and then replied, “Let's take this to the library or the Great Hall, all right?”

Harry caught Neville as he was about to leave with Susan and the rest of the students, and quietly asked him to stay behind. As soon as everyone else had left and the door was closed, Neville asked, “Now what's this about?”

Harry wasn't sure how to begin. He settled for saying, “It's not easy to be a friend of mine, Neville, and it's only going to get worse. The Marquis had a talk with me before the Yule break, and the Headmaster's told me more or less the same thing. You know that some of the papers have been calling me The Chosen One. The goblins call me that, too –”

“Are you trying to find out if I'm on your side? 'Cause if you are, then the answer's 'yes' – of course I am,” Neville said.

Harry pressed on, “It's a bit more than that, actually. When the Headmaster defeated Grindelwald, he had a group of wizards and witches who helped him. They were a team, see?”

“I know my dad was an Auror, but... Gran hit the sherry a bit hard once, and... well, she said that my mum and dad were part of another group back in the day, some sort of Order...? That's what

you're doing, isn't it?" Neville returned.

"That's it exactly," Harry said.

Neville immediately said, "If you're asking, then I'm in."

"It's going to be hard. The sodding *Watcher* already thinks we're killers, the both of us. Can you imagine what they'd say if they found out about this? I can see it now: 'Longbottom joins Potter's army'. Do you really want to get crossed up in that?" Harry asked him.

Neville said, "I'm not letting some stupid paper decide for me what's right and wrong. Can I ask you something?"

"Yeah, sure," Harry said.

Neville asked, "I figure this Chosen One business is the truth, it makes too much sense not to be. V-Voldemort was after your parents and mine at the same time. It could have been me, couldn't it?"

"It was going to be one of us, yeah," Harry admitted.

"If it was me, and not you... would you have been on my team, part of my Order?" Neville asked him.

"Yes," Harry said without a moment's hesitation.

"So why's it any different for me? Like I said, I'm in," said Neville.

Harry felt a small weight lifted and said, "Thank you."

"How big is this Order going to be?" asked Neville.

"Me and twelve others," Harry said.

Neville said, "It's an honour. Is it all right for me to ask who else is in?"

"I've only talked to Ron so far," said Harry.

Neville's eyes widened; he said, "Really? Er... wow... it really *is* an honour. I'd have thought you would have been to Hermione first, though."

Harry said, "Hermione isn't part of it. She'll be there alongside, but everyone says she has something else to do."

"Makes sense, I suppose," Neville said with a shrug; "So what's this Order called, then?"

"The Knights of St. Peter," said Harry.

Neville goggled, “Knights? Gran will be surprised by that – me, a knight, and to Harry Potter no less!”

Harry chuckled and said, “It's not as though I'm allowed to knight people, but that's the name we're using. There will be an oath, Neville, and I'd rather you didn't talk about this until that's done. We'll do the oath after everyone's on board. The Marquis says it's bad luck to take the oath last, so it's arranged that none of us will know who that is.”

“I'll take whatever oath you ask, because I know it'll be a fair one. I'm in this to the end, Harry,” Neville promised.

“If you're willing, I'd like five names from you, of people who you think should be part of this,” Harry said.

“You'll have it by morning, but... I have to ask you something: whom do you think is talking to the papers?” said Neville.

"I haven't thought about that; I probably should, though," Harry admitted.

"It has to be someone in the Duelling Club, but I can't imagine who. I don't think it's Malfoy, though - the papers haven't been very kind to him this time," said Neville.

"I don't think it's Malfoy, either, but you're right - it has to be someone from the Club," Harry agreed; then he realised there was one more important thing to bring up: “Um... there's one more thing, and you might not like it...”

Neville gave him a curious look and said, “All right...”

Harry said uneasily, “It's like this: with knights and orders and such, there's a token – something everyone is given, right? Well, erm, it's not the best thing, but the Marquis sort of did it on his own...”

“It can't be that bad, can it?” Neville asked.

“It's a sword,” Harry said quickly.

Neville paled and managed to say, “Rotten luck, that...”

Harry Potter and the Years of Rebellion

From the notes: The Most Honourable and Courageous House of Potter [SPOILERS]

Excerpted from: Atkinson, D.G. (2023). The Most Honourable and Courageous House of Potter. In A.K. Hess, F.A. Villaume & H.J. Granger (Eds.), *Great Families of the Western Wizarding World*, 409th ed. (pp. MCCCXLVII – MCCCXLIX). Edinburgh, UK: Obscurus Press.

THE MOST HONOURABLE AND COURAGEOUS HOUSE OF POTTER

The Most Honourable and Courageous House of Potter is the fourteenth oldest remaining family house in Great Britain. It is arguably the most well-known wizarding house in the world presently, owing to the exploits of its current head and the sacrifices of his parents.

MEMBERSHIP

As of the time of publication, the House consists of the Head of House; his consort and her parents; the Head's designated magical heir; seventeen persons who have sworn fealty; and five persons who were members of the House of Black at the time it was consolidated into the House of Potter. The House had seven human employees and three house elves in its service. The House is entered into nine reciprocal relationships involving house room and protection, most notably with the Houses of Longbottom and Pucey. The House holds regency for the Original Noble House of McIlvaine, one of the nine so-called 'compact families'.

ASSETS

Financial

Most of the House's assets in the wizarding world were consumed or lost during the Riddle War of 1997-1998. A 2019 report by the Ministry for Magic of England and Scotland estimated that the House's net worth was approximately 6,000,000 galleons. It is widely understood that the majority of the House's assets are held in the non-magical world, and Ministry for Magic estimates do not take such assets into account.

Political

The House of Potter controls six hereditary seats in Magical England and Scotland's 88-member

House of Peers. The current Head also holds a Life Peerage, one of eight allowed to stand at any given time. As of 2022, the hereditary seats were held in proxy by the Head of the House of Longbottom. Under the governing arrangement put into force after the Riddle War, the House of Peers is primarily responsible for judicial matters and agreements between Britain and other wizarding governments and organisations.

As of 2022, three persons who have sworn fealty to the house held elective seats in the 108-member House of Commons. The House of Commons maintains oversight of the Ministry for Magic of England and Scotland, and the Minister for Magic serves at its pleasure.

HISTORY

The Wrights and the Potters

The magical lineage of the House of Potter is generally held to begin in 1292, with the birth of Bowman Wright (1292-1360). Wright and his two siblings, Edmund (b. 1294) and Elinor (b. 1296), were the offspring of Ambrose and Catherine Wright, a non-magical couple; Mrs. Wright died in childbirth in 1296. The neighboring farm belonged to a Squib, who recognised that the three children were likely magical and arranged for Mr. Wright to take on a house maid in order to care for the children. The young house maid, Gillian Brodnax, was a witch who eventually married Mr. Wright. Mr. Wright was a tinkerer as well as a farmer, and the two Wright sons were mechanically inclined as well as magical. Bowman Wright introduced his father to Quidditch in 1306; both were appalled by the use of the Snidget, and thus began Bowman Wright's quest to craft a suitable replacement. He married Avis Waldegrave (1293-1383), a third-generation witch, in 1314.

By 1323, when Mr. Wright's Golden Snitch made its competition debut, Madam Wright née Waldegrave had borne four daughters. Two years later, Wright took on an apprentice enchanter in order to keep up with demand for his Golden Snitches and innovative Bludgers and Quaffles. Mathias Potter (1303-1394) became part of the Wright household during his apprentice and journeyman years, and a junior business partner upon completion of his mastery in 1337. Philippa, the eldest of Wright's daughters and twelve years' Potter's junior, began a relationship with Potter after having left home for several years. The two married in 1341 and produced six children in ten years. The eldest child, Samuel (1342-1420), was the first Potter to attend Hogwarts; he entered the family business upon completing at the school in 1361.

For the next three generations, the senior line Potters produced single children; fortunately for the future of the House, all were male. Brendan Potter (1385-1457) and Nicholas Potter (1412-1500) continued to slowly grow the family business. Bartemius Potter (1447-1509) married the last of the Brodnax family, Edith (1452-1536) in 1472 and proceeded to produce six daughters in fourteen years.

The Potter

William Potter (1488-1599), also known as The Potter, was born at the ancestral Wright home in Wales. William was reputed to be extraordinarily competitive as a child. He was also

exceptionally tall for his era: 5-feet-6 inches upon entering Hogwarts at age 11, and 6 feet-5 inches upon leaving at age 18. First of the Potters to compete in professional Quidditch, he played as a Beater for the Caerphilly Catapults from 1506 until 1509. He was forced to enter the family business upon the death of Bartemius, and took on the next phase of his life with the same competitive spirit as he demonstrated on the pitch. He began crafting custom brooms in 1510; prior to that time, Quidditch players had charmed their own brooms, frequently with lethal consequences. In 1512, William attempted to market the first standardized broom. William's design, called the Broadsword, was based on his own Beater broom. It was chiefly purposed for families as it easily accommodated two riders or an adult and two children. Although the cost was prohibitive for most magical households, the attempt bolstered William's fortunes and drew the attention of Emma Molyngton, widow of the last Head of the House of Molyngton. Madam Molyngton reintroduced her eldest daughter, Beatrice (1489-1600), to William; the two had attended one year apart at Hogwarts.

Through a group of his friends, William became involved in an effort to quash an outbreak of dark wizardry in the south of England. By 1514, the outbreak had erupted into an organized and violent opposition to the Wizards' Council [predecessor of the Ministry for Magic of England and Scotland]. Though neither a trained duellist nor an exceptionally gifted tactician, William found himself at the forefront of the effort to break the opposition. At six and a half feet tall and armour-clad, he was doubtless intimidating. Accounts of the day described his appearance in battle as 'fearsome' and 'enough to turn a man from boasting to terror'.

The wizards working to defend the Wizards' Council won the day, at the cost of three bloody battles over a five month period. William was credited at the time with slaying ninety-one opponents. It was almost certainly a reference founded in arithmancy [seven times thirteen], and was disputed thus in 1528 by William himself: 'My fearsome reputation was surely borne of alchemy, for those who first spake it transfigured shyte to gold'. Contemporary scholars of magical combat place the actual number who died at William's hand between ten and fifteen. There is no doubt that he benefited from his reputation following the battles. On December 8, 1514, he was offered a hereditary seat at the Council that he immediately accepted.

Madam Molyngton's efforts increased, and William took Beatrice Molyngton in marriage on October 31, 1515. Beatrice was not only the heiress of the House of Molyngton but also the House of Piggott by consolidation. The marriage brought three lines of seven or more generations together, and William was solidly eligible to declare a House of Potter. However, he was determined to wait until an heir was produced. The Potters produced twin girls in 1517 and a third daughter in 1520. The House of Potter was publicly declared and acknowledged within a year of the birth of William's heir, Daniel (1522-1604). Daniel was followed by two more sons and an additional daughter by 1530. In honour of the Potter's original magical lineage, William formally named the family business as Wright and Sons in 1531.

Daniel Potter showed little interest in Wright & Sons, and it was left to William to lead the family business until he took ill in the spring of 1593. At 71, Daniel was ill equipped to take William's place, and management of Wright & Sons fell to Daniel's younger brother Richard.

A Controversial Succession

Daniel and his wife, the former Lettice Bartelot, produced two children: Humphrey (1555-1600) and Isabel (1559-1647). Isabel became a gifted healer and married the renowned Mungo Bonham in 1588. Humphrey, a gourmand who was rarely seen in the company of women, never married and never took a role within Wright & Sons.

When William Potter died in 1599, both 77-year-old Daniel and 44-year-old Humphrey were in ill health. Under the terms of succession, the House of Potter would have fallen to Isabel Bonham née Potter. Were that the case, the House of Potter would by Council rule have yielded to a new House of Bonham. Both Isabel and Mungo Bonham had long made clear that they had no intention of joining Wright & Sons.

Given their disinterest in the family business, Daniel's brother Richard Potter – who had worked for Wright & Sons for forty-five years and had led it for six – argued that he and his sons should inherit in the event that Humphrey died without issue. While Richard was talented in the world of business, he had no gift for family politics; all but one of his siblings loathed him. Daniel in particular had openly bemoaned the thought that the family legacy might pass through Richard.

Humphrey and Isabel came to an agreement that Isabel and Mungo's third son, Geoffrey (1599-1693), would become Humphrey's son by blood adoption but would be raised by the Bonhams. The blood adoption was carried out on March 22, 1600, and Humphrey died six days later. Richard fought the arrangement for nearly twenty years; when he died in 1619, he was estranged from his own children over the matter. Richard's eldest son, Marcus Potter, welcomed Geoffrey Potter into the family business upon the younger man's graduation from Hogwarts.

During his Hogwarts days, Geoffrey inadvertently quashed the 1612 Goblin Rebellion; his casual mention of a gathering of goblins in Hogsmeade at the end of a student visiting day led to a quick intervention. Geoffrey was an extraordinarily talented spell crafter; he went on to marry Marion Blane, the daughter of renowned charms master Balfour Blane. Madam Potter née Blane was a gifted charms mistress in her own right, and under Geoffrey and Marcus' leadership Wright & Sons expanded into the manufacture of charmed household items.

Geoffrey's third child and heir, Hugh Potter (1643-1711), played a token role in Wright & Sons. Richard Potter's extended family were allowed to direct the business until Hugh's grandson, Henry Potter (1718-1801), assumed leadership in 1753. Hugh Potter's most notable activity was his vigorous opposition to the International Code of Wizarding Secrecy, which caused the House of Potter to lose influence within the Wizengamot for more than thirty years.

Hugh's son, Giles Potter (1690-1768), was a key figure in the Goblin Rebellion of 1726. Giles led negotiations on behalf of the Ministry for Magic; the goblins later gifted Giles with an honorary true name, Fingerthief. In 1766, Giles served for eight months as the caretaker Minister for Magic during a contentious transition of power. He remains the only Potter to serve as a Minister or Deputy Minister.

Henry Potter's son, John (1763-1843), consolidated the family lineage with the ancient House of Stanwix upon his marriage to the last Stanwix heir, Felicia (1774-1923), in 1794. The Stanwix line was well known for being exceptionally long-lived. Though Felicia Potter's life was brief in

comparison to her younger sisters, she was nonetheless present at the wedding of her great-great-grandson Alexander in 1919. Ursula Hensel née Stanwix died at the age of 163 in 1951. Griselda Marchbanks née Stanwix (1799-2016) had a notable career in government service that spanned more than 160 years; at the age of 197, she returned to her first love of teaching and served on both the final faculty of Hogwarts and the founding faculty of the Royal Academy.

A Legacy of Courage

Both John Potter and his son Martin (1800-1876) played significant roles in Wright & Sons, but Martin's son Roger chose otherwise. Roger Potter (1831-1886) was a highly skilled spell crafter and had a remarkable career as a duellist on the international circuit. Most experts cite the 1850s and 1860s as the most competitive decades in the history of the sport. Against opponents of extraordinary skill and renown, Roger captured the world title four times (1859, 1861, 1865, and 1866). The Marquis de Maupassant famously proclaimed him to be the second greatest duellist of the nineteenth century. Roger left the duelling stage and joined the Ministry for Magic of England and Scotland as a Hit Wizard in 1869. When the rise of the Dark Lord Tramoso in the 1870s threatened all of Europe, Roger was recruited into an international force led by the Marquis de Maupassant that also included such notable wizards as Albus Dumbledore, Boris Karensky, Tiberius Ogden and Silvestre Goya.

Roger's son Zebulon (1857-1939) took the helm of Wright & Sons upon Martin Potter's death. Zebulon and Roger's already tattered relationship was destroyed when both Roger and Ariadne Potter née Longbottom (1831-1895) left England in 1880 to recruit and train local resistance movements in Germany. The two men never spoke again. In 1885, Roger left Germany to join the Marquis de Maupassant's gruelling advance against Tramoso's self-proclaimed kingdom in Catalonia. He was killed on October 31, 1886, the final day of the Battle of Barcelona and less than ten minutes before the Marquis and his four remaining lieutenants took Tramoso's life. Ariadne Potter's health quickly deteriorated after Roger's death; she was admitted to St. Mungo's long-term ward in 1888, where she spent the final seven years of her life.

The Lord of Business

Zebulon Potter was considered a ruthless and disagreeable man by most who knew him. He was also the single most important figure in European wizarding business in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In 1881 he married Gladys Boothby (1859-1943), a cutting-edge enchantress who created the Moontrimmer broomstick in 1901. Madam Potter née Boothby led Wright & Company's first subsidiary, the Comet Broom Company, for the first forty years of its existence. In 1906, whilst sailing on a trans-Atlantic sailing ship operated by non-magicals, Zebulon became aware of 'radio-telegraphy', a new non-magical means of communication that allowed one speaker to reach many listeners. A year later, Zebulon demonstrated his 'magical wireless transmitter' by broadcasting an address by Minister for Magic Sheffield Aldicott into the chambers of the Wizengamot [predecessor body to the House of Peers]. Within two years, Wright & Sons had produced the first wizarding wireless receivers available to the public and launched the Wizarding Wireless Network.

Zebulon's eldest son Alexander (1889-1978) completed his education at Hogwarts in 1907. He

was brought into Wright & Sons for one year, at which time he was abruptly dismissed. Alexander's younger brother Charlus (1909-1970) was born shortly thereafter. In 1921, Zebulon began dismantling Wright & Sons and selling its various assets. By 1926, the Comet Broom Company was the only business wholly owned by the House of Potter. Potter retained the licensing rights for wizarding wireless transmitters until 1928 and receivers until 1931. As a result of the sell-off, the House of Potter's liquid assets in 1929 exceeded fifty million galleons. A 1976 analysis conducted by Gringotts estimated that the rights to wizarding wireless transmission and reception charms generated an average income of five million galleons per annum over the forty year period following sale of the rights. In an interview shortly before his death in 1939, Zebulon Potter said that the sale of those rights was his second greatest regret, while his greatest regret was the 'utter lack of business acumen and good sense on the part of my elder son.'

Recent History

Alexander married the House of Henshawe heiress, Elizabeth, in 1919; this was one of the very few decisions taken by Alexander of which his father approved. The wizarding world experienced the same economic upheaval in the 1920s and 1930s as did non-magical Europe. Alexander Potter quickly made a name for himself as a philanthropist, much to Zebulon's rather public dismay. The elder Potter cut off his son's access to the family trust at least five times between 1921 and 1937. Despite the rancor between father and son, Zebulon never followed through with threats of disinheritance or disownment and Alexander received the remains of Wright and Sons upon his father's death in 1939.

The House of Potter kept a low public profile from Zebulon's death through the end of the Grindelwald War and the associated non-magical Second World War. The Potters were widely seen as neutral parties. Scrolls declassified by the Ministry for Magic of England and Scotland following the Riddle War of 1997-1998 tell a different story, however. Alexander Potter was in fact the principal financial backer behind the efforts of Albus Dumbledore and his colleagues to eliminate the threat of Grindelwald. Elizabeth Potter and a network of her friends on the continent engaged in a clandestine effort from 1940 through 1945 to evacuate as many as five thousand members of the Veela, Romany and Hebrew magical communities and others targeted by Grindelwald.

Charlus and Dorea Potter née Black gave birth to David Potter in 1942, at the height of the wartime period. By then, Alexander was 53 years old and without issue. David was therefore presumed to be the next Potter heir. After the Wars, in addition to continuing their philanthropic efforts, Alexander and Elizabeth Potter began to invest in new businesses in an attempt to spark the weak wizarding economy. Many of these flourished, and the House of Potter's coffers began to grow once again.

In the summer of 1956, David Potter drowned whilst swimming with school friends. The loss of David left the dwindling Potter family without an heir. Alexander quietly sought a blood adoption from an allied family, without success. Most unexpectedly, James Potter was born two years later; Alexander Potter found himself a first-time father at the age of 69.

In 1967, the Potters made the greatest of their casual investments when Alexander staked a 22-

year-old broom designer named Devlin Whitehorn. This gave the House of Potter 34% ownership of the Nimbus Racing Broom Company. Alexander restructured Wright & Sons in 1969 as a holding company for the Comet Broom Company, his share of Nimbus and other investments.

James Potter (1958-1981) became the second Potter in four generations to marry a so-called 'Muggle-born' witch. James and Lily Potter née Evans (1959-1981) were Head Boy and Head Girl respectively for Hogwarts' 1976-77 school year, and married three months following the end of their studies. The six months following their marriage were remarkable for their losses. Alexander and Elizabeth Potter both contracted dragon pox during the catastrophic outbreak in the fall of 1977, as did Charlus Potter's widow, Dorea. By February 1978, all three had succumbed. This was followed closely by the mysterious deaths of Lily Potter's father and mother, which are now attributed to the work of the Dark Lord Riddle's followers. In June 1979, a column in England's *Daily Prophet* observed that the much-lauded House of Potter consisted of James Potter, his wife, and a house-elf.

The current Head of House and plans for the future

The deaths of James and Lily Potter on October 31, 1981 and the unlikely survival of Harry Potter (1980-), which concluded the Riddle War of 1976-1981, as well as the younger Mr. Potter's eventual defeat of the Dark Lord Riddle in 1998 are subjects of considerable documentation and speculation, and will not be elaborated upon here.

Harry Potter assumed his place as Head of the House of Potter in July, 1996 upon legal emancipation by his late guardian, Sirius Black. Mr. Potter also assumed headship for the House of Black [see pp. MCLXXI - MCLXXXIII] at that time. Mr. Potter completed six years of studies at Hogwarts prior to the beginning of active hostilities in the Riddle War of 1997-1998. Like many others, he received an honorary certificate of completion following the war.

Mr. Potter has been in what is understood to be an exclusive relationship with Hermione Granger (1979-) since 1997, and the couple have shared a permanent residence since 2000. Mr. Potter and Ms. Granger were handfasted from September, 1997 through August, 1998, but allowed the handfasting to expire and have never recorded an ICW-recognised marriage or binding.

Mr. Potter and Ms. Granger's ongoing engagement in the non-magical world is broadly known but incompletely documented. Various reports have suggested that Mr. Potter and Ms. Granger married under non-magical auspices sometime between 2001 and 2006, but no records to support these claims have ever been publicly presented. It is widely rumoured that Mr. Potter attended a non-magical school in London between 2002 and 2005 that specialises in the study of economics and politics; no records have been located, which suggests that either this rumour is false or that he studied under another name.

According to the non-magical United Kingdom's Companies House, Mr. Potter is director of Wright and Sons, Ltd., which reported 16,520,000 Euros [approximately 3,000,000 Galleons] in net profit for 2022. Mr. Potter is also listed by the Ministry for Magic of England and Scotland as director of Wright and Sons; as a legacy business [founded prior to 1692], it is not required to publicly report performance. Mr. Potter is known to be engaged in philanthropy under the

auspices of Wright and Sons in the magical world and via PGW Charities, Ltd. in the non-magical world.

Ms. Granger is in the periodic employ of Obscurus Press where she has edited more than 40 books and scrolls, including several sections of this publication. In 2013, Ms. Granger completed an advanced course of study relating to ancient history and languages. As a result, she was awarded the title of Doctor of Philosophy, and is customarily identified as Dr. Granger in non-magical settings and publications.

As of the time of publication, Mr. Potter and Ms. Granger are reported to have no children; however, it is impossible to state this with absolute certainty, as the pair are extraordinarily private and do not reside in a wizarding enclave. In 2016, Mr. Potter named Ronald Longbottom (2012-), the third son of Neville Longbottom and Susan Longbottom née Bones, as magical heir to the House of Potter in the event that Mr. Potter has no surviving issue of his own at the time of his death. According to an information request directed at the Ministry for Magic of England and Scotland in 2022, this agreement remains open.

No similar agreement is known to be in place for the House of Black. This is a matter of some controversy within the House of Peers; some have argued that Mr. Potter cannot consolidate the much-older House of Black into the House of Potter, and must either explicitly name a Black heir or surrender the family to a cadet line.

There may be a designated heiress of the House of McIlvaine, but no public registry requirement is imposed on the remaining so-called 'Compact families'. Despite their close friendship, it is thought unlikely that Mr. Potter would turn to the family of Mr. Longbottom for more than one magical heir. Speculation regarding the identity of a McIlvaine heiress in recent years has centred around Brìghde Duke (2009-), the daughter of Kirley Duke and Heather Duke née Magruder, and god-daughter of Mr. Potter and Ms. Granger. Allegra Pucey [daughter of Adrian Pucey and Anna Pucey née deFlandres] and Rachel Goldstein [daughter of Anthony Goldstein and Ginevra Goldstein née Weasley] have also received mention but are thought less likely given that both are being raised and educated outside of Britain.