

**Mutant Storm
Special Notice**

Welcome to the start of Mutant Storm. A few notes, before we begin.

This story is a Harry/Ginny hookup. You've been warned. If you don't like that relationship, stop now and leave. We will not put up with any whining, bitching or moaning over the ship. You were not ambushed or tricked in any way. If you continue to read from this point on, knowing you dislike/hate/loath the ship, you have no one to blame but yourself, so refrain from commenting. If you comment anyway, we will simply delete your review, regardless of whatever else you had to say. Do yourself a favor and don't waste your time or ours.

As for Potterverse and X-Men canon, this story is AU in both 'verses. Don't like the idea? Again, don't read any further than this. We've twisted both to suit our needs, something you should all be used to at this point. Again, if that's not your thing, stop now and go elsewhere.

For those still here, we hope you enjoy the story.

Mutant Storm

Chapter 01 - Aftermath and Consequences

Standard Disclaimer:

“Threatened the readers about the ship. Check,” muttered Alyx.

“Warned the canon nazis away. Check,” she added.

“Called Rent-A-Llama. Check,” Bob added helpfully.

Alyx blinked and narrowed her eyes at him, then she pulled out the shotgun she was going to use on the shippers. “What did you say?” she asked tensely, while loading the gun.

“Nothing dear,” Bob replied, eying the double barreled gun nervously.

“Good, now shut up, I'm trying to figure out what I forgot. I know I forgot something,” she answered, pointing the gun at him.

Bob edged away slowly, nodding in fear.

“Now what did I forget?” she muttered.

“Did you forget to order the see through lingerie for our heroine? Or maybe the trampoline for that sex scene if Dorothy allows it?” Bob called from the edge of the stage. He was ready to dive into the orchestra pit in a second if she lifted the gun again.

“Dolt! We don't write smut!” she screamed. She raised the gun and Bob dived into the pit, crashing into a kettle drum.

In the front row Harry turned to Ginny and smiled. “I see they're off to a fine start.”

Ginny nodded wide eyed. This was her first time in the seat next to Harry, the seat of honor. “Yeah, but until they tell everyone that they don't own Harry Potter, they can't tell our story,” she complained.

Bob bounced out of the pit and up onto the stage. “That's it! That's what you forgot!” he chortled at Alyx who huffed at him. She hated when he chortled, especially when he chortled because he was right.

“Well she said the words,” she retorted bitterly, now she couldn't get Alan Rickman to do it for them.

“Yup, and on with the story. Oh and Harry? Don't get to chummy with the red head yet. You have a way to go before you get to grope red.”

Ginny snickered at Harry's grimace.

Mutant Storm

Chapter 01

Aftermath and Consequences

Hogwarts, School of Witchcraft and Wizardry...

Sirius was dead!

Harry Potter staggered from Dumbledore's office. All the time that Dumbledore was trying to explain to Harry why the world saw fit to piss on him and him alone, the pain in his head had been steadily increasing, along with his rage. The pain built and one thing dominated his thoughts.

Sirius was dead!

And still Dumbledore droned on about how he knew the Dursleys would not treat him well, and it was all Dumbledore's fault. The pain steadily mounted and he refused to give the Headmaster the satisfaction of knowing he was in pain. He was used to pain; it was an old friend, a companion that he welcomed with open arms. It was Dumbledore's gift to him, something he had given him time and time again. Only this time, he had gone too far.

Sirius was dead!

He vented only a small measure of his displeasure, destroying the old man's office and his things. In among his physical rage, his magic popped and sputtered, aiding him in destroying objects that mere physical force alone could not have accomplished.

Sirius was dead!

Harry stumbled on the last stair and narrowly avoided falling to the floor. Just outside Dumbledore's office, he bit back a moan as the pain increased to new levels. He hurried to the nearest bathroom, knowing he was going to throw up.

Sirius was dead!

Tumbling through the bathroom door, he fell to his knees, then down to all fours, and groaned slightly. His muscles bunched and his brow beaded with sweat. Something was happening to him that he didn't understand. *But how is this different from anything else in my life?* he

asked himself.

Something deep inside was responding to his rage, to his anger at the injustices in his life. Something deep within him was awakening. The air around him started to roil and churn from the magic flowing off him. He reared back up on his knees and his body burst into a blinding aura of golden light. Silently he screamed, as not one, but two sources of power awoke, fed by his emotional storm.

He keeled over on all fours again, breathing heavily, and looked at his arms in shock. They were transparent! Catching his breath, he sat back on his heels and looked at his hand in wonder. With no effort at all, he was able to change from solid to transparent.

Harry Potter was changing and the world would never be the same.

Had Dumbledore's instruments been working, they would have been screaming and sounding alarms.

Up in his office, the old man looked wistfully at the remains of his office and shook his head. It would take him many weeks to repair all of his instruments, if they could be repaired. His only regret was that he could not make Harry understand that the sacrifices he was forced to make were for the good of their world. *Harry, he thought, isn't mature enough to make the connection between his sacrifice and the well-being of the wizarding world. It is a good thing I am here to guide him.*

King's Cross Station, London (10 days later)...

Harry shut the car door and waited for the explosion to begin. He didn't have long to wait. The Order's attempt to bully Vernon was sure to backfire, but he didn't mind. He was planning on putting his relatives in their place this summer anyway. All this meant was that his timetable would move up somewhat.

"Boy!" snapped Vernon, his face was already mottling a bright red. "What lies have you been telling those freaks?"

"None, Uncle," Harry said with a slight sneer.

Dudley giggled and looked at Harry, making faces at him. He was sure his father was going to put the freak in his place this summer once and for all.

"I am sick and tired of your freakish ways, boy. And it's going to stop this summer. I am going to beat you until you beg to never go back to that school. Do you hear me?" snarled Vernon.

Harry looked at Vernon with contempt. He wasn't planning on taking any more abuse, not from Vernon or from anyone else.

"I hear you," Harry said contemptuously.

Vernon glanced up, looking at him in the rear view mirror. "Don't use that tone with me, you useless sack of shit! We should have drowned you when you were left on our doorstep. You and all your kind deserve to die. Your parents were a waste, on the public dole..."

Harry tuned Vernon out, letting his anger simmer. It could wait until they got back to number four. Then he'd teach Vernon a new tune.

To Vernon's dismay, Harry looked at him in the mirror and instead of seeing fear in the boy's eyes, he saw disdain and lack of respect. It wasn't a look he was used to getting from the boy. He'd have to change that!

Headmaster's office, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry...

Dumbledore poured drinks for Minerva and Severus. "It's funny. I always look forward to the first day of school. Yet, once school is in session, I look forward to seeing them go home," Dumbledore said, amused.

Minerva took her drink. "Thank Merlin this year is over," she said tiredly.

"Yes, a most difficult year indeed," Dumbledore said softly. He looked around at the wreckage of what was his office. He had cleaned up and fixed what he could, but many of the more delicate pieces were beyond repair. He'd been able to put them back together, but they no longer functioned. It was a serious blow to the monitoring of his most important student, as he relied on those instruments for that purpose.

"Have you contacted Miss Granger's parents, Minerva?"

"I have, Headmaster. They do not have a problem with her attending extra classes during the week. They were planning on a series of day trips rather than an extended holiday this year and were happy to accommodate. And, of course, Molly doesn't have any problems with it either."

When Snape snorted and shook his head, Dumbledore turned to eye him. "You have something you wish to add to this conversation, Professor?" he asked.

"Yes. Training Granger and the Weasleys to fight? Why? They're just a bunch of impulsive Gryffindors, as bad as Potter himself," he said, barely repressing a snarl.

"Now, Severus, we've been over this before. Those three need the extra dueling training if they are to be of any use to the Order," Dumbledore said placatingly.

"And what of your golden boy, Potter?" he snapped. "Aren't you going to train him, as well?" Snape was worried. Reports in the newspapers were making disturbing references to Harry being 'The Chosen One' and he didn't like the implications of that.

"In time, when he is ready. He will see how far advanced his friends have become and ask for the same training for himself. For now, he is best

left where he is," Dumbledore replied sagely.

"I'm still not comfortable with that, Albus," Minerva said. "The last few days of school, Mr. Potter became very withdrawn and uncommunicative. I could barely get two words out of him, even when I confronted him directly."

"I'm sure he'll be fine, Minerva. He's had a shock, after all. But he'll bounce back; he always does," Dumbledore replied. If there was one thing he knew it was that Harry would bounce back, like always. The lad was resilient.

Number Four Privet Drive, Surrey, England...

"Shut the door, boy!"

Harry closed the front door, knowing full well that once it was closed and it was just him and his 'family', the outside world would be of no help. He didn't mind. The last few days at school had been an eye opening experience and his relatives would reap the rewards of that experience. He knew now he was alone, and it didn't matter.

He wasn't going to put up with it any more. Harry Potter had a talent that the Ministry couldn't detect. Underneath his seemingly calm exterior, he seethed with anger and guilt. He had a towering rage which he was barely able to control and it was about to be unleashed.

He turned to face his Uncle. Vernon's fist had already reached its maximum velocity. With his considerable bulk thrown in for good measure, the blow would be substantial. And it was. Except that it never touched Harry.

The blow slipped right through Harry, exited the back of his head and crashed into the wall. Vernon howled as the bones in his hand shattered. He danced back from his intended target, looking at him fearfully.

Dudley ran back into the room from the kitchen, and seeing his father whimpering in pain, he balled his fists and struck at Harry, with the same – predictable – result.

Stupidity was a genetic trait in the Dursley household.

Harry looked at the two Dursley men in contempt. "Worthless Muggles," he spat. "Give me one good reason why I should let you live."

Petunia shrieked from the doorway to the kitchen. "You can't perform magic; they'll expel you!"

Harry turned to gaze at her. While he wasn't actively using his magic, it was responding in subtle ways. His eyes glowed eerily and there was a faint light around his body.

"It's not magic, you ugly bint. God, you are the stupidest shrew I've ever met. I can't believe you and I share a blood connection, and it's certainly not something I'd admit to in public. All of you, into the living room. We have a few things to discuss. Well? Move!"

He crossed to the center of the living room and glared at his relatives. The Dursleys timidly entered the room, trying to keep as much distance as possible between themselves and Harry.

"Now, I'll ask again. Why should I let you three live? What possible purpose would it serve to allow your miserable, worthless lives to continue? Ah, I know, it will keep those stupid wizards off my back. Can't let my jailers know something is wrong in the prison."

Harry walked over and sat in Vernon's favorite chair. Both Dudley and Vernon watched him fearfully.

"For fourteen years I have put up with your abuse and starvation. No longer. Here's how things are going to play out this summer. Leave me alone. I will cook my own meals, but aside from that, I won't bother you unless you bother me. Bother me, just once, and you won't survive the outcome.

"Dudley, instead of terrorizing the neighborhood this summer, will do all of the chores. All of them. In fact, I'll give you a list of them to do every day."

Dudley glared at him and shook his head, refusing.

Harry stood and walked over to his cousin. He reached out one arm and his hand sank into Dudley's chest. The fat blond trembled and immediately lost control of his bladder.

"One squeeze and I can stop your heart, Dudders," Harry said quietly. "To the rest of the filthy Muggles it will look like heart failure because of your weight. So take your pick. Do the chores, or die."

"I'll do the chores. Please! I want to do them," whined Dudley.

Vernon and Petunia cowered back in fear and Petunia whimpered.

Harry pulled his hand from Dudley's chest. He was bluffing about squeezing, but the Dursleys didn't need to know that.

"Excellent. Start by cleaning up the mess you made. Aunt Petunia doesn't appreciate your turning her white rug into a urinal."

Harry returned to Vernon's chair and looked at them.

"Are we all clear on what we're doing this summer? You 'freaks' leave me alone, and come summer's end, you'll still be alive. Annoy me just once and you'll have a war on our hands that you can't win."

The three Dursleys nodded frantically.

"Fine. I'll be in my room until dinner," he said. A strange sound echoed in the room. Then, with a small puff of smoke, Harry was gone.

The Dursleys stood in their living room slowly coming to realize that the last fourteen years of abusing Harry had come home to roost and they weren't going to enjoy the results of their actions. Petunia led the stampede to escape the house, with Vernon and Dudley tied for second place.

Alone in his room, the door locked from the inside for a change, Harry collapsed on his tiny bed and started to weep. Sirius, Snape, Voldemort, Dumbledore, the prophecy, it was all too much. His mind went around and around in circles trying to make some sense out of the disaster that had become his life. And as he considered it, his depression mounted to an unbearable degree.

Harry's plunge into the abyss was complete. If Voldemort were to show up on Privet Drive, he'd calmly surrender his wand and accept his fate.

The stress that released his new abilities wasn't finished with him yet. He buried his face in his pillow and wept in frustration. He was tired of it all. If he could stomach the Dursleys again, he'd risk going downstairs for a knife to kill himself. He hated being here, he hated Dumbledore for sending him here, he hated and despaired.

Unknown to Harry, and the wizards who had imprisoned him, his emotional storm was sending shock waves around the world. He had become an epicenter of powerful energies, magical and otherwise. His cries were being heard in a most unusual place and were setting events in motion that would rock the Wizarding world, signaling the end of an era.

Westchester County, New York...

Xavier smiled and waited. He could hear the sound of running footsteps approaching. He expected she was coming for the same reason he was here now. They both felt the massive surge in mutant energies and the emotional cry for help that rode that wave of power. He could still feel it echoing around the world. A powerful mutant had awakened and was crying out for help.

"Professor!" Jean Summers said, skidding to a halt in front of the entrance to Cerebro.

"I take it you felt the power, and the anger, in that cry for help?"

The woman nodded, her expression confused and worried. "But there's more, Professor. I know this mutant."

Xavier swiveled his chair to face his student. "Oh? How is that possible, Jean? Even without using Cerebro, I can tell he's far away, in another country."

"I know, Professor, but this mutant, his mind screamed of familiarity. I can't describe it. He seemed so familiar, and so lost. Even now, I can feel his despair. He's lashing out in anger because he doesn't know what else to do."

It was a common story among mutants. Misunderstood by friends or family, they were often abused and mistreated. It was something that Xavier worked hard to prevent, and it was the reason why Magneto had so little difficulties recruiting to his cause. Most mutants hated normals because of the way the normals treated them.

Xavier nodded, then motioned for Jean to follow him into Cerebro's chamber. Jean followed calmly behind the man she admired so much.

"What else do you feel from him, Jean?" he asked. He was powerful, in many ways outstripping Jean's abilities. But his power came from experience, while hers was instinctive and often more empathic.

"His powers are new, recently awakened. The shock that awoke his abilities has left him reeling. He has a lot of power, Charles, more than I've ever sensed before, and a terrible rage. He feels lost and alone. He's being forced into a dark path by forces outside of his control. He feels... so familiar and alone." She shivered in response to the echoing loneliness she felt from this mutant and it pulled on her. She could also feel the sensation of her own mind fighting to recognize something hidden from her. Whoever this mutant was, his cry had triggered something within her own mind.

Xavier nodded absently while he worked the massive computer known as Cerebro. Finally, the machine gave him a clear location.

"Oh, my. Surrey, England," he said softly and somewhat regretfully.

"Professor?"

He held up a hand while he pulled in more information, confirming his initial impressions. *This isn't going to go over well*, he thought sadly. He'd known this day would come, and had been dreading it for years.

Using Cerebro, he reached out to the distant mutant, pulling in as much information as he possibly could. What he could retrieve from this distance disturbed him and set him worrying.

He removed the helmet and placed it on the console, then turned to face Jean with a heavy heart.

"Jean, you were right about the source seeming familiar. Tell me, how much do you remember of your time before you came to me?"

"Not much, Professor, just bits and pieces."

Xavier reached out and gripped her hand. "Your memory was deliberately blocked, though not by me. However, I confess I stupidly allowed it to happen at the time. The call from this mutant has probably triggered your mind into assaulting the blocks on your memory. I think it's time we remove them, don't you?"

Nervously, she nodded. At least it explained why she seemed to be struggling for a memory just out of reach.

At her nod, Xavier deftly slipped into her mind, searching for the hidden memories and bringing them forward. The blocks placed upon her using magic were bypassed. The memories hidden for so long were now being freed, destroying the blocks in the process.

A minute later, Jean gasped and stared at the Professor. "Lily? Petty? My family? What happened?"

"Come to my office. We'll talk there," Xavier said softly, noting the tears beginning to slide down her cheeks. "There is much to discuss and little of it good, I'm afraid."

Jean wiped her tears away and followed Xavier. He had destroyed the blocks on her memory, releasing her past. She wanted to be angry at him, but the more she recalled, the more she realized that Xavier had not only been her mentor, he had been her savior. She realized that he had been maneuvered into letting her memory be blocked and when he realized it, he had very nearly set the mutants to war against another race of people.

A few minutes later, Jean and Xavier entered his office. He hovered around his desk and pressed a button to activate an intercom and called for Scott. After receiving a reply, the Professor told him to ready the Blackbird for a transatlantic trip they'd be taking in a few days and to inform Logan of the trip.

Once finished, Xavier looked at Jean carefully. "I know you're struggling with the return of your memories, and I will help you face them when you have the time. For now, I want to tell you a story of how you came to be in my care. It's not a subject we've talked about before and the memory block that was placed on you made it appear as if your earliest memories are from this school."

Jean nodded, concentrating on what the Professor was saying.

"When you turned eleven, you and your twin sister received a letter from two special schools; mine and one other. I used to visit many student's home, explaining what I had to offer. When I arrived at your home, there was already another gentleman there, explaining about a school called Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. When I introduced myself and explained that both you and your sister were mutants, as well as witches, your parents and the man, one Albus Dumbledore, were shocked into silence.

"Your sister's mutant abilities were very minor and could easily be hidden as part of her magic, which was extraordinarily strong. On the other hand, your mutant abilities were extraordinarily strong and your magic only average."

"Magic?" exclaimed Jean.

Xavier smiled. "Yes, magic does exist; it's all around us. In fact, there's a whole hidden society of magic users in our world. In any case, it was decided that since your mutant abilities were so strong you'd be sent to my school, while your sister would go to the other."

"But, Professor, what does this have to do with that mutant I sensed?"

Xavier sighed. "I don't have all of the details, but from what I could find out, your sister Lily and her husband James were killed many years ago by an evil wizard. But before that happened, she gave birth to a son. His magic is very strong, and so are his mutant abilities, as strong as yours, but in a different way. From what I can discover, he's been in a bad situation most of his life and he's beginning to fight back against it now."

"Lily's dead? But I - I have a nephew?" she stammered.

"Yes. His name is Harry James Potter. The reason why he seemed so familiar to you and why you could sense him so strongly is because he is family. Because you and your sister were twins, you have a closer bond than normal with her son.

"What's happening to him, Professor? I can tell you've picked up something from his mind."

Xavier shook his head and looked down for a moment. "If what I have lifted from his mind is correct, your nephew has been used and abused most of his life. He recently lost the only adult figure he respected. He's in a bad way, Jean. Your other sister and her family have been abusing him since he was left with them, shortly after he turned a year old."

"Petunia?" Jean exclaimed angrily. "But why?"

"I don't know, but I do know that something has changed in the home. He recently returned from school and had some sort of confrontation with his family. I suspect he is using his mutant talent to keep them from abusing him further. Now they fear him and he is losing any respect for what he calls 'Muggles'."

Jean didn't like the sound of that at all. Many mutants lost any respect for normal humans in the process of defending themselves. Violence usually followed.

Xavier paused and looked at her for a long moment. "Jean, you need to consider carefully before you leap. Young Harry is desperate for someone to love him. You cannot just show up on his doorstep, spend a day or two and then leave him behind. If you intend to intervene, you will have to step into the role that your sister Petunia refused. She has shown the boy no nurturing or love."

Jean looked torn for a moment, then her expression hardened. "Professor, he's the son of my sister, and he's a powerful mutant who needs help. You wouldn't turn away a mutant who came to us looking for help, and I'm not going to turn away from him. He's family. He needs me."

Xavier smiled. "Good. But we can't rush into this. I don't know how long we'll be in England. There are elements of this story that are still unknown. Something very heavy lies on your nephew's shoulders. I just hope you and Scott are up to being parents to a troubled teenage boy."

Jean stood. "That's something Scott and I will have to find out, I guess. Besides, sooner or later we were going to have children of our own. Might as well get some practice in now."

And with that, she stepped from the room.

Xavier stared at the closed door for a while, then he turned and gazed out the window. "Albus, just what are you up to? Why are you doing this to young Harry?" he said quietly.

Four Privet Drive (early June)...

After Dudley and Vernon had their hands fixed by a doctor, the Dursleys returned to Privet Drive with the intent of forcing their old ways back on their hated nephew. From that moment on, a silent war raged within the Dursley household. A war in which one side was unarmed.

"BOY!" screamed Petunia.

A small puffing sound came from behind her and she whirled around. Harry stood there and she shrieked before falling on her ass.

"You bellowed, Muggle?" he sneered.

She climbed to her feet, enraged. She took two steps closer and swung on him. Her hand passed right through his cheek and out the other side.

He laughed and leaned closer to her. "Don't sleep too deeply at night," he whispered. "It's bad for your health. You might wake up dead."

She stumbled back away from him in fear, tripped over the foot rest and fell to the floor. "Why are you doing this to us?" she asked in a fearful whine.

"I'm only treating you the same way you treated me, Aunt Petunia," he replied mockingly. "What would your dear sister say about your actions? What will my parents say when you finally meet them again, I wonder? I warned you to leave me alone and you were too stupid to listen, now you'll pay the price."

"You can't do this! They'll throw you out of that freak school of yours," she stammered. He had explained this several times, but she kept coming back to it.

He sneered at her. "Not before I kill your marvelous Duddie Dumpkins Diddikins," he said in a sing-song voice. "Do you have any idea just how asinine you sound, saying that to a fifteen-year-old? You stupid waste of a Muggle. Killing you and your spawn would be a community service to the human race!"

He walked over to where she lay and bent over. His eyes glowed with suppressed power. "Killing you would be worth the expulsion," he hissed, then he stood and walked away.

He never noticed the twin red heads peering in through a window with wide, astonished eyes. They had appeared part way through the encounter and saw only Harry towering over his whimpering aunt.

Surrey, England (early June)...

"You've got nowhere to run now, Potter," spat Piers Polkiss.

"Gee, Piers, did you think that up by yourself or did you have help?" sneered Harry.

Harry had let Dudley's gang corner him on the gym rooftop. It wasn't a tall building and the exterior maintenance ladder had provided him with an easy way to get up on the roof when being chased. He could have teleported up here, but he wanted them to follow him. He was going to put the fear of Harry in them once and for all time.

Dudley's gang surrounded him against one edge.

He glanced over the edge behind him at the hard concrete eighteen feet below, then turned his attention back to the thugs menacing him. Dudley had somehow managed to make the jump to the bottom rung of the ladder and pull his bulk up, despite having his hand in a cast. Now he hung back, trying not to let the fear in his expression be too obvious.

"Well, Piers, are you going to sit there mouthing off all day? If so, I'll be off. I have better things to do," Harry said nonchalantly.

Piers growled and lunged. Harry smirked and never moved. Piers passed right through him, falling the distance to the ground below. There was a sickening thud and a low groaning sound coming from over the edge.

Harry looked at the prone figure on the ground. "Pity, he's still alive," he said, then he turned to the others.

The rest of Dudley's gang recoiled and he sneered at them. His eyes glowed with suppressed magic. To the Muggles, it gave him a demonic appearance. He was controlling it, barely.

"*Run away, Muggles, lest ye die,*" he hissed in parseltongue. Inwardly, he winced. He knew it was corny and he could have easily asked if they'd like mustard on their ham sandwich, as long as it was in parseltongue.

Dudley immediately peed in his pants and fainted. That was all it took. The rest of Big D's gang fled as fast as their little feet could take them. Just to be annoying, Harry teleported to the bottom of the ladder so he could greet them when they climbed down.

His presence was enough to make them scatter in every direction. When they were all gone, he walked towards the park, whistling off key and chuckling to himself. Dudley was still unconscious on the rooftop.

“Harry?” said an anxious voice a few minutes later as he approached the park.

Harry turned to look at Tonks, one of the Order members set upon him by Dumbledore.

“What do you want?” he spat.

“Hey, Harry, looking good. Are you all right?” she asked tentatively. The magic rolling off the boy was making her queasy. She'd never felt anything like it before.

Harry looked at her and his eyes flashed with magic. “Go home, Tonks. I have nothing to say to you or anyone else that moron Dumbledore sends to me.”

“But Harry, we need to make sure you're safe from You-Know-Who,” Tonks said defensively.

Harry stopped walking and whirled on her, noting that she flinched back from his gaze. “You're pathetic,” he sneered. “If you can't even say his name, how do you expect to fight him? Tell me, Nymphadora, what kind of mark does Dumbledork use to mark his followers? Dark Lords come in all types and sizes. You and the rest of the Order are working for one, just like your cousin, Lucius Malfoy.”

When Harry turned and walked away, Tonks shuddered. She had to talk to Remus!

Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix (Later that evening)...

“I'm telling you, Remus, something is seriously wrong with Harry,” Tonks said heatedly. “If you had seen him today, you'd know for yourself. And earlier I saw him push his aunt out of the way, nearly knocking her over. She flinched back from his touch like she was terrified of him.”

Remus sighed and shook his head. “You aren't the only one telling me about this, Tonks. I've heard complaints from several others about Harry calling his relatives worthless Muggles. The twins are convinced he's deliberately sabotaging his Aunt's rose garden, and they saw him spike his Uncle's tires.”

Tonks leaned back in her chair and folded her arms across her chest. “So, what are you going to do about it?”

Remus shrugged. “There isn't much I can do. The old man won't let us interfere with what goes on in that house. I'm not sure exactly what does go on there, but this is different than the previous years. If I didn't know better, I'd say his family is afraid of him.”

“He wanted to know where Dumbledore had marked us, Remus. He said we're no better than the Death Eaters, then he called Dumbledore a Dark Lord,” she protested.

Remus bowed his head and sighed heavily. “All right, I'll try talking to Dumbledore again, but I don't think it will do much good. Harry's not sending his letter every three days and Dumbledore didn't do anything about that.”

“Why is he doing this?” Tonks asked plaintively.

Remus looked at her. “Who? Dumbledore or Harry?”

“Either!”

“I don't know,” he replied sadly. From what he had heard from Harry's friends, Harry was furious with Dumbledore at the end of the term. He thought it might be related to Sirius' death, but he wasn't sure.

“I don't know,” he repeated in a whisper. Suddenly, he had a real bad feeling about what was happening.

Surrey, England (late June)...

“Boo!” Shouted a voice.

“ARGH!” Vernon screamed, and the car swerved wildly. He glanced over his shoulder, but there was no one there. Turning back, he swung the wheel hard, just missing a tree. The car rolled to a stop and he laid his head against the steering wheel, his heart beating like a jack hammer in his chest.

“What's the matter, dear Uncle?” said a voice he hated.

He looked up to see Harry smiling at him from the back seat.

“Damn you!” he growled and tried to turn in the seat, but his seat belt was still on, pinning him in place. Harry smiled and opened a bottle of Scotch he had stolen from Vernon's liquor cabinet. With the bottle open, he upended it, pouring the drink on the front seat and Vernon.

Harry laughed and vanished in a puff of smoke.

Vernon screamed in frustrated anger, then he cringed. He smelled horrid, and the blue flashing lights blinking in his mirror told him the police had pulled up to his accident.

He ground his teeth, knowing the damn freak was untouchable. He had tried hitting him, he had even tried stabbing him, only to find himself suddenly staring at the knife he was going to use on the freak. Somehow the freak was able to take away any weapon he tried to use on him.

Petunia was no help. She was too distraught by the fact that somehow her roses were disappearing. And Dudley had retreated to Piers' house,

saying he'd return when the freak was gone.

The Library, Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix... (early July)

Harry whirled when he heard the pop. In a flash, his wand was out and aimed. He had just finished placing a locking charm on the door to the library when he heard the pop.

Kreacher stood staring at him. "Nasty half blood master steals Mistress's books."

Harry straightened and stared at the elf for a moment, his expression filled with hatred. "I steal nothing. These are my books and you know it, otherwise you wouldn't call me master. I own this house and everything inside it."

"Filthy master lets his filthy friends stay here and abuse my mistress," Kreacher snarled.

Harry scowled. "Shut your hole, you traitorous elf! Do everyone a favor and go kill yourself!" he said in a fit of anger

Kreacher's expression altered, for the first time he looked like he was in pain, then he vanished with a pop.

Harry blinked in surprise and then shook his head. *So the Order is still using the house?* he thought. *I wonder what they're doing here. I'll check after I get some newbooks.*

Harry's trips to Grimmauld Place always took place after Moody had served his shift at Privet Drive. He knew the old Auror went home to sleep and wouldn't be in his Godfather's house.

He opened his bag and pulled out a number of books that had finished reading, placing them back on the shelves. As he put them back, he pulled other books down, taking anything that looked interesting.

With his bag refilled, he paused and considered his options. He could return to Privet Drive, or he could do a little snooping. He waved a hand, releasing the lock on the door. His wandless magic had been improving steadily, but he was still limited in what he could do. Dispelling a charm with a simple finite was easy to do wandlessly.

He grinned and his body turned transparent. It was the first step in his normal teleportation sequence, but he continued concentrating on the process until he looked like little more than roiled air in the shape of a person. Then he walked through the wall. It was time to see what the Order was doing in his house.

Hogwarts, Headmaster's Office...

"Albus, I think we may have a serious problem," said a voice from the fireplace.

Dumbledore looked up and spotted Moody's head in the fireplace. He waved his wand at the floo, then motioned for him to come through. The fireplace widened and grew taller, allowing the old grizzled Auror to enter. He stumped over to a chair and sat down.

"Alastor, what seems to be the problem? Is there something wrong with Harry?"

Moody looked at him for a long moment before speaking. "Potter is another problem and I don't think you're going to like what I have to say about it. But that isn't why I'm here."

"Oh?"

"I can't figure out how, but books have been disappearing from the library at Headquarters. At first I thought it was that blasted elf, but the elf committed suicide. We found the body the other day. I figure he's been dead at least a week. No, there's a good chance we have someone working for the other side. Frankly, my money is on either Snape or Dung."

Dumbledore frowned. The library at Grimmauld Place contained many dangerous books on the Dark Arts and many rare and very valuable manuscripts. "Have you sealed the library?"

"Of course I have! I may be a bit beat up, but I'm neither senile, nor stupid. I've sealed the library, I've warded it, and still the count of books has been steadily dropping. A week ago there were 11,630 books. Now there are 11,590 books. The really strange thing is the number fluctuates, like someone is returning books when they're done reading them."

Dumbledore scowled. "I'll come to Headquarters later today and place some wards on the library. Is anything else missing?"

"I'm not sure. We didn't even start to inventory everything until a few days ago. There were a surprising number of cursed items, and some other interesting things in the room. Some things show signs of being moved recently, but it's impossible to tell if anything is missing. The books are the real treasure in that room. Some of those manuscripts are extremely rare, and proscribed by the Ministry."

Dumbledore leaned back in his chair and tented his fingers. "Do you think Miss Granger might be getting into the library? I know we told her not to, but you know how she is around books."

"I don't see how that's possible. She's only in the building a few hours a day for her training, along with the Weasley pair. And that's another thing that I think is going to backfire on you, Albus. Training those three without training Potter is a mistake!"

"Ah, I wondered when you'd get to Harry. Now, tell me what problem you foresee with him?"

Moody sat back and rubbed his jaw for a moment. "It's nothing specific, but the guards have overheard him a few times and I don't like the

direction he's going. Did you know he calls his family 'filthy Muggles' right to their face? Or that he's showing absolutely no respect for them anymore? Merlin knows they don't deserve it. But you keep sending him back and he's starting to hate all Muggles because of their influence."

Dumbledore smiled and shook his head. "He's just going through a teenage phase, Alastor. Harry has too much love in him to reject his family like that." He was aware of Harry's home life, but he firmly believed the boy cared for his family. He had stepped in on several occasions to tell them to tone down the physical abuse and, for the most part, they had complied.

Moody stood and grimaced at his friend. "If you say so," he replied dubiously. "I'll see you later at Headquarters."

Dumbledore nodded and watched his old friend leave via the Floo, then he leaned back against his chair and reached up to stroke Fawkes.

"No, Harry has too much love in him to go that route," he said to the phoenix.

If he and Fawkes could have truly communicated, he would have been surprised to find Fawkes not only disagreeing with him, but urging him to go check on Harry immediately.

Number Four Privet Drive, Surrey, England...

Harry sat on a swing in the nearby park, thinking. The past few weeks hadn't been too bad. While he wouldn't call it the best summer ever, it was better, so far, than many others. He had the Dursleys terrified of him, he had no chores to do, most of his summer homework was already complete and he had found two different ways around the underage magic restrictions.

He tried not to think about Sirius, or the prophecy, too much. Those particular lines of thought brought on a crushing despair that he struggled against continually. He laid the blame for Sirius at the feet of Dumbledore and Snape, numbers three and four on his 'must seek revenge against' list, right behind Bellatrix LeStrange and Voldemort. And that list was getting longer nearly every day.

After the strange event in the seventh floor bathroom, he had sought out answers in the school library. He drew a blank trying to identify the ability, but in his search he did find something nearly as useful. He found a spell that was supposed to tell him what kind of ability it was by monitoring the magic it used. To his surprise, however, it didn't use magic at all. And that caused him to develop a very smug grin.

He had an ability he could use over the summer and not get into trouble from the Ministry for using it. They couldn't detect him doing anything! Suddenly the summer looked a lot less bleak for him, and a lot more difficult for his 'relatives'.

Two days before they were supposed to leave for home, Harry had been walking along an empty corridor, doing his best to control his anger and grief, when he had been startled by a bright flash of light. Working on instinct, knowing he'd never dodge the curse in time, he'd partially 'phased'. He didn't know what else to call it.

The curse had traveled right through his body because he had become insubstantial. Hearing the sound of running feet, he had teleported to the floor above the one he was on.

Over the next two days he had discovered a few key facts about his new abilities. He could teleport himself to anyplace he had been before, even through the Hogwarts wards. He learned that by accidentally teleporting himself to Grimmauld Place. He could teleport objects, as long as he knew the object. That would come in handy to disarm people, since he could teleport their wands right out of their hands. And he could perform a partial teleport, halting the process just at the point where his body wasn't quite in this plane of existence. He even discovered that he had control over the level of transparency he had when he phased. He could look quite solid and still be insubstantial or he could fade until he was almost totally invisible.

His phasing gave him one crucial advantage. Solid objects, like a fist or bullet, would go right through him and never hurt him. Magic passed right through him as well.

Since his arrival at Privet Drive, he had visited Grimmauld Place several times, raiding the library. He also found a box of nearly thirty wands. Each wand was labeled with the name of the owner, usually a member of the Black family, and the date of their death.

The oldest wand was dated from 1407. According to the labels on the wands, none of them had Ministry tracking charms on them. Of the thirty, only two seemed to be a good fit for him, and not a perfect fit at that. He took the box of wands, depositing it in his trunk. He also helped himself to a foe glass, a small pensieve and a sneakoscope.

It wasn't theft in his mind. Sirius had told him that everything he owned, Harry could use. Then at the train station Remus told him that Sirius' will had been examined. Sirius had left Harry a lot of money, and everything, including Grimmauld Place. So as far as Harry was concerned, he was helping himself to his own property.

The other thing he had learned was that the Order was still using his home as their headquarters and using it to train his friends in fighting and defense techniques.

He was annoyed, at first. He didn't get angry at them until he received a letter from Hermione, telling him that she was sitting home, bored out of her wits and complaining because her parents weren't taking a vacation this year.

Ron sent a similar letter a day later, saying he was spending time at the Burrow working on his chores and practicing Quidditch. After that, he threw away any letters from his friends. He wasn't interested in reading their lies and he added their names to his list. He placed no value on people willing to lie to him and betray him.

Since that point, he spent most of his time reading the books he had taken from his library. Occasionally he'd experiment by casting some of the spells using a wand he had taken from the Black Library. His favorite book so far was one describing how to develop your talent in wandless casting, which he found to be easier than the book said it should be.

He sat on the swing and looked around. The day was warm and people were out and about. He could see kids playing and several couples

walking hand in hand.

The atmosphere in Number Four forced him from the house on a daily basis. He couldn't stand the absolute hatred he felt coming from his relatives. It beat on him like a physical force, making him physically ill at times. That was something else that was new. He had begun to feel the emotions of people around him. And every so often, he would see tendrils of colored light surrounding objects. That particular thing scared him. He wasn't sure why he was having vision problems but it frightened him.

At least his hours in the park every day gave him some sense of peace.

He had frightened his relatives, and had done what he had to do to keep them frightened, but the simple fact was he had reached the point where he didn't care what happened to them. One could make a case that apathy was worse than anger, but he just didn't care. He'd defend himself from them, doing and saying whatever he needed to keep them afraid of him and that was it. Slowly but surely, Harry's 'saving people thing' was dying.

He pulled a book on Occlumency out of his pack and opened it. He tried to spend at least an hour a day working on this subject, and rereading the book he had found. He would never let Voldemort fool him again, and he would learn this subject, despite Snape. Despite his desire, his progress in this field had been woefully poor.

"Harry?"

He closed his book and looked up to see Remus Lupin approaching. "Professor," he said, greeting the man in a neutral tone.

Remus looked startled by Harry's cold greeting. "Er... How are you?"

The expression on Harry's face plainly asked if Remus really was that stupid. "How do you think I am, Professor? I'm locked away in prison with those abusive Muggles again while my ex-friends lie to me about the training they supposedly aren't getting. Go back to Dumbledore and tell him he's making enemies at Privet Drive and I don't mean the filthy Muggles. Go back and tell him that Voldemort won't be the only wizard he has to worry about."

Harry stood and turned to walk away.

"Harry!" Remus said in a shocked voice. "Surely you can't mean that."

Glancing over his shoulder, Harry stared at him for a moment, then simply shook his head in disgust, turned away and began walking from the park. He had no patience for Dumbledore and his games. He had no patience for any of them anymore.

Remus scowled at Harry's retreating back. He had warned Dumbledore about sending the boy back to the Dursleys. He shook his head and wondered what he would be saying to the Order and to Dumbledore at tonight's meeting.

He looked down, then glanced back at Harry only to find no sign of the youth.

Number Four Privet Drive, Surrey, England...

Harry teleported back to his room, laughing inwardly at the confusion it would cause Remus. He had once liked the former Marauder, but Harry felt that Remus relied too heavily on Dumbledore. He was too loyal to the old man to be of any use to him.

He opened a book on elemental runes. It was a fascinating subject, but one he didn't dare try on Privet Drive. Elemental runes were normally used for wide area effects, such as bringing down a firestorm on an enemy stronghold. Harry considered it as a possible method of attacking Voldemort, but it was hardly something he could practice without being noticed.

He looked up when someone knocked on his door. His eyes narrowed and he fingered one of the spare wands he carried with him at all times.

"Yes?"

"May I come in?" said the voice of a strange man.

Harry frowned, not recognizing the voice, and readied his wand. "All right, but keep your hands where I can see them."

The door opened and a man in a chair hovered into the room. Behind him was a man wearing the strangest pair of sunglasses he had ever seen.

Harry held both men at wand point, ready to teleport away at the first sign of trouble. He couldn't imagine a Death Eater in a chair like that; clearly it was a Muggle device. Unlike normal wheelchairs, this had no wheels. It made a soft humming sound as it glided over the floor.

"Did Dumbledore send you?" he asked angrily.

The man in the chair smiled. "No, Harry. In fact, Albus would be most upset if he knew I was here with my associates. Please, let me introduce myself. I am Professor Charles Xavier and this is Scott Summers. Right now, downstairs, Scott's wife, Jean, and another associate of ours are talking to your Aunt and Uncle."

"All right, if Dumbledore didn't send you, why are you here?"

"We're here to help you."

"Me? What are you on about?"

"We don't have a lot of time to explain, but you will be told everything, I promise you. Right now I just ask you to trust us. Scott's wife is a relative

of yours, one that Dumbledore would not want you to meet. If all goes well, Jean has already convinced your Aunt to grant her custody of you. We'll take you back to America where you'll be surrounded by people who care what happens to you."

Harry backed up, his eyes widening. This had to be a trick!

Someone walked into the room. "I've got the signatures, Professor," the woman said, then she turned and Harry got his first good look at her.

He blinked and he started to tremble. "Mum?" he whispered. It was too much, all of it. With everything that had happened at the end of the school term and over the summer, his mind finally refused to acknowledge this new shock and it shut down.

His eyes rolled up in his head and he slid bonelessly to the floor. Scott leapt forward, catching him before he landed.

Jean seemed transfixed by the sight. He had Lily's eyes. Though he looked a lot like the image she had seen of James Potter in Xavier's mind, but his bone structure was softer, more like Lily's, especially around his eyes.

Jean stepped forward, staring at him and shivering slightly.

"What is it?" asked the Professor.

"Even unconscious, his anger and hurt are almost overwhelming, Professor. If only we could have found out about him sooner!"

"Be thankful we have him now, Jean. Let's pack his belongings. I do not think it will be long before a wizard comes to investigate what's happening here." Xavier said.

"What about the ones watching the house?" asked Scott.

Xavier smiled. "They are not seeing anything out of the ordinary, but that will not last. The more quickly we leave, the better off we'll be."

Jean opened Harry's trunk and started levitating everything she could see into it. Scott picked up Harry and carried him out of the room.

"What of his Aunt and Uncle?" asked Xavier.

"After I got their signatures, I did as you asked and removed all memory of Harry from their minds. When this is done, I think I need to bathe, repeatedly. My sister has become twisted and hate filled; the things I saw her do to her own nephew are appalling. If it weren't better that Harry come with us for now, I'd insist she and her husband be arrested."

"Sooner or later, their kind will pay for their crimes, Jean. But what about their son?"

She shrugged helplessly. "He's not here. And unless you want to spend the time tracking him down..."

"No, we have far more important things to do. Right now, let's concentrate on helping Harry and leaving this place behind," Xavier said. "We'll worry about the boy later."

She nodded and snapped the trunk closed. She picked up Hedwig's cage, handed it to Xavier, then levitated the trunk out of the room and down to the waiting limousine.

Ten minutes later, they were gone from Privet Drive. Petunia and Vernon had their memories erased in a way that no wizard could detect or understand. And the two Order members that had been standing watch never saw a thing, thanks to Professor Xavier.

Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix (Later that evening)...

Dumbledore walked into the large kitchen basement and he nearly staggered back from the noise. "What in the name of Merlin?"

He lifted up his wand and fired off a cannon blast charm, which effectively brought all the shouting to an end as all eyes turned to him.

He sat and surveyed the membership of his Order. "Thank you for quieting down. Now then, let's deal with some old business before I delve into what has caused such a commotion in here tonight."

Dumbledore turned to Moody. "Alastor, that matter we spoke of has been looked into and some new protections added. Hopefully it will be enough to either deter the individual in question, or at least provide an alarm if it occurs again."

Moody's eye spun around several times as he looked at several people, but he nodded in understanding.

"Excellent," Dumbledore said, placing both hands on the table. "Now, just what has got so many people upset this evening?"

There was a moment of silence, then Remus stood. His chair made a loud screeching sound when it was pushed back.

"Headmaster, I went to see Harry today. You know he hasn't been sending his check in letters, and he ignored the letters sent by Ron and Hermione..."

Dumbledore arched an eyebrow and turned to look at the two students who had the grace to look embarrassed. "I thought I made it clear that Harry needed time alone to grieve and come to grips with what he's gone through?"

Remus looked annoyed at Dumbledore. "That was my doing, Headmaster. I thought perhaps Harry would respond to a letter from his friends, since he clearly wasn't responding to any from us. I asked Ron and Hermione to write him several letters."

Dumbledore frowned and motioned for Remus to continue.

"When he didn't reply to his friends, I went to visit him today. He told me tell you that you're making enemies on Privet Drive and that he didn't mean the 'filthy Muggles'. He also said he's aware that his ex-friends are receiving training, while he's held in prison."

Hermione's expression turned to one of horror, while Ron looked on confused.

"That's what I've been trying to tell you for a week Headmaster," exclaimed Tonks. "I tried to talk to him and he called me a bunch of names, then he asked to see my Dark Mark. The wild magic that was flowing off of him was enough to make me nauseous."

Dumbledore pulled his glasses off his face and pinched the bridge of his nose tiredly. "I never thought it would come to this point. He's rejecting everything we stand for."

George stood up, glaring at him. "Can you blame him? We told you three summers ago they were starving him, and had him caged like a wild animal. You ignored the problem, Professor. You ignored the problem and when he needed someone to help him the most, you sent him back to those Muggles who hate his guts and treat him worse than Malfoy house elves!"

Fred stood and pointed a finger at them all. "Honestly, how do you expect Harry to react when he's with those evil Muggles? You knew it, Headmaster! You weren't raising the Boy-Who-Lived, you were raising a bloody weapon, and now your weapon is saying 'enough' and refusing to take it anymore. We've done our shifts on Privet Drive. His relatives are terrified of him. I don't know why, but they are. I watched Harry lay into his Aunt last week until she was weeping on the floor and begging for mercy. Thanks to those people, and you, he hates Muggles. He doesn't call that place home; he never did. And you can stop lying about the blood wards. We know those became useless when Voldemort used Harry's blood during that ritual during the Tournament!

"Honestly, I don't know who's worse. Voldemort? All he does is hate and kill. You, Professor, pretend to care when you really don't."

"Enough, you two! Albus Dumbledore is a great man!" Molly shouted.

Both twins looked at their mother and shook their heads sadly.

"Boys, did you tell Harry what was happening here at Headquarters?" Dumbledore asked.

The pair exchanged a look between them, then sat down, looking smug. "We didn't have to, although we were tempted," Fred said. "He knows what's happening here. We don't know how, but he does."

George looked at Ron and Hermione. "You two are his friends. He would have been angry and hurt that the Order was training you, but he would have gotten over that. Instead, you had to lie to him on the orders of the mighty Albus Dumbledore. Ron I can understand; he's been jealous of Harry since first year. But you, Hermione? How could you be so monumentally stupid? What will Harry do now that he knows you've lied to him? Apply some of that vast intellect everyone claims you have and tell me."

Hermione refused to meet George's eyes. "He'll never forgive us. He'll cut us out of his life and never speak to us again," she whispered, then she started to sob. Ron, sitting next to her, looked stricken.

"Well, isn't this rich," Snape said from his corner with a low chuckle. "The Golden Boy isn't so golden after all."

"Severus, please." Dumbledore replied in a pained voice.

"The answer is simple, Headmaster. Just go over to the brat's home and Oblivate him. It's clear to me now that maybe the papers were right; he is the 'Chosen One' and you've been trying to toughen him up. Oblivate him, already. After all, he's just a weapon, is he not? Why should any of us care what our weapon thinks or feels?" Snape said, pouring salt into the wound. He was enjoying himself thoroughly.

"That is enough!" Dumbledore said firmly, then he stood. "I admit I have made grave mistakes with regards to Harry Potter, but I had my reasons for what I did, and it wasn't so I could raise a weapon. I think the answer is obvious. Remus, Tonks, if you would, please return to Privet Drive and bring Harry here immediately."

Remus and Tonks stood, nodded to Dumbledore and left the room.

He watched them leave, then turned back to the remaining Order members. "I confess I knew that Harry's home life was less than adequate, but the protections provided by his mother's sacrifice were worth it, I thought. Now I see that I was wrong. Placing him in an environment like that has not been helping him."

"I told you not to place them with those people," Minerva said scathingly.

"Yes, Minerva, and you were right. I should have heeded your warning. Now I can only hope that we will be able to help Harry and perhaps in time earn his forgiveness," Dumbledore said softly.

"Albus? What are you saying? What do you mean, 'less than adequate'?" asked Molly Weasley, her face ashen. It was finally dawning on her that everything wasn't all right with Harry, and possibly her errant sons were in the right.

Dumbledore sighed. "The Dursleys have no love for their nephew, Molly. I remember telling you that I would take care of it when you passed word along of Harry's confinement during the summer between his first and second years. But the truth is, I did nothing. The Dursleys had been physically abusive to him in the past and I did not want to provoke them into starting that again. I have spoken to them on several occasions, warning them to stop beating the boy. And they did, for a while. Most of the time they resorted to other, less physical ways of expressing their hatred for Harry."

"How abusive are we talking about?" asked Minerva in a frigid tone.

Dumbledore looked down at the now cold cup of tea in front of him, saying nothing. Finally he spoke. "I'm not really sure, I just know that they've beaten him, at least once."

Several in the group gasped.

"The first time he was sent to the infirmary I did a routine scan on him. Before coming to Hogwarts, he had broken at least a half dozen bones," Poppy said angrily. "And his back is laced with scars from a belt or whip. He's also suffered bouts of malnutrition throughout his life before coming to Hogwarts. I sent you notices to that effect every year, Headmaster."

Dumbledore sagged in his chair and covered his face in his hands. He had hoped that Poppy would not reveal that information. He knew that they would now ignore the fact that there were four attempts to kidnap Harry when he was younger, or that the wards had protected him each time.

"Why?" Minerva asked. "Why did you ignore this, Albus? Why did I let myself ignore it? All the signs were there."

"Minerva, what are you talking about?" asked Arthur Weasley.

"All the signs of being abused, Arthur. He always comes back from summer break very skinny, never has his summer homework done, he's painfully shy and hates to have anyone make a fuss over him."

Fred and George exchanged a look, then stood up. "We're leaving," said Fred.

"And quitting the Order," added George.

"Now, boys," Dumbledore began. The twins had just recently joined and their loss wouldn't hurt the Order except from a morale standpoint.

"We like Harry and have done our best to help him whenever we could. In a little while you'll bring him here," Fred said, interrupting the Headmaster.

"And he'll blame everyone here for everything that's gone wrong in his life," George explained.

The two looked at each other again and Fred nodded to George. George turned to the rest. "You know, I once thought that being like you guys was the greatest thing; fighting evil, righting wrongs. If only that were the truth of it. You're not fighting evil, you're fighting Voldemort, who wants to change the world. But your vision of what the world should be is not much different than his. And your methods are equally brutal, only you directed them towards one boy, rather than the whole world.

"Ron, Ginny and Hermione are just starting to realize what a mistake they made and how it might not be recoverable..." George paused. "I don't know why I waste my breath. Come on, Fred," he muttered.

"What he said!" Fred quipped, then he followed his brother from the room.

Molly opened her mouth to speak, but Dumbledore waved her to silence. "No Molly, your boys are right. In my rush to fight Voldemort, I forgot that Harry is a person with the same needs as the rest of us. My treatment of the boy has been one mistake after another, I see that now. He would have done far better had he been placed with a family like yours, rather than his Muggle relatives."

Dumbledore looked up to see Remus and Tonks enter the room; they were alone. His expression dropped.

"Remus? Where is Harry?"

"He's gone, Albus. Taken. And if that isn't bad enough, his relatives have no memory of him, or of the Wizarding world. Tonks ran a couple of tests on Petunia and found that her memories have been wiped entirely. Whatever was used to accomplish the removal of those memories was not an Obliviate."

Remus handed Dumbledore a sheet of paper. "We found that on what used to be his bed."

Dumbledore took the paper with a trembling hand and read quickly.

Professor Dumbledore,

If you are surprised to be reading this, think about how surprised I was, having to write it. I honestly thought our paths would never cross again. Considering what happened the last time they did, I hoped we'd never meet again.

I want you to consider something, Albus. I want you to consider just how much pain, loneliness and anguish he had to be in, in order for me to sense him four thousand miles away. Then imagine my surprise when I discover he's the legacy of the girl I let you have.

You know, I've always felt that the decision of the wizards to isolate themselves was wrong, but in this case it worked out in my favor. It allowed me to gain custody of the boy, placing him in the care of his very surprised and very worried Aunt. Yes, his call for help started the process of burning through her memory blocks. I did as I promised and left them alone until she asked for my help in removing them.

Now, let me get down to business. The Dursleys have signed over all parental and custodial rights for Harry to his Aunt, Doctor Jean Summers. Jean wanted to see them arrested when she learned how he had been treated, but instead opted for wiping their memories. They no longer know about your world, or anyone named Harry Potter.

Harry's mutant abilities awoke recently due to some trauma which I haven't determined, but I intend to find out. When we last met, we had a strong mutant with a small amount of magic power, and a weak mutant with strong magic. Now we have a very strong magical mutant. And he is incredibly angry at you and others in his life.

Harry has come very close to crossing a line which he must not cross, and the simple fact is, Albus, you pushed him to this point, then pushed harder. He may never trust you again, but that is an issue which you will have to work out with him.

Here is the deal I am putting on the table, Albus. Back off. Let Jean, her husband and myself help Harry. If possible, we will try to convince him to return to your school come September. But right now he needs time to grieve and heal. And he needs time to learn what it means to be loved. If all goes well, we will come for a visit a week or two before school starts. Returning to Hogwarts will be Harry's decision. I will not force it on him, nor will his Aunt. And if this is to work, you will have to abide by his decision.

Charles Xavier
Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters.

The paper slipped from Dumbledore's numb fingers, falling to the table. One by one, people passed the letter around, while Dumbledore sat silent, refusing to look at anyone.

Finally Arthur coughed twice and Dumbledore looked up at him.

“Just what does this mean, Albus? What mutant is this letter talking about?”

“Mutants!” Ron said with a laugh. “They aren't real.”

“Yes they are, Ron, very real,” countered Hermione. “They are found in every country now.”

Ron looked at her in surprise.

Dumbledore sighed heavily. The results of his actions were coming home to roost and he didn't see any good coming from this. Now it was time for honesty and all he could do was pray he could salvage something from the situation.

“Miss Granger is quite right. Mutants are very real, Mr. Weasley. But they have never been a problem for the Wizarding World. For reasons we don't understand, there have been very few mutant wizards or witches. Until I ran across a pair of twin girls over twenty-five years ago, I thought I'd never see magical mutants,” Dumbledore said.

Remus stared at Dumbledore with wide eyes. “Lily?” he gasped.

The old wizard nodded. “One of the pair was a very powerful witch, with only a minor mutant ability. The other was a very powerful mutant, with only an average level of magic. I was in the midst of trying to convince their parents to allow them to attend Hogwarts when another man came into the picture. He represented a school for mutants, where the girls could be taught to control and harness their mutant talents.

“We verbally sparred for a while, then I foolishly tried to Oblivate the man. My spell had no effect on him. The next thing I knew, I was on my knees gasping for breath, while he lectured me on the dangers of attacking a fully functioning telepath. I had no control over my own body.

“In the end, he released me and we decided to split the twins up. I took the strong witch and he the weaker one. Before I left, I Oblivated the whole family. I know I shouldn't have, but I was unnerved by this man and his unusual abilities and did not think before I acted. The damage was done. Something unique in the makeup of the elder Evanses – perhaps the seed that resulted in the girls having both magic and mutations - prevented the spell from being removed. The other man was furious and threatened to assault Hogwarts.

“Eventually things worked out, after a fashion. But Lily's parents couldn't have their memories of their other daughter restored. I took away that little girl's parents. I orphaned her without killing anyone. In the end, I had to Oblivate her as well.”

“This just keeps getting better and better,” muttered Tonks. “So Harry is a mutant and a wizard. Next thing you'll say is he is the only person capable of killing Voldemort, like the papers claim.”

Dumbledore jumped in his chair as if slapped and he stared at Tonks. His expression gave everything away. He knew that the papers had been speculating on Harry's role in Department of Mysteries fight and some had taken to calling him the 'Chosen One'. What he had not seen was the issue of the Prophet released today that speculated on Harry being the one destined to kill Voldemort. Tonks' comment caught him totally by surprise.

“We're doomed if we have to rely on Potter,” Snape said, sinking his head into his hands. Inwardly, he was crowing. He didn't need to know the exact wording of the prophecy! This information would serve him well. “Doomed, I tell you.”

“Harry's a mutant? Well then, good riddance to him!” Ron said huffily.

Hermione turned and glared at Ron. “You idiot! He's your best friend and you'd turn your back on him over this? You have more growing up to do than I thought, Ronald Weasley. I'm very disappointed in you.”

Molly glared daggers at her son and told herself for the umpteenth time that he got the stupidity from Arthur's side of the family, then she turned to Dumbledore.

“Albus, we simply cannot allow these people to have Harry. We must go after them.”

Dumbledore shook his head. “We cannot, Molly. Charles Xavier is a man of his word. He will help Harry, and so will Harry's Aunt -- once Harry gets over the shock of discovering he has an Aunt who looks just like his mother. While not quite identical twins, they were remarkably similar in appearance. I have no doubt in my mind that they will help Harry through this crisis. But will Harry trust us again? That I cannot say.”

“But will he be safe with these -- mutants?” Ron asked. He said the word “mutant” distastefully, as if he didn't want to acknowledge what his friend was.

“I daresay he would be safer with them than where he was, Mr. Weasley. Some of Professor Xavier's mutants have abilities which we cannot defend against. Lily's sister, Jean, was a powerful untrained telepath when I met her. Her potential exceeded that of even Professor Xavier.

“No, I'm afraid we simply must give Harry the time he needs and hope that he will decide to come back to us at the end of the summer,”

Dumbledore said wearily. "A lot has been said today. I think enough damage has been done. I would caution you all that Mr. Potter's whereabouts and his role in this war are to be kept secret. Let us break for now. We will have our next general meeting at the regularly scheduled time."

Xavier's School for Gifted Children, Westchester County, New York...

"He's coming around," said a voice. It wasn't a voice he recognized.

Harry opened his eyes and looked around wildly. This wasn't the infirmary! A large rolling cart of high-tech equipment was nearby, beeping and buzzing softly.

"You're awake, finally. We were beginning to worry," the man in the wheelchair said.

"Where am I?"

"Ah, explanations. Yes, well, Harry... May I call you Harry?"

Harry nodded. He could call him anything he wanted, as long as he explained what was going on.

"Harry, you've suffered a bit of a shock and we were worried about you, so we brought you here. Now, if you'll allow me, I will be happy to relate the entire story to you. But it will take a bit, so why don't you have something to eat while I explain?"

Harry nodded and looked around. The door opened and the man with the strange glasses entered, carrying a tray with food and drinks on it.

"Go ahead and eat, Harry. You've been unconscious for two days. From what we can determine, you were suffering from a combination of exhaustion and mild shock, so we decided to let you sleep until you woke."

Harry looked at the man with the food. "I remember you, and there was a woman -- My mother?" he turned and glared at the Professor.

Xavier hovered his chair in closer. "That is part of the story, Harry, if you will allow me?"

Harry picked up a sandwich and nodded at the Professor to begin. Something in the man's attitude made him willing to listen.

"First off, let's deal with things that are the most important to you. The woman you met is not your mother. Your mother is, as you know, dead. The woman's name is Jean Summers, formerly known as Jean Evans. She is your mother's twin sister; your Aunt."

Harry stopped chewing and stared at Xavier.

"Dumbledore, right?" Harry said slowly.

Xavier nodded in reply. He was shocked to see Harry delving to the heart of the matter so quickly. *The lad's smarter than we thought.*

Harry clenched his fists and a surge of anger rushed through him. The lights in the room flickered and the building trembled. The equipment on the nearby cart made a buzzing sound and the screens went dead. The acrid smell of burnt electronics wafted up, filling the room. He bowed his head and he started to glow with magic as his anger increased.

"*Harry, you must not let your anger control you.*"

Harry looked up in surprise at Professor Xavier and the trembling ceased. Xavier's mental command shocked him silly. Up until that point he had hoped he had been making some progress on his Occlumency shields.

"How?"

"I am like you and your mother, and your Aunt. A mutant."

"A mutant? But I thought..." Harry said, then he paused. "That explains why I could do those things and no magic was being expended, right?"

"It also explains how we found you in the first place. You see, we didn't know of your existence. Your Aunt had been Obliviated by Dumbledore, and no longer remembered her parents or sisters. I hope you will remember that when you finally meet with her. We know you're angry, but she is as much a victim in this as you are."

Harry took another bite of his sandwich and chewed thoughtfully for a moment, then he nodded. "Can I see her? Please?" If there was even a remote chance of finding family that actually wanted him, he was going to reach for it with both hands.

Xavier paused and smiled at him. "I suppose you can. I wanted to explain everything to you first, but I think the details aren't as important right now as reuniting family."

Harry looked at Xavier expectantly, but he did nothing. Then the door opened and Jean walked in.

Harry stared at her.

Jean took a few steps forward and hesitantly raised a hand. Harry's eyes filled with tears and he tried to blink them away, but there were too many.

"I know you're not my Mum, but you look just like her pictures," he whispered, trying hard to control his emotions.

Jean's eyes were filling with tears also. He was a stranger to her, but there was a strong family bond between them. She hadn't really been

aware of the bond until recently, and now, with him here, awake in the room she flared to life, roaring in its intensity. "No, I'm not your Mom. But do you have a hug for your Aunt?"

Harry choked back a sob and nodded his head vigorously. Jean rushed to his bed and she wrapped her arms around him. Xavier and Scott quietly left the room, leaving them alone.

Slowly the pair pulled themselves together and separated.

Harry looked up at his smiling Aunt and shook his head. "I prayed for years that another relative would come for me. I had given up hope."

"I know," Jean replied. "We... I felt it when you gave up. I was afraid we wouldn't reach you in time. I wanted to leave right away, but the Professor made us wait, while he had his lawyers draw up the paperwork to transfer custody of you to me."

"I never have to return to the Dursleys?" he asked hopefully.

"No, Harry, you never have to return there. You don't need much in the way of parenting - you're nearly grown already - but Scott and I would like to provide that for you," Jean answered with a smile.

Harry looked down at his hands, his feelings conflicted. Someone wanted him? The concept was alien to him.

Jean placed her hand under his chin and lifted his face up to look at him. "Harry, you know I'm a full telepath, don't you? I can feel your emotions, and your confusion. You have some abilities in that area as well, which is why I'm feeling your emotions so strongly. You're broadcasting."

Harry recoiled from her touch, frightened and angry.

"I won't read your mind unless you let me, Harry. But right now you're broadcasting what you're feeling," she said trying to soothe him. "It may be a new sensation for you, but you are wanted, very much."

He took several calming breaths and tried to focus. "So what happens now?" he asked in a worried tone.

She sat down on the bed smiling at him. "First, we get you out of the infirmary, then we get you some better clothes than what the Dursleys gave you. Professor Xavier and I will help you come to grips with your abilities as a mutant. And hopefully by the time you're ready to return to Hogwarts, we'll be a family."

She winced slightly at the huge spike of anger and hurt when she mentioned Hogwarts. She placed a hand on his shoulder. "Harry, listen to me. You don't have to go back there if you don't want to. But you can't run from your problems either. Professor Xavier and I will help..."

"You don't know the whole story," Harry hissed. "I don't know who has messed my life up more, Dumbledore or Voldemort. But both of them are back there. And at least one of them wants me dead. Maybe both of them!"

Jean leaned back and her brows knotted in confusion. "Voldemort?" she asked. It was a name she wasn't familiar with.

Harry stared at her. "You don't know?" he finally blurted out.

She shook her head. "I'll only look in your mind with your permission," she said gently.

"Voldemort, he's why my parents are dead. He's the one who started this whole mess, and he wants me dead too," Harry said bitterly. "He's the reason why everyone hates me, or expects me to save them. I curse his name every night for not killing me, too."

Jean frowned and fought down her own spark of anger. "Will you let me see? It would be quicker than you retelling the story."

Harry looked torn.

"It would help me understand." Jean added in a hopeful tone. "I'd like to know how my sister died."

"I don't know," he replied hesitantly. A fear flared in his chest. "You'll probably hate me afterwards. I'm the reason she died."

She reached out a hand. "Can I see?" she asked softly.

He took her hand, nodding, but he refused to look in her eyes. She slipped into his mind with skill and a deft touch. He shuddered under her touch and she calmed him, helping him keep the panic from getting out of control. She paged through his memory, touching on key points of his life, the Dursleys, Hogwarts, Voldemort, Dumbledore. She saw the manipulations and the burden increasing until it became unbearable. She saw him in the depths of his despair, the only thing preventing him from killing himself was lack of a method.

Harry shivered and his mind tried to pull from her grip, but he lacked the strength. She surrounded his mind, comforting him and telling him he wasn't alone, nor would he ever be again. She followed the thread of Voldemort memories, coming to understand the threat he posed to both Harry and the Wizarding world. Finally, she withdrew from his mind, having tasted his experience and his life.

As soon as she pulled out, Harry released her hand and wrapped his arms around his knees. His eyes were closed tight, but that couldn't stop the tears flowing down his cheeks. She had reviewed his life and in doing so, he had been witness to it all over again. He shuddered and wanted to die from the shame. Between the Dursleys and what happened to his parents, he was certain she'd walk away in disgust.

Jean's eyes slowly focused and she fought the urge to lose her lunch over what she'd seen of her nephew's life. Things were far worse than she could have possibly imagined. She looked down at Harry on the bed and was startled by the change in him. She stepped forward and wrapped her arms around him. He stiffened against her at first, but slowly relaxed.

She rocked him, whispering words of comfort. Later, she would share what she had learned with Scott and Professor Xavier, but right now she had Harry to take care of. She admitted to herself that she could understand why Lily had been attracted to James Potter. He had been a

handsome, dashing man, and their son, her nephew, combined the best of both of them.

Harry relaxed and just let himself be held. It was a sensation he had never experienced before. Molly Weasley's hugs were stifling and confining. This was comforting without being stifling. The emotional roller coaster was coming to an end for the day and he had exhausted himself.

Jean watched and monitored his state. He was still exhausted, and she could tell he was fighting to stay awake now.

"Sleep, Harry. We won't be far away," she said, pulling away enough for him to lie back down.

"You won't go away?"

"No, I'll be near and I'll know when you wake," she replied with a smile.

His eyes closed and he smiled slightly. Jean brushed the hair out of his eyes and kissed his forehead.

"Thank you for coming for me, Aunt Jean," he whispered.

He didn't see it, but Jean's smile lit up the room. "Sleep, we'll talk more later. You have family nearby."

Jean stood and walked from the room. Her entire posture screamed of her fury over what had become Harry's life. She had thought that her sister's behavior was bad enough, but this Voldemort problem on top of that added a level of burden that stressed Harry to the breaking point. *No wonder he was lashing out*, she thought.

Jean walked into Professor Xavier's office a few minutes later. Xavier looked up in alarm, sensing the level of anger radiating from the powerful mutant. Scott and Logan also looked at her in surprise. It was very unlike her to interrupt one of the Professor's meetings unless it was important.

"I don't know who to be more angry with at the moment, Professor. Your role in this isn't exactly snow white, you know," she spat.

Scott stood and walked over to her. He'd never heard her talk to the Professor in this way.

Xavier bowed his head. "Yes, I know, Jean. I should have fought harder to get Lily here, or at least let her know her heritage. My failures from that day have come back to haunt us, and I'm not proud of what happened. I promise you I will do my best to help Harry through this. Did he tell you anything about what triggered this crisis?"

She stared at him for a moment before nodding. Despite these revelations, she still trusted him.

"They are at war. The whole wizarding world stands on the hairy precipice over prejudices hundreds of years old and my nephew is the linchpin of the whole bleeding war! According to prophecy, he's the only one capable of killing the same monster who killed my sister and her husband. It's the same monster that is running this war. This Voldemort is their version of Magneto, only worse. At least Magneto still has a little conscience left. Harry's faced him more times than anyone alive and has survived, barely, each time. He's never been trained to fight properly and he's given up hope of living through this war of theirs."

Jean sat down heavily, her anger bleeding away as she felt herself infected with Harry's own sense of hopelessness. "The Dursleys were abusive and Dumbledore knew about it. He's also known about the prophecy since before Harry was born, but he kept sending him back to that house. Most of the abuse came from Vernon and Dudley, but my sister wasn't entirely blameless either.

"He feels betrayed by those he trusted and he feels like he's alone against overwhelming odds. He's also been mentally abused by several of his teachers. It seems that he's suffered through a string of ineffectual Defense teachers, some of whom were out to kill him, and one of his other professors has committed a sort of magical mind-rape on him. Repeatedly.

"As to his mutant abilities, he's only begun to scratch the surface. He's going to need help in several areas. I can help him tap into his powers. But I think it would do to have Scott and Logan start him on some physical regime. He needs to know how to protect himself in all ways."

"And his anger?"

Jean frowned. "That's going to take an entirely different approach. He's never been shown any sort of parental love before, and I'm not entirely sure that he'll accept it at this point in his life. But we can try," she said softly. "He was falling asleep when he shocked me by thanking me for coming for him. The idea that anyone could want him is something alien to him. The Dursleys have spent his whole life reinforcing the idea that he's worthless, and he believes it."

Xavier pulled away from his desk and looked out a window across the wide lawn. "Introduce him to Scott and Logan when he wakes. Logan, start working with Harry on how to defend himself. Scott, after Jean and I give him some memories, start bringing him up to speed academically. Jean, I think we should make the best of this. The boy is smart and I think we should see if he'd be willing to help you harness your own magic. He'll have new information coming at him from several people. Giving him a bit of control in teaching you to use your talent might help him from becoming overwhelmed and feeling under siege."

Xavier paused for a moment, then nodded. "Split his times between defense, classwork, mastering his powers and teaching magic to Jean. I'll work with him in the evenings, trying to help him overcome his past."

The three nodded and walked out of the office, leaving Xavier staring blankly out the window. Dumbledore wouldn't have allowed this to happen to the boy unless he had a plan. Now the big question was if Dumbledore would follow his letter and leave them alone for the summer. Would the wizarding world leave them alone?

(TBC)

Mutant Storm

Chapter 02 - Explanations

Standard Disclaimer:

Perhaps it was the loud crash or the bloodcurdling scream that alerted Alyx that something was wrong. In either case she reluctantly rolled out of bed and slipped on her robe. She scowled seeing the condition of her slippers and once again smirked at the thought of what she did to get rid of that blasted llama that kept chewing on her slippers.

It should be noted at this point that Alyx is now banned from most South American countries and Peru has a death warrant out on her for her decimating their national animal. And while she is inordinately proud of the mayhem she's caused, she still hasn't matched Bob and his wonderful George Bush Sock Puppet attack on the Queen of England.

The scream came again and she hurriedly tied off her robe and rushed from the bedroom onto the stage. Now you might be wondering why her bedroom is just off the stage. Good, keep wondering because we don't intend to tell you.

"What are you doing?" Alyx shouted. She needed to shout over the screams and moans of a large group of people who were tied to their seats around the fire. Bob stood before a bonfire casually tossing items onto the fire. He lifted up an unopened package of twinkies and tossed it on. One of the men in the back of the group moaned piteously and a woman wept.

Bob tossed the season five Buffy CD set onto the fire and three people fainted. Then he turned to Alyx. "Yes? Did you need something?"

"What are you doing? You're supposed to be writing the disclaimer not torturing people you picked up off the street!"

"These aren't any people I picked up... these are the nerds that run that website that let our work be stolen," Bob hissed angrily.

Alyx's eyes lit up and she turned to the audience. "Erm, we don't own anything, really, even my slippers are rentals! Oh just read the chapter."

She whirled back to face the group of people and calmly picked up a cell phone and a pocket protector, then tossed them into the fire. Someone screamed and another woman fainted seeing her iPhone iBurn.

The pair of crazed author's laughed maniacally. "Terms of Service being ignored eh? Not for much longer!" Bob said with a cackle.

Mutant Storm

Chapter 02

Explanations

Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix (July 1st)...

Hermione sat in one corner of the kitchen sipping her tea and watching as some of the Order members who lived in the house came down for breakfast. The revelations of Harry's past had polarized the Order. A few came down solidly on an anti-mutant footing, but many more opted to support Harry, no matter what his heritage. A few were undecided.

Molly and Ginny were among the undecided, while Ron leaned heavily against the mutants. Ron's attitude didn't surprise her. It did disappoint her. She realized that he was once again reacting to a situation that Harry found himself embroiled in, not because he had facts or logic, but because he was jealous of Harry being special, again.

No matter how hard I've tried, he still gets jealous of Harry, she thought with a heavy heart. Harry is special, but not for the reasons that Ron thinks. He knows next to nothing about mutants, except for the few low rumors that have filtered into the wizarding community, and his jealousy of Harry being the center of attention is getting to be too much!

"Hermione?"

She looked up to see Ginny staring at her, her hand touching her shoulder lightly.

"Yes?"

"Tell me about mutants. What makes them different?" the younger girl asked.

She knew Ginny was trying to understand about Harry, and mutants in general, but so far all she'd heard was fictional stories from Ron. Hermione was getting exceedingly annoyed at the young red head. His bigotry and jealousy were shining through and she was finding herself repulsed.

She frowned for a moment, trying to find the words. "Have you ever heard of something called DNA?"

When Ginny shook her head, Hermione leaned back in her chair and realized that she was attracting the attention of others. Taking the time to explain might work to allay some fears.

"All right, pull up a chair and I'll try to explain this. DNA is a Muggle term. Muggles, lacking magic, use science to understand why things are, and DNA is one of those things they discovered.

"Everybody has DNA, Muggles, wizards, mutants, everyone. When a baby is conceived, the DNA from the mother and father are combined together. For example, my mother has bushy hair like I do, and my father has flat hair. That means that the little tiny piece of DNA that describes

my hair was inherited from my mother.

"What the Muggles have learned is that DNA is made up of millions of things called genes. Each gene describes something about us. Whether we'll be tall, or short, fat or skinny, have blue eyes or green. In all likelihood, there exists in each of us a gene that says we're wizards. Think about that. One tiny piece of you so small you can't see it without the aid of a Muggle machine determines whether you're a wizard or a Muggle."

She paused and watched as people considered what she was saying.

"So, I got my red hair from my Dad and Mum?" asked Ginny uncertainly.

Hermione nodded. "Yes, common traits will reinforce each other. Both your parents have red hair, so the odds increased that you'd have red hair."

"And mutants?"

"Mutants are like Muggles; they can't use magic. But they have one gene that's different from Muggles and this gene gives them powers. The problem is, until the power manifests itself, it's impossible to say what that power will be. No one has done the research to figure it all out. They do know that one gene determines if you are a mutant or not, but they haven't figured out what determines the powers the mutant has.

"Most mutants develop their power at puberty, but a few develop their powers after puberty, usually during their teenage years, and they seem to be triggered by periods of great stress.

"Professor Dumbledore mentioned that Harry's aunt was a powerful telepath. That's a general term which covers a lot of mental abilities. She could read minds, or be able to move objects with the power of her mind. Possibly even both. The stronger a mutant, the more chances they can do a lot with their powers."

She looked around, noting a few confused expressions, but most seemed to understand. She needed one more thing to drive the point home.

"Mrs. Weasley, would you help me for a moment?" she asked.

"What do you need, dear?"

"Would you conjure two identical clear glass salt shakers and fill them with salt please?"

Molly blinked, but she complied with the strange request. A minute later, she handed the requested items to Hermione.

Taking them, Hermione put one shaker down, then unscrewed the lid of the other. Carefully, she removed one single grain of salt and placed it on a plate. Pointing to the grain, she then asked Mrs. Weasley to turn it black.

"I don't understand," Molly began.

"Please? Just turn it black? It will make sense in a moment, I promise," pleaded Hermione. Most of the Order was watching with interest and she didn't want to lose their attention.

Molly frowned, but waved her wand, turning the grain of salt black. Smiling her thanks, Hermione carefully put the black grain back in the open shaker and put the lid on.

"This is me," she said, holding up the salt shaker without the black grain. "Inside this bottle are thousands of grains of salt. That is my DNA. Compared to any normal witch, pure blood, half blood or Muggle born, there is very little difference. There is information in here that details the color of my eyes and hair, my gender, even how my bones are built. And somewhere in here is one tiny little piece that says I'm a witch."

Hermione put her salt shaker down and picked up the one with the black grain in it. "This is Harry. Like me, his DNA is inside the bottle, but there is one grain of black salt in here. One grain. That's all it takes to make Harry a mutant wizard and me just a Muggle-born witch. By now it should be obvious just how tiny the difference between Muggle, Wizard and Mutant is."

Hermione turned a hard eye on Ron.

"I want to be sure everyone understands something. Mutants are still human. Harry is still human. He's a wizard and he has at least one extra ability that doesn't involve magic. In my mind, hating mutants because they're different is no different than hating the Muggle-born because you're a pure-blood, or hating Muggles because they have no magic.

"Some Muggles are afraid of mutants because of what they represent. Some think they're the future of humanity, and others think they are out to destroy it. The truth is probably much simpler. Nature is constantly testing and changing her designs, and we are creatures of nature. Mutants represent a possible change to the human race, just as we do."

Ron glared at her and stomped from the room.

She shook her head and sighed, disappointed and more than a little hurt by his attitude. She knew there was every chance that Harry would not talk with them if he returned, and she was feeling especially alone because of Ron's stubbornness.

"That tiny change can result in something so dramatic?" Ginny exclaimed.

Hermione nodded. "He's still human, though some people would argue that he isn't. But he's no less human than you or I."

Ginny nodded thoughtfully, then sighed. "He's going to be very angry with us, isn't he?" she asked, her expression unhappy.

Hermione looked at her hands on the table. "I think he will be. I lied to him. I let my belief in Professor Dumbledore cloud my judgment."

Molly watched the two girls talk, frowning at them. She could understand Hermione being upset, but she didn't think it would be as bad as they were making out. And she didn't like Hermione placing the blame on Professor Dumbledore. Sure, the man had made a few mistakes, but still, he was Dumbledore!

"It will be all right, Hermione,. We'll apologize and he'll forgive us," she said, trying to reassure the girl and her daughter.

"No, Mum," Ginny said, surprising her. "I don't think it will be. Harry isn't a very forgiving person. In fourth year he barely spoke to Ron because Ron was being a git. Harry gives trust easily enough, but he doesn't forgive when that trust is broken. I think in some ways he still hasn't forgiven Ron for fourth year."

"Ginny's right, Mrs. Weasley. I know Harry well enough. He won't scream at us in anger like he did last summer, he'll just cut us out. We won't exist to him anymore," Hermione said quietly.

Ginny shook her head, refusing to contemplate the possibility that Harry might never talk to her again. The fact that she hadn't been one of his friends to write him was of little comfort to her. "So what can mutants do, Hermione?" she asked.

The older girl took another moment to collect herself. "It depends. Imagine if you could cast only one spell. That would make you like a mutant. Some are able to levitate objects, others can blow holes in things, and still others run very fast, or fly. The ability varies from mutant to mutant. If Professor Dumbledore is correct, then Harry's mother was a strong witch who had a weak mutant ability that she hid as being magical. And his aunt is a very strong mutant with only an average magical ability. The letter said Harry was a strong mutant, and we know he's a strong wizard. That's a powerful combination."

"It is indeed, Miss Granger," a voice from the doorway said.

She looked up to see Dumbledore standing in the doorway.

"Harry is a very powerful wizard. In some ways I think even more powerful than myself."

"Oh, no, Albus. He's just a boy," protested Molly.

He moved over to the table and sat down. "Yes, Molly, he's just a boy, who at the tender age of thirteen cast a Patronus capable of chasing off over a hundred Dementors. Not even I can do that."

Dumbledore swished his wand, causing a cup of tea to appear in front of him. "What Harry will grow into is hard to say. He has always shown much promise."

"Unfortunately, I'm no longer sure Harry's future includes us," Ginny said unhappily. The truth about his home life had blown away her illusions of the Boy-Who-Lived, leaving behind only Harry in her mind. It had been a painful and frightening revelation to discover that the Boy-Who-Lived was a myth. In one way it saddened her, because she recognized it as a passing of her childhood. But in another, she welcomed it. Her feelings had crystallized; she no longer wanted the myth, she wanted her friend and, perhaps someday, more.

"That depends," said Remus sadly. "If he's like James, then he'll be unmoved by any apology. Lily would eventually forgive someone, given enough time. The only person I know that fought with Lily was her sister, Petunia, and I know for a fact that their fight caused her a great deal of pain."

"Do you think he'd accept mail from us?" Ginny asked hopefully.

Dumbledore frowned and shook his head. "Not right away, I think. Perhaps if you gave him a week or two. Professor Xavier's school is reputed to be one of the most advanced Muggle schools in the world. Harry is undoubtedly still trying to get used to the new environment and learning to deal with an aunt and uncle who obviously care for him."

Xavier's School for Gifted Children, Westchester County, New York...

He ran around the corner and hid behind a burned out hulk of a main battle tank, panting and struggling to catch his breath. The building behind him was burning fiercely, and the one closest to him was just a hollow shell of itself. From up the street he could hear screams and a heavy thumping sound. His enemy wasn't far away and he wasn't going to be allowed to hide for long.

The thumping grew heavier and the ground vibrated under his feet. He peeked out from behind the tank for a look. It was coming for him!

"*Reducto! Reducto! Reducto! Reducto!*" Harry shouted, stepping out from behind the tank. He knew other, more dangerous spells, but the Reductor hex had a simple incantation, which meant he could cast a lot of them quickly. That Harry's Reductors were acting more like high explosive charges than a simple blasting spell was something he didn't know was unusual. He wrongly assumed that everyone was capable of the effect.

The pattern of spells lanced out from his wand and three of the spells hit the Sentinel in the knees. The huge machine slid off its legs at the knees and crashed to the ground. It lay silent and immobile for a moment, then a panel opened in the head and a small black object ejected out, bounced in Harry's direction and landed nearly at his feet.

From the control room, Logan watched Harry turn transparent. The grenade exploded a second later, spewing fragments in all directions.

Harry staggered back, temporarily blinded by the bright light of the explosion. In his phased state he was safe from danger, but he had forgotten about the light!

"Freeze simulation," Logan said quietly.

All movement and sounds stopped in the Danger Room.

“Harry,” Logan said over the loudspeaker. “You’re a wizard and a mutant. You could have shielded against that grenade, or teleported away. Instead, you stayed and took it in the face. What were you thinking?”

Harry wiped the tears away from his eyes and looked up at Logan in the control room. “I wasn’t thinking. I got too caught up in the fight.”

“You’re relying too heavily on your phase state,” the older man said bluntly. “You need to treat everything as a threat until proven otherwise.” Logan shook his head and glanced at the wall clock. “All right, you’re due to work with Jean in a bit. Go grab some lunch and catch up with her. Remember, I want you out with me running the grounds after dinner. We’ll talk about this more while we run.”

Harry nodded and waved. Logan was a tough instructor; he was also blunt and used language that would tie Hermione into knots. Harry found the change refreshing.

The Danger Room rippled; the ruined street vanished and a door appeared.

Logan grinned as he watched Harry leave the room. *The kid has a lot of spunk*, he thought. He’d taken everything Logan had thrown at him and merely gritted his teeth. He couldn’t help but admire the kid. Not many people his age would be so focused.

Of course, he mused, *not many teens his age had a wacko with a private army out to kill them, either.*

The last few weeks had been hard on Harry. He was coming to grips with the idea of having an aunt and uncle who really cared what happened to him, and coming to understand that a teacher could be tough, but still likable. Logan worked Harry brutally, getting him into shape as well as helping him learn to defend himself.

It had only been a few weeks, but already he was starting to see some improvements. Running the grounds after dinner no longer left him panting and feeling like he was going to throw up. The other training was helping him also.

Jean and Xavier had given him a head start by performing a memory transfer of science and math skills. Xavier also gave him a smattering of philosophy and history, as well as a foundation in ethics and literature.

Scott worked with Harry to bring him up to speed on basic math and science. The memories provided him with a basic understanding of the fields. Scott helped by showing him how to apply what he learned and then to build upon that foundation.

In the afternoons, he taught his aunt magic, which improved his own understanding and casting abilities. He taught her mostly Charms, Transfiguration and Defense. The other topics he wisely refrained from actively teaching. That didn’t stop Jean from reading, especially potions, which she was certain would have medical applications.

One thing that surprised Harry was the fact that he was allowed to do magic in the States. The Department of Magic, the American equivalent of the Ministry, didn’t have an underage restriction law. That meant he was free to practice as much as he wanted, as long as he observed the law involving secrecy of the wizarding world.

That being the case, Logan had smoothly integrated his magic into his combat training.

He had worked through those thirty wands he’d taken from Grimmauld Place with Jean until they found one that was suitable for her to use. Professor Xavier had promised a trip to Salem at a later date, where they could get a better-fitting wand for her. She had tried Harry’s Phoenix core wand, but it was too overpowered for her and difficult to control. The hole in the kitchen wall was testimony to that.

Jean was helping him come to grips with his past, as well as helping him learn to control his mutant abilities.

Surprisingly, he had a touch of telepathy, which Jean and Professor Xavier coaxed out of him. Between the two they were able to help him begin building a set of mental shields that no magic could penetrate. The telepathy was part of a legacy talent from his mother. Lily was a strong empath and he had inherited a minor ability in both of those mental skills. It was his empathy that had been making him ill at the Dursleys. His talent had picked up on all the animosity and was manifesting it physically.

Jean was also working closely with him to help him overcome his nightmares. She was initially surprised and frightened by their intensity and frequency.

“Harry,” said a voice.

He looked up from the sandwich he was making and smiled. “Hi Aunt Jean, Uncle Scott.”

Jean walked in with Scott right behind her. “You slept better last night,” she said neutrally.

He nodded and went about making sandwiches for Jean and Scott. “Yes, second night in a row without a nightmare. I don’t think the problem is entirely beaten, but it’s getting better. It felt good to wake up in the morning and not be exhausted.”

He turned and handed each their lunch. “How are you coming on your Charms?”

Jean grinned around a mouthful of food.

“She’s driving me nuts, Harry. Last night she spent half the night playing with that coloring charm. She must have changed the colors in the room twenty times,” Scott complained with a grin.

Harry laughed. “You’re lucky. In Britain, we’re taught these spells and then told we can’t perform them unless we’re in school. I was put on trial for defending myself and my cousin from a pair of Dementors last summer, all because I used magic outside of school.”

Scott shook his head.

Jean nodded slowly, recalling what she had read from Harry's *Monster Book of Monsters*. "Foul things."

"Foul things? Crazy government for employing them. I don't know how we're going to manage over there," Scott quipped.

"Manage over where?" Harry asked, his eyes narrowing suddenly. A cold feeling developed in the pit of his stomach.

Jean glared at Scott, then motioned for Harry to sit down.

"Honey, please let me talk before you get upset. Nothing is decided, so I don't want you to worry. The Professor has been thinking about expanding the X-Men and his school and he's been thinking about opening a base in Britain.

"None of this is decided," she stressed, "but it was thought you could finish up your education and during the summers you'd be able to train with us. Scott and I would move there. It would be easy with my dual citizenship. I'd have to find a job, of course, but it's been talked about."

Harry sat stiffly. "How can I go back there?" he whispered, then he looked at her bleakly. "You know what they did to me."

Jean stood from her chair, walked over to him and wrapped both arms around him. "I do know what they did to you. But going back and facing them and telling them you won't accept that behavior anymore would do you a world of good. You don't have to forgive them. You don't even have to like them anymore. But for your own sake, you should confront them. If you don't, it will eat away at you for the rest of your life."

Harry leaned into her embrace and tried to master his emotions. He nodded stiffly and she kissed his forehead.

"Has the Professor picked out a place yet?" he asked.

"No, he hasn't." Scott replied. "What are you thinking?"

"My G-G-Godfather, he told me that he was leaving everything to me. His family was very wealthy and I think mine was also. If we could check with Gringotts, the Wizarding Bank, we might find a property we could use."

Jean and Scott shared an amused look. "We never considered that. But would you be willing to let us use something your family left for you?" Jean asked.

Harry's expression turned somber. "I will always honor my parents and my heritage. But you two are all the family I have left. Sirius died trying to save me. If he left me something the Professor could use, it will feel like his death had some meaning."

He paused and lowered his head. "I don't want to think about where I was headed. You two and the X-Men saved me from that."

He looked up at the pair, his eyes filled with despair. "If it weren't for you and Professor Xavier, I'd either have turned into another Voldemort, or killed myself," he whispered.

"But you don't still feel that way, do you?" Jean asked, watching him carefully. She and Xavier were both aware that something had happened to Harry that made it very difficult for him to control his emotions. Xavier thought it might be related to the so-called Occlumency lessons, but no one knew for sure. The one thing that was certain was that some subjects easily invoked an extreme reaction from him and his ability to contain and control his emotions had been damaged badly.

He shook his head. "No. I still sometimes get very angry, but I can see now what I was doing to myself. Sometimes it seems I have no control over my emotions at all. A lot of people did things that made my life harsher than it needed to be. But that wasn't my fault and I'm not accepting the blame for it anymore. I didn't kill my parents, Voldemort did. Dumbledore and Snape are responsible for Sirius' death. And Muggles are responsible for how I was raised."

Jean frowned. "You sound like you're talking about revenge."

He smiled, but shook his head. "No, just survival. I have no intention of going after Voldemort, Bellatrix or the Dursleys, if that's what you're worried about. They've taken too much from me at this point. I'm not about to let them turn me into a killer just because some fraud spewed out a prophecy. It probably isn't even real."

"And Snape and Dumbledore?" Jean pressed.

Harry's eyes began to glow with magic. "I won't do anything to those two either, except maybe ignore them utterly. But I'm not going to let them walk all over me anymore. I promise you, Aunt Jean. I'll even give you a wizard's oath. I'll not start anything with any of my old 'friends'. But if they start with me, or fall back into their old methods, I will end it."

"You can't ask more than that, Jean," Scott said. "He has a right to defend himself."

Jean crossed her arms and looked at the both of them warily. "We'll see," she replied softly.

Harry nodded soberly and tried to change the subject. "So, did you do your Charms homework?"

Jean grinned. She loved learning about magic. She had been initially surprised to see how extensive a collection of books Harry owned on the subject, many of them defense related. While he helped her with the beginner spells, he was also busy ripping through his texts, learning to cast without a wand or an incantation. She had tried to copy his example, but found she lacked the power to cast without a wand to focus her magic.

She nodded. "I have, but I'm a little lost about this one wand movement. It seems to me that the jab and the point are the same movement." She made a gesture with her finger and his eyes tracked the movement.

Harry made a reaching gesture with one, blurred hand, and a can of Pepsi appeared in it. "They are the same movement. But the point has a target associated with it, while the jab doesn't," he replied before opening the can.

So, basically a point has a target, and that's usually the last movement in an incantation?"

Harry frowned for a moment, then nodded. "That's basically right, but you'll find that some spells end with a jab that require you to jab in the direction of a target. It's a blurring of the movements, if you ask me," he replied, then he smacked his forehead with his open palm. "Blimey! Listen to me! I sound like bloody Hermione!"

Jean and Scott fell silent, watching his reaction. During his first few days at the manor, Harry would get very angry just thinking about his 'friends'.

He lowered his gaze and took a deep breath, then sighed heavily. He wasn't going to let them ruin this! They had ruined enough of his life, but no longer.

Jean suppressed a soft smile. She was pleased to see him visibly recognize the danger signs and control his emotions. Since his arrival, there had been a few frightening panic attacks, complete with flashbacks. Fortunately, there was usually plenty of warning before it got that far.

He looked up at Scott. "Logan and I will be running this evening after dinner. Are you going to join us?" he asked in a normal tone.

Scott nodded and poked at his belly. "I don't suppose it would hurt."

"Very good, Harry. I thought mentioning your friend might upset you again," Jean said softly.

Harry shook his head. "No, the Professor is right. It doesn't pay for me to get angry at people who aren't here."

"What will you do when you're confronted with them, face to face?" Jean asked.

Harry shrugged. "I'm not sure. Ignore them probably and make new friends. I can see the logic behind completing my education, but after that? I don't think I'll want to stick around."

"What do you mean?" asked Scott.

Harry leaned back in his chair and sipped his soda. "Think about it. The wizards live in a world that closely resembles late Victorian England. They rely on a magical form of gas lighting for their homes, or candles. They go out of their way to avoid using any sort of technology. Even their version of the radio is done entirely with magic.

"It's an isolated world, separate from the Muggles, and they want to keep it that way. Petunia and Vernon wouldn't let me partake in their Muggle world, and I thought the wizarding world was my only option. But you've shown me in these past weeks that I can have my magic and my MTV. Hank seems to think that with the proper shielding, I'll be able to own a TV and not fry it when I cast a Lumos.

"The computer that Professor Xavier gave me has hundreds of textbooks saved on it. I'm walking around with a library the size of a notebook and I can reference the information anytime I need to. There's nothing like it in the wizarding world. I won't even mention the Internet. Each day the Muggles pull further ahead of them and they haven't a clue."

Harry turned to look at them both and his eyes burned with intensity. "Why would I want to go back to Victorian England when I can have *Star Trek* and the Hubble Space Telescope? I'll bet you anything that the wizarding world will think of Mutants as another form of Muggle and consign us to the trash heap with them. I might have had only vague understanding of what DNA was, and what made us mutants, but they have no idea."

"So what will you do then?" Scott asked curiously.

Harry looked down at the table. "Honestly? I don't know. Hogwarts doesn't teach us to live in the Muggle world. What I'm learning from you, Aunt Jean and Professor Xavier is teaching me what I need to know. I've been helping Hank with his experiments and I find the whole process fascinating. I don't have to decide today what I want to do, right?"

Jean smiled. "No, you don't have to decide today."

Later that evening, Jean, Scott and Logan were in Professor Xavier's office, talking.

"I'm telling ya, the kid has what it takes. He's got guts and he learns from his mistakes. I've never seen him make the same mistake twice. He's prime X material," Logan said hotly.

Jean opened her mouth to reply, but Xavier jumped in.

"I'm not concerned about turning him into another X Man, Logan. I just want to make sure he's capable of surviving his battles."

"Well, I'm just saying, the kid has what it takes," Logan grumbled. "Besides, I think he could be really useful to us."

"Noted," Xavier replied with a smile.

"Professor, about his battles. I am coming to think that Harry will probably not fight for the wizarding world. He is very reluctant to return there. In a way, we've done him a disservice by taking him from that world. He's learned about music videos and space missions. I saw him watch, entranced, during a rerun of *Top Gun*. The airplanes fascinated him. The Dursleys limited his exposure to the normal world so it's like he's discovering it right under our noses. The wizarding world has none of that stuff and he's becoming increasingly reluctant to give it up," Scott said.

"Yes, Hank mentioned that Harry had spoken to him about getting electronics to work around magic. Hank seems to feel that a carbon-polymer shielding... Hang on a moment. Harry's approaching the door. Something is very wrong."

The door opened and Harry staggered into the room. His scar was bleeding and he weaved drunkenly, one hand pressed up against his scar.

“Voldemort,” he gasped. “Shields falling... I can't hold him. He wants to know where I am... help...”

Jean immediately reached out with her mind, connecting to Harry. She could see his shields crumbling from some external attack that crashed against his shields like waves on a beach, and causing him tremendous pain. Without thinking she poured energy into his shields, bolstering them. A moment later, she could feel the presence of Xavier, shoring up Harry's shields right beside her.

The attack lasted only a few moments longer before it ceased. Harry's eyes rolled up and he fell limply. Logan and Scott leaped to catch him before he hit the floor.

“Put him on the couch,” Xavier ordered. Jean rushed from the room to fetch her medical kit.

“What the devil was that?” demanded Logan.

“That was a magical attack by this Voldemort of his. Harry is still learning how to shield his mind and he will soon master a technique that will keep these attacks out. Even now, he managed to hold this creature off long enough to get help,” Xavier replied with satisfaction.

Jean returned a moment later, carrying her medical bag. She fussed over him for a while before leaning back on her heels. “Well, it's over. I don't think I can remember seeing someone with a pain threshold as high as his, except perhaps for Logan. His tolerance for pain is abnormally high.”

Harry opened his eyes and Jean turned her attention back to him. “How are you feeling?”

“Tired, and like I've been hit with a Bludger,” he said weakly. “Voldemort knows I'm missing. He was trying to find out where I am. I think he was surprised that I nearly kept him out.”

“You did keep him out, Harry. Another week of training and I think you'll be able to keep him out if he attacks again. How do you suppose that he found out you're missing?”

He sat up and rubbed at his aching temples. “Snape, I suppose. Dumbledore uses to Snape to feed information to Voldemort, but I'm not so sure Snape is working for Dumbledore.”

Xavier frowned. “Yes, I've seen the memory of his lessons. He wasn't attempting to teach you anything useful.”

“Go get some rest, Harry. I'll look in on you later,” Jean ordered.

Harry nodded. “All right. I have some books to read. Maybe they'll relax me enough so I can sleep.”

Malfoy Manor...

“Crucio!” snarled the strange-looking man.

Snape fell to his knees, screaming in pain.

“You told me the boy never learned Occlumency! You told me his mind was weak and could never keep me out!” Voldemort said, then he twisted his wand, increasing the power to the curse.

Snape quivered and howled on the floor, soiling himself.

“I want to know where the brat is!” Voldemort said.

Snape writhed on the floor, to the amusement of the assembled Death Eaters. Most of those captured at the beginning of the summer had been given a pardon, thanks to a generous contribution to Minister Fudge's reelection fund from the Malfoy family.

Voldemort released the spy and walked around the man on the floor for a few moments, staring at him. “First, you lie to me about his learning Occlumency. Then you come here, telling me the boy has run, leaving the protection of his Muggle Aunt, but you don't know where he is. What good are you, Severus? I would have thought by now you would want to please your Lord.”

“I do want to please you,” gasped Snape. “If the brat has learned to shield his mind, he did not learn it from me. It is true I do not know where Potter has gone, but the wards around his family have dropped. You could take that sanctuary away from him.”

Snape hoped the information would be enough. Anyone who knew him would not be surprised by this. Snape worked for himself, after all. He followed the direction he felt would most ensure his survival. Voldemort had a hold on him, but he was constantly working on ways of freeing himself from that hold.

“Yes, that would hurt Potter,” mused the Dark Lord. He turned to Bellatrix. “Bella, take a cadre of my servants and go teach Potter's family that it does not bode well to defy me. Show them my displeasure.”

Bellatrix rushed up, bowed low and kissed the hem of his robe, before backing from the room.

Voldemort watched her leave, then turned back to Snape. “You will return to Dumbledore and inform him that I am searching for the boy. Tell him nothing about my other plans. Nothing!”

“As my Lord commands,” Snape said with a whimper.

Several hours later, the Little Whinging Fire Brigade were called to handle a fire on Privet Drive. Unfortunately, the family living at number four did not survive the blaze.

Xavier's School for Gifted Children, Westchester County, New York (July 7th)...

Harry looked up at the darkened control room and frowned. Logan was supposed to be setting up for today's training session.

"He's not going to be able to make it today, Harry," said a voice.

Harry turned to see Scott standing in the doorway.

"Oh?"

"Yeah, something came up and he had to go look into it. He might be gone a few days, so I'm going to handle training until he returns."

Harry shrugged. He didn't mind his Uncle handling training for him. In fact, it would make for an interesting change of pace. While his Uncle Scott was every bit as athletic as Logan, Scott had been mainly overseeing Harry's academic training, helping him with his math, sciences and other fields.

"Your Aunt tells me you're quite a flier on a broom. How about if we see if you can translate that broom skill into something more mundane?"

"Flying?" Harry asked, his interest peaking immediately.

Scott nodded and then he tapped a few keys on a hand-held controller. The room shimmered and changed, revealing a small airstrip and a small jet nearby.

Scott walked over to the plane, with Harry following eagerly behind him. "This is a two-seat jump jet with supersonic capabilities. It's identical to the jets we use when the Professor sends one of us out to investigate something. We save the Blackbird for missions requiring a larger group.

"We're going to use this simulation for an hour or two, so you can get used to the controls. Then, if I think you've mastered the basics, we'll try it out in the real thing. Oh, and when we're done today, I'll give you a controller like this one, so you can call up this and a few other canned simulations in the Danger Room. It's not as good as what we can do in the control room, but we have a few canned simulations we use for training, like the jet trainer."

Harry nodded eagerly as he climbed into the front seat. He watch Scott strapping himself in, then he copied his movements. Scott lowered the canopy, then began to describe the controls and what they did.

Four hours later, Harry walked into the kitchen, smiling happily. Scott staggered in behind him, looking as though he'd been run through a wringer.

"What happened to you?" exclaimed Jean.

When Scott sat down on a chair and groaned, Harry gestured and handed him a can of cold soda he'd teleported from the fridge.

Scott popped open the can and drained it in one long swallow, then he placed the empty can down on the table and looked at Jean. "Harry. Harry happened to me."

Harry's smile faltered a bit. "It wasn't that bad," he muttered, blushing a bright red.

Scott snorted. "You know Logan is on the West Coast looking into that report about a possible Sentinel sighting, so I thought I'd introduce Harry to the flight trainer, then maybe take him up in a JJ2. Jean, your nephew isn't a good flier, he's a natural. He picked up the controls in the simulator in less than an hour, then we went out to use a real JJ2.

"He was doing maneuvers I didn't know you could do with those jets. He pulled more G's than I've seen anyone else pull and it didn't even bother him. Me? I feel like I've been beaten with a baseball bat!"

Jean laughed. "Well, I did warn you he was good on a broom. Speaking of that, we're going to have to get to Salem soon so I can get a broom for myself. I can't keep using his Firebolt."

"And a fitted wand, Aunt Jean," Harry prompted.

Jean smiled. "Yes, a fitted wand also."

"Are those jump jets expensive?" Harry asked.

"Very. Why? Do you want one for yourself?" Scott asked, grinning.

Harry laughed. "It's not as crazy as it sounds, Uncle Scott. If I can solve the electronics problem, I could shrink it down to something that could fit in my pocket. Imagine being able to carry around your own little escape plane."

Scott blinked in surprise and his expression grew thoughtful. "Would would you be able to return the jet to normal size, even if you didn't have magic?" he asked intently.

"Sure. A simple *finite* rune would to it. I never took Ancient Runes, but even I know that's how to cancel a spell without using a wand." His brow furrowed in thought. "I suppose with the right runes you could even shrink something without being magical. That's the advantage of rune magic. You don't need a wand or even a wizard to power the spells."

"What are you thinking, Scott?" Jean asked.

He turned to look at her. "Think about it. We could shrink anything from jets to trucks and store them for easy carrying, then use them in the field. I think Harry just hit on an idea that makes solving the electronics problem that much more important. I'll mention it to the Professor and see what he has to say."

Jean turned back to Harry. "That's another thing we have to talk about. Your course selections for next year. I do not want you taking any courses with that Professor Snape."

Harry blinked and if possible, his smile broadened. "I am so going to enjoy watching you explain that to Dumbledore. You won't get any argument from me about it. That man hated me before he even met me."

"Then it's settled. When we return to Britain, we'll try to find out which class he is teaching and arrange for a private tutor to cover that topic."

"You know, I could just not take Potions," Harry said slowly. The only reason for Potions, in his mind, was to be an Auror and he wasn't sure he wanted that anymore. Especially with Fudge as Minister.

Jean leaned forward and ran a hand against his cheek. "I know sweetie, but it's best that you learn as much as you can."

Harry nodded reluctantly, then he turned when a scratching came at the window. He stood and opened the window, letting Hedwig back in. His owl chuffed a few times and landed on his shoulder, where she stuck out a leg for him to remove a letter.

He unrolled the scroll and as he read, he absently stroked Hedwig with one free hand. The owl preened under the attention, much to Scott and Jean's amusement.

"Who did you write, Harry?" asked Scott.

"I wrote the Salem Academy of Magic. Aunt Jean needs to learn how to Apparate. So I wrote the school asking if they had summer classes. Apparation isn't difficult, but it will take at least a few days for her to learn," he replied.

"What's Apparation?" asked Jean.

"It's one of the ways that wizards travel, Aunt Jean. It's a lot like my teleportation. Once you learn how to Apparate and get your license you'll be able to move around quickly."

Jean leaned across the table, looking intrigued. "What other methods of travel do wizards have?"

Harry glanced at Scott, who seemed interested in the conversation as well.

"Well, there's the broom, of course, and flying carpets, but those are illegal in Britain. My ex-mate's father had a car charmed to fly and Sirius owned a motorcycle that flew. Then there are Portkeys and the Floo network. Oh, and we can't forget the Knight Bus." Harry said, ticking the methods off on his fingers.

"You make it sound like you don't like Portkeys and the Floo network. What are they and why don't you like them?" asked Scott.

Harry picked up Scott's empty soda can. "Imagine reaching for this can and suddenly you find yourself pulled to some location far away. Portkeys can travel internationally and come in a variety of types. But the biggest problem is that it is so easy to turn an ordinary object into a Portkey. You have no clue it's a Portkey until it activates.

"Back at the end of fourth year, a friend and I both touched a trophy cup that had been spelled to be a Portkey. We were pulled hundreds of miles away, to a cemetery. My friend was killed by the same man that betrayed my parents to Voldemort, and I was forced to partake in an evil rite which gave Voldemort a body again.

"I don't like Portkeys. I'm not afraid to use one, but I'm always uneasy that the destination won't be what I thought it would be."

Jean remained silent. She'd seen the event Harry described when she had viewed his memories. It was one of the key events that continued to haunt him.

"And the Floo thing?" prompted Scott.

Jean had explained a lot of Harry's life to Scott, but some details she held back, hoping that Harry would openly share them with Scott, once he began to trust him. Trust was something he didn't give easily anymore. He almost instantly trusted her, but only because she looked so much like his mother. And right now, he was relying on her trust of others to decide when and where to give his own trust. She knew this was a critical time in his life and his faith in her and others was still fragile.

Harry smiled. "The Floo network is something you need to see to believe. Basically, they've hooked up a bunch of fireplaces and by tossing some powder into the fireplace and saying the address, you're moved from fireplace to fireplace until you arrive at the right address. It's dizzying, to say the least. I've never been able to use the Floo and land properly. That's why I love my teleporting. No more Floo or Portkeys for me."

Scott nodded thoughtfully. The details of the wizarding world fascinated him. He was amazed at the lengths they went through to avoid the use of technology.

Satisfied, Scott reached into his pocket and withdrew the hand-held Danger Room controller, then slid it across the table to Harry.

Harry picked it up, looking very pleased.

"All right, Harry; rules. First, in your room you will find two books. One is on the basics of flight. It includes most of the current FAA rules for VFR and IFR flying. However, the FAA doesn't normally license pilots for what amounts to small scale fighter planes. If you want an official license, you'll need to get jet rated on something like a Gulfstream G. I think if you do want that kind of license, you'd best get a British license, not an

American one. You'll find that I've also left a series of math and physics problems tied into flying and aircraft design. They're similar to the same type of math we've been doing already, and I expect you to do them all.

"The second book details the flight characteristics and systems of the standard jump jets, including the single seater JJ1 and the twin seater JJ2. Study them. The more you know about what you're flying, the safer a pilot you'll be. I'll quiz you on them, so you better know the information.

"Second. You are to put at least forty hours of simulator time in this month. I want you to split that time between ground classes and air time in the simulator. I'll be combining your math and physics classes into the flight classes to save some time. Actual flying time can happen only when one of us can act as a check pilot. You are not to fly solo until I say so.

"Play your cards right and you'll be checked out in a JJ2 and ready to solo by the end of July. But if I hear you're slacking off in your other studies, I'll ground you. Understand me?" Scott said in a serious tone.

Harry looked down at the controller, then up at Scott. "I'll do my best in my studies, Uncle Scott," he said softly, trying to hide his surprise. He wasn't used to having a strong male parental figure. Even Sirius was more like a friend than a parent. Scott was different. He outlined a reasonable set of requests, told him what the ultimate goal was, and warned him what would happen if he slacked off.

Harry stood and held the controller close to his chest. "I'm going to go check out those books," he said, then turned and walked from the room.

Jean looked at Scott carefully. "You look beat."

He sighed and leaned back slowly on his chair. "I never knew a teenager could be so exhausting. I still don't understand how he managed some of those maneuvers in the plane. My sore spots have sore spots."

"He's really that good?" she asked incredulously. Scott wasn't one for extravagant compliments.

"Let me put it this way. He could probably fly through lower Manhattan, at fifty feet, and never hit a thing," Scott said tiredly. "I think our biggest problem will be keeping him on the ground. I bet he'll learn the Blackbird systems in record time, too. Maybe all new pilots should be required to fly brooms first, if Harry's abilities are anything to go by."

Laughing and shaking her head, Jean reached across the table and picked up the parchment Harry had left behind. "According to this, I could take the Apparation class near the end of July. It might not be a bad idea to bring Harry along and let him learn this also."

Scott nodded. "Yeah, it would also give him a chance to relax and maybe have a little fun. We've been working him pretty hard since he arrived."

"I know we have, but he's been enjoying himself despite the hard work. I don't know if you noticed or not, but he practically glowed with pride when you complimented him on his flying."

"He's a tough kid, Jean, but I like him a lot. I know he's not ours, but it's beginning to feel like he is. Did you know that he came to me the other day, asking for help with some math problems? He was so hesitant and nervous about it, but when he saw I wasn't going to yell at him or anything, he settled down nicely." He shook his head. "I think I know how you feel about him. I mean he doesn't look much like your sister, but he's your last link to her. I can't help wondering if we shouldn't make our relationship with him more formal."

Jean sucked in her breath and stared at him for a moment. Then she stood up, walked to him and knelt down next to his chair. "What do you mean?"

Scott rubbed the back of his neck and looked at her. "I'm not sure. I mean, he's nearly grown up now, but maybe we should offer to adopt him? Of course, by the time it works its way through the system he may be an adult.

"He's a great kid who's had a crappy life with a lot of adults making it even worse. When we went to go get him, I thought the whole thing was crazy. Now that I know him, I care about him, you know?"

Jean's eyes filled with tears and she leaned against him. "Thank you," she whispered. "I think it would make Lily happy to know her son has a family he can count on."

She stood and caressed his cheek. "Go take a soak in the whirlpool bath, work out a few of the kinks and maybe later we'll see what other kinks we can discover."

Scott smiled broadly before he stood and left the room.

Harry's Room...

Harry stopped and frowned at his trunk. Hedwig had made her way to his room and she, and her cage, which sat atop his trunk, both glowed softly.

"This is annoying," he muttered. He had been noting the strange glow around objects and people since coming home from school. Jean had tested his vision and, other than needing his prescription updated, and switched to contacts, there was nothing wrong with his vision. He thought it was tied to his ability to sense what people were feeling, but now he knew better.

Professor Xavier had explained to Harry that he was an empath, like his mother. It was something they called a legacy talent, sometimes passed from mutant parent to mutant child.

The glow troubled him until he discovered an old text that described Mage sight. The problem was, it described it, but didn't say how to control it or if it could be controlled. And while magic didn't bother him, he found being able to see magic a touch disconcerting.

Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix (July 8th)...

Albus Dumbledore walked tiredly into the room and looked around. He sighed, seeing so many empty chairs. A large number of the Order were away at the moment. He knew better than to try to deceive himself. They weren't away on missions. Many had left to consider whether or not to remain in the Order at all.

Those that remained did so because they were committed to the cause, if not loyal directly to him.

The Weasleys were still here, as were Tonks and Remus Lupin. Minerva McGonagall, Alastor Moody and Kingsley Shacklebolt were also present. To make up for the loss of numbers, Dumbledore decided to allow the two youngest Weasleys and Hermione Granger to sit in on their meetings, making them 'associate members'. They would attend meetings and offer opinions or ideas. Hermione and Ginny would be used for research purposes, but none of the three would be allowed to perform any field work for the Order.

Dumbledore sat in his chair and waited while Molly Weasley ran around, fussing over people and passing out drinks to everyone. Finally, she took a seat next to her husband and nodded to Dumbledore.

He sighed. Tonight's news would not go over well.

"This morning, Severus Snape returned to the castle after undergoing many hours of torture at the hands of Voldemort and his followers. The Dark Lord is now aware that Harry has left the safety of his relatives and is seeking him. According to Severus, the Dark Lord was most unhappy about the fact that he could no longer enter Harry's mind, probably due to the distances involved. Severus is recovering, but I expect he will remain in the infirmary for at least another day, perhaps two.

"Also, last night Bellatrix led a group of Death Eaters against Harry's relatives. I regret to say there were no survivors."

He paused and waited for reactions.

"Should we contact Harry and inform him?" asked Molly in a worried tone.

"I have considered it, but I am unsure how such news will be received," Dumbledore replied.

"Harry won't react much at all to the news, except to see it as another failure on our part to protect people from Voldemort," Remus said, to the shock of most everyone.

When Molly glared at him, he scowled back. The two had been at odds since Sirius' death, mostly over how to handle Harry.

"Professor Lupin is right, Mum," Ginny said. "Harry didn't want them killed, but he hated them. One of the things he told me before he left to return to his relatives' home was that he wasn't sure he'd protect them if Death Eaters attacked."

The thought of Harry Potter, savior of the wizarding world, turning a blind eye to someone in peril shook them to the core.

"Maybe this is our punishment," Ginny said softly.

Everyone turned to look at the young girl.

"Ginny?" Arthur said.

She looked at him, her eyes full of misery. "I used to think that Ron would get together with Hermione, and I would get together with Harry and we'd be one big happy family. Harry would save us all because he's our hero. It's what we've come to expect from him, after all. It's what he does. He hates being thought of as a hero, but he can't help what he is.

"But that isn't happening. Hermione and Ron are barely talking because Hermione's pointed out what a bigot he is. Harry's gone and even if he comes back he'll probably not forgive us. Even if he does forgive us, can we forgive ourselves for what we've done to him? I'm not sure I can. He was changing when he left school, becoming someone different, someone harder, and it's really our fault that happened. The Boy-Who-Lived was dying before our eyes. He became just Harry."

Ginny pointed at herself, then Ron and Hermione.

"We all knew that Harry hated his relatives. He never called them family. Never. We all relied on you adults to see that Harry was taken care of, but you never did anything about it and we never said anything about your lack of action.

"We did nothing and I don't think I can ever forgive myself for that," she finished in a whisper.

"Now, Ginny," Molly started.

Arthur stopped her with a shake of his head. He leaned closer to his daughter and smiled reassuringly. He knew his daughter better than any of his children and knew that she still held hope that someday Harry would notice her. It was one of the reasons why she had worked so hard in the last year to burn away the image of the Boy-Who-Lived and started looking at Harry.

"We all made mistakes when it came to Harry, Ginny. If he will allow it, we will try to make it up to him as best as we can. All we can do right now, however, is try to learn from what we've done and pray we never put someone else through the same thing," Arthur said.

"Harry's reactions are the least of our worries at the moment. From what I've learned, the Ministry has discovered that Harry's relatives are dead and they are now seeking him as well. It appears that Lucius Malfoy has stepped forward, stating that he'd be willing to be Harry's guardian. I've managed to block that by pointing out that I am Harry's magical guardian. I also reminded the Minister that Lucius is a pardoned Death Eater and therefore ineligible to be his guardian, but that will stop the Ministry for only so long. They know he wasn't in the house on Privet Drive when it burned down and they want answers," Dumbledore said.

"Then they need to learn about his leaving the country," Remus said thoughtfully. "And about his other Aunt assuming guardianship over him."

"One of us is going to have to go to him and explain what's happening, but who would he trust?" asked Tonks.

The group fell silent. Everyone wanted to volunteer, but no one knew if Harry would believe them.

"Professor McGonagall should go," Hermione said finally. "She's an authority figure that he respects. He knows she had no control over where he was placed when he was little, and he knows she was a friend of his parents."

Professor McGonagall looked surprised, then she shook her head. "No. That would have been true perhaps before last year. Now, I don't think he'll trust me, either."

"Why is that, Professor?" asked Dumbledore intently.

"Lee Jordan approached me after the end of the term, telling me how disappointed he was in me. It seems that Madam Umbridge was using an illegal blood quill during detentions. Harry received more detentions than any other student last year, mostly with Umbridge. And when he tried to complain to me about them, I cut him off before he could explain what was going on. I told him to keep his head down and his mouth shut. He did over one hundred hours of detention with that damned quill. I don't know how he managed to hide it from anyone," she said whisper.

Hermione had the grace to blush and look down at the table.

Dumbledore noted her reaction and turned to her. "Miss Granger? You knew about this?"

"I helped him treat his hand with essence of Murtlap, Professor," she said in a small voice. "It helped with the pain and kept infection from forming, but did nothing for the scarring."

Dumbledore sighed heavily. "I see. Anything else I should know about?" he asked.

Hermione blushed again and looked down at the table, ashamed of her actions now.

"The scar on his hand. It's very clear, even from several feet away," Ginny said. "It says, 'I must not tell lies'. That was what he had to write for saying Voldemort had come back."

Dumbledore pulled his glasses off and laid them on the table. He wiped at his face tiredly. He was coming to understand just how badly he had failed Harry last year. It worried him. He needed Harry; his mistakes from last year would severely compromise the trust he needed Harry to have in him.

"Beggin' yer pardon Professor, but I think the lad will listen to me," Hagrid said, then his expression darkened some. "Unlike sum others 'ere, 'arry won't think I mean 'im harm."

Dumbledore stared at the half giant for a bit, then he nodded. "Very well, Hagrid. Come see me when we get back to the school and we'll start getting you ready to visit Harry in America."

"Are you really going to allow Harry back into the school, Headmaster? He's a mutant," Ron said darkly. "I don't want him in my dormitory."

"Ron!" Molly, Ginny and Hermione all exclaimed, causing the young man to flinch slightly.

The Professor looked at Ron, his expression disappointed. "I'm sorry you feel that way, Mr. Weasley, but should Mr. Potter return to Britain, he will be allowed to continue his education. I know for a fact that Harry is not the only mutant who will be attending school this coming year."

With that, Dumbledore stood and walked from the room, leaving everyone staring at his retreating back in shocked silence.

Xavier's School for Gifted Children, Westchester County, New York (July 12th)...

Harry yawned and stepped into the danger room. Logan had returned a few days ago and they were back on their normal schedule.

He was surprised to see Professor Xavier, Scott, Jean and Logan waiting for him. Around the room were several couches for everyone to sit.

He stopped and eyed everyone suspiciously. "What's going on?" he asked warily.

Xavier held up a hand and smiled at him. "Rest easy, Harry. Today we're going to do something different. I know that you've been working very hard with Scott and Logan. We're very pleased with your progress, and I'm certain that your shield training has advanced to a stage where your mind is protected from a magical invasion. So today, we want to see if we can define the limits of your mutant abilities.

"A mutant must understand their abilities and, more importantly, their limitations. Your Aunt is a powerful mutant and her telekinetic abilities are some of the strongest I have ever seen. But even with that, her mind isn't powerful enough to hold up something the size of the Blackbird for very long before she collapses. Knowing your abilities teaches you what you can and can not do," Xavier lectured.

Harry thought about it for a moment, then he nodded. Jean patted the empty spot on the couch next to her and he walked over to sit next to her.

"We've seen your ability to teleport, and your ability to perform what looks like a partial teleport, where you become insubstantial. You also seem to have no problem teleporting objects to you, assuming that you know exactly where they are and what they look like."

Harry nodded in agreement.

"Harry, can you teleport your jump jet manual to you?" Jean asked. "I know it's become one of your favorite books."

Harry held out a hand and there was a barely discernible puffing sound. His manual appeared in his hand.

"Excellent! Now, let's try something harder," Xavier said. "There is a big black book on the right end table in my office. Can you teleport that to you?"

Harry held out his hand and nothing happened. He looked up in concern. "I don't understand..."

"Relax Harry. Let's see if we can understand what is happening. The book in question is bigger than most, it weighs about ten pounds."

Harry concentrated, but nothing appeared.

"It's jet black, leather cover with gold lettering," Jean offered.

Still nothing appeared, except beads of sweat on Harry's forehead.

"The book is titled *Blackbird Technical Specifications, Details and Advanced Modifications and Proposals*," Scott said.

The book appeared in Harry's hand a second later. His other hand shot out quickly to steady the heavy volume.

"Good work. You may keep that book for your studies," commented Xavier. "We've now learned that in order to teleport an object you've never seen before, you need a detailed description. That's useful to know. How are you feeling?"

"A little tired, sir, but otherwise I'm fine. It felt like I was groping around in the dark, trying to reach something just out of my grasp."

The three adults exchanged a glance, then Xavier moved his chair a little closer to Harry.

"Have you wondered if you can teleport someone?"

Harry scowled. "I don't know, Professor. To be honest, I'd be afraid to try it on a person first. What if I don't do it right and they don't come with me? Or what if I only bring a piece of them along? I could really hurt someone that way."

Xavier nodded. "Valid points indeed. So, let's test the idea first with Samuel. Scott, would you bring in Samuel?"

Scott grinned and left the room. He came back a few moments later with a black rat in a cage.

Seeing it, Harry frowned.

Jean saw his look, then it dawned on her. "Oh! Pettigrew! We're sorry, Harry. Perhaps we can find another test subject."

"What's going on?" asked Logan.

"You remember when I told you about some wizards having the ability to change their form into one of an animal?" Jean asked Logan.

The heavily-built man nodded.

"The wizard that betrayed my sister, Harry's parents, could do that. His form was a rat."

Scott started to turn, but Harry stopped him. "No, Uncle Scott. I'll be alright. I can use Samuel. After all, it's not Peter, he's just a rat."

Scott nodded and placed the cage on the table.

Harry stood and looked down at the cage for a moment, then he looked around. "How about something simple first. I'll hold Samuel and teleport across the room?"

Seeing the adults nod at him, he reached into the cage and gently removed the rat.

"Hello, Samuel. How about we go for a little ride?" Harry said softly.

Stroking its fur to calm the little creature, Harry then vanished, only reappearing at the other end of the room. He carefully examined the rat, then smiled, seeing Samuel was just fine.

"Excellent, Harry! You've managed to do that without making smoke or any noise," Xavier said from the other end of the room.

Harry vanished from the far end of the room and reappeared amidst the others. He grinned. "It's become a lot easier since you showed me those meditation techniques, Professor."

"That's because the abilities are linked," replied Xavier. "You are a weak telepath, but you have enough ability to build a set of shields that magic won't penetrate. The mental discipline required for those shields helps you visualize your target destinations. I'd be willing to bet that it even helps you retain what you study easier. Now, put Samuel back in his cage and see if you can teleport Logan to the other side of the room."

Harry nodded and put the rat back in the cage, then he turned to face Logan. "Ready to try this?"

Logan grinned and put a cigar in his mouth. "Sounds like fun, Merlin," he muttered around the stogie.

Harry looked at him strangely. "Merlin's dead; has been for fifteen hundred years."

Jean, Scott and Logan stared at Harry in surprise.

"Merlin was real?" exclaimed Jean.

“Of course he was,” Harry stated flatly. “He was the last known descendant of the race that built Atlantis.”

Jean blinked in surprise and mumbled to herself about reading Harry's history books.

“All right, then let's use Wiz, since Merlin's taken,” Logan commented.

“Wiz?” Harry asked in surprise.

Logan shrugged. “It's a good X-Man name.”

“I thought we agreed Harry wasn't to be trained to be an X-Man,” Jean said with a frown.

Harry held up a hand. “It's all right, Aunt Jean. The name is kind of neat. And I may not be an X-Man today, but it's a better goal to shoot for than being an Auror. Even if I don't become an X-Man, it's still neat, kind of like an honorary title.”

Jean frowned, but Logan, Scott and Harry grinned. Jean looked at Xavier.

Harry turned to stare at the two, perplexed. “You know, I can almost hear you two. I can't quite make out what you're saying, it's like a murmur that isn't distinct.”

Xavier moved his chair closer. He looked up at Harry quietly for a moment. “You may be able to develop that talent. But that's a topic for another time. Logan, if you will?”

Logan stepped up and grabbed Harry's arm.

“Let's go for a trip, Wiz. And don't go leaving any part of me behind, if you know what's good for you,” he said with a growl.

“I don't suppose I can leave his grumpy mood behind, can I?” Harry complained. The others laughed and Logan extended one claw, waving it under Harry's nose.

“Don't even think it, Wiz,” he warned. “It's part of my charm.”

Harry rolled his eyes, then vanished, leaving a large cloud of smoke behind. At the other end of the room, he appeared with Logan, who grumbled as he began to pat himself, checking to see if anything was missing.

“I didn't leave anything behind,” Harry said with mock hauteur. “Not even your grumbling. A pity, that.”

Logan looked at him and extended his claws, his eyes alight with humor. “I can fix that stuffy attitude for ya, Wiz,” he threatened.

Harry laughed and teleported back across the room, leaving Logan facing a blank wall.

“Hey! Logan! We're over here!” he called in a loud voice.

The others chuckled while Logan walked over, muttering under this breath. “Wise ass kid.”

“All right, he can teleport others. But what about range? How far can he go?” asked Jean.

“I teleported from school to... erm... this place in London by accident,” Harry said.

Everyone turned to look at him.

“This place in London? Isn't that a little vague?” Scott asked.

Harry looked down at his feet. “It's under a spell. I can't talk about it.”

“Harry, may I?” asked Jean.

Harry nodded and looked at her.

A moment later she turned away with a slight frown. “I was able to see the place he's talking about, even the location, but the spell is preventing me from saying where it is. It is an interesting effect. Strangely enough, I don't think it's perfect. I think I could locate it on a map and program a GPS unit with the coordinates.”

Xavier shook his head. “Magic has its limitations and the biggest flaw is that, by ignoring normal people, they have allowed technology to overtake them,” he said, then paused for a moment. “Well, his school is in central Scotland, so that's a distance of several hundred miles, at least. Impressive,”

“I don't think the distance matters, Professor,” Harry said softly. “Teleporting is a two step process. I first turn incorporeal then I step through a... I suppose the best way to describe is a tear in the world that I make. I don't think I'd want to try going through that tear solid.”

“So, jumping to this place in London would be no problem for you, Harry?” asked Scott.

“No, I don't think so. It seems that distance doesn't make any difference to my teleport. Do you want me to try?”

The four adults exchanged a look.

“Go for it, Wiz,” Logan said, shrugging. After all, the kid knew more about his abilities than anyone else. If he thought he could do it, Logan didn't see any reason to hold him back.

Harry nodded and started to concentrate, then he stopped for a moment. A second later his trunk appeared at his side. He knelt down and opened it, then he started to move all the old stuff out of the trunk.

“Harry, what are you doing?” asked Jean in confusion.

He grinned. “The place I'm going is where I got my books. My Godfather told me he was leaving his house to me. Before you came to get me, I was jumping to the Black family library every few days and taking books. I'm sure they know by now that some books have been going missing, so I won't have a lot of time. I'm going to arrive, throw open my trunk and grab as many books as I can.”

“All right, but be careful,” Jean said worriedly.

He nodded and finished emptying his trunk onto the table.

With one hand resting on his now empty trunk, he vanished from the room.

He reappeared in the Black family library. The room was still as dark and dingy as he remembered. He opened the trunk and turned it to face the stacks and shelves of books. He was thankful that he had practiced the space expansion charm on his own trunk; now it could hold a lot of books.

“Pack!” he commanded, waving his wand.

Books started flying off the shelves and into his trunk. He grinned, knowing Granger would kill to be able to read some of the volumes. And Dumbledore would kill to keep him from reading them.

Elsewhere in the manor, an alarm started to scream. Harry looked up, startled, then frowned and cast several sealing spells on the door, including two that he'd learned from the Black books in recent weeks. He could hear the sound of pounding feet, but by then trunk was full. He shut the trunk, placed his hand on the top of it and vanished from the room just as someone started pounding on the door.

Harry reappeared in the Danger Room with his full trunk and a rather large smile.

“Everything went well, I take it?” asked Xavier.

Harry shook his head and chuckled. “Hardly. I think they must have increased the wards on my library. All sorts of alarms went off when I started taking books. But I managed to fill the trunk and get out before anyone spotted me.”

“Seems like a lot of trouble for a bunch of magic books,” Logan said.

Harry smirked. “If you call close to a thousand a 'bunch', Logan. I put an space expansion charm on my trunk last week when I was experimenting with that spell. So it can carry a lot more books than you'd expect.”

Jean's eyes lit up at the chance to dig through so many books on magic.

“Someone's approaching the manor,” Xavier said, cutting off the conversation. “He's magical, but I don't sense him meaning any harm.”

Harry suddenly looked worried. “Someone magical?”

“I'll go meet with him,” Scott offered.

Xavier nodded and Scott slipped out. Harry, as a precaution, teleported his trunk up to his room.

“While we're waiting, may I look over your shields, Harry? It has been a few days,” Xavier asked.

Harry nodded and turned to face him. Jean moved to sit next to Harry, while Xavier examined the shields he'd built.

“Very impressive, Harry,” Xavier said finally. “You'd even give a normal telepath problems with those shields. I think we can move off that topic in our nightly sessions and onto other matters.”

“Yes, sir,” he replied, as the door opened.

Harry turned and stared. “Hagrid?” he exclaimed, then he jumped to his feet and backed away.

“I'm not going back, Hagrid, and you can't make me,” he said. He had his wand out and ready.

Hagrid blinked and then smiled. “Here now, I'm not here to take yeh back, Harry. All sorts o' things have changed back home, thanks to yeh. The Order is in a bad way at the moment, but tha's not yer fault. No, Dumbledore sent me to warn yeh. The people in the Order may feel bad about what's happened to yeh, but others in the Ministry are lookin' fer ways to take advantage o' it.”

“Dumbledore didn't send you here to drag me back?” Harry asked, watching the giant man carefully.

“If he had, I wouldn't have done it!” Hagrid said, sounding greatly offended. “Drag yeh back against yer will? I'd not do somethin' like tha'!”

Harry stared at him for a moment longer, then nodded to himself. No, Hagrid might respect Dumbledore a little too much for his liking, but he cared for Harry and wouldn't hurt him if he could help it.

“Harry, would you introduce us to *your friend*?” asked Jean softly.

Harry noted how she stressed the word friend and realized she'd come to the same conclusion. “Right. Sorry about that. Aunt Jean, Uncle Scott, Logan, Professor Xavier, I would like to introduce you to Rubeus Hagrid, Professor of Care of Magical Creatures and, of all the people I know

In Britain, probably the only one I can still consider a friend.”

Hagrid grinned broadly. “Just call me Hagrid. It’s easier.”

Harry waved his wand and transfigured a chair into something big enough to hold Hagrid.

The half giant laughed and grinned at him. “No underage laws here, eh? Good enough, Harry, thanks!” he exclaimed, then sat.

Hagrid turned to Jean. “Yeh are the spittin’ image o’ yer sister. She was one o’ the finest witches to ever attend Hogwarts and a good friend. I miss her still.”

As Harry moved a little closer to her, Jean smiled. “Thank you, Mister Hagrid. I take it things have changed in Britain, then?”

“It’s just Hagrid. Don’t know about no Mister. Always think they mean me Dad, bless ‘is soul. And aye, lots o’ things have changed,” Hagrid said, then he turned to look at Harry. “A lot o’ people didn’t want yeh to go to yer Aunt, Harry. Professor McGonagall was most upset when Dumbledore placed yeh there, an’ even more upset when she learned how yeh had been treated by ‘em.

“I won’t make no excuses fer what Dumbledore did, Harry. He is a great man, but as I’ve come to learn, the greater the man, the greater the mistakes they can make.” He shook his huge head sadly.

“The Ministry is now lookin’ fer yeh, what with the Dursleys bein’ dead an’ all,” he continued.

Harry shot to his feet. “Dead?” he croaked.

Hagrid blinked and shook his head. “Didn’t I mention tha’ already? I thought I had. Seems they was visited by some Death Eaters. They was dead before they burned down the house.”

Jean looked torn. Petunia was her sister, but she was still very angry over her treatment of Harry. She looked at him then, and her concern flared. He stood a few feet away, shaking his head in denial. Despite his anger and his hatred of them, he never wanted them dead.

She stood and walked over to him, wrapping her arms around him. “It’s going to be all right, Harry,” she whispered in his ear.

“I hated them, but I never wanted them dead, Aunt Jean,” he said in an anguished voice. “I swear I never wanted them dead. I only threatened them so they’d leave me alone.”

Scott joined them and placing his arms around both of them. Xavier looked at the family, then over to Hagrid.

“Hagrid, you’ve had a long trip. Can we convince you to stay for a while? I think Harry and his family will need some time to sort things out.”

Hagrid stared at Harry, his distress obvious. Clutching his umbrella, he nodded. “Of course, Professor,” he replied.

They met with Hagrid several hours later in Professor Xavier’s office. Jean, under Harry’s watchful eye, expanded a chair so that Hagrid could sit.

Hagrid stared at the big chair for a moment, then he grinned at Jean. “I see Harry’s not wastin’ any time. Dumbledore said you was a witch tha’ hadn’t been trained. Harry’s fixin’ tha’, eh?”

“He is, and is a fine teacher,” Jean said as she sat down on the couch. She smiled when Scott sat down beside her.

Harry conjured a tea set and one extra large cup, which he handed to Hagrid, then he took a seat on the couch next to Jean.

“Hagrid, what’s happening back in Britain?” Harry asked.

“The Order is a right mess now. It turns out tha’ a good many members knew you wasn’t bein’ treated right an’ Dumbledore was tellin’ ‘em to keep their mouths shut about it. I think tha’ Dumbledore felt tha’ growing up with the Dursleys would toughen you up. News tha’ you was a mutant sent ‘em into a tizzy fer a while. Some are still upset about it,” he replied.

“It doesn’t seem to bother you, Hagrid,” Xavier commented.

Hagrid shrugged. “No reason why it should. I’m not fully human myself. My Dam was a full giant. She ran away shortly after I was born an’ my Dad, bless ‘is soul, raised me. Mind yeh, not all wizards are as understandin’ as I am. Some will be downright surly, includin’ some yeh once thought were friends.”

Hagrid slurped at his tea for a moment, then he leaned back on his chair, which creaked ominously but held together.

“I don’t rightly know nothin’ about mutants. But Harry is the son o’ two o’ the finest people I ever knew. They weren’t afraid o’ me when they was little an’ they treated me like an equal after they left school. Young Harry has done the same fer me, even helped get me out o’ Azkaban Prison at the end o’ his second year, bless ‘im.”

Hagrid grinned broadly at Harry, then turned back to Xavier.

“Some o’ us aren’t too happy with Professor Dumbledore right now. But he seems genuinely concerned fer Harry an’ sorry fer what he’s done.

“On the other hand, tha’ idiot Fudge is makin’ all sorts o’ noises. It’s known tha’ Harry wasn’t in his family’s home when it burned down. Lucius Malfoy tried to make a grab fer custody o’ Harry, but Dumbledore managed to stop tha’. The Ministry doesn’t know about Jean or about her bein’ a witch an’ havin’ custody o’ Harry. So they are tryin’ to grab him fer ‘emselves. Fudge thinks tha’, with yer help, he’ll keep his job.”

When Harry stood and walked to the window, a silence descended in the room. Finally he turned to face Hagrid.

“So, Malfoy bought his way out of prison then?” he asked.

Hagrid nodded and Harry's expression darkened.

“All of them?”

Hagrid nodded again. “From wha' I understand, Malfoy bought 'em all pardons with a very generous donation.”

Harry sighed and shook his head, then he turned to Jean. “And you want me to go back there?” he asked incredulously.

“I know it won't be easy, Harry. The Ministry will find themselves facing a huge problem if they try to take you. First off, they don't have any way of holding you, not with your abilities. And Professor Xavier pulled a few strings with the State Department. Because I have dual citizenship, you've been granted it as well, as a minor. And mind you, over here, you're not an adult until you're eighteen,” Jean replied.

Xavier moved his chair closer to Harry. “When the U.S. Department of Magic realized that Harry Potter was seeking sanctuary here in the States, they pulled out all the stops. What this means, Harry, is that until you are eighteen, you are considered to be a U.S. citizen. When you turn eighteen, you can opt to either continue holding a dual citizenship, or pick one of the countries as your own. It also means that if the Ministry tries to move against you, the U.S. Department of Magic will lodge a formal protest.”

“Why do I get the impression that I'm being ganged up on?” Harry protested. “I thought you said you wouldn't force me to go back.”

“We're not trying to force you back. If you want to stay here in the States, we'll get you set up in a school. All we're trying to do is get things set up so that if you *do* go back, there are safeguards in place that didn't exist before,” Scott said, then he looked at Jean for a moment. When she nodded, he turned back to Harry. “The biggest safeguard is one we haven't talked about. The only reason we didn't discuss it with you is because we were unsure how you'd take it. Harry, Jean and I would like to adopt you.”

Harry stared at him for a moment, his eyes growing huge. “Adopt... me?” he whispered.

Both Jean and Scott nodded and smiled hopefully.

“You could keep your name if you prefer, or you could be Harry James Summers, or Summers-Potter or Potter-Summers, whichever you like best,” Scott offered.

Harry nodded jerkily and tried to wipe away the tears that appeared. It was like a dream come true. Someone actually wanted him!

“Harry, even if we file the paperwork today, it could take as long as a year for everything to happen,” Jean said softly. “Scott and I want to do this very much, but only if you're willing.”

“Yer mum an' dad would be proud. Yeh've finally found a family,” Hagrid said, sniffing and reaching for a handkerchief.

“Here, big fella,” Logan said, tossing Hagrid a box of tissues. “Knock yourself out.”

It took several minutes for everyone to calm down enough and when they did, all eyes were still fixed on Harry, waiting for a response.

“I'd like that very much,” he said, suddenly shy. After so many years of hoping someone would want him, it had finally happened and it left him nearly speechless.

“I'll contact the lawyers, Scott. The papers will be filed immediately,” Xavier said.

“Thank you, Professor,” Harry replied for the three of them.

Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix (July 12th)...

“Well?” asked Dumbledore, once Moody entered the room.

The old Auror shook his head in annoyance. “Nothing! Any magic lingering from those broken locking charms is being drowned out by the wards. I can't get a signature off it.”

Dumbledore frowned. He had hoped he'd be able to get something from that spell signature. “How many books were taken this time, Alastor?” he asked.

“According to our count, we're now more than thirteen hundred books short, covering every topic - dark arts, light arts, Ministry proscribed books, everything!”

“Well, at least we know it wasn't Miss Granger now,” commented Remus. Hermione and the young Weasleys had been with Remus when the alarms sounded in the building.

Moody gave him a hard stare then turned back to Dumbledore. “What do you want us to do, Albus?”

“We cannot discount the possibility that another Black family elf is taking the books and hiding them, or that Voldemort has found a way of accessing the building enough to get his hands on the library. There are other properties owned by the Blacks, and other elves as twisted as Kreacher was.

“I had hoped to keep those books out of enemy hands, but it seems that we can't. Therefore we have no choice but to move the books. We must remove them from headquarters as soon as possible,” replied Dumbledore.

"How?" demanded Moody. "There are still over ten thousand books in that room!"

"I'll summon some of the school's elves to move the books to a secure room in Hogwarts."

"I don't like this, Albus. I think we should make plans to move headquarters in case these breaches continue. This place is supposed to be safe!" grumbled Moody.

"I know, Alastor, and Severus has assured me that Voldemort is not the one behind these thefts, although he freely admits that he isn't told everything. Make your plans, but let's hold off doing anything until we absolutely have to."

Moody nodded unhappily.

"How are things in the Ministry?" asked Remus.

"Tense," Dumbledore admitted. "Fudge may have killed his career with those pardons, but I'm afraid that the next Minister might be even more uncooperative. There are several good candidates waiting in the wings while Fudge teeters, and even more bad candidates. In the meantime, Fudge has managed to convince himself that if he can find Harry, he can salvage his position, so he has intensified his efforts in that regard."

"Malfoy lost a lot of prestige when he was sent to Azkaban as a known Death Eater. Everyone knows what he is, but that doesn't stop people from taking his money. Right now, he's hedging his bets. He bolsters Fudge with money and gives to others who would be prime candidates for the position. The only good thing I can think of that is coming from all this is the fact that the Malfoy fortune is shrinking rapidly."

The three fell silent, considering the news. It wasn't the worst, but it was by no means good.

Author's Note:

UPDATE! The stolen file has been removed finally. Probably thanks to your assistance. We'll return to regular author's notes next chapter.

LiquidFyre, we're setting you up for a full body waxing... :D

Mutant Storm

Chapter 03 - First Contact

Standard Disclaimer:

Alyx took her seat in the front row next to Bob and she looked expectantly at the stage. Around them, the audience filed into the theater and took their seats. Bob sat placidly, eating some popcorn and watching.

Confused, Alyx scratched her head and leaned over to whisper at her husband. “What are we waiting for?”

“The disclaimer,” Bob replied with surety.

Alyx looked around uncertainly then leaned closer. “Ummm, did you write the disclaimer?”

Bob blinked and turned to look at her. “No, I thought you were going to write it.”

“And I thought you were going to!” she exclaimed.

“Oh shit!” they both chorused. They knew they were in deep doo doo. Without a disclaimer the story couldn't be started and the audience would turn into a rampaging mob and lynch them.

“What are we going to do?” she hissed at him.

“Ummm hide!” Bob said, then slid under his seat.

Alyx rolled her eyes and bent over to look at Bob who was curled up in a ball and trying to pretend he wasn't there.

“Hide? Is that the best you can do?” she said disdainfully.

Bob looked at her, then he gestured with his hand. “Um no, since we forgot the disclaimer we need to do something to tell the audience that we don't own Harry Potter or the Potterverse. Or give the audience a scape goat.”

Alyx sat up straight her said and never noticed the glowing sign over her head which said “SCAPEGOAT” in fourteen foot tall neon yellow letters.

“They wouldn't go that far, would they?” she asked herself. Behind her, the audience started to growl and several people started handing out pitchforks and torches.

Mutant Storm

Chapter 03

First Contact

Xavier's School for Gifted Children, Westchester County, New York (July 15th)...

Harry stumbled into the kitchen and flipped on the light. His nightmare had been especially disturbing and he was in no mood to try to go back to sleep.

Hagrid had returned to Hogwarts yesterday, and Harry had gone to bed depressed about seeing his friend leave. His nightmare was a mix of the usual; Voldemort killing people he knew, and the people he had lost accusing him of being responsible for their deaths.

He shivered, but he wasn't sure if it was from the nightmare or from his bare feet on the cold kitchen floor. He conjured a hot cup of tea and rooted around in the pantry until he found a box of cookies. *Cookies*, he mused. *These Americans are a strange lot. They sure call things by some strange names. Cookies, mail, trucks. What's next? Oh, and we mustn't forget the subway*, he thought with a wry grin.

He opened his flight manual, hoping to lose himself in the hundreds of minute details and fight off the sleepiness he felt, but a noise interrupted him. He looked up to see a tall black woman with white hair enter the room.

She paused in surprise, seeing him there.

“Hello,” Harry said with a slight smile.

“You must be Jean's nephew, Harold?”

“Harry, actually. Just Harry,” he replied.

“I am Ororo Munroe, otherwise known as Storm,” replied the woman.

Harry's smile broadened. “I've heard about you. Would you like to join me?”

Storm nodded and sat down at the table. Harry waved his hand, conjuring a cup of tea for her. He was working on his wandless magic more and more. Logan had correctly pointed out that he needed to avoid making gestures, so he was trying to break himself of that particular habit. It wasn't easy. Even more frustrating, some things were easy to do wandlessly and other things were extremely hard to do.

That's a handy talent to have," she commented, then she picked up the cup and sipped. Her eyebrows lifted at the taste and she saluted him with her cup.

He shrugged. "It is. I'm still learning to do things without my wand, and it's a good ability to have in a fight, but it's not easy."

"So, that isn't your mutant talent, then?" Stormed asked in surprise.

He grinned and shook his head. "No, I'm a teleporter," he replied. "I could conjure the tea cup because I'm also a wizard. I can do magic."

"I remember now. The Professor told me about you. You've been teaching Jean to do magic, haven't you?"

He nodded. "She's pretty good, considering she hadn't received any training before I came along. If she's as smart as my Mum, she's going to be a great witch."

Storm nodded. "So why are you up so late?"

He looked down at the table. "I had trouble sleeping," he said softly. He didn't want to think about how Hagrid's departure had affected him.

"Another nightmare?" asked Jean from the doorway.

Harry nodded and refused to meet her gaze. She sighed and walked over to sit next to him.

"I don't get them every night anymore, Aunt Jean," he said.

"Harry," she replied, lifting his chin so she could look at him. "You could have come to me, you know."

"I didn't want to disturb you and Uncle Scott."

"We're here to help you," Jean replied with a sigh. "Now, I want you to finish your tea, then go back and try to get some sleep. If you continue having problems, I'll prescribe something very light to relax you. It won't be a sleeping pill, but it will help you relax and fall asleep easier."

"All right," he replied. He closed his book and took another sip of his tea before banishing the cup, then he stood. "Good night, Aunt Jean. It was nice meeting you, Storm."

The two women watched for a moment while Harry left the room, then Storm turned to Jean. "He has your eyes," she said.

"They're my sister's eyes. How much has Charles told you about him?"

"Just the basics. It's a common thread, isn't it? A badly treated mutant that we find only as they're coming to the end of their rope? He seems like a good boy, however; very polite and he makes a wonderful cup of tea."

"He does, at that. And according to Scott, he's a natural pilot." Jean smiled, then shook her head and looked at Storm carefully. "So, how was Hong Kong?"

Storm shivered slightly and her eyes grew distant. "It was ugly. The trail for Magneto ran cold among the docks of the harbor. I was making no headway there so I decided to come home."

Jean nodded. "It's good to have you home, Ororo. I could use another woman around here. The place is drenched in testosterone; it's enough to overwhelm a girl."

Storm laughed. "As if you couldn't handle them." She smiled at her friend, then cocked her head to one side. "How are you taking to becoming a parent overnight?"

"It's both easier and harder than I thought. I mean, Harry's nearly an adult, but in a few ways there's still a little boy there, looking for someone to hug him. He's been badly treated, but he's coming to realize that there are people who care about him. It's something he isn't used to."

"Scott surprised me the other day by suggesting we adopt him. We've already filed the paperwork," Jean said, smiling broadly.

Storm looked at her friend and shook her head. "You, a mother. That is something I can see. But Scott as a father? That is almost as bad as asking Logan to play clown for a child's birthday party."

Jean chuckled. "He's not that bad. It's just taking some getting used to, but we'll get there."

Storm nodded. "I think you two will do well." She stood up and stretched. "However, as I'm about to fall asleep, I'm going to bed. I need to talk to Charles in the morning, then I think he wants me to visit Capetown next."

"Sleep well, Storm."

"Thank you. Good night, Jean."

Jean waited until Storm left the room, then she pulled out her wand and pointed it at the conjured cups. "*Evanesco!*" she intoned, waving her wand. The cups vanished, to her amazement, and she laughed. Magic was just so much fun!

On the way back to the bedroom she shared with Scott, she paused outside of Harry's room. She nodded in satisfaction when she sensed him sleeping peacefully inside.

“Come in, Harry,” Xavier called from his desk.

Harry walked into the room and placed his books on the coffee table.

“I'd like to do something different today. However, before I begin with that, Hank asked me to give you this. He seems to think it will work,” Xavier said, passing over a small box.

Harry opened the box and grinned seeing the cell phone waiting for him. “That is a combination cell phone and X-Man communicator. With it, you can place a regular phone call, or contact us without having to dial anything. Hank says he's shielded it. If it works, he said all he needs to do is provide shielding for other items. He's already spoken to several people at some manufacturing facilities I own about shielding our equipment.

“Hank also mentioned that you had worked out a way to power the electronics?”

Harry looked up from examining the tiny phone, pleased to note the built in camera and small color display. “What? Oh, yes, I did. The proper runes carved onto the surface of a battery will allow that battery to run forever. I found the notes of someone who was working on providing everlasting power among the books I removed from London. The person hadn't completed the work, but it was easy enough for me to take it to through the final steps. I dare say, if it can be powered by a battery, I can make it run forever.”

Harry raised a hand and levitated the phone out of the box. He flipped it open and grinned when the keypad lit up and he heard the dial tone. “Brilliant,” he murmured, then he looked up sheepishly at the Professor and closed the phone.

Xavier chuckled. “Not to worry. I was young once myself and remember getting something new and being eager to try it out.

“Your Aunt and I are very pleased with your progress,” he continued as Harry sat down. “You've worked hard on catching up with your studies, especially in the areas of science and mathematics. Your progress has been nothing short of remarkable. Just remember, if you get stuck, we're here to help you.

“And that brings me to another topic, something important that I want you to understand. Your aunt and uncle are your family, but we X-Men are all family. Even if something were to happen to Jean and Scott, you would still have us.”

He placed the phone on the coffee table next to his books and looked at Xavier. “Sir?”

“I want you to understand that we X-Men are as much a family as you and your aunt and uncle will be. It's something you need to know and believe in, Harry. It's your safety net. We will always be here for you.”

Harry leaned back and nodded. “I think I am coming to understand that, sir. But sometimes what my head knows and what my heart believes are two different things. Sometimes I get so angry.”

Xavier nodded and poured himself a cup of coffee. He was aware of the problem Harry had controlling his emotions. At first, he'd thought it might be a result of his upbringing, but now he was convinced that somehow, his ability to control his emotions had been recently damaged. Helping Harry learn to bring order to the chaos was a difficult task.

“Mark Twain, a famous American author, once said, 'Anger is an acid that can do more harm to the vessel in which it is stored than to anything on which it is poured'. Think about that for a moment.”

The office fell silent while Harry considered the words carefully. He was used to conversations like this from Professor Xavier and he knew that the man liked to sneak little semantic traps on students to make them see his points. Xavier often used part of these lessons to augment the counseling he was giving Harry.

“My anger hurts me more than it hurts the people I'm angry at?” he asked.

Xavier nodded. “Indeed. Anger creates stress and stress can be measured; blood pressure increases, adrenalin flows. But more importantly, in Twain's time, all he knew was that being angry caused more problems for the angry person, not less.”

Xavier moved around his desk to the nearby window “When you're angry, you lose control of your magic. Do you remember when you first arrived? Even the mention of Dumbledore's name made you very angry. Your magic flared, destroying the medical cart and shaking the house.”

Harry remembered that fateful night, the night he talked to his aunt for the first time. Living in the mansion had made him very aware of what his emotion could do to his magic. With so many electronics around, both he and Jean were constantly checking to see if they had fried something.

“But what am I to do, Professor? When I think about some of the things done to me, I get very angry,” Harry protested.

“You wouldn't be human if you didn't. Considering what was done, you have every right to be angry. However, you now know that anger isn't healthy. So what can you do about it?”

Harry's expression became confused. “I suppose I could forgive them...” he said dubiously.

“Forgiveness comes after you have resolved your anger, not before. What's more, some of them truly don't deserve your forgiveness. Why don't you channel that anger and the energy it creates into something more positive? For example, you could channel that anger into your determination that no one will ever abuse you again. Or, you could put that energy into something constructive, like your enchanted batteries or your studies. Anger is power untapped and out of control. Tap that power and use it to your advantage.

“I'm not here to tell you what to do. That's something you need to figure out for yourself. All I can do is help guide you to your goal and point out when you need to change goals.”

“I appreciate that sir.”

Xavier smiled at him. “Good, because starting today, I want you to spend a little time each day thinking about the people who have hurt you and instead of getting angry, try to focus your energies on something positive.”

Harry looked at him for a moment before nodding. Then a thought occurred to him. “Sir? Should I forgive them at all?”

Xavier moved his chair closer to Harry.

“Only you can decide that, Harry. The trick is to examine each person and try to figure out exactly what they did and why. Take your friend, Hagrid. He obviously had a clue about what your home life was like. What about him?”

Harry frowned. “Hagrid never hurt me! He's my friend,” he said angrily.

Xavier looked at him with an arched eyebrow and Harry flushed. The Professor had a way of making him feel ashamed, without ever saying a word.

“Hagrid might have known about the Dursleys, but there was nothing he could have done about it,” Harry protested, trying to channel his anger into seeing Hagrid from a new angle.

Xavier nodded and motioned for him to continue.

“Well, he's a half giant, nearly classified as a dark creature. If he hurt the Dursleys, the Ministry would have sent him to Magical Animal Control for disposal. As much as I like Hagrid, and respect his knowledge of animals, he's like a kid in some ways.”

Xavier nodded. “So, he knew about the Dursleys, but he couldn't do anything about it. How about when you were at school?”

Harry smiled. “His cottage was always open to me. We'd sit and drink tea and talk about Quidditch or what new animals he was going to be showing off next.”

“So he did everything he could to make you feel welcome and safe while at school, but there was nothing he could have done for you at the Dursleys. This is what I mean by analyzing what each person did. What about your friends?”

“They lied to me,” Harry said darkly. “They followed Dumbledore's orders again without question. I'm not even sure that's all they've done.”

“Do you have reason to suspect they've done more than just lie to you?” Xavier asked curiously.

Harry shook his head. “No, just a gut feeling, Professor. Something tells me that my being a Mutant is going to be a problem with them. Hagrid hinted around it a few times while he was here.”

Xavier frowned slightly. “All right, gut feelings are important, but not always correct. So put them off to the side and do nothing until you can resolve that feeling. Dumbledore? What about him?”

Harry's expression darkened and his fists clenched.

Xavier watched carefully as he slowly mastered the surge of anger that rushed through him.

Harry took several deep breaths with his eyes closed, then he turned to look at Xavier. “Some wounds are too deep to heal easily, Professor,” he said softly.

Xavier nodded. He knew it was too soon for Harry to be thinking of forgiving Dumbledore, if he ever did. Xavier wasn't sure of the older wizard's motives, so he couldn't nudge Harry into trusting the man again, when he didn't trust him himself.

“You're right. But make sure you examine the issue dispassionately. Don't let anger cloud your judgment and don't think that it's wrong to come to a conclusion that some people can't be forgiven. The different between justice and revenge is that one is done without anger, while the other is driven by it. Don't let your anger drive you.”

Harry leaned back thinking about what Xavier had said.

“There is nothing to be done about it today. Consider what I've told you. Now, let's break out the textbooks. We're going to start by looking into Newton's laws of Motion. Newton's first law states that every object in a state of uniform motion tends to remain in that state of motion unless an external force is applied to it. We can interpret that to mean...”

Harry pulled out his notebook and started writing. The sciences and mathematics were quickly becoming favorite subjects of his. His classes with Scott and the Professor were some of the best points of his days.

Salem Massachusetts (July 25th)...

Harry looked out the window of their hotel and smiled broadly. For the first time in his life, he was going on a little vacation of sorts. The only sour point in the whole deal was the fact that Scott had been sent away with Logan at the last minute. Harry hoped that the two of them would be able to catch up with them sometime in the next six days, but he understood.

Jean had the room adjoining his, with a connecting door that they left open during the day.

For Jean, it was a kind of working vacation. In two days time they would attend a three day course to learn to Apparate. Both of them were eager to start, and they decided to arrive a few days early so they could see the sights and visit the world famous Salem Institute of Advanced Sorcery. The Institute also ran the more common Academy of Magic that so many of the American wizards went to.

Jean also wanted to visit Witchway, the local version of Diagon Alley. She was keen to do a little shopping to get a fitted wand, and enough ingredients so she could start making potions, though that was one area Harry said he couldn't help her with, claiming he didn't know enough about the topic.

Harry had learned that there was a Gringotts branch on Witchway and he hoped to be able to get some galleons from his account there.

Jean stepped into his room and moved to stand behind him.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked softly. She could sense his excitement, but with his new shields in place, she couldn't get much from him unless he lowered them.

"I was just thinking how I've never been on a vacation before. I'm not sure I even know what to do," he said, smiling at the view. They had two large rooms in the Hawthorne Hotel and the view overlooked the Salem Common. "It almost seems sinful to stand here and know there's no chores, no studying to be done. Nothing."

Jean chuckled. "There isn't much to do except to relax and have fun. Did you pack away the jet?"

Harry nodded. Since it was only the two of them, he had been allowed to fly from New York to Salem, using his favorite jump jet. Unfortunately, he had to promise Jean that he'd not perform any acrobatics during the flight. When they returned to Westchester, the jet would be sent back to Xavier's factory, where it would be modified to work around magic.

"So, what do you want to see first?" she asked.

"I think we need to deal with Witchway first, Aunt Jean. From the information sent to me by the Academy, there's a branch office of Gringotts there and I may be able to access my account. That would make things so much easier."

Jean's eyes lit up at the thought of shopping and Harry started to laugh. "Uncle Scott was right. Even you can't resist the idea of shopping."

Jean's eyes sparkled. "Oh, hush, you. You're looking forward to this as much as I am. Now, do we know where Witchway is?"

"According to the letter from the Academy, it's on the south end of Mall Street," Harry replied. "It's only a few blocks from here. We can walk it, or I can teleport us."

Jean glanced out the window. The sun was shining brightly with only a few overhead clouds. "Let's walk it."

With a little searching, they found the entrance to Witchway about twenty minutes later. They found it behind a small shop that sold Wiccan supplies to Muggles.

"Does Wicca work?" Jean asked Harry in a hushed tone.

Harry frowned. "I'm not sure, to be honest. There are many different types of magic, Aunt Jean. The wandless kind is just one example. Considering some of the things I've seen and read, I wouldn't be surprised if Santa Claus was real." He shrugged. "Most of the wizards I know would scoff at the idea of wandless magic, but I'm doing it. I guess what I'm saying is there are more types of magic out there than I've learned about."

Jean laughed and entered the door he held open for her. She stepped inside and gasped. Harry stopped next to her, also surprised by what he saw. Witchway was huge, far bigger than Diagon Alley. He looked around for a moment before he spotted the large white marble building leaning to one side.

"That way," he said, pointing and urging her forward. "That's Gringotts. Watch what you say there. The goblins can be a little touchy."

Jean skidded to a halt. "Goblins?" she exclaimed.

Harry laughed and grabbed her by the hand. "Come on," he said, pulling her forward.

He dragged her into the building and over to a goblin sitting at a desk counting robin's egg-sized gems. Jean's eyes bulged at the sight, then she shook her head.

"Yes?" the goblin asked.

Harry recalled the proper greeting from a book he had read. He held both hands outward, palm up to show he was unarmed. "Peace, health and prosperity unto you and yours, noble goblin. I would ask for your assistance."

The goblin sucked in a breath and stared at Harry, who began to worry. The goblin was supposed to provide the ritual reply, but he hadn't.

"My clan is honored to assist you, young wizard. With our help, may your gold flow freely," the goblin finally said.

The room fell silent as all the bank employees turned to stare at Harry. Several senior looking goblins hurried over from their counting stations.

Harry produced his key, offering it to the goblin. "My account is based in Diagon Alley, but I am wondering if it is possible for me to access it from here?" he asked in a hopeful tone.

"Name?" asked the goblin. He took the key and examined it carefully.

"Harry James Potter," Harry replied.

The goblin jerked and stared at Harry. "Potter? I think you had best see the branch manager, Bagger. I will take you to him."

Harry and Jean were ushered into a large, sparsely furnished office. Behind the mahogany desk sat a regal-looking goblin. At their guide's urging, they sat in two lushly appointed chairs facing the goblin.

"Mister Potter, I am Bagger, director of Gringotts, North America," he said in a surprisingly deep voice, then he looked at Jean.

"Oh. May I introduce Mrs. Jean Summers, my maternal Aunt and guardian, soon to be my adopted mother," Harry said softly.

Bagger raised an eyebrow and stared at Jean for a moment. "We were unaware that Lily Potter had a sister other than Petunia Dursley."

Harry's expression darkened. "Yes, Dumbledore performed a number of illegal memory charms, wiping out all memory of my Aunt. I am, however, willing to submit to a blood based genealogical test to show the relationship."

Bagger grinned at him and shook his head. "Your word is sufficient for us, Mister Potter. However, if you would indulge us, I would like to send our London branch proof that you here and wanting to access your accounts."

Harry started at the word accounts.

Jean touched Harry's arm, stopping him from speaking. He glanced at her and nodded. "Director Bagger, I am a witch, but only recently introduced into this world. Even with that, I can tell you are withholding information from us. What has happened that requires proof that Harry has been here?"

Bagger leaned back in his plush leather chair for a moment. "You are quite correct, Mrs. Summers. The British Ministry of Magic has been trying, unsuccessfully mind you, to confiscate the Potter family accounts and properties. They seem to feel that, by doing so, they will draw Harry out into the open where they can capture him.

"No charges have been levied against him, you understand. They merely said that they want to bring him in for questioning and to keep him safe. While we were able to stonewall the Ministry on the family accounts, they were able to seize his trust vault, taking all of the money contained within it."

Harry sat rigidly in his chair for a moment. "They *stole* my money?" he asked quietly. The air around him began to glow slightly and the smell of ozone filled the office.

"Harry, control your temper," Jean said sharply. "We'll fix the problem."

Harry blinked and closed his eyes. He took a few cleansing breaths before opening his eyes again.

"Director, you wouldn't be telling us this unless Gringotts had a way of fixing it," Jean said. She stood and walked behind Harry's chair and placed a calming hand on his shoulder.

Bagger grinned, impressed by the pair. She had effectively calmed Harry and Harry had shown an impressive amount of magic.

"There is an old British law still on the books which dates back hundreds of years. The law was enacted to prevent the Ministry from illegally seizing assets they had no right to. Called the Fiscal Vendetta Law, it allows us to recover double the amount that was seized from each party involved until the original sum has increased tenfold.

"That means we can recover double from the Ministry coffers directly, then double from the Minister or Department Head that ordered the seizure, then double from the department that performed the seizure and so on. The law had been passed because there was a time when the Ministry would take someone's money and that person would call for a vendetta against the Ministry, killing dozens or more before it was over. This law relieved the need for killing people."

Harry grinned. "I like it. Let's do it."

"Wait a second," countered Jean. "This was just a trust account. Doing this will make a lot of enemies for little gain."

Harry leaned back in his chair and nodded to Bagger. "Most of the Ministry are already my enemies, Aunt Jean, but we're not talking a small amount of galleons either. Director, would you please tell my Aunt how much was in my trust vault?"

Bagger opened a large book and flipped some pages. "As of the end of June and the last interest period, your trust account had just over 1,116,000 Galleons."

Harry's expression turned to one of astonishment. He knew he had a lot of money in that account, and he had heard rumors of his family being wealthy, but he never suspected his vault contained so much money. His own guess was much closer to twenty thousand galleons than the actual amount.

Jean's jaw dropped open. "How much is a galleon worth again?"

"At today's rate, a single galleon will exchange for ten dollars and sixty eight cents. United States currency, of course," Bagger replied.

"Harry," Jean said in a breathless tone. "You're rich!"

"No," he replied after shaking himself from the shock. "We're rich. Family, remember? So, shall we spank the Ministry, Aunt Jean?"

Jean nibbled on her lip for a moment, then nodded. This wasn't a case of a few thousand dollars. They had stolen real money from Harry.

"We'll do it, Director. Please prepare whatever paper work you need and tell me where to sign."

Bagger nodded and scribbled a note, which he then tossed into a tray. The note vanished. "It is a shame you don't have your custody papers with you, Mrs. Summers. We could kill two birds with one stone and shut up the British Ministry for good on this."

Jean looked at Harry speculatively. “Do you think you can?”

Harry blinked in surprise. “You want me to go get it, or to bring it here?”

Jean thought about it for a moment. “Bring it here. Wait! What about...” Her eyes darted towards Bagger, who was watching them with interest.

“Gringotts has a strict privacy policy, Aunt Jean. They will never divulge any secret we tell them,” Harry replied.

“That is very true, Mrs. Summers. What happens in Gringotts, stays within Gringotts.”

Jean looked relieved as she turned to Harry. “Under my bed is a gunmetal gray lockbox with a handle on the lid. There is a sticker on the box of a unicorn and a naked woman.” When he smirked at her, she blushed. “Scott put it there,” she mumbled.

Shaking his head, Harry closed his eyes and his hands blurred as he reached for something. There was a slight puffing sound and the box appeared in his hands and he gave it to Jean.

She took the box and fished a set of keys out of her pocket. She went back to her chair and sat down, the box in her lap. A moment later, she gave the astounded Bagger a complete set of documents, including Harry's passport showing his dual citizenship, as well as a note from the American Department of Magic instructing any U.S. Embassy worker to treat Harry as a VIP. She also handed him copies of the adoption filing.

Bagger thumbed through the documents for several minutes before looking at the pair again.

“I see there is truth to the rumors about the Boy-Who-Lived. But I am curious, why are you going through the trouble to adopt him in the Muggle courts? We can handle that for you right now if you're both willing,” Bagger said.

“We weren't aware of that option, Director,” Jean answered. She glanced at Harry, who seemed to be as surprised as she was.

“The Muggle process will take a while. They can't move as fast as we do.”

Jean looked at Harry, who looked undecided. He was still having trouble understanding that someone really wanted him.

Bagger waved a hand, duplicating the documents Jean gave him, then the door opened and another goblin entered, carrying several parchments. He handed them to Bagger, who spoke to him for a moment in Gobbledegook. The goblin bowed and hurried from the room.

Bagger looked at the two. “Why not do both, then? No magical Ministry in the world would dare contest a goblin adoption contract, and the Muggle adoption would make it legal in the Muggle world.”

Jean looked to Harry. “Well?”

Harry suddenly felt very embarrassed and shy. “You don't have to do this,” he whispered. He could feel her gaze on him and he couldn't look her in the eye. All his life he wanted to belong to someone. It had been his dream, his fantasy. More than anything else, he'd wanted to be part of a family, a real family. He'd wanted someone to want him.

“Yes, I do.” She took his hand between both of hers. “Lily would do this in a heartbeat for a child of mine. And in a very real sense, I've come to think of you as mine. Half of the blood that flows through your veins is my blood,” she said softly. “You've been alone for far too long, and if our friends here can end that, then it ends today.”

Harry's eyes grew moist and he nodded, unwilling to trust himself enough to speak.

Jean squeezed his hand gently, before letting it go and turning to Bagger. “We'll do it.”

“Excellent! Mr. Potter, if you would just sign these papers and let your guardian countersign them, we'll start dealing with the trouble over your trust account. Once they're signed I'll send them to London. Before you know it, your trust account will be reopened with funds available. We charge a one percent fee for collecting the penalties, but I don't see that as a burden to you. We only charge on what we collect, not the theoretical maximum.”

Harry and Jean quickly signed where Bagger told them, then he collected the documents, placing them in an ornate box with an engraving of Big Ben on it. He placed the box on a table behind his desk and it slowly faded from sight.

“I would strongly suggest that you visit our London branch in the foreseeable future, Mr. Potter. The trust account issue is but one of the issues you need to attend to. Your Godfather's will still needs to be probated, but it cannot be executed without you present. Also, your parents' will needs to be re-examined, as it was not properly probated.”

Jean's eyes bulged. “How much are we talking about here?”

“I'm afraid I simply don't know the answer to that, Mrs. Summers. We aren't the branch maintaining the accounts. But I do know this; the Blacks were the fourth largest depositor in Britain and the Potters weren't far behind them. It is a substantial amount, not counting less liquid assets such as estates and stocks and so forth.”

Jean looked at Harry. “Did you know about this?”

He shook his head. “I had a few clues, but no real idea. A couple of my mates told me that my family was well off, but Dumbledore controlled my access to my account and to Diagon Alley. I thought there was only about 20,000 galleons in my vault.”

Jean was about to reply when the door opened and a goblin entered, holding a scroll and a large silver chalice. Bagger unrolled the scroll and quickly filled it out. Then he turned it to face Jean and Harry.

“Mrs. Summers, if you would sign where I'm pointing please?”

Jean took the quill and signed the parchment, then handed the quill to Harry, who stepped up and signed.

Bagger reached into a drawer in his desk and pulled out a small flask. He poured a clear fluid into the chalice, then he produced a knife.

“One drop on the contract, then another in the chalice, Mr. Potter,” he said, handing over the knife.

Harry nodded and sliced open his finger, placing a drop of blood on the contract. Then he moved and placed a drop of blood into the chalice, mixing with the fluid. A minute later, Jean copied Harry's actions, though she was a bit unnerved by the process, and surprised to discover the wound healing all by itself.

The parchment with the blood glowed a blinding white.

Bagger handed Harry the chalice. “Drink some of this, then give it to your Aunt.”

Harry took a swallow and found it surprisingly tasty. He handed the cup to Jean, who also took a swallow. She swayed a little and there was a bright flash of white light. She felt a massive surge of energy pulse through her and there was a sensation of warmth, then it faded away. A second later the light was gone and Harry and Jean were left blinking back tears.

“Congratulations, you are now mother and son by blood rite. You will be given a copy of this parchment. No Ministry on Earth would dare deny its validity.”

“What happened to me?” gasped Jean.

Bagger grinned. “The basis of the adoption rite is a blood-based power sharing ritual. Mr. Potter is a very powerful wizard. Because of that, your own core has been adjusted, increasing your own power levels to something appropriate, had you been his real mother. You are not as powerful as your son, but your power has been boosted to something close to what your sister had.

“Now,” he said in a more business-like tone, “the appropriate paperwork will be sent to all Ministries worldwide. By the end of the business day, our collection agents will be calling on the Ministry to collect your funds from the individuals. The money taken from the Ministry coffers should be available any moment.”

Harry's key began to glow and made a small chiming noise.

“Ah, there it goes now,” Bagger said with a grin. “Now then, is there anything else that Gringotts can do for you today, Mr. Potter?”

“My money is available again?” Harry asked.

Bagger nodded.

“Good, can we get two five thousand galleon purses and five thousand dollars in American Muggle currency?”

“That's a lot of money, Harry,” Jean said disapprovingly.

“The purses don't really hold that much, Aunt Jean. That's just the maximum you can spend from one in a single day. Basically, it's a connection to the vault. You open the purse while thinking how much you want to spend, then tip it over and the correct amount comes out.”

Jean shook her head. She was coming to learn that the wizarding world had its own versions of Muggle things like credit cards, but the way they implemented those things were pretty off the wall.

Ministry of Magic, London (July 26th)...

“Percival Weasley?” asked the goblin.

Percy blinked in shock at seeing a goblin standing in front of his desk. Behind him were six others, all heavily armed.

“Yes. What is it you want? I'm a very important person!” Percy said haughtily.

“You authorized the confiscation of vault 678, owned by Harry James Potter?” asked the goblin.

Percy looked at the goblin in confusion. He was beginning to get a bad feeling about this. “Yes. We did it to lure Harry into the open. The Minister needs him,” he stammered.

“Of course, Mr. Weasley,” sneered the goblin. He pulled out a scroll and began to read. “Percival Weasley, by order of the owner of that vault 678, you are remanded into indentured servitude. The owner of the vault is invoking his right of financial vendetta. Since you lack the means to pay the fine, you are ordered into indefinite servitude. All wages and or salaries you make from here on are the property of Harry James Potter.”

Percy stared at the creature in horror. Several of the heavily armed goblins rushed him, pinning him behind his desk. Another goblin stepped up and placed a collar around his neck. The collar snapped shut with an audible click, then they released him.

He struggled with the collar, but was unable to open it.

Percy stood and glared at the goblins. “You can't get away with this! I'm the special assistant to the Minister of Magic! I demand you release me!” he cried.

Percy pulled his wand and attempted to cast a spell, but it failed. He paled and faced the lead goblin again. “I will have you put in jail! You and Potterrrrrrahhhhh!”

He pitched to his knees. The pain was incredible!

“The collar binds your magic and prevents you from even thinking about hurting your lord and master,” sneered the goblin. “Only Harry Potter can free you from it. You belong to him, until you pay off your debt of 2,232,000 galleons. As for your magic, you can only use it to earn Mr. Potter’s money.”

Percy slumped sideways on the floor. With a salary of just two hundred galleons a week, he’d be a long time paying off that debt.

The lead goblin turned to the others. “Come on, we still have to find several others.”

The goblins never looked back as they left the office. On the floor, Percy Weasley wept and cursed his fate. He had been sure the Minister would protect him!

Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix (July 26th)...

“Albus!”

Dumbledore looked up from the kitchen table where Molly had been laying out diner. “Arthur? In the kitchen.”

Arthur rushed into the kitchen looking disheveled and a little wild eyed.

“Albus! The Ministry... Percy! goblins! Harry!” he panted.

“Goodness, Arthur, catch your breath and then tell us what the emergency is,” Molly said.

Arthur bent over and breathed deeply while everyone waited impatiently for him to be able to speak. Finally he straightened up and looked around.

“It seems the Ministry decided to confiscate the trust vault assigned to Harry Potter. They tried to take away his family vaults and the Black vaults, but the goblins prevented that. I only heard about it today when a goblin war party entered the Ministry building.”

All of the adults shivered. None of them wanted to cross a war party! It had been more than a hundred years since the last goblin rebellion and people still had nightmares about them.

“Harry learned of the confiscation and he invoked an ancient punitive law that allows him to recover the money several times over. Percy was one of the people instrumental to the Ministry plan, so the goblins placed a collar of servitude on him, since he doesn’t have the two million galleons needed to pay Harry,” he said.

Molly sat heavily in her chair staring at Arthur in horror. “Oh, Arthur... our baby!”

“Damn Harry!” shouted Ron. “How dare he do that to Percy?”

Hermione and Ginny sat silently, neither interested in admonishing Ron for his outburst. Dumbledore bowed his head. Things were spiraling out of control and Harry was causing a lot of damage.

“I will try to contact Harry tonight and see if I can get him to change his mind,” Dumbledore said softly.

Molly looked at him hopefully.

Dumbledore turned back to Arthur. “Who else has been hit with this law?”

“The Ministry, of course, and Fudge, the Malfoys and the Zabinis as counter signers of the original order,” Arthur replied.

Dumbledore shook his head. “Harry is making powerful enemies,” he murmured.

“Including the Weasleys. That damn mutant,” muttered Ron angrily. No one bothered to correct him.

Salem Academy of Magic, Salem Massachusetts (July 27th)...

Jean entered Harry’s room, carrying an open text book. “Harry, did you read that section about splinch...”

She stopped. Harry was sitting on the floor, giggling. On the table was a beautiful red and gold plumaged bird eying him with disapproval. Jean shook her head at the sight. If she didn’t know better, she could have sworn the bird was unhappy about Harry’s laughter.

He spotted her and waved before standing.

“What’s so funny?” she asked.

Harry pointed to an unrolled parchment on the desk. She picked it up and started to read. Her expression darkening almost immediately. Finally, she put the parchment down and stared at him. “You can’t allow this to continue! It’s slavery!”

“But, Aunt Jean, I could make him run naked through Diagon Alley, shouting Fudge’s praises while smearing lime Jello over his body. Cold lime Jello,” he said, his eyes lighting at the prospect. “Trust me, Aunt. You don’t know Percy Weasley. Making him do something like that would be

worse than asking him to cut out his own tongue. His pompous, stuck up attitude would take such a blow, he'd likely never recover!"

"Harry," Jean said repressively.

"I could make him wear a monkey costume and have him reenact the climbing of the Empire State Building," Harry added, losing himself in his dream.

"Harry..."

"No! I could make him sing 'I'm a little Teapot' over and over while wearing a ballerina outfit. Perhaps I could charm him to follow Hermione around, picking at her hair... or he could play connect the dots with Ginny's freckles."

"HARRY!"

Harry turned to look at Jean. "Yes? Did you want something?" he asked mildly.

"You are not going to do any of this. You need to put a stop to it!"

Harry looked down at the floor and scuffed the carpet with one bare foot. "But he's a pretentious git!"

"I don't care if he's the right hand of Satan, you need to free him."

Harry sighed. "Oh, all right. But I hope you realize that you're taking all the fun out of this," he muttered, then he went over to the table and pulled out a sheet of parchment and started scribbling. When he was done, he showed the parchment to Jean.

She quickly read it, frowning slightly. "This is a little harsh, don't you think?"

"No, I don't," he replied with conviction. "My own feelings aside, he's hurt and alienated his family, opting to follow the Ministry. I know this sounds harsh, but believe me, it will work. You don't know Percy like I do."

Jean sighed and one hand reached up to twine in her hair. Harry recognized the signs of her thinking hard. He wondered if his mum had had the same habit. Finally, she turned back to him. "All right, do it your way."

"My way? If I'd had my way, the name Percy would be synonymous with lime Jello. But this is a good compromise," he said, then quickly cast charms over the letter.

When he was finished, Fawkes hopped from the back of the chair to the table. He pushed at Harry, nudging him to towards the second letter he had brought.

"Harry? What's wrong with the bird?"

"The bird's being cheeky. He wants me to open the second letter he brought with him," Harry replied, then he turned to Fawkes. "I'll get to it, Fawkes, just let me finish with these charms first."

"I'll open it. And if it's notification of another person taken into slavery, I'm going to personally pin Bagger's ears to the wall. He should have explained this better," Jean said, reaching for the sealed parchment.

*Mr. Potter,
Here are your O.W.L. examination scores. Please inform your Head of House of your course selections (see attached parchment) before the start of school.*

*Transfiguration – Outstanding.
Charms – Outstanding.
Potions – Outstanding.
Defense Against the Dark Arts – Outstanding (Highest Recorded Score).
Herbology – Exceeds Expectations.
Astronomy – Acceptable.
Care of Magical Creatures – Outstanding.
Divination – Acceptable.
History of Magic – Dreadful.*

Congratulations on such excellent results. Your score in Defense qualifies you for the Governor's Award in Defense. You are ranked 5th overall in the school and 2nd in Gryffindor House.

*Griselda Marchbanks,
Wizarding Examination Authority.*

"You failed History?" Jean exclaimed.

Harry's head whipped around from charming the parchment. "What? My O.W.L. results are here?"

"You failed History?" Jean repeated.

Her words sunk in and Harry suddenly paled. "Voldemort sent me that vision of Sirius being tortured during the exam," he whispered. His eyes widened and he backed up a few steps. "I'm sorry, I'll try to do better. Maybe I can make it up or something."

He trembled and Jean dropped the parchment. She rushed to his side and wrapped him in a hug. "Oh, honey, I was only teasing. Relax,

breathe slowly.”

Harry slowly fought off the panic attack. He hadn't had many of them, but both his aunt and uncle had been witness to them enough to recognize the onset of one.

Jean mentally kicked herself. What she thought would have been accepted as gentle teasing nearly pushed him into a panic attack. She would have to be more circumspect in her comments until he knew her better.

“Better?” Jean asked worriedly.

Harry nodded slowly. “I'm sorry, it just snuck up on me...”

She handed him his scores. “It's all right. You're getting a lot better with them. Trust me when I say there will come a point when that won't happen anymore.”

“I hope so,” he said wearily. He glanced down at the parchment, then he read it through. “I passed Potions,” he whispered.

“You did really well,” Jean said with pride. “Fifth ranked? That's really great. I'm very proud of you.”

Fawkes trilled in agreement.

“Oh, hang on, Fawkes, let me put one more spell on this letter,” Harry replied, then he placed his O.W.L. results down and walked over to the table again. He waved his hand, watching the letter glow blue for a moment. Then he rolled it up and sealed it.

He handed the parchment back to Fawkes. “Take this straight back to the old meddler. No stopping for sightseeing and don't talk to any strange American Eagles,” he said.

Fawkes trilled a sound that sounded like laughter, then he grabbed the parchment in his talons and vanished in a flash of flame.

“Interesting bird,” Jean commented.

“He's a phoenix. He saved my life and the life of Ginny Weasley back in second year.”

“From that Basilisk, right?”

Harry nodded. “That's right. Ginny was being controlled by a memory of Voldemort from when he was Head Boy.”

Jean shook her head at the thought of the events of his school career. It was a wonder he had gotten as far as he had.

“And you're sweet on this Ginny? You've never said anything bad about her, unlike your friends Ron and Hermione.”

He looked at her in surprise. “Sweet?”

“You like her?”

Harry mumbled something.

“I'm sorry. I can't seem to hear you,” Jean said with a grin.

“I said, I don't know. She didn't lie to me about receiving training from the Order, but that could be simply because she didn't write me. Besides, she has a boyfriend. He's one of my dorm mates, actually, named Dean Thomas,” Harry shot back.

Jean laughed and decided to change the topic.

“So, Scott and Logan will be arriving here on your birthday. I thought we might do a little more shopping, and then celebrate that day. After that, we're heading for Britain, if you want.”

Harry looked down at his feet for a moment. “I see the logic in it, but I still have my doubts.” He shrugged. “I suppose so.”

“Don't worry so much. Scott, Logan and I will be with you most of the time, and other X-Men will be dropping by once we figure out where we're going to be based,” Jean said, trying to cheer him up.

He nodded and smiled weakly at her.

“Good! Now, let's talk about that spell for correcting a splinching,” she said, summoning her text book to her.

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Office of the Headmaster (July 30th)...

Dumbledore reread Harry's letter and shook his head. If nothing else, Harry still had his sense of humor. He had examined the charms on the letter carefully and the one that would cause his underwear to catch on fire if he talked about the letter early was particularly amusing. It was an impressive array of spells, worthy of the son of a Marauder.

The Floo flared to life and Molly and Arthur stepped through. Molly cried out, seeing Percy kneeling next to a goblin, looking pathetic and miserable.

Dumbledore held up a hand. “Please wait until everyone arrives before we begin.”

Molly and Arthur nodded and moved to stand not far from Percy, who looked at his parents. His face burned with shame.

The Floo flared to life again, and this time Fred and George exited the fireplace. A moment later, Ron and Ginny, then Bill arrived. Charlie was still in Romania and not needed at this meeting. Fred and George stared at Percy incredulously, but they still thought that Harry wouldn't leave Percy in bondage like this.

"As everyone's here, let's get this moving, Dumbledore," said the impatient goblin.

"Yes, well, a few days ago I received a reply from Harry, but due to the charms on the letter, I was unable to reveal its contents. Until today that is. I will read the letter as it pertains to all of the Weasley family."

Dumbledore picked up a piece of parchment.

"My dear Weasleys,

"I have to admit that I was surprised when my move against the Ministry snapped up Percy as well. I suppose I shouldn't have been surprised, however. Percy's been actively trying to stab me in the back since fourth year. Percy, your brothers have said it many times but you don't believe them. You're an arrogant arse and quite frankly I don't want your money or your servitude.

"Unfortunately, under goblin law, I cannot simply free you. Instead, I have to sell you to someone. Only your newowner may decide to free you.

"So here's the deal, you insufferable git. Your father may buy you for the bargain basement price of one knut, but only after you've done the following. You will quit the Ministry and take an oath on your magic to never work for them again. Once he's freed you, you will apologize to your family, individually, and collectively. Finally, you will allow Fred and George to use you as a test subject until your father thinks you've learned your lesson. Be very grateful, Percy. My original thought was to sell you to Fred and George.

Fred and George began to chuckle and each looked at Percy with devilish delight. Harry had once again come through for the Weasley family.

"The Ministry is full of fools, Percy, but you are not going to be one of them. The few rare competent men, like your father, only make the others look that much worse in comparison. I owe it to your mum and dad to see that never happens to you. You gave up the most important thing in your life, for what? Blind ambition and a willingness to lick the boots of people like Fudge and Umbridge. And in doing so, you hurt two of the best people I know.

"I used to envy the Weasley clan. You may not be rich in money, but you have love enough for your entire family and still had a little left over for an orphan who never knew love before.

Molly broke down in soft sobs. It was clear to her what was happening. If Harry had been present, she would have hugged him tight enough to threaten his ability to breath.

"I hope the past week has taught you a lesson, Percy. Learn from it. Family is more important than a job. Your father and mother are the richest people I know.

"Harry Potter"

There was a moment of total shocked silence, then Fred and George broke out in peals of laughter. Ginny followed a moment later, greatly relieved that Harry had provided this loophole for Percy. Ron stared open-mouthed at Dumbledore.

Arthur grinned and walked over to Percy. "Well?"

Percy dropped his gaze again. His relief was evident. "On my magic, I swear I will never work for the Ministry again," he said softly.

Arthur nodded and turned to the goblin, passing him a knut. The goblin scowled and took the coin, then he waved his hand at Percy's collar. The lock on the collar glowed blue for a moment, then it made a clicking sound as it unlatched.

"There! Now you can open it, or leave it closed and make him work for the rest of his life!"

Several Weasleys flushed angrily at the goblin's comments. Arthur held up a hand, shushing any reply anyone might make. "Thank you, noble goblin," he said.

The goblin nodded, then walked over to the Floo and left the room.

Arthur watched for a moment then turned back to his son. "You've been given a second chance, Percy. Harry could have had you work for him your entire life and nothing would have been yours. Considering all that has happened this summer, I am shocked and humbled that he'd do this for us."

Arthur stepped forward and removed the collar from around Percy's neck and looked at it in disgust.

Dumbledore took the collar from him. He placed it on the floor and incinerated it. The collars were a hold-over from a darker time and each one destroyed was a blow against the system that developed them.

Percy stood, feeling his neck and looking at his family, afraid of their reactions. The room remained tensely silent and then Molly swept Percy into a hug, crying all the while. A second later, Percy was weeping on her shoulder.

"But I don't understand!" Ron protested. "Why would that mutant do this?"

Arthur scowled and angrily turned on his son. "That mutant has a name, Ronald. And with what he's done today, he's proven himself a friend of the Weasley family forever. Remember what the letter said? He didn't know Percy would be caught up by the law, but when he was, Harry did

what he thought was best. He let Percy stew for a few days before giving him back to us. Harry would have been within his rights to keep Percy indefinitely!

"Instead, he gave Percy nearly a week to consider all that he's done and what was wrong with it. Then he used the same law to free Percy in the only way he could. And in doing so, he brought Percy back to us. I'm very disappointed with you, Ronald. 'That mutant', as you call him, used to be your best friend. The very same friend who nearly lost his life saving your sister. He also saved my life, and now Percy's! The twins owe their business to Harry's generosity. What more does Harry have to do before you grow up and stop being jealous of him?"

Ron stared at his father, his mouth opening and closing, but saying nothing. Finally, he turned white with anger and he walked out of Dumbledore's office, slamming the door behind him.

Muttering to himself, Ron exited the school, taking the road to Hogsmeade. He had a lot to think about, a lot to consider.

He was angry. He wanted to hate Potter for being a mutant, for being rich, for coming between him and Hermione. He wanted to scream at him and hit him for releasing Percy. He was doing all the things that made him special in the eyes of his family, while he was still plain old Ron.

The issue of mutants brought up another problem he was forced to face. Despite his vocal statements, he was coming to realize that he lumped Muggles and mutants into the same group; people unworthy of his attention. He didn't have a problem with Muggle born, as long as he didn't have to deal with their Muggle parents. Unlike his father or his sister, Muggles held no particular fascination for him.

He wandered aimlessly for several hours around Hogsmeade. Finally, he found himself in front of the Hogshead bar. Shrugging, he pushed the door open and found an empty table in the back of the room.

"Fire whiskey," he said, placing the galleon coin on the table. The server arched an eyebrow and then nodded, sliding the coin into her pocket. The server walked over to the bar, where a woman stopped her and whispered something at her. She nodded and grinned at the woman.

When the server placed a fourth glass of fire whiskey in front of him without asking for more money, he became firmly convinced that the bar had the cheapest drinks in the country.

"Well, if this isn't a surprise. Ronald Weasley, whatever are you doing in a place like this?" asked Rita Skeeter as she slid into a seat across from him. She nodded slightly to the server who placed another drink in front of Ron.

"Drinking," replied Ron. "Drinking n'thinking."

Rita smiled winsomely and she reached out to touch his hand lightly. "You must be thinking really hard, hmm? I mean, best friend of Harry Potter, you must have an awful lot to think about."

Ron frowned at Skeeter. "Potter," he spat. "That damn mutant! I'm tired of being in his shadow. First, I'm in the shadow at home, then at school. All because of Potter... poor little orphan boy. Who cares if his Muggle relatives beat him. Serves him right, if you ask me. He's even lower than a Muggle."

"Harry Potter is a mutant?" exclaimed Skeeter. *Oh, god, I've hit the mother lode* she crowed to herself.

Ron nodded drunkenly. "So you heard about that, too? Shhh it's a bloody secret, isn't it? No ones s'posed to know 'bout it. 'Course it'll get out sooner or later. Always does with Potter. He always finds a way to make the papers. His mother was a mutant, and his aunt too."

"The Dursleys?" Skeeter exclaimed.

"Nah, not those Muggles. His other Aunt, the one that Dumbledore hid from everyone, including Harry. She has custody of him now. Who cares if he's the only one that can kill You-Know-Who? He's a mutant, for Merlin's sake! He's not a wizard, he's a thing!"

Skeeter leaned across the table smiling at him. "So, tell me about this Aunt of his, the mutant?"

The server came by to drop another drink off for Ron.

Ron peered at Skeeter for a moment, then nodded. "All right, maybe people do need to be warned about their precious Potter."

Two hours later, a very drunk Ron staggered out of the Hogshead and activated his Portkey to Grimmauld Place, there he wandered into an empty bedroom and collapsed on the bed.

The Leaky Cauldron (August 2st)...

Harry stepped into the Leaky Cauldron, followed by Jean, Scott and Logan. They had just arrived in Britain a few hours earlier, landing at a private airstrip. Professor Xavier would arrive later in the week.

Harry wore a sweat shirt with the hood pulled up and a Yankee's baseball cap to hide his scar. Scott had introduced him to baseball and once the rules had been explained to him, he found it rather enjoyable. Scott was a die-hard Boston fan, but Logan had turned him on to the Yankees. Harry never looked back from that point. It didn't hurt that the Professor had season box seats at Yankee Stadium.

Harry walked over to the counter where Tom was busy drying some glasses. Tom looked up and eyed him warily. *Couldn't hurt to be too careful*, he thought.

"We need three rooms for the night," Harry said, pitching his voice lower than usual.

Tom eyed him and the three people behind him cautiously. "Do I know you?" he asked.

Jean stepped forward. "I'm Jean Summers, my husband, son and our friend just arrived here today from America. We're here on some business and maybe a little sightseeing."

Tom eyed Jean for a moment, there was something very familiar about the woman, but her American accent clearly showed she wasn't a local and he didn't recognize the name. Tom nodded finally. "Can't be too careful these days, not with You-Know-Who on the loose," he muttered.

"Quite," Harry replied in a droll tone. Tom peered at him; his accent was British, unlike the woman's.

Harry reached into his pocket and slid several coins across the counter to Tom, who caught them expertly.

"Bert!" he shouted. "Show these nice folk up to rooms two, three and four."

Harry tossed a few more coins to Tom. "Send up diner for four, plus some extra butterbeers."

Tom nodded, suddenly not caring that the boy spoke like a native. These were paying customers! Considering how few of those he had of late, he wasn't going to complain. With the announcement that Voldemort was back, people were staying closer to home this summer.

Bert showed them to their rooms. Once he was gone, they all met in room two, the largest of the rooms, where Scott and Jean would be staying.

"You're in the Wizarding world now," Harry said after casting several privacy charms. "Be careful of what you say and who you talk to. The people in the red capes with feathered caps are Aurors; they don't have a badge that is visible, but the uniforms are obvious."

A knock came at the door and Scott rose to answer it. A moment later Bert floated in meals for all four of them. Harry turned away from Bert, pretending to examine a painting. After Bert left, Harry eagerly reached for a butterbeer, then his expression changed. He snapped his fingers.

A small elf appeared, staring up at Harry with soulful eyes. "What is the young master needing?"

The others jumped to their feet and stared at the elf in astonishment. Harry dug into his pocket and pulled out several galleons. He handed the coins to the elf.

"Would you please bring each of my companions a Fire Whiskey?" he said softly.

The elf nodded and vanished, a moment later he returned carrying a tray with a bottle and three shot glasses.

Harry took the tray from the elf. "Thank you," he said. The elf stared at him in surprise then nodded and vanished again.

He placed the tray on the table. "I've never tasted this, and I'm not sure I want to. But this is a favorite Wizarding drink. I'll stick with my butterbeer, while you guys try this."

He sat down and took a long satisfying gulp of his drink and started to pile food onto his plate. The others exchanged a glance, then Scott shrugged and poured three shots of fire whiskey, while Harry watched expectantly.

"To finding a place to base here in Britain!" Scott proclaimed, raising his glass.

The other two raised their glasses and Harry raised his bottle. Then they drank.

Jean turned a shade of fire engine red and fell off her chair. Scott burped, emitting a cloud of steam that shot across the room. Logan smiled and reached for the bottle; the only impact the drink had on him was to turn the tips of his ears red.

Harry laughed himself silly.

Several moments later, Jean lifted her head from under the table and her hair was practically standing on end. "What is that stuff?" she said hoarsely.

"Fire Whiskey," Harry replied, still chuckling. "But if that's too strong, try a butterbeer instead."

Harry passed her one of the chilled bottles and she hesitantly took a sip, then her face lit up with delight. "Now this would put Coke out of business!" she said with a smile.

Harry nodded and looked over at Scott, who was staring down at a fresh shot of Fire Whiskey that Logan had poured for him. "Here, One Eye, this will make your lashes grow all curly and girly."

"Logan, stop trying to get my husband drunk!" Jean said angrily.

He grinned at her in reply.

Scott wisely pushed the drink away and reached for a bottle of butterbeer.

"Tomorrow, we'll talk with the goblins at Gringotts. Hopefully there will be a property that Professor Xavier can use," Harry said softly.

"Harry, even if there isn't, you need to know the extent of what you own," Jean replied.

"Yeah kid, listen to the red head," Logan said, sipping another glass of whiskey.

"What we own," Harry grumbled.

Scott turned to face him. "We really appreciate the idea that you'd want to share with us, but this is what your family left for you. We're not going to take that from you."

Harry sighed in defeat. He'd never get them to understand.

Ministry of Magic, Office of the Minister (August 3rd)...

“Minister, Rita Skeeter from the *Daily Prophet* is here asking if you can spare a few minutes to answer a few questions,” said a voice.

Cornelius nervously straightened his tie. “Send her in!” he replied. According to the latest polls, he had less than a twelve percent approval rating. Talking to Skeeter might help reduce the increasing calls for a vote of no confidence.

Pasting a smile on his face, he waited patiently.

The door opened and Rita stepped in, followed by Bozo, her personal photographer. Fudge stood, holding out his hand. “Rita! What a wonderful surprise! How good it is to see you again.”

“Minister, thank you for taking the time out of your inordinately busy schedule to see me,” Rita lied. She knew Fudge spent most of his time these days calling people and begging for their support.

“Nothing is too good for the press. After all, the people must see their government at work, right?” Fudge said jovially while Rita sat.

Bozo snapped off a few obligatory photos and Rita rummaged through her bag

“Minister, rumor has it that the Ministry tried to appropriate the Potter family vaults, and that the goblins prevented it from happening?”

Fudge frowned at the question. The goblin actions and follow-up actions had prevented him from finding Harry Potter and cost him personally over two million galleons. “Yes, well, the simple fact is, Harry Potter has been missing since the tragic death of his beloved family. We thought that if we were to confiscate the monies, he'd be forced out of wherever he is hiding.”

Rita nodded and waited for her quick quote quill to finish writing. “Sounds reasonable to me, Minister, but were you aware that Potter isn't a full wizard?”

Fudge looked at her like she was insane. “Really, Rita, it's common knowledge that Harry Potter is only a half-blood. His mother was a Muggle-born, you know.”

“And a mutant,” she added dryly.

Fudge stood. “WHAT?”

Rita leaned back in her chair, enjoying the scene. “You mean you didn't know? My source tells me that Lily Potter was not only a witch and a mutant, but she had a twin sister who attended a mutant school in the United States. I've since learned that she has been given full custody of Harry Potter by the British Muggle Government. I understand she is also a witch, but hasn't the formal training of one.”

Fudge sputtered some more, his face turned several colors.

“My source also revealed that the whole purpose behind You-Know-Who's attack on the Ministry last June was to obtain a prophecy, which named Harry Potter as the only person capable of killing him. And...”

Fudge held up a hand. “Rita, no matter what a prophecy might say about Harry Potter, the Ministry position on mutants is quite clear. When Mr. Potter resurfaces from wherever he is hiding, he will have to register with the Department of Magical Creatures as a Dark Creature.”

Rita's quilled scribbled furiously.

“Would you care to add anything to that, Minister?” she asked in a silky tone.

“Yes, tell your readers that the Ministry will continue to protect them at all costs. I will alert the Department of Magical Law Enforcement today that Harry Potter is to be taken into protective custody if spotted. After all, the public must be protected,” Fudge said pompously.

Rita stood, having gotten what she came for. “Thank you, Minister. I appreciate your allowing us some of your valuable time.”

Fudge nodded and watched her and Bozo leave the office before he turned back to trying to drum up more support for his position.

Gringotts, Diagon Alley...

Harry, Jean, Scott and Logan set off that morning after a heavy English breakfast. Harry continued to wear his disguise and Jean continued to draw the occasional stare.

Harry stepped into the Gringotts lobby and frowned, seeing the face of Bill Weasley. He didn't want any entanglements with the Order today if it could be avoided. He walked over to one of the goblin counting stations and asked to be taken to the estates division.

“Name?” asked the goblin.

“Harry Potter,” he replied. Nearby, Bill Weasley looked up hearing Harry's name.

“Come with me, Mr. Potter,” the goblin said.

When Harry and his party followed the goblin, Bill Weasley made a beeline for the exit. The Order would need to know that Harry was back in

Britain.

The goblin stopped at a door and turned to the group. "Senior Manager Pageknock will help you, he has been the Potter estate manager for the past forty years," he said, then he opened the door.

Harry and the others filed in to the empty office and sat at the large conference table. A moment later, another door opened and an older goblin entered. He fussed with some documents on his desk before approaching the conference table.

"Mr. Potter, we received the paperwork concerning your adoption by the Summers. As your legal parents, until you turn seventeen, they have final say in what happens to your estate. You will not come into your full inheritance until you turn seventeen, however your adopted parents can access selected parts of the estate and the properties in your name."

Pageknock paused and looked at Harry. "Your signature is required on all transactions. For any transaction over ten thousand galleons you are required to provide an oath stating you are free from compulsion and/or any form of coercion," he said pointedly. He turned to the others. "Please understand this is done merely to protect Mr. Potter and his inheritance until he is of age to handle his financial matters himself."

Jean leaned forward slightly. "We understand, Manager Pageknock. We want to see that Harry gets what his family left him also. Can you tell us the size of the estate you're talking about?"

Pageknock rifled through several papers. "There are actually two estates; the Potter estate and the Black estate. The Black family estate is available to him now in its entirety and doesn't need your approval for him to access. That includes roughly twenty four million galleons of liquid assets and another fourteen million galleons in properties, stocks and securities. The Blacks were a wealthy family and when combined their fortune with the Potter fortune, Mr. Potter here stands to become one of Gringotts largest depositors."

He pushed a parchment across table to Harry. "That parchment contains a list of all properties owned by the Blacks and the Potters, which includes the Black family manor, which has gone missing, and their family castle, which we hold the secret to. There are also four Potter properties listed, although the home in Godric's Hollow was destroyed and never rebuilt."

Harry winced at the mention of Godric's Hollow and glanced at the list for a moment.

Jean placed a hand on his shoulder, knowing that he was having trouble dealing with these inheritances.

"The Black castle is under a Gringotts Fidelius charm?" Harry asked suddenly.

Pageknock blinked. "Yes, Mr. Potter, it is, and Gringotts holds the secret in one of our most secure vaults."

Harry looked at Scott and Logan for a moment. "The Fidelius charm makes the castle hidden from anyone who hasn't been told the location by the secret keeper. In the case of a Gringotts held secret, the owners are issued special Portkeys, disguised as rings or necklaces, which allow them access to the property without really knowing where it is. A Gringotts-held Fidelius means no one knows where the property is, not even the owners.

"That wouldn't be a problem for us. If the castle is serviceable, the Blackbird's GPS, or even a portable GPS unit should tell us where it is without breaking the charm. The goblin charm acts differently than a human cast Fidelius."

Scott looked intrigued. "Maybe we should check it out today?"

"It's a good idea," Harry replied, then he turned back to Pageknock. "Can you supply us with Portkeys to the castle?"

Pageknock nodded and scribbled down a note which he tossed in a basket. The note vanished from sight. "They will be available shortly. Now, if you're ready to continue, I'll outline your Potter family inheritance."

Harry leaned back in his chair. "Please."

"The Potter fortune has always been difficult to put an exact value on. In terms of liquid assets, the Potter family has only fourteen million galleons on deposit and another six million in various properties, stocks and securities. Mind you, this doesn't include the nearly eight million galleons collected by the recent financial action. However, the real wealth of Potters stems from a cache of True Silver, which the family has kept for nearly eight hundred years. The last inventory of the vaults revealed some fourteen tons of ingots, more than half of the world's known supply of True Silver. The current market value fluctuates, but as of this morning's commodity postings, one troy ounce of True Silver was going for eighteen hundred and sixty four galleons."

Harry stared at the goblin in shock. He tried to do the math and his mind shuddered back from the numbers.

Jean gasped. He had enough to buy whole countries!

"That's a lot of dinero, Wiz," muttered Logan. "I didn't think silver was all that valuable."

"Not silver," Pageknock said, correcting Logan. "True Silver. It doesn't exist at all in nature. It took a master alchemist his entire lifetime to make twenty tons of the material. True Silver is like metallic magic. You can enchant an object made from True Silver and it will remain enchanted forever. It's very strong, very lightweight and a highly valued commodity.

"It was a Potter family member that came up with the recipe for creating True Silver. Unfortunately, he died in a tragic accident and he seems to have taken the recipe to the grave with him. This was the initial source of the Potter family's wealth, and it is one of their most closely guarded assets.

"It is the sole reason why it is so difficult to put exact figures to the Potter estate. The True Silver can be sold, but only in minute quantities. Selling too much would radically devalue its worth."

I think another time I'll come back and get a sample of that stuff. The Professor says he wants Hank to start tutoring me on chemistry next year. It would be interesting to see if we can figure out what's in it," Harry said slowly.

Jean gave him a broad smile. She loved how motivated he was to learn things. But his comment also reminded her of something.

"Pageknock, I am told that Gringotts provides a variety of services to their depositors. I am wondering if you can help us in another matter?"

"What would that be, Mrs. Summers?"

"It has come to my attention that the Potions Master currently employed by Hogwarts is less than adequate. Could you assist us in finding someone capable of tutoring Harry in N.E.W.T .level potions, so he can take his exam?"

"Gringotts would be pleased to assist in that matter. Shall I charge the job search to the estate?"

Harry nodded at Jean, pleased that she had remembered. He hadn't remembered it at all. Jean nodded at Pageknock, who made a notation in a small ledger.

The door opened and a goblin entered, carrying a leather pouch and several parchments. He handed the parchments and pouch over to Pageknock, who glanced through them before passing them to Jean.

Pageknock waited until the other goblin left, then explained. "As his guardian, I feel it only proper that you should keep these copies of the Potter Wills, as well as the Will of Sirius Black. There are certain... ah... discrepancies in the Potter Wills, which you might find interesting. Perhaps it will lead to a conversation for another time," Pageknock said, then he opened the pouch and extracted four rings, one more ornate than the others.

"Under the terms of Sirius Black's will, he named Mr. Potter his heir. As such, he holds the title of Lord Black of Blackmoor. This is the Black family signet ring, only to be worn by the current Head of that family, in this case Mr. Potter.

"The other rings are Portkeys to Blackmoor Castle. To activate the Portkey, twist the ring on your finger. The ring can only be removed by the wearer or by Lord Black."

Harry took the signet ring and placed it on his finger, then handed out the other three rings. Pageknock handed him the leather pouch with additional rings.

"I will owl you with resumes for possible Potions tutors when I have them," Pageknock said.

Jean nodded and stood.

"Wait, don't we need keys to the vaults?" Harry asked suddenly.

Pageknock grinned and shook his head. "No, Mr. Potter. All our top level vaults require blood keys. The first time you visit them, they will require a sample of your blood. After that, they will open for you every time you visit. No key is necessary."

Harry grinned in return and stood. "Thank you, Pageknock, your assistance has been invaluable. May your gold flow freely."

Pageknock bowed from his seat, then turned back to the paperwork on his desk, while Harry and the others left the office.

They paused in the lobby to talk for a moment.

"Where to now?" asked Harry.

"I want to stop at the bookstore," Jean said eagerly.

"And I need to check in Ollivander's for holsters. These American made holsters aren't all that great. The wands are excellent, but I was surprised by poor quality of the holsters."

"Meet us at the bookstore when you're done, then, Harry," Jean replied.

Harry turned to Logan. "Want to tag along?"

"Sure thing, Wiz," Logan replied.

The group split into two pairs, each picking a different direction.

Harry led Logan to the wand shop, wondering idly what the strange wand maker would make of his surly friend.

The bell on the door chimed as they entered. Almost instantly, Ollivander appeared. "My word, Mr. Potter. I thought you were missing."

Harry grinned. "Nope," he replied cheekily. "I've always known where I was."

Logan laughed.

Ollivander arched an eyebrow, then he turned to look at Logan. His eyebrows rose up into his hairline. "If I didn't know better, I'd say this was an animagus gone terribly wrong, but I sense no magic around you."

"This is a friend of mine, Mr. Ollivander. He knows about the wizarding world," Harry replied before Logan could get his ire up.

Ollivander turned his attention back to Harry. "Well, he is different. But I'm sure that's not why you came here. How can I help you, Mr. Potter? Do you need some wand polish, perhaps?"

“Oh, I'm sure he needs help polishing his wand, but you're really not his type,” Logan said with a smirk.

Ollivander glanced at Logan disapprovingly, while Harry blushed.

“Actually, Mr. Ollivander, I'd like to purchase some wand holsters. The ones I own now are all right, but they don't have anti-summoning charms on them.”

“Very well, wrist, back or ankle?” asked Ollivander.

“Wrist and ankle, and I need the woman's version of the same.”

Ollivander turned to stare at him. “Why would you need two holsters, Mr. Potter?”

Harry sheepishly lifted one pant leg exposing a second holster and a wand made of pine.

Ollivander frowned. “I didn't sell you that wand. American, isn't it? I do hope you didn't buy one of their cheap mass-produced wands.”

“No, I didn't go to McWands. This is an Iverson wand, custom fitted and made. Mountain Pine with a Sasquatch hair core.”

“Iverson? Why, he's only been in the business for two hundred and forty years. I don't know if I'd trust any wand made by someone with so little experience,” Ollivander said with a sniff as he reached under the counter for the requested items.

Muttering to himself, Ollivander eventually found what he was looking for, and placed the holsters on the counter. “You do know that the Ministry has prohibited all British subjects from owning a foreign import wand, Mr. Potter?”

“Good thing I'm an American citizen then, wouldn't you agree, Mr. Ollivander?” he replied with a tight smile. He'd just realized that his second wand was untraceable in Britain.

Ollivander blinked in surprise, then he nodded with a grin. “Yes, quite a good thing, Mr. Potter. That will be forty-two galleons.”

Harry paid for his purchase, then he turned to leave the building. Something caught his eye and he froze. Logan bumped into his back.

“Wiz, what did you...”

“Quiet, Logan,” Harry said tensely. “There's a group of Aurors waiting outside the bookstore. I think we need to be careful.”

“Good spot,” Logan answered.

Harry pointed at an alleyway. “Go wait over by the mouth of that alley. I'll try to get my hands on Aunt Jean and Uncle Scott and teleport all three of us to you. From there, we can Portkey to the castle.”

Logan looked at Harry appraisingly for a moment. “Who put you in charge?”

Harry looked at his feet for a moment. “Ummm, no one?” he said, suddenly feeling foolish.

Logan nodded. “All right, here's what we'll do. I'll wait in the alley while you grab Scott and Jean and do your mojo.”

“What a wonderful plan!” exclaimed Harry sarcastically.

Logan grinned at him, then walked away quickly, though calmly.

Harry turned and frowned. Scott and Jean had just exited Flourish and Blotts and the Aurors were moving in. He hurried in their direction.

“Halt!” said an Auror.

Jean and Scott skidded to a stop in front of the store and stared at the man in confusion.

“Keep your hands where I can see them,” growled one of the men.

Jean and Scott realized they were surrounded by Aurors.

“What is the meaning of this?” Jean asked angrily. “We've done nothing wrong!”

“You were seen with Harry Potter today. He is wanted by the Ministry,” replied one of the Aurors. “I'm afraid you'll have to come with us.”

Just at that moment, Harry strode up to stand in between Jean and Scott. He placed a hand on each of them.

“Auror Dawlish, I'm surprised they didn't fire you last year. The Auror corps must be really hard up for people if they keep a near-Squib like you on the force,” Harry said scathingly. He spoke loudly in order to draw a crowd.

Dawlish flushed and whipped out his wand. A second later, the other three Aurors had pulled their wands, as well. Nearby, a flash bulb went off, capturing the moment on camera.

Harry noticed Rita Skeeter and grinned. “I'm afraid we won't be going anywhere with you today, Dawlish. Perhaps this failure will be the last one and you'll finally be fired.”

Harry concentrated for a split second and every Auror wand pointed at them vanished. “Imagine that, Aurors without wands. What kind of fool sends Aurors out unarmed?” he said with a bit of a laugh, then he teleported them away from the scene.

There was a moment of stunned silence and then the crowd that had formed started booing the Aurors and throwing things at them.

“Bullies!” shouted one person. “Leave Potter alone!”

“Fudge fuck-ups! Down with Fudge!” shouted another.

Dawlish ducked a conjured tomato someone had thrown. Surprised, the Aurors made a hasty retreat, apparating back to the Ministry building, while Skeeter walked away gloating. She was already writing this up in her mind, combining it with information gained from Ron Weasley and Fudge. It had taken her a few days to confirm some of the things she had learned. For once she was trying for accuracy in her writing.

If she hurried, she could still make the today's afternoon edition and the morning headline.

In the alleyway across from Ollivander's, Harry reappeared with Jean and Scott. He turned, looking for Logan, when a reddish brown light arced down the alley. Harry instinctively ducked and wandlessly cast a shield but before the shield could form, Jean fell from the bludgeoning hex.

“Dammit, Shackbolt, no one told you to shoot!” Remus Lupin all but growled at the Auror standing beside him.

Harry's eye's flared with anger and he whipped out his wand. The mouth of the alley was blocked by Bill Weasley, Remus and Kingsley Shackbolt. Logan lay unconscious at their feet.

Harry chanted, laying down a precise and deadly fire of high powered bludgeoning hexes. Bill Weasley fell screaming, his leg broken in several places. Kingsley managed to shield himself and Remus, but the spell shattered his shield and threw him out of the alleyway. He flew thirty feet, landing in a store after crashing through the front window.

“Accio Logan!” Harry shouted.

Remus ducked out of the way, rolling to one side. “Harry! Stop! We're not here to fight you!”

“You have a damn strange way of showing it, Werewolf! You want a war? You've got it!” Harry shouted.

He glanced over at Scott, who had caught Logan. He looked to be stunned. “Hold onto him and twist your ring, Uncle Scott. I'll bring Aunt Jean.”

Scott nodded and, with a twist of his ring, vanished, with Logan in his arms.

“Harry, wait!”

He looked up and gestured. Suddenly, the sides of the buildings near the mouth of the alley began to collapse, closing off the alley.

Remus cursed and retreated, covering his head to protect himself from the falling bricks.

Harry grabbed Jean's hand and gave her ring a hard twist.

Harry landed next to Jean and fell to his knees. He shook his head groggily and looked around warily. Nearby, Scott had laid Logan down on the ground and was now kneeling over Jean.

Harry moved to her side and cast a simple healing charm on her. “Come on, Mum, don't do this to me,” he whispered in anguish. Scott stared at him incredulously for a moment, then he turned his attention back to Jean as she opened her eyes.

“Oh, what hit me?” she moaned.

“Bludgeoning hex, Mum. Are you all right?” Harry asked anxiously.

Jean's eyes widened and despite her pain she smiled broadly. “You called me Mum!”

Harry leaned back on his heels. “Is that all right?” he asked tightly, unsure if he's made a mistake.

She reached up and touched his cheek. “I'd hoped you'd get around to it sooner or later.”

He returned the smile, then he moved to Logan and revived him.

As the surly man came around and began to curse viciously, Harry looked up at the imposing building before them and frowned.

The castle wasn't quite as big as Hogwarts, but it was still huge and seemed nearly as old. “I think we're going to need help with this,” he murmured.

Author's Notes:

Erm... well Alyx wouldn't write the author's notes and I'm seriously pissed off! I mean really, here I am slaving over a hot word processor and She refuses to write the Author's notes.

I thought about copying some notes from another story but... wait.

EEP!

(Bob, spotting the double barreled shotgun tracking his every move, backs up the cursor and deletes what he had written)

What I'd like to say is I'm perfectly fine with the fact that there's no author's notes and I hope you are too!

And if anyone reads this far down in the file. SEND HELP!

Mutant Storm

Chapter 04 - The Mutants are coming!

Standard Disclaimer:

Alyx stepped onto the stage and looked around nervously. The stage was bare, and a lone spotlight shone down on her, causing her to begin to sweat. Crickets chirped outside a window, it was the only sound she could hear.

“Why did you do it?” a voice suddenly asked.

Alyx squeaked in fright and she whirled around, trying to find the source of the voice. It wasn't one she recognized. She peered into the gloom anxiously. “I'm sorry? Do what?”

“Don't play coy with us!” snapped the voice. “We know you did it. We want to know why!”

Alyx frowned and reached for her holstered FPIA. A look of panic crossed her face when she realized that her Frying Pan of Infinite Attacks was missing.

“Yes, you're disarmed.”

She scowled and peered into the darkness. “Who is this? Where is Bob? Did he put you up to this?”

“Your husband is safe for the moment. But if you don't start cooperating...” said the voice. It trailed off, leaving the threat unsaid.

A slight whimper broke from Alyx. “Alright! I did it! I couldn't help myself! I tore up the disclaimer for this chapter!”

“Why?” said the voice coldly.

She put both hands on her hips. “All he had to do was write something simple that said we didn't own Harry Potter or the Potter universe. But did he do that? NO! He had a dozen porn stars spelling out the disclaimer in various sexual positions. I mean come on, some of those girls are going to be arthritic when they get older from doing that!”

Alyx took a deep breath and then continued. “Besides, he rejected my disclaimer out of hand. It was only fair.”

There was a moment of silence, then she could hear the rustling of paper. “According to our investigation you wanted a disclaimer that involved naked mud wrestling with Alan Rickman and Sean Connery.”

Alyx blushed. “Well yeah, but we'd wash up afterwards, so it would be all clean fun.”

The light snapped off and Alyx screamed. The sound of scuffling could be heard coming from the stage. A moment later the lights came back up and Bob walked onto the stage. A group of women followed him onto the stage.

He looked around and smiled benignly. “Gimme a 'W',” he shouted.

Mutant Storm

Chapter 04

The Mutants are coming!

Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix...

“William!” screeched Molly. Her cry caused a number of the Order members to rush to the sitting room. Molly rushed to help Bill to a chair.

Bill was being carried in by Remus, while Kingsley limped in behind him, holding his ribs.

“Molly, call Hogwarts and ask for Professor Dumbledore and Madam Pomfrey to come here. Ask that she bring her potion bag,” Remus said through gritted teeth. Several bricks had hit him on his way out of the alley and he was just starting to feel the pain from them. He shook his head in dismay; in less than a second the situation had turned deadly and Harry's response impressed the hell out of him.

Harry had disabled two of his attackers in his first volley of spells. Three trained wizards had taken on one underage teenager and he had cleaned their clocks in under a minute.

Molly threw some powder into the Floo and stuck her head in the fire. A moment later she pulled her head out. “Albus is on his way,” she said worriedly.

They sat in tense silence for several minutes; then there was a bright flash of flames and Dumbledore appeared with Madam Pomfrey. Fawkes circled over head for a moment before settling on the mantel of the fireplace.

Poppy immediately went to work.

“Let us give Madam Pomfrey time to do her job. I suggest we all wait in the kitchen.” Dumbledore said softly.

For nearly thirty minutes they waited, while other Order members drifted in, asking questions.

At one point, there came a scratching at the window. Ginny went to it and let the owl outside enter. She absently removed the rolled copy of the *Daily Prophet*, paying the bird from a bowl kept for such a purpose. She started to unroll the paper when the door opened and Madam Pomfrey entered. Laying the paper aside, she returned to her seat.

“How are they, Poppy?” asked Dumbledore.

“They’ll live. Remus and Kingsley have some bad bruises and Mr. Weasley broke his leg in two places, but he’ll be fine by tomorrow,” she replied.

The door opened and Remus walked in, followed by a very chagrined looking Kingsley.

“I thought I told you two to rest!” exclaimed Poppy.

“We can rest in here as well as we can out there, Poppy,” Remus said reasonably. He carefully slid into a seat next to Tonks, wincing as he did.

“Excellent, now can you tell us how you three managed to get injured?” asked Dumbledore.

When Remus glared at Kingsley, the bald man lowered his head. “It’s my fault, Headmaster,” he said. “I got a little carried away.”

“A little?” exclaimed Remus angrily. “Perhaps I had best explain this then.”

Kingsley nodded unhappily, refusing to meet any of the eyes staring at him.

“It started this afternoon when Bill heard someone say Harry’s name in Gringotts. Then he spotted Harry with three people being escorted to a private office.”

“Bill contacted Kingsley and me and we set up to watch them from an alley just off the main street. Harry and his companions left the bank and split up; Harry and another man went to Ollivander’s and the other pair went to the bookstore. I’m almost certain the woman was Lily’s sister, Albus, the resemblance is striking. She might as well be an identical twin.

“When Harry came out, he sent the other man to wait in the same alley we were watching them from.”

Remus leaned back in his chair and winced when his shoulder blades touched the back of the chair. Molly poured him a cup of tea and he smiled at her gratefully.

“We realized that the man was a Muggle, but when he saw we were watching Harry, these knife things came out of his hands. It took all three of us to stun him,” Remus said, shaking his head over that fact.

“We turned back to see Harry surrounded by Aurors, then poof! He vanished, just like that! No sound, nothing. Suddenly, they were behind us in the alley. Kingsley fired off a bludgeoning hex and a stunner. The stunner missed Harry, but the bludgeoning hex hit the woman and she went down in a heap. That’s when things went wrong. Harry whirled and fired off five bludgeoning hexes and created a shield faster than I could have believed possible. Bill went down with his leg broken and Kingsley was thrown through a storefront window. I tried to calm Harry down and told him we weren’t looking for a fight.

“He looked at the woman, then snarled at me, saying that if we wanted a war, he’d be happy to oblige. Then he somehow collapsed the entrance to the alley and by the time I could get back in there, he was gone.”

Dumbledore’s eyes flashed with anger. “What were you thinking, Kingsley? Now the boy will never trust us!”

“I thought, Headmaster, that you would be happy if we brought him in. I never expected Harry to fight back, or be able to fight back so ruthlessly. He broke Bill’s leg, for Merlin’s sake!”

“You hit his Aunt with a hex! Of course he’s going to fight back! All things considered, I think we’re lucky he didn’t kill us.” grumbled Remus.

Dumbledore lowered his head, wondering what to do now. He couldn’t believe how rapidly things were spinning out of control. He heaved a heavy sigh and lifted his head.

“I will write Harry a letter as soon as I get back to the castle, telling him that you three were not following my directions. I will offer him my oath on it,” Dumbledore muttered.

The door opened and Minerva McGonagall walked into the room. All eyes turned to her. In one fisted, white hand, she carried a rolled up newspaper, and her jaw was clenched so tight her neck muscles were almost bulging. The fury in her eyes was directed at one person: Ronald Weasley.

“Mr. Weasley,” she said, her lips compressed into a thin angry line. “I am removing you from the position of Prefect, and also banning you from Quidditch. I cannot begin to tell you how angry and disappointed I am in you. Were school in session, I’d be deducting hundreds of points from my own house and giving you detention for the entire year!”

As she spoke, Ron paled and he looked around wildly.

Molly and Arthur stared at Minerva in uncomprehending shock.

McGonagall silently handed the paper to a confused Dumbledore, who unrolled it. He sagged in his chair and seemed to age almost before their eyes.

Ginny, remembering the paper, turned in her chair, picked it up from the counter and unrolled it. Her scream sent several Order members scrambling to their feet.

Harry Potter, Mutant and Chosen One?
By Rita Skeeter.

"I don't understand why so many people think Harry Potter is so wonderful. Sure, he killed a Dark Lord, but he's not human, he's a mutant. And besides, if he killed the Dark Lord, then how come he's back?"

So says Harry Potter's closest friend and confidant, Ronald Bilius Weasley. In an exclusive interview with this reporter, Potter's long-time friend reveals secrets that he had kept for his friend for many years. Like the fact that Harry's mother was a mutant, posing as a witch, and that he really is the child of prophecy, the Chosen One.

The Daily Prophet was shocked to discover that, as an infant, young Harry was placed in an abusive environment by none other than Albus Dumbledore, and that Dumbledore has been hiding the existence of another aunt of Harry's, also a mutant and witch.

"He's not a wizard, he's a thing!" says Mr. Weasley, and yes, we here at the Prophet have confirmed this. Minister Fudge has issued a warrant for young Potter on the grounds that he is a dangerous dark creature.

Minister Fudge says that he wants all wizards and witches everywhere to know that their government is working hard to protect them.

Quite honestly, in our opinion, Mr. Potter is not a dark creature, but the Ministry has their rules, which they must follow. We think this is the final straw. If Harry Potter is indeed the Chosen One, then arresting him is not going to make him want to fight for us. The time to remove Minister Fudge is now, before his policies condemn our entire world to slavery under You-Know-Who...

Ginny dropped the paper and scrambled for her mother's wand, which was lying on the counter. She whirled and fired off a bat bogey hex at Ron. He ducked and her hex hit part of the table and exploded. Arthur leapt from his chair, tackling his daughter to the ground.

"Get off me! I'll kill him!" she shouted angrily.

Hermione scooped up the paper and read the article, growing paler with each passing moment.

Molly rushed forward and plucked her wand from her daughter's hands, as the girl was still trying to get a bead on her brother, despite her father's best efforts.

Wandless, Ginny went limp in her father's arms. "How could you, Ron?" she sobbed, then she turned in her father's embrace and held onto him, weeping.

The kitchen slowly fell into silence, broken only by the sniffing of Ginny and Molly. Ron sat on a chair, refusing to meet anyone's gaze. Hermione sat coldly furious, staring at Ron with a burning glare as the paper was passed around.

"Mr. Weasley, did you really say these things?" asked Dumbledore.

Ron looked up at him. "Yes... no... I don't know. I was... I had too many fire whiskeys. I don't remember exactly what I said to Skeeter."

Dumbledore sat silently for a moment, thinking. "I see. I'm afraid I must agree with Professor McGonagall's punishments. From this moment forward, you may no longer attend any Order meeting, nor may you know any Order business. You have caused more damage with a few badly chosen comments than a host of Death Eaters could have caused.

"You will give your Headquarters Portkey to your father. I think, for the sake of all of us, you should be confined to Headquarters until the time comes for you to return to Hogwarts. Until today, I had hoped that Harry Potter would return to us," Dumbledore said, then he stood. "Now I am not sure we will ever see him again. You have damaged your friendship with Mr. Potter, Ronald. And while I hope he will forgive you, I am not sure I would, were I he."

Dumbledore turned and left the room. Hermione stood and walked over to Ron.

He looked up at her.

"Upstairs," she said coldly.

"What?" he replied stupidly.

She latched onto his earlobe, pinching it viciously. "I said, upstairs," she hissed.

Still holding him by the ear, she pulled him from his chair and led him from the room and up the stairs, into the room he'd previously shared with Harry.

"Sit and don't say a word," Hermione said furiously.

Ron hastily sat on his bed, watching her nervously.

Hermione paced back and forth for a moment, literally shaking with fury, then she turned to look at him.

"I want to thank you."

"Hunh?"

"I said, I want to thank you. For the past two years I thought I might fancy you. I even dreamed of a time when we would be together, perhaps with a family of our own."

Ron blinked and grinned at her.

"This past summer has been an eye-opening experience for me. I learned firsthand just what an ignorant, conceited and self-centered fool you truly are."

"Hey!" he protested.

Her hand met his cheek in a slap that caused his ears to ring.

Ron held a hand to his stinging cheek and looked up at Hermione in surprise.

"Did I say you could talk?" she ground out between clenched teeth. She was furious with him, and herself for her loss of control.

He shook his head. She glared at him for a moment longer, then she resumed her pacing.

"You showed your true colors this summer, Ronald. Between your hatred of mutants and now this ... this public attack on our friend? You did more than just talk to a reporter. You proved to me that I could never love someone like you. Never! What we had with Harry was magical, it was beautiful! In all my life before Hogwarts, I had never experienced a friendship like that, and you've destroyed it.

"Harry is no different than you or I, but you have always been jealous of him. Well, that stops today, right here and right now. You killed two things today. You killed the relationship you had with Harry. He may never talk to you again, ever. And you killed forever the possibility that I could have fallen in love with you. The fact that I could be so angered by your actions that I'd completely lose control and slap you was the final straw. I shouldn't have struck you, and it proves we could never be together, regardless of whether Harry forgives you.

"You don't know any better, but you automatically lump Muggles and Mutants as being beneath your notice. My parents are Muggles! And your attitude is something I'd expect from Malfoy!"

Ron's eyes flared with anger at the Malfoy comment, but he wisely kept his mouth shut.

She stopped pacing and looked at him. "I'm going to be selfish here and hope that Harry won't lump me in with you. I'm going to hope that I can recover at least a part of what I had with him. You have a lot of growing up to do, Ronald. A lot. You sit there and you have no idea what you've lost, or what you've done to your own sister."

"Ginny? But..." He shrank back from her glare.

"Grow up, Ronald. I strongly suggest that you spend the rest of the month here pretending you don't exist, because I really doubt that anyone is going to want to see or hear from you."

Hermione turned and walked out of the room, slamming the door on the way out. Ron flinched again and looked down at the floor.

Hermione returned to the kitchen, where everyone was still gathered, and sat down next to Ginny.

"It's over for real, isn't it, Hermione?" she asked brokenly.

Hermione sighed heavily, finally letting her own tears flow. "Merlin, I hope not, Ginny, but I think it is."

No one, not even Molly, could find the strength to rebut her comment.

Blackmoor Castle, Southern England (August 4th)...

Jean Summers rolled out of the bed and quickly searched for her slippers. The stone floor was freezing! She quickly dressed and hurried down to the large hall where they had spent several hours last night. She paused by a window to glance outside and shook her head.

The castle, and the entire island on which it rested, was hidden from the Muggles. Located just off the coast of southern England, the island group known as The Manacles had long been a hazard to navigation in the channel. There were numerous small islands and shoals, rocks mostly, jutting above the water, or worse, lurking just below it. Sometime in the tenth century, someone saw fit to build a castle on one of the larger islands of the group, then hid the island from the Muggles by means of a Gringotts-controlled Fidelius charm. Eventually, ownership of the castle passed into the hands of the Black family, and then into Harry's.

Jean continued down the stairs. No one had been to the castle in at least fifty years and she had expected it to be a total wreck. And it was, until Harry summoned help. He called two little creatures named Dobby and Winky and asked if they would be interested in working for him. She frowned now, recalling how both wanted to be bonded to him, but he explained it was the way of house elves.

Once he accepted their bond, they started working immediately on the castle. Winky went to the kitchen and put things in order there, while Dobby fixed up several rooms so that they had comfortable places to sleep that night.

Harry explained to Jean and the others that the elves would follow him, caring for whatever home he lived in unless he assigned them to the castle. He wasn't ready to assign anyone to the castle until it had been repaired better. The elves could clean it up and repair most of it, but in order to make it usable for the X-Men, they'd need to make modifications to the structure.

She walked into the large hall and stopped in shock. It was sparkling clean. Large banners depicting the Black and Potter crests hung from one wall and fires burned merrily in the four fireplaces, warming the room. Surprisingly, Harry had also added a large black banner between the two family banners. The large black and red X seemed to fit right in with the motif of the room.

Scott shot her a warning look and she slowed her pace. He sat with Logan, going over several large sheets of paper. It looked like they were drawing a map of the keep. Harry stood silently, looking out a huge window at the turbulent waters of the English Channel.

She walked over to her husband and kissed him on the cheek.

“What’s wrong?” she asked in a hushed tone.

“Dobby brought a copy of the late edition paper,” Scott said grimly, then he slid the paper in her direction.

She quickly read the article, then she stood and walked over to stand next to Harry.

“You know, I never *really* saw the ocean before this summer,” he said to her quietly. “Before this, it was just stuff on the telly, or pictures. That hut Hagrid met me in was offshore, but it was raining hard, so I didn’t see anything.”

“How are you doing?”

He smiled, and it was a measure of the strength of his shields that she could not penetrate them without using most of her power now.

He turned to her. “I don’t really know. It hurts. It hurts bad and I find I want to cry, but I can’t. I won’t. I won’t let them have that level of power over me any more. Last year, I would have screamed and thrown things around. Now... I just don’t know what to feel except numb to it all. I wish we could go home. Professor Xavier’s school was starting to feel like home.”

He turned to look out the window again.

“That article,” he said, shaking his head in disbelief. “They expect me to save them again and I’m no longer convinced they’re worth the effort, Mum. And if by some miracle I did save them, they would probably try to throw me into prison as a potential threat to someone.”

He turned back to her again. “Do we have to stay here? Can we please just go home?” he asked, the plea in his voice was painfully obvious.

She placed an arm around his shoulders. “You know the answer to that, Harry. None of us will insist you fight for these people. But we will insist you fight for yourself. Show them that you are better than they are by not stooping to their level.”

She reached up and tried to arrange his hair neatly, it was something she still hadn’t given up on.

He smiled weakly at her. “I’ve spoken to the elves. They know they can take orders from you three. Dobby is going to put the word out to the disgraced elves. We’ll hire those that want to be hired and bond with the others. The castle will be fixed up perfect in no time.”

“I’m glad you’re talking about hiring,” she commented.

He shrugged. “I don’t want to bond them, but most of them aren’t like Dobby and will die without that bond. Would it be all right if I went out flying? I feel the need to burn off some steam and since I can’t do it by leveling the ministry building, a nice flight should help.”

She smiled at him. “All right, but remember, stealth mode your jet. I don’t want to find you coming back here being chased by a squadron of fighters like the last time.”

Harry winced. He had been caught out by a flight of four Air National Guard jets over upstate New York because he had forgotten to put the jet into stealth mode. It took him twenty minutes to lose them before he could slip into stealth again. Shortly after that, Charles pulled in a few strings and called in a favor or two, and he found himself the proud owner of an official FAA license. The name of Harry Potter, it seemed, opened all sorts of doors among the Americans, who seemed to take a perverse pride in helping him spite the British Ministry.

He nodded and smiled before turning to leave the hall. Satisfied that for the moment he’d be fine, Jean turned her attention back to Scott and Logan. They were planning on setting up a beacon so that Xavier could arrive on the Blackbird in a couple days.

Jean pulled out her wand and conjured a pad and pen. She had her own plans to make, setting up an infirmary and seeing that the rest of the living quarters were outfitted. Conjuring wasn’t her strong suit, as Harry hadn’t given her many lessons on the subject. As a result, her pad was a little rough, but it did the job and she was pleased with it anyway.

Blackmoor Castle, Southern England (August 7th)...

Harry rolled out of bed and quickly slipped on his robe and slippers. Dobby kept the room warm by making sure the fireplace was always going, but it did little for the stones of the keep. Dobby had brought three more disgraced elves who wanted him to hire them. He kept Dobby and Winky as his personal elves, and assigned the three new elves to work at the castle.

He had kept to himself the last three days, hiding from the storm that swirled around him – a storm that had nothing to do with clouds or ocean currents.

There had been more articles about him in the newspaper. Some denounced him as a dark creature in need of a cell, no better than a werewolf or vampire. Other articles demanded that he come out of hiding and deal with Voldemort.

The outward effect the articles had on him was chilling. He felt numb. He didn’t hate the wizards, but he was now convinced they deserved whatever fate had in store for them. If he could have gotten away with it, he would have written a letter to Voldemort, telling him that he could have the wizarding world. He was angry with Dumbledore, who could have shut so many of the complaints down with a short and simple letter to the editor.

A letter had arrived via Fawkes, who delivered it to Gringotts. Dumbledore had written, apologizing for the actions of Kingsley, Remus and Bill Weasley and stressing they had not been acting under his orders. Harry found he couldn’t bring himself to care about Dumbledore’s excuses. It was just another failure in a string of failures the man had racked up for Harry.

He knew his mum was worried about him, but he couldn’t help himself. Between the attack, the attempt to arrest him and the articles, he was

ted up with the wizarding world. For the last three days he had Dobby bring his meals in his room, while he enchanted hundreds of batteries, from small watch batteries to industrial sized truck batteries – all the things needed to power a base for the X-Men.

With no cable connection to the mainland, batteries and a generator were the only ways they had to power the base. Harry was convinced the generator was a waste of time, but he couldn't talk Scott and Logan out of it.

And in-between the enchanting, he studied his Muggle course work, rapidly advancing from algebra to calculus. Harry had been pleased to discover that he seemed to have a talent for math and greatly enjoyed the subject and related topics that used math.

Dobby kept a watchful eye on Harry, while Scott and Jean gave him the space he needed to figure things out.

He looked up at the knock on his door.

"Come in!" he called.

Professor Xavier and Jean entered the room.

"Hello, Professor. When did you get in?" Harry asked, happy to see him.

"Hello, Harry. We got in late last night. Your mother tells me that you've been feeling out of sorts the last few days and the reason for it. I think I'd be out of sorts too, after all the stuff that's been published. Is there anything we can do to help?"

"I don't suppose returning to America is an option," Harry said softly.

Jean stepped forward and wrapped her arms around him. "You know it isn't." She paused for a moment. "Professor Xavier would like to continue your evening classes with you," she whispered.

He bowed his head and nodded. He didn't mind the sessions with Xavier in the evenings. The Professor's work had helped Harry a great deal and the classes were stimulating and fun.

"Harry," Xavier said. "I think I do have something that might cheer you up."

Harry lifted his head and looked at the Professor. "Oh?" he asked with interest.

"Yes. Scott and Logan have looked over this castle from top to bottom now and we think it will make an excellent base of operations, once we make certain heavy modifications. Jean also told me about your generous offer to just give the castle to the X-Men."

Harry nodded. He wanted them to have it.

Xavier smiled. "I'll be blunt, Harry. I am a rich man, and so are you. At our level of wealth, we don't just give things away. People like to feel as though they've earned something and you don't want someone to come to rely on your generosity. Since neither of us are in need of money, and you have something I can use, I'm going to propose that you lease me the castle on a five year lease. In exchange, I will give you that Jump Jet you are so fond of. I have been told that the jet is now fully rated to work around magic and Hank is supervising similar changes to the Blackbird."

"Really?" Harry gasped. He loved flying the jet. It was even better than flying his broom.

Jean sat on the edge of Harry's bed and sighed heavily.

"Jean? What's wrong?" asked Xavier. He was startled by her reaction to his offer.

"Most parents have to worry about their sons, their girlfriends and a car. The only advantage to a jump jet is it's too small for that sort of behavior," she muttered.

Harry snorted. "It's not like I'm going to be exposed to any girls interested in that sort of behavior, Mum," he countered caustically. "Victorian Britain, remember? Besides, none of the girls are interested in me. All they want is to date the famous Boy-Who-Lived."

"What about that girl, Ginny? The redhead?" she said teasingly.

He scowled at her. "After what her brother said about me in the paper? No, thank you. I think I've had my fill of Weasleys for this lifetime. Besides, she's dating someone else and I'm not sure I want to get involved with a witch."

"It is your world, Harry," Xavier said gently.

Harry turned to look at him. "No, it was never my world. I was never an accepted part of it. I can see that clearly now," Harry laughed bitterly. "You know what's funny? All those years of Vernon telling me that I was a freak and it turns out he was right. A mutant wizard? You don't get more bizarre than that."

"Harry," Jean chided. "Don't be like that."

He looked down at his feet for a moment before looking at her. "I'm sorry. The past few days haven't been very good ones. Dobby's told me about the newspaper articles. The only good one was written by a girl I know and I think she's a nutter. She claimed I was born of phoenixes turned human and therefore couldn't be a dark creature. I appreciate her effort, but I think she has been on the merry go round for far too long. I mean, she's a nice girl and means well, but..." he ended with a shrug.

Jean smiled reassuringly and she ruffled his hair for a moment. He smiled weakly at her.

"Harry, why don't you invite your friend Hagrid to come for a visit?" Xavier offered. "Having another friend around will help, and we could use his

help in preparing the castle for some of the changes we plan on making to it. I'd be willing to pay for his help."

Harry looked thoughtful for a moment, then nodded. "That might not be a bad idea. I saw some signs that a kraken may be nesting at the far end of the island on the day we arrived. He'd know how to deal with it."

"A kraken? Do I want to know?" asked Xavier mildly.

Harry grinned at him. "Let me put it to you this way, Professor. If you want to go swimming, install a pool. You do not want to swim in the water with a kraken around. It's probably attracted to the island by the Goblin magic protecting it. Magical creatures tend to have an innate sense for that sort of thing."

"A kraken," Jean repeated looking at Harry as though he were nuts.

"You don't believe me?" he asked dryly.

Jean crossed her arms and stared at him. "This isn't anything like a wizarding version of that left-handed smoke shifter Logan sent you out to buy, is it?"

Harry grinned. "Come over and stand at the window," he replied as he stood up.

Jean and Xavier followed him to the window.

"Dobby," Harry called.

When Dobby appeared, Harry leaned down and whispered something to him. The little elf vanished and reappeared a moment later, levitating a huge lamb roast.

"Perfect, Dobby," Harry murmured, then he reached for the roast. It vanished in a blink.

Jean and Xavier watched the area for a moment. Both noted the arrival of the large piece of meat. From the rocks a huge head appeared. It shot upwards and the lamb vanished in a single gulp. Then the head retracted back into the rocks.

Harry leaned around Jean, looking out the window. "That's a kraken... I think. No swimming around the island."

Jean swallowed nervously, her pale complexion going even paler. "Right, no swimming and I think we need Hagrid to visit," she murmured.

"Indeed," added Xavier dryly. "I've always liked owning a pool."

They stood there for another minute, then a bone, minus the meat, was hurled from the rocks. It arced high out over the water before landing with a small splash.

Harry started chuckling, then he turned to spot Dobby looking at him with his arms folded. "Harry Potter Sir gets Dobby in trouble with Winky! Dobby said he'd bring meat back, but now it's gone. What will Winky serve for dinner now?" Dobby asked, moaning and tugging hard on one ear.

Harry leaned over and patted Dobby on the shoulder. "Relax, Dobby. Take some coins from the house fund and go buy Winky a larger piece of meat, and tell her I'm sorry that I ruined her plans for dinner."

Dobby nodded and vanished again, leaving Harry chuckling to himself.

Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix (August 10th)...

In the days since the paper published the story about Harry, there had been editorials and letters to the editor on both sides of the issue. Some people wanted Harry arrested and locked up, others considered him to be the last great hope of their world. And the *Prophet* lapped it up, publishing both sides, while carrying news of the mess that had become the Ministry.

At the headquarters to the Order of the Phoenix, it was a changed Order. Morale was at a point even lower than it was right before James and Lily were killed. Many people came and went without staying long. Due to the public hue and cry over Harry, Dumbledore was forced to confine not only Ron, but Hermione and Ginny to Grimmauld Place. Those few adults living there went about their business, tight-lipped and refusing to discuss Order business with any of the students.

Ron spent most of his time in his room working on his homework, or thinking. Hermione's words had rocked him to his core and he was slowly coming to realize exactly how much damage he had done, to his own life and to Harry's.

At first he tried to blame Harry for his troubles, but even he couldn't come up a reasonable excuse by which he could logically make it Harry's fault.

Molly and Arthur, after the initial shock of Ron's betrayal had worn off, found themselves forced to take away Ginny's wand. She'd made several attempts to hex her brother, and only the fact that her magic was masked from detection prevented her from being expelled. Few of the adults even seemed inclined to lecture her about her behavior, however, and the message wasn't lost on Ron.

As a group, the three students were all suffering. Hermione stoically shouldered the burden of being locked up, and she played watchdog over Ginny to keep her from killing her brother. But even she was becoming short tempered.

Hermione walked into the kitchen to get a cup of tea to help calm her nerves. She was surprised to see Dumbledore, Minerva, Molly, Arthur, Remus and Hagrid sitting at the table.

"So, it's confirmed then, Arthur? I have been avoiding the Ministry for fear of seeming to be supporting one candidate over another," Dumbledore said.

"It's confirmed. Amelia and several Aurors escorted him..."

Arthur trailed off, seeing Hermione standing in the doorway. That was the final straw for Hermione.

"Really, Mr. Weasley. I am not your son. I know why he is being punished, but why are Ginny and myself also being left out of the loop? If this continues, I will go home, whether the Headmaster approves or not," Hermione said scathingly.

"Miss Granger!" exclaimed Minerva.

"No, Minerva. Miss Granger is quite right. She has done nothing to deserve the punishment she has been made to endure. It is not fair to assume she would tell Ronald anything she hears," Dumbledore said, jumping in before Molly could.

"Arthur was just telling us about Minister Fudge being booted out of office today. It's official, Rufus Scrimgeour is now the Minister for Magic. He's not exactly the candidate I would've picked, but he isn't in Voldemort's pocket," Dumbledore said.

Hermione frowned as poured herself a cup of tea and sat at the table, opting to listen to the conversation. She was feeling profoundly troubled and more than a bit angry at Dumbledore's lack of action. He had done nothing when the *Prophet* ran editorial pieces claiming Harry to be an evil dark creature. And now, it seemed, he'd done nothing to influence the outcome of the election for Minister!

She had been struggling all summer with changes to her attitudes towards authority figures like Dumbledore and hadn't resolved the struggle yet. The child within her still wanted to believe in the infallibility of her elders and, in particular, of Dumbledore. The blossoming adult was beginning to question their judgment and their value system.

"Anyway," Arthur said, picking up his tale, "Rufus immediately banished Umbridge back to Hogwarts. I'm not sure if she'll go or just resign. And rumor has it that Harry and his Aunt sent their registrations to the Magical Creatures Department by owl today."

Minerva turned to Dumbledore. "Albus, you can't let that woman back into the school!"

Dumbledore shook his head in resignation. "I'm afraid that most of the educational edicts from last year still apply, Minerva. There is little I can do to prevent it."

A scratching at the window attracted Hermione's attention, and she stood and went over to open it.

"Hedwig!" she gasped, seeing the white owl fly in.

Hedwig flew over to Hagrid and dropped a note into his waiting hands. He smiled and reached into his pocket, pulling out a live field mouse, which he offered to the owl.

Hermione paled and turned away when the owl bit down viciously on the little rodent, which gave a pathetic squeak and went silent.

Hagrid stuffed the note into a pocket and looked up, suddenly noticing that everyone was staring at him.

"Hagrid, you know, you never told us much about your trip to see Harry," commented Professor McGonagall.

"Aren't you going to open that, Hagrid?" asked Hermione anxiously.

"Yes, it could be important," added Arthur.

"Oh, I do hope he's eating well enough. He never gets enough food during the summer," worried Molly.

Hagrid stood, causing everyone to fall silent. "Aye, I'll read it later, when I'm alone. My trip to visit Harry in America went well enough. He was happy, an' he has a family tha' loves him fer the first time. I only spent a few days with the lad, but he was busy an' happy. His Aunt is a spittin' image o' her sister, bless her soul. She loves him as if he was her own."

Hagrid looked at Hermione. "I didn' talk much with him about his friends. I could tell how hurt he was, and it was a might touchy subject with him. Instead, I told him about the Ministry, an' the Dursleys, then I spent some time with his family an' friends. We talked about magical creatures mostly, an' some o' the trainin' he's been gettin'.

"Aye, I'll read his letter, an' if there is somethin' in it that he wants me to share with yeh, I will. Otherwise, it's private," Hagrid said, then he walked from the kitchen, carefully balancing Hedwig on his shoulder.

Molly huffed and looked angrily at Hagrid's retreating back, but there was nothing she could do about it.

Hermione sighed heavily. "You know, this is the absolute worst summer I've ever experienced."

"Hermione dear, where's Ginny?" asked Molly.

"She's upstairs. She said she wanted to work on her homework."

Molly eyed Hermione for a moment worriedly. "Do you have your wand on you?"

Hermione's eyes widened with fear. The house trembled with the sound of the explosion and a scream could be heard from upstairs. Hermione bolted for the door with Molly hot on her heels.

Ginny had found a wand.

Blackmoor Castle, Southern England (August 15th)...

Harry ran down the stairs. “Hagrid!” he shouted.

Hagrid laughed as Harry skidded to a halt and hugged him briefly.

Harry stepped back a moment later, smiling. “I see you came prepared,” he said, eying the harpoon, nets and rope that Hagrid brought with him.

“Course I did! Not every day I get to catch a kraken to show off to class! Merlin, yer lookin' good, Harry. Got enough muscle on yeh to turn the eye o' every witch at school now.”

Harry blushed and mumbled something inaudible.

“I think you're right, Hagrid,” Jean said from the hallway. “He is a handsome young man.”

“Muuuum,” Harry protested.

Jean laughed and stepped into the entrance hallway. “Welcome to our home, Hagrid. We're pleased you were able to come help us with our little problem. Harry said if you can't help, no one can. High praise from him.”

Hagrid blushed and clapped a monstrous hand down on Harry's shoulder, nearly knocking him to his knees. “Most folk would call in an exterminator, but I found it's better to try to work with the beast. They are really mostly misunderstood.”

“Would you like me to take you to the area Hagrid?” asked Harry.

“Off ta work already, eh? Why not?” he replied, grinning at Harry.

“Do you mind if I tag along?” asked Jean.

“Course! Course! Come along, we'll troop out to the beastie an' see what we can do 'bout it,” Hagrid said merrily.

Harry laughed and led the pair out of the castle and down the rocky path towards the far end of the island. Five minutes later, he stopped and pointed to the many whale bones thrown haphazardly on the shoreline. Hagrid frowned, seeing the size of some of the bones.

“Yeh sure this is a kraken, Harry?”

“I think so. We only got one look at it when it snapped up some meat I sent to this end of the island. The head was enormous.”

Hagrid nodded and turned to Jean. “A kraken is from the class o' Cephalopoda, the order o' Octopoda, but what we have here might not be a true kraken,” Hagrid said softly. He looked around at the bones again. “These bones are too big. This beast has been eating blue whales, or maybe sperm whales. There is a beastie even more rare than a kraken tha' is sometimes mistaken fer a one 'cause it can thicken it's neck until it appears to look like the kraken. The North Sea Sea Dragon is much more intelligent than a kraken too.”

Harry frowned at him. “It's not a kraken?” he asked, sounding disappointed.

Hagrid shrugged and grinned at Harry. “Don' rightly know yet, but I think not. A kraken would've caught the meat yeh gave it with a tentacle, not its mouth.” Seeing Harry's crestfallen expression, the large man smiled. “Don' feel bad, Harry. We haven' covered kraken in class yet. Now, let's go take a look!” he replied, then he started forward.

A loud hissing came from the waterline.

“Hagrid,” Harry said carefully. “Don't move any closer to the water.”

Hagrid turned to him. “Eh? What is it?”

“Would a kraken be related to a snake?”

“No.”

Harry scowled. “Well, then, whatever it is, it's telling you to stay back in parseltongue.”

Hagrid's grin broadened into a huge smile.

“What's parseltongue?” asked Jean.

Harry looked at her. “It's the language of snakes. I can speak to them and they can speak to me. Whatever is at the end of the island is speaking in snake language.”

“Can yeh ask it to come on out so we can look at it?”

Jean blinked and stared at Harry in shock when he hissed something. Something in the rocks hissed loudly and he replied in kind. Then he hissed again.

“Hagrid, put down your harpoon. She's afraid you'll try to hurt her. I've promised no one will hurt her if she comes out for us to look at her,” Harry said softly, then he turned to Jean. “Mum, make no sudden movements, and keep your wand hidden. If you see us do something, do what we do.”

“She?” she exclaimed.

Harry nodded. “Yes. I was right. She's nesting, she has several eggs she's protecting.”

Harry turned back to the shoreline and hissed loudly. There came a loud reply then a head extended from between two large boulders. The head was easily the size of a full grown cow. Hagrid backed up a stepped and sat down heavily.

“She's beautiful!” he exclaimed.

The large golden eyes gazed down at them and Harry took a step forward, then he bowed. The scales of the creature rippled and changed colors constantly, shifting from one iridescent shade of blue to green and back.

“Do you have a name, great one?” he asked in parseltongue. “I'm asking what her name is,” he repeated in English.

The creature hissed at Harry for a long time, then he hissed something back before turning to his friends. “She is K'nor, daughter of Migard the Mighty, of whom the legends speak. She's guarding a nest of four eggs, her first laying in one hundred years.”

“Harry, she's protected by International law. We can't touch her,” Hagrid said.

“I thought that might be the case. Let me talk to her for a moment,” he replied.

Harry turned back to the dragon when he clearly heard a voice in his head. *“You can speak normally, youngling Wizard.”*

“She's telepathic!” exclaimed Jean.

The huge head turned and eyed Jean closely, then it moved in until it was only a few feet away. More of its body appeared from the den it had been occupying. The creature was huge, and it moved awkwardly on land, its legs replaced long ago by clawed tentacles.

“Interesting witch, with two sources of power, like the young wizard. You smell of the youngling, but you are not the youngling's mother. You honor your line and all mothers everywhere by caring for the youngling.”

The Sea Dragon stretched out her long neck until the scales parted slightly. One scale snapped off and flew into Jean's waiting hands.

“A token for the mother who is not. May it serve you well.”

Jean stared at the plate sized scale in wonder. It continued to ripple and change colors.

The head reared back and eyed Hagrid for a moment.

“When the eggs hatch, come see me, lover of all creatures. I will allow you to bring the young wizards here to learn about my kind.”

Hagrid scrambled to his feet and followed Harry's example, bowing to the dragon.

Finally, the head turned back to Harry. He could feel the power of the mind that touched his, easily bypassing his shields. He shuddered, feeling that ancient alien mind touch his. In an instant, he saw a vision of a time when dragons wheeled in the skies and swam the oceans and understood. Where man now stands, dragons once stood and a few still remembered their greatness.

The dragon stared at Harry for long minutes and he hid nothing from her. Then, to the surprise of all, she started to hum in the back of her throat. It was a deep rumbling hum like the beating of hundreds of drums. Harry shook at the sound and his magic surged.

The very air around them seemed to sing with magic, and Harry found himself lifted into the air.

“Destiny's child, wounded by serpent and curse, innocents he will defend, I name thee Dragon Friend.”

Very gently K'nor lifted one clawed tentacle and she cut away his sleeve, then she swung the claw, digging deeply into Harry's flesh. He screamed and his back arched. K'nor moved her head close to the wound and breathed deeply on it. In seconds the wound sealed and Harry fell limply to the ground panting heavily.

Jean sprang forward with Hagrid to help Harry.

“Rest well, Dragon Friend. When the time comes, call and those that remember the old ways will aid thee.”

K'nor withdrew, leaving Jean and Hagrid alone on the shore of the small island. Harry leaned against Jean, barely conscious.

“Hold him, Hagrid, I need to look at his arm,” she said tensely. This was not something she had expected to happen at all today!

Lifting up his tattered sleeve she was shocked to discover no wound, not even a scar. Instead, there was a stylized tattoo of a dragon surrounded by flames.

Harry slowly opened his eyes and he looked around in confusion.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

“I think so,” he said. “But now you see why magic is such a pain. Had someone told me that was going to happen, I would have stayed in the castle playing a video game or doing my homework.”

Hagrid made a rumbling noise in his chest and Jean realized he was chuckling.

Harry started to stand, but Hagrid pressed him back down. “Easy lad, tha’ was quite a display. Yer parents would’ve been so proud. If we was in school right now, I’d be passin’ yeh fer the rest o’ the year. By Merlin! Did yeh see her? One o’ the ancient dragons, I reckon, an’ she honored yeh! I can hardly believe it!”

Jean turned to look at Hagrid. “Do you understand what just happened here?”

Hagrid nodded his head. “She marked him. Yeh see, some beasties, especially the smarter ones like dragons, have the ability to honor a person if they feel they are worthy. The person is marked somehow, like tha’ tattoo. I expect he’d be able to walk through a field o’ dragons now an’ not one would touch him. There may be other advantages, but it will take time fer him to figure ‘em out. I remember one fellow, had the mark o’ the spiders. Could climb walls, he could.”

Harry climbed unsteadily to his feet and looked at his big friend. “I’m sorry we called you all this way for nothing, Hagrid. We can’t ask K’nor to move while she’s clutching. I thought it was just a common kraken.”

“Tha’s alright lad. This was more impressive. Besides, I’ve got a camera on me. Later today I’ll come back an’ ask K’nor if I can take some photos to show the students.”

Jean stepped up and placed a hand on Harry’s arm. “If she can warn us, we can provide her with meat or other necessities when the eggs hatch,” she offered.

Hagrid grinned broadly at her. “Just like yer sister! She would do the same thin’. I remember when Lily helped me heal Aragog when he got sick.”

“Do I want to know who Aragog is?” Jean asked Harry in a whisper. Hagrid was already walking towards the castle.

“Not unless you like spiders the size of a pickup truck,” he whispered back.

Jean shuddered and grimaced. *Just another misunderstood beastie*, she thought sarcastically.

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Office of the Headmaster (August 20th)...

Dumbledore frowned at the knock at his door. “Come!” he said loudly. His wards hadn’t told him that anyone was approaching, let alone who.

The door opened and several people stepped into the room, including Charles Xavier. Dumbledore’s eyebrows rose when he saw Xavier’s hover chair was functioning normally. That wasn’t supposed to be possible!

Xavier’s chair was brand new, one of the first electronic devices adapted to work around magic. When Hank finished adapting it, Harry spent a full day racing around the Castle, testing it, and casting magic. Finally, he and Dobby took turns riding in the chair before passing it to Xavier with their seal of approval.

“It’s been a long time, Albus,” Xavier said with a slight smile. He knew exactly what Dumbledore was thinking and wasn’t surprised by his reaction to his hover chair.

Dumbledore nodded. “A long time indeed, Charles. You are looking well.”

Xavier waved him off. “Thank you. I’d like to introduce you to Jean Evans-Summers, Harry’s adoptive mother and maternal aunt, her husband Scott Summers, and Logan.”

Dumbledore nodded to each of them. “Please make yourselves comfortable. Might I offer anyone a lemon drop?”

Logan moved to accept one of the candies, but Xavier stopped him.

“Logan,” he said. When the man looked at him, he shook his head slightly and Logan moved away. Turning back to Dumbledore, Xavier raised an eyebrow. “Really, Albus. Candy that is laced with truth potion? Don’t you think that’s a bit unfair?”

Dumbledore had the grace to look chagrined at being caught out.

“My apologies. It’s a habit stemming from dealing with less than honest students,” he replied. “I am disappointed that you didn’t bring Harry with you.”

Logan laughed. “Don’t be. The Wiz is mighty pissed at you at the moment. Between your Order, your Ministry and your Press, he nearly went home.”

Dumbledore winced. “Yes, about that. Some of my people got overzealous, I’m afraid. I have spoken rather firmly with them over it. I was not pleased.”

Xavier’s eyes flitted to Logan for a brief second. “Of course. I understand perfectly how difficult it can be to have your people follow the directions you give them, but that isn’t why we’re here today. As I told you in my letter, we gave Harry a choice. After much consideration, he agreed to return to Hogwarts, but only under some very specific conditions.”

Logan grinned, showing a row of shiny teeth.

“Oh?”

“Yes, Headmaster,” Jean said coldly.

the fact that she was a formidable mutant and it didn't help matters.

"To be blunt, Headmaster," Jean said. "We don't trust you. Harry doesn't trust you at all and did not want to return to Britain, let alone this school. One of the ways we were able to convince him to return here was by promising to continue his normal education. Harry is far more intelligent than anyone here suspected and he is currently catching up to where he would be, had he been sent to a Muggle school. To accomplish that, he will need to spend at least one night a week away from the school, plus all day Saturday."

"I don't see a problem with that," Dumbledore replied.

"Tell me, what class is Professor Snape teaching this year?" Jean asked, suddenly changing the subject.

"Potions," Dumbledore replied warily. Unfortunately Umbridge had opted to remain at the school in the defense position.

Jean nodded and made a mark on a pad. "Excellent. Harry will be taking Charms, Transfiguration, Defense Against the Dark Arts, Herbology and Estate Management. I would sign him up for your Muggle Studies class, but your professor is not qualified to be teaching that course. He'll be dropping Potions and Divination."

Dumbledore stared at her in shock. "But he needs Potions! He can't become an Auror without Potions!"

Jean's smile was all teeth. "His career goals have changed. He no longer wishes to become an Auror and he knows that, as a registered Dark Creature, that line of work is forever closed to him. Besides, according to the published by-laws in Hogwarts: A History, any student may seek outside instruction if they feel the instructor is not competent. Harry will be tutored in NEWT level Potions on Saturdays by an accredited Potions Mistress that we've hired.

"Harry has no wish to attend another class given by Mr. Snape. That condition is not subject to negotiation, Headmaster. Mr. Snape is a bigoted menace, and if it were up to me, I'd lobotomize him."

"He needs to learn potions from Professor Snape!" exclaimed Dumbledore. Snape's attitudes towards the boy helped Harry trust Dumbledore. That needed to continue!

"Why, Headmaster? Mr. Snape is cruel and abusive and you turn a blind eye to it. Why do you insist on forcing Harry to work with a man who is too stupid to realize that Harry is not James?"

Jean stood up, a scowl marring her lovely face, when Dumbledore didn't answer her question. "Come on," she told the others. "I can see that he's not interested in hearing what we have to say. We'll go with our other plan and enroll Harry in Beauxbatons."

Dumbledore stood in anger. This could not be! "Wait!"

Jean turned to eye him. "Yes? Was there something you wanted to say?"

Dumbledore stared at the woman for a moment, his natural Legilimency trying to reach out to her.

Jean smiled thinly. She could feel him slithering around, but he couldn't find her mind to even begin to probe it. Finally, he slumped back into his chair in defeat. "Fine," he muttered in defeat. "Harry can drop Potions."

Jean sat down and nodded to the others to resume their seats.

"Things have changed. Harry doesn't trust you. You've hurt him almost as much as Voldemort has. I'm not even going to go into what you did to my own life. We know exactly what you think Harry's role in your little war is, and we reject it utterly. Harry will not be your weapon against Voldemort. It's time that the Wizarding world grows up and learns to stand on its own two feet, rather than relying on an untrained sixteen year old, who only wants a family and a normal life. Something which you've denied him for far too long.

"Do not put Harry in a class with Snape. If you do, Harry will most likely kill him. Don't switch Snape over to teaching Defense, or Harry will drop that class as well. He has my permission to walk out of any class if he discovers Snape is teaching it."

"Spell it out for him Jean," growled Logan.

Jean nodded. "If we accept your version of the prophecy and the idea that Harry is the only one capable of killing Voldemort, then Harry holds all the cards. We've told him we will support any decision he makes, up to and including withdrawing him from this school and returning to America. If you continue to push Harry and Snape together, he will withdraw from your school, and we will allow it.

"You need him, he doesn't need you. That's what it boils down to, and that is what he knows. He's in the driver's seat in this war and if you want to win, you had better realize that he's running the show the way he wants to. He's not going to listen to you anymore."

As she spoke Dumbledore paled and lost the twinkle in his eye. Harry's conditions for returning were far worse than he ever imagined.

"Too wordy, Jean," Logan growled. He extended a fist towards Dumbledore, the claws extending slowly.

Dumbledore's widened, then blinked as he stared at the metallic claws. "Leave Harry alone, or I'll personally carve you and your turkey into little pieces."

Fawkes squawked and flapped his wings indignantly.

The threat hung there for a moment before Dumbledore nodded in numb shock. He had no choice, after all, but to accept the conditions these people had laid out.

"Excellent," Xavier said. "September first is a Friday. Harry will arrive at Hogwarts on the second. He is currently busy with his classes and he

has exams on the first. It should please you to know he's excelling in his studies."

Dumbledore nodded again and asked himself if this could possibly get any worse. Now he wasn't even coming to school on the Express! He shook his head, trying to clear the screaming thoughts and the sensation of panic. A seed of an idea occurred to him.

"I think we all got off on the wrong foot. Perhaps we can start over and work together?" he offered in a conciliatory tone.

"What do you have in mind?" asked Jean in a neutral tone.

Dumbledore smiled benignly. "Harry needs to take six classes, but you have only listed five. You complain that our Muggle studies instructor isn't up to par, so why not take the position for yourself? Every year our Muggle studies Professor asks that I replace him, so why not replace him with you?"

Jean blinked in surprise. "Are you offering me a job?"

"Yes, but I'm offering you more than just a job. You'll be close to Harry, so you can keep an eye on him and make sure he's safe. I understand Harry's been tutoring you in magic? By being in the castle, we'll be able to give you far more comprehensive tutoring than Harry can. And you'd be able to fix the problems in what we teach in Muggle Studies," Dumbledore offered.

"It would solve your principal concern, Jean," Xavier commented.

"Besides, do you really want to be stuck in that dreary old castle while we make the needed modifications?" added Scott.

"Castle?" queried Dumbledore.

"Yes. Harry was kind enough to lease one of his properties to my organization, but it's in need of some repair and modifications," Xavier answered. "Part of it will always be his home."

Jean leaned back in her chair and thought for a moment. "All right, I'll do it."

"Excellent. Can you arrive before September first? The sooner the better, since we need to move you into quarters. We prefer to have all our staff in place at the start of term, so they may be introduced to the students. Also, I will owl you the course outline and lesson plan that has been used since 1902."

Jean nodded. It was a reasonable request. "How about a week from today?" she asked.

Dumbledore nodded agreeably. "That would be excellent. It would give you enough time to learn your way around the castle and give us the chance to see where we can help you the most."

Dumbledore looked down at his desk, seemingly hesitant, then he looked up at Jean. "Can you tell me how Harry is? I can understand his anger towards me. I've done a lot that I'm not proud of and I'm not sure I would do again, if given the chance. But I am most concerned about him."

Jean sighed. "Harry is well, for the most part. He did not want to return to Britain, and quite frankly, he is in favor of letting you wizards deal with Voldemort. He is very angry at times, and I think he has a right to be. When we brought him to the States, he was plagued with a crushing guilt and nightmares that let him sleep only a few hours each night.

"Professor Xavier and I have been helping him deal with it, but coming here and being confronted like he was caused him to slide back into old habits. The death of the Dursleys seems to have buried some of his contempt for Muggles, but at this point, he considers himself a mutant, not a wizard. He has little love for Muggles and even less for wizards. In time, that will change, but right now it is how he feels."

"He has been getting better," added Xavier. "And his love of flying has provided a badly needed emotional release. I do hope you will allow him to continue flying."

"Harry has always loved to fly. I wouldn't dream of taking that away from him," Dumbledore replied. He wondered why Logan and Scott shared an amused grin. The lad might not be able to play Quidditch anymore, thanks to Umbridge, but he'd never stop him from flying on his broom.

Muggle Studies Office, Hogwarts (August 27th)...

Jean was busy unpacking boxes of material that she and Harry had put together. It included recent Muggle history texts, magazines and several kits designed to demonstrate principles of electronics and physics. Harry had fixed the kits so that the electronics would work properly.

She stopped and turned. Sitting in her doorway was a striped tabby cat. Jean's eyes narrowed. "You are *not* a normal cat."

The cat blurred and grew into the form of a woman. "You are most perceptive, my dear. I'm Minerva McGonagall, Deputy Headmistress and Transfiguration Professor. I thought I would drop by to welcome you and also to talk with you for a bit."

"Please come in, Professor," Jean said.

"Please, when there are no students around, call me Minerva. Everyone else does," she said with her habitual tight smile. She stepped into the room and gasped when she got a closer look at Jean.

"Only if you will call me Jean," replied Jean.

"Dear Merlin, you are the spitting image of your sister," she breathed, then she blushed. "I apologize for that. Lily was in my House, as your nephew is now. She was one of my favorite students. When she died, I tried to find out what would happen to Harry. I protested to Albus about his placement at the Dursleys, but he overrode my protests. I would have raised Harry myself if I could, instead of his going to those Muggles."

Jean motioned her over to a chair, then she pulled out a thermos with some hot tea. She offered Minerva a cup.

“Someday, I would like to hear more about my sister. She was taken from me so long ago and she had a life that I'm just coming to learn about,” Jean said, handing her guest a cup. “I'm sorry it's not conjured. I made it this morning. I haven't mastered conjuring very well yet and I certainly can't make tea as well as Harry can.”

“Conjuring falls under my area of expertise. I'd be pleased to help you master it. So, I take it Harry has been teaching you?”

Jean nodded. “He's a very patient teacher. He's walked me through all of the first and second year and most of third year spells in Charms, Transfiguration and Defense. It wasn't easy, at first. It wasn't until nearly the end of July that we were able to obtain a fitted wand for me.”

“So you used Harry's wand?”

“Oh, no. Harry had a bunch of spare wands that he took from his Godfather's house,” Jean replied with a bit of a smile.

Minerva looked shocked for a moment, then her eyes narrowed. “I don't suppose he helped himself to some books, as well?”

Jean laughed lightly. “Yes, he does have a rather eclectic collection of books now. I take it he is in trouble?”

Minerva sighed and shook her head. “No, but it is a relief to know that those books weren't falling into the wrong hands. The Order thought that the enemy was somehow taking the books.”

She looked at Jean for a moment, then came to a decision.

“Jean, let me tell you a bit of a story because I want you to understand at least part of what happened and what went wrong,” Minerva said seriously.

Jean's eyes widened and she nodded.

Minerva leaned back in her chair and sipped her tea for a moment. “In the years following World War I, a German wizard by the name of Gustav Grindelwald rose to power. Grindelwald was a ruthless man who managed to accumulate a large following. He would either kill his enemies or drain their magic, leaving them powerless. People feared Grindelwald; his name alone was enough to send people fleeing in panic.

“At nearly the same time, a dynamic speaker rose through the ranks of the National Socialist Party in Germany. The man was equally ruthless, and because he was so charismatic, he rose to lead that nation into a terrible war.

“Grindelwald held the European Wizarding community in his grip and we all lived in fear that his minions would come knocking in the middle of the night, ready to drag us off to only Merlin knows where. Grindelwald knew that the true path to power in this world lay in the Muggle world, so he became the power behind the leader of the National Socialist Party, Adolph Hitler.

“In 1940, a middle aged teacher of Transfiguration here at Hogwarts lost his wife and infant daughter in an attack by the followers of Grindelwald. It wasn't even a planned attack; she just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. The teacher was a very powerful wizard who, up until that point, had no wish to do more than teach children how to control their magic. That teacher, Albus Dumbledore, began the difficult task of uniting the wizarding world around him. Five years later, on a mountaintop in Bavaria, he beat Grindelwald in a personal duel, ending the war that had killed millions.

“Dumbledore became a hero. People from all over the world asked for his advice. Ministers, Ministries and organizations wanted his help with their endeavors. During the years following the war, he helped our world many times, and saved us from ourselves on at least two other occasions.”

Minerva paused and took a sip of her tea.

“I'm not making excuses for him by any means. But the simple fact is, Dumbledore isn't the only one that failed Harry, or you. We, that is, the wizarding world, had become so accustomed to listening to Albus Dumbledore that none of us even considered questioning his judgment.

“Harry arrived here every September, exhibiting all the signs of coming from an abusive home, and to my eternal shame I ignored it because I knew that if it were a real problem, Professor Dumbledore would deal with it. Had I known what his life had been like, I would have fought with Dumbledore to prevent leaving him with those Muggles.”

Jean had sat passively listening to her tale. Now, she leaned forward and met the Professor's gaze with eyes so hauntingly familiar, Minerva felt her heart lurch painfully.

“Minerva, while Dumbledore has hurt me and my son...” She paused when Minerva frowned slightly. “Yes, you heard right,” she continued. “My husband and I have adopted Harry and he is now our son. But the point of this is that Dumbledore has done what he thought was right, regardless of the damage. And I don't think any of you really understand just how far Harry fell at the end of the last school year.

“If Harry could have managed it, he would have committed suicide. If he could have gotten away with it, he would have killed his uncle and cousin, but he didn't. Even after he got his hands on the spare wands, all he did was frighten them.

“Harry is healing, but it's a slow, painful process. He can't remember anyone ever telling him that he was loved. Can you imagine what that does to a child? I remember when he accidentally broke a window and my husband Scott got angry with him. Harry cringed away and expected to be beaten! We were shocked and he had a full blown panic attack, including flashbacks that took us hours to help him through.

“Imagine how you must live, if your first reaction to someone touching you is to flinch away. Imagine that every raised voice, whether in anger or joy, made you cower and tremble. That's how Harry came to us. Wounded, emotionally injured, and possessing a furious rage aimed at those who should have protected and loved him.

"I am very proud of Harry and how far he's come in such a short time. But I know he's not fully healed. With few exceptions, he doesn't trust any adult and he's resigned himself to the fact that he has lost his friends."

Minerva moved to protest, but Jean waved her to silence.

"Between what my sister and her husband did to him, his guilt because of Sirius and Cedric, the terrible nightmares and Voldemort, I'm surprised he survived and remained sane this long."

Jean sighed heavily and shook her head. "He's a very strong person, Minerva, but he reached his limit at the start of the summer and I intend to see that no one puts anything else on his shoulders."

"That's how it should be. If you've adopted him, then he needs to learn he can count on you," Minerva replied. "But he hasn't lost his friends. They are very upset, thinking they've lost him."

Jean frowned and picked up her cup of tea.

"Harry doesn't know who wants to truly be on his side and who is just using him. I think his approach is a bit simplistic, but it *is* logical. He's assumed that everyone is just using him. He intends to slowly weed out those he can be real friends with from those that look at him as just a tool for this war. While I'll agree that what some of his friends did was minor, it came at a point in his life when he was a hairsbreadth away from ending it all. And let's not talk about Ron Weasley. That newspaper article hurt him deeply.

"Think about it. I felt his anguish nearly four thousand miles away. It was what first alerted us to his existence," Jean said, then she paused and shook her head doubtfully.

"He went home having enormous doubts about the wisdom of Albus Dumbledore. He blames Dumbledore and Snape for Black's death. Not Bellatrix or Voldemort, and I'm not sure he's wrong. Then he discovered that his friends are being trained, by Dumbledore's orders, and lying to him about it, again by Dumbledore's orders. He took it for what it was; nothing short of a betrayal of the bond of friendship that existed."

Jean's voice lowered. "Harry sees betrayal in only one light, Minerva. His yardstick is what Peter did to my sister and her husband. Harry compares what his friends did to that and asks how soon before they do the same?"

Jean paused for a moment and sipped her tea.

"It doesn't help that the wizarding world now knows he's a Mutant. Their reaction hurt him so much that he no longer believes the wizarding world is worth saving," Jean said quietly.

"Surely it isn't as bad as that?" Minerva replied with a gasp.

"Think about it. In his second year, most of the school believed he was the heir of Slytherin. In his fifth year, the wizarding world turned on him, believing the smear campaign run by the Ministry. After the article appeared, we had to have Gringotts screen his mail. This past summer, two out of every three letters he received were death threats or complaints because it was revealed that he isn't just a wizard. The Ministry didn't come down on the *Prophet* for running those opinion pieces, saying that mutants were dark creatures, like werewolves. Professor Dumbledore didn't try to straighten them out.

"The only voice of reason came from a fifteen year old girl, who most consider to be 'strange'. And she wrote an opposing piece in a tabloid that no one takes seriously.

"I'm gratified for the welcome, Minerva, and hope we'll be able to become friends, but I have to warn you. Do not push Harry this year. You will find him much changed and not all for the better. I'm hoping he'll come around, but..."

Jean finished with a shrug. She and Xavier had many talks with Harry, but on some issues, his opinion remained unchanged. His idea that the wizarding society wasn't worth saving was one of them.

Minerva nodded unhappily and cursed her lack of inaction. She hoped that when she faced James and Lily Potter again, she would not be defending herself for her actions.

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Infirmary (August 28th)...

"Can I help you?"

Jean whirled around, then relaxed, seeing a middle aged woman dressed in healer green. "You must be Madam Pomfrey," she replied, smiling and extending her hand.

When Poppy stared at Jean for a moment, then shook her head, Jean hid a smile. She was used to the reaction by now. "Yes, I am Lily Potter's twin sister," she said dryly. "I'm Jean Summers, the new Muggle Studies Professor."

Poppy smiled weakly. "Merciful Merlin, where is my head these days? Please, come in. Do you need any medical help?"

Jean shook her head. "No. Actually, I am trained as a Muggle physician. The Headmaster hired me on so I could keep an eye on my son, Harry."

Poppy stared at her again and Jean laughed. "I'm sorry, I just love seeing the reaction that causes. My husband and I adopted Harry this past summer."

Poppy relaxed and motioned for her to join her in her office.

I'm still putting together the infirmary for the coming school year, but come in and have a seat. I'll pour us some tea."

Jean accepted the cup and waited until Poppy had sat down. "I'm curious, Madam Pomfrey. How is it you didn't notice the signs of abuse in Harry?"

Poppy scowled. "I did. But you need to understand, child abuse is very rare in the wizarding world. It almost never happens, and because of that, we have no laws or procedures in place to do something about it. Blood lines are too important to risk a child's life or well-being by beating him. We mostly see it in children of Muggles, or half-blood families, where they are living among the Muggles.

"In the case of a half-blood or Muggle-born, if they come to me and complain, all I can do is tell the Headmaster and advise the child to talk to the Muggle authorities. By law, I'm forbidden from alerting the Muggle authorities because I might inadvertently violate our secrecy law."

Poppy sighed. "In the case of Harry, he never complained. Not once, even when I knew for certain he was in pain, he never complained. That child has the highest tolerance for pain that I've ever seen and it's obscene! No one should be able to take the kind of pain he has. I can count on one hand the times I've seen him shed tears and have most of my fingers left over.

"When I could, I've stuffed him to the gills with nutrient potions and vaccines. I've held his hand in the middle of the night while he whimpered through nightmares. It's killed me to see what Harry's gone through. And every year I've complained to the Headmaster about it, for all the good it did," she finished, her tone bitter.

Jean nodded. Poppy's story just continued to confirm what she believed. "Well, Madam Pomfrey, for what it's worth, Harry thinks very highly of you."

Poppy smiled. "I keep threatening to put a sign on one of the beds proclaiming it his. He's spent more time in here than most other students."

"Madam Pomfrey, I have more homesickness potion for you," said a voice from just behind Jean.

Jean turned and her eyes narrowed, seeing Severus Snape for the very first time. She had seen Harry's memories of the man, but his descriptions fit him to a tee. Greasy-haired vampire, indeed!

Snape paused mid stride to stare back at Jean.

"Oh, Severus, this is Jean Summers. She's the new Muggle Studies Professor."

"I knew your sister. Unfortunately for her, she lacked the wit to fall in love with the right man and paid the price for it," he said with a nod of his head.

Poppy gasped and Jean bristled. What she was pulling from his mind appalled her. It was a sewer, overlaid with a cesspool!

"Really?" Jean said in an icy tone. "I doubt that was the case. From what I can tell from others, and from Harry, Lily was happily married to James."

"Yes, Potter," he spat. "I don't know what lies that moron has told you..."

Snape's comments cut off in a strangled gurgle. He found himself pinned to the wall and unable to breathe, while Poppy watched helplessly.

Jean had pulled her wand for show, but she wasn't using it. "Mind your manners, Professor," she said softly. "I will not stand for any further rudeness shown to my son."

She waved her wand slightly and Snape slid down to the floor. He rubbed his neck and stared balefully up at her for a moment, before standing slowly and backing out of the room, his eyes never leaving hers.

Poppy looked at Jean, aghast. "I'm sorry, Jean. I know Severus is somewhat abrupt at times..."

Jean whirled on the older woman. "Abrupt? That man shouldn't be allowed within a thousand miles of a child," she exclaimed, then she shuddered. "I know exactly what he has done to Harry, Poppy. Believe me, if you knew, you'd be calling for his head, as well. Now if you'll excuse me, I have some things to attend to. I'll see you at dinner?"

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Headmaster's Office (August 29th)...

Dumbledore scowled at the knock at his door.

"One moment, Alastor," he told Moody. "Come!"

The door opened and to his surprise, Jean Summers walked in.

"Professor, I don't mean to be rude, but I'm in the middle of an important meeting here," Dumbledore said tersely.

"Yes, Headmaster, I know. I came as quickly as I could when I sensed Mr. Moody here. What I need to tell you involves him, as well as you."

Dumbledore blinked, then he nodded. "Very well, then. Please, be seated."

Jean moved to sit next to Moody. "I've only been in the castle a few days and I have met most of the staff at this point. At first, I wasn't going to tell you this, and I want to warn you, I have not told this to Harry. If I did, he'd run back to America faster than you can say Jack Robinson.

She sighed and rubbed her forehead tiredly. "After talking to Professor Xavier, we've decided to come forward with this information. Harry may not want any part of your war, but the Professor and I agree that he's not seeing the bigger picture yet. He will eventually, but until then, we need

to at least superficially work together. Tell me Headmaster, are you aware of my abilities?"

Dumbledore frowned. "I know you have shields I cannot penetrate. I know you are a telepath, like Professor Xavier, but I really do not know all that you can do," he replied slowly. "I assume you could control people like Xavier did with me at your parent's house long ago."

Jean nodded. "Yes. Harry has similar shields, although he lacks most of my other abilities. At best, I would say that Harry borders more on being empathic. I am a full-range telepath, Professor. Your mind's shields are useless against me. I can reach past them and pluck out your life story and you'd never know I did it. For example, I know that in your youth, Aberforth called you Albie and you hated the nickname, and you were sweet on a village girl named Tilly."

Dumbledore blinked in surprise and his expression darkened. "I don't know if I like the idea of you being able to bypass my shields," he murmured.

"Perhaps now you understand how Harry felt when he discovered that you and Snape were doing that to him on a regular basis." She waved her hand dismissively. "I do not run around lifting people's secrets from their minds, Headmaster, but to my talent, everyone broadcasts thoughts that are at the forefront of their mind. I can't help but pick up these thoughts. What I did right now was a little deeper than that, just to prove the ability exists."

Moody turned to Jean. "I take it there is a point to all this, lass?"

Jean nodded. "There is, Mister Moody. You and your Order have been betrayed."

The two men stared at her for a moment, then Dumbledore surged to his feet. "What?" he exclaimed.

"Snape?" asked Moody.

Jean glanced at him and nodded.

"But that's impossible!" Dumbledore said. "I trust Severus."

"And my sister trusted Peter," Jean retorted. "Look where it got her."

Dumbledore winced.

Moody turned to Dumbledore. "This is serious, Albus. Snape knows too much."

Dumbledore leaned back in his chair, thinking furiously, then he turned back to Jean. "You already suspected something, didn't you?"

Jean nodded. "I saw Harry's memories of those so-called Occlumency lessons. Snape used them to torture him. He pulled up every bad memory, every embarrassing moment, forcing Harry to relive them. He damaged what little shielding Harry managed to build until he was unable to block Voldemort from entering his mind. His actions were, in my opinion, highly suspect. He caused Harry great physical and mental pain and I wanted to know why. To be frank, Headmaster, my original thought was that he was acting under your orders."

Dumbledore stared at her, aghast that she'd even consider that he'd condone such an act. While he would allow Snape some liberties, he would never condone the man hurting a student, even Harry.

"Snape is working both sides against each other and is passing Voldemort more information than he's giving you. Voldemort knows Harry is the only one that can kill him now. Snape confirmed what the papers said at the beginning of the summer. I wasn't able to pick up his motivation for teaching Harry the way he did, but I'm almost sure it was on Voldemort's orders," Jean added.

"Mind rape," Moody commented softly.

Dumbledore removed his glasses and wiped at his face tiredly.

"Now things make so much more sense," he muttered, then he turned to Moody. "Alastor, what do we do?"

Moody grinned. "Well, since you probably won't let me kill the bastard, I'd say we start feeding him false information. We'll need a special meeting of the executive council to inform them, but the general membership can't be told. And we have a lot of things that have to change right away."

Moody stood. "I need to get on this right away, Albus," he said, then he turned to Jean. "Thank you lass."

Moody walked over to the Floo and quickly left the room. Jean turned her attention back to Dumbledore.

"There is a term first coined by the International Mind Arts Council which describes Severus' actions, Professor. It's called 'mind rape', and it is devastating for the victim. If this were any other student, I would be seeking help from a Mind Healer, but seeing how it is Harry, I can assume you and Charles are helping him?"

Jean nodded.

"You must be careful, Jean," Dumbledore said softly, his eyes full of pain. "Harry's emotional control will be quite fragile for a some time to come. Victims of this crime are not healed overnight. Normally, it takes months, years even, to fully come to grips with it. We must take care that his emotions do not result in wild magic. If you think extra help is needed, I know a Mind Healer that has experience with this sort of problem. I promise she will be quite discreet."

"I'll let you know if that becomes necessary, but for now, I think he's doing all right. He's got most of his magic under control. It wasn't easy, when he first came to us. He had problems performing his spells with the power boost," Jean replied.

Oh?" Dumbledore replied, looking at her in confusion.

"Charles seems to think that Snape's lessons changed him in some way. He believes that a combination of Voldemort's possession of him, Snape's lessons and the depression he experienced resulted in the emergence of Harry's mutant abilities. He also thinks that with his mutant awakening, his magic was boosted significantly."

Dumbledore shook his head ruefully. "I want to help him, but I doubt he would accept it from me. I do not know how to make amends," he confessed. "I know that you and Harry have rejected the prophecy, but the undeniable fact is that Voldemort has not. That means that Voldemort will keep coming at him until either Harry kills him, or he is killed by Voldemort."

"Harry won't accept any help from me, so instead, if you will allow it, I will rely on you. Tell me what you need to in order to train Harry to fight and I'll help as much as I can. Unlike so many others, I harbor no fear of mutants. In fact, we have another mutant witch starting school this term. A Cynthia Creevy, although I do not know what her abilities are. She has been at the heart of several incidents and we know no magic was involved. I can only assume she's a mutant."

Jean watched him, measuring his sincerity and found he was telling her the truth. "Professor Xavier and I agree that Voldemort will keep coming at him. Harry still hopes to keep a low profile, finish school and vanish from the wizarding world forever, which I think is a bit naive. Harry is still coming to grips with the changes in his life. And until he does, he'll never understand that Voldemort's interest in him is personal. He'll get there eventually, but in the meantime, we have no choice but to wait for him."

Jean stood and glanced around the office before turning back to Dumbledore. "Don't expect Harry to be very cooperative. At least not for a while yet. And please, do not tell him about Snape. Harry would kill him. I'll tell him myself."

Dumbledore nodded and watched Jean leave his office. Fawkes crooned soothingly at him and he reached up to stroke his soft feathers.

"It was even worse than I feared, my old friend. And now we've got to see what kind of magical changes Harry has undergone."

Fawkes trilled a comforting warble and Dumbledore leaned back, relaxing to the sound of phoenix song.

Authors Notes:

There have been a number of reviews asking for appearance of so and so from the X-Men universe. People need to understand that this is a Harry Potter story. That is why we brought Harry back to England and to Hogwarts. That is why there are no kids from the X-Men universe in this story. They would detract from it, not add to it.

It's not easy writing a crossover. You need to blend just the right mixtures of two universes and never forget that in most cases, your crossover is primarily one universe with a mix of elements from another. In the case of *Mutant Storm*, this is a Harry Potter story with Harry Potter characters. We've thrown in a select grouping of X-Men and their abilities/technology into the mix, but it's still mostly a Harry Potter story. That is why you won't see Kurt, or Kitty, or Bobby or any of the other X-Men other than perhaps being mentioned in passing. It also explains why we moved from America back to England as quickly as we did.

If that bothers you, well you know where the door is. (grin)

Dogbertcarrol: The wizarding world did know about mutants, they just never encountered a wizard/mutant before. As to the registration, that's easily explained. All non-standard humans (ie werewolves, veela, mutants, vampires etc) are considered dark creatures.

In this chapter Ron hits rock bottom and begins his long climb out of the hole he's dug for himself. For the Ron haters out there, we're sorry, but we're not killing him off. Instead we are marginalizing him and pushing him off to the side. He'll be in the story and eventually Harry and him will make up, but they will never regain the level of friendship they once had.

Alorkin: 42g wasn't for two holsters, it was for FOUR holsters. Harry bought two for himself and two for Jean. Holsters are something that fan fiction often overlook, or cheapen. If you have a holster strapped to your forearm, it needs to be able to automatically resize the wand so that it doesn't affect your arm motion. 10.5g per holster that is charmed to be unsummonable and resizes isn't all that unreasonable in my opinion.

A few people commented about how Logan could get stunned. Well we know he can heal nearly anything. But in this case, he was hit with multiple stunners (which is something we made obvious in this chapter).

Gringotts made the distinction that the money was seized illegally. Sorry if we didn't make that clear.

Harry's feelings for Remus are difficult to describe. In this story Remus is part of the cult of Dumbledore. Hagrid is also part of that mindset, but Hagrid has come to learn how much Dumbledore's actions hurt Harry. As a result Hagrid has opened his eyes and has reevaluated things. Harry's seen him do that first hand. He hasn't been in contact with Remus other than during the attack on his mother. Obviously Harry's attitude to Remus and any other Order members is going to be tinged by that encounter.

RNCybergate: Holding a dual citizenship is a headache. You actually have to be careful that you don't mess up and break laws inadvertently. Harry has a spare wand that is illegal for him to own in Britain. He knows it and is not flaunting the fact that he owns a second wand. He made a bad comment to Ollivander, that is true, but the simple fact is, he trusted the older man to enough that he relies on his discretion.

Taegous: I'm sorry you see it as an insult to Lily. But honestly, what does Harry know of Lily? She's a name and voice in a dementor induced nightmare and that's it. Jean and Scott adopted him, giving him the one thing he wanted all his life. Parents that loved him. Calling her Mum and Scott Dad are major points for Harry.

And finally to all those people that leave reviews that simply say "Update soon!" Knock it off. We know where you live and have sent five dollars in your names to the International Terrorist Retirement fund, then we sent that information to the department of homeland defense. Don't bother trying to run, they are coming for you.

Mutant Storm

Chapter 05 - Adjusting to the New Reality

Standard Disclaimer:

Alyx walked over to Bob and stared him down. “So you're finally going to do it?”

Bob looked at her nervously. “How did you find out about it?”

“You can't hide from me!” She snapped. “I know you too well.”

Bob looked down sheepishly. “I didn't want you to know,” he mumbled.

“How could I not know? You're sitting there with the file up on your monitor!” She exclaimed.

Bob blinked and suddenly looked very relieved. “Oh! That. Um... yeah you caught me, I admit it. In fact, I'll even admit that we don't own Harry Potter.”

Bob hit the save key, then shut down his computer and walked away whistling.

Alyx nodded sagely then she paused. “That was too easy,” she grumbled to herself. “What else could have done this time. The Llama fence is operational, so he can't get any more llamas into the house.”

She stared suspiciously at her husband's retreating back. She was about to follow him when the doorbell rang. Seeing Bob sprinting away at top speed she went to the door and opened it.

“Hll!” squealed the naked girl. “I'm Pamela from the Naked Donut Delivery Service!”

Pamela thrust a box of chocolate donuts into Alyx's hands.

“I'm going to kill him,” she muttered, then she slammed the door on the overly endowed delivery girl.

Alyx turned to the audience. “Read the chapter and please ignore Bob screaming. He must die, really, it's for the Greater Good.”

Mutant Storm

Chapter 05

Adjusting to the New Reality

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Great Hall (September 2nd)...

A subdued and quiet Ron, Ginny and Hermione made their way down to the Great Hall for breakfast. They had hoped to speak to Harry yesterday after the feast, but they'd been unable to find him. Ron reported that he hadn't been in the dorm room and his bed had not been slept in. Nor was his trunk present.

Hermione and Ginny had finally allowed Ron back into their group, but he knew he was on probation. One small step out of line and he'd be bat bogeyed for sure. The truth was that his comments in the Prophet were not well received by many of the Gryffindors, who rightly viewed it as an attempt to stab Harry in the back.

Dumbledore had introduced Jean Summers last night at the start of term feast, and welcomed Madam Umbridge back as their Defense Professor. The rumor was that the toad-like woman's posting at Hogwarts was Minister Scrimgeour's way of punishing her for her support of Fudge and his administration.

The students were less than enthused to find her back, but then so was she. And unlike last year, this year she lacked the support of the Ministry.

Harry's absence started the rumor mill running wild. Some thought Harry had run away to live among the Muggles, while others were sure he had been captured by Voldemort. Still others were certain that Harry was off somewhere preparing his mutant minions to assault the wizarding world.

“She's a dead ringer for Lily Potter,” Hermione murmured, staring at Jean at the staff table. “Harry has to be around somewhere. She's his aunt!”

“Dumbledore didn't introduce her as such, but that has to be her. She's even got Harry's eyes,” Ginny agreed with a touch of jealousy. Jean was a very beautiful woman. Ginny felt her eyes were one of her least attractive features. Other than that, she was rather pleased with how well she was growing. She had a good figure, having inherited her mother's attributes before she succumbed to the ravages of bearing seven children.

“That makes her a mutant, too, doesn't it?” Ron asked, cautiously. Hermione's talk with him had helped him see the light, but he was still uncomfortable with the concept.

Hermione frowned, looking at him. “So what if it does? She's still a witch, Ronald.”

Ron dropped his eyes. “I'm just saying, that's all.”

Hermione rolled her eyes, but looked back at the head table quickly when she heard a sound she'd never heard at Hogwarts before. Someone had a mobile phone and it was ringing! The electronic tones were unmistakable.

Jean turned away from speaking with Hagrid and reached into a pocket. Pulling out her phone, she flipped it open and put it to her ear.

"She's got a working phone!" Hermione gasped.

Around the hall, half-bloods and Muggle born stared at Jean in shock, while the pure bloods looked on in confusion.

Jean spoke softly into the phone for another minute, then she snapped it closed and put it back in her pocket. She looked at the kids in the hall and grinned knowingly.

"I've seen that expression before," Ginny muttered. "Harry grinned the same way when he charmed Fred and George bald for the day. Something is about to happen."

Hermione turned to say something when those in the hall were nearly deafened by a thunderous crack, followed by a low rumbling that shook the castle to its very foundations.

"What in the name of Merlin?" exclaimed Ron. He stood up and drew his wand.

Hermione saw that Jean was hurrying from the hall. "Come on," she said tensely. Standing, she quickly followed the new Professor, Ginny and Ron on her heels.

Jean stopped just outside the entrance hall and stared skyward. She hadn't noticed the crowd of students and teachers forming behind her.

"Look!" someone shouted.

"What is it?" cried a Slytherin student.

The sunlight glinted off a canopy as a two seat jump jet rocketed past the castle again, then went ballistic.

Jean laughed and shook her head when she saw the jet climbing in a tight corkscrew, bleeding off speed as it rocketed skyward.

Harry topped out the jet around twenty thousand feet, then he pushed the nose of the small supersonic jet over and accelerated through the sound barrier again.

The crowd of students flinched when the thunderous sound hit them. It was much softer than the first one, coming from the much higher altitude.

Harry rocketed nearly straight down, pulling out with only a hundred feet to spare. The rumble of the passing pressure wave pressed on everyone, knocking some off their feet. He barrel rolled away from the castle, heading in the direction of the lake.

Hagrid stepped up to stand next to Jean. "He's showin' off again."

"Yeah, but flying is one of the things he really loves to do," she replied. "He feels free when he's up there."

The small jet flew over the lake, bleeding off speed before it looped back around and headed toward the castle. The sound of the engines altered as the jet slowed and Harry brought the craft from cruise to hover mode.

Jean listened to the students and laughed.

"What is it? Is it dangerous?" shouted one of the students.

"Get everyone inside! It's coming back!" shouted another.

"It's a jet! But that isn't possible. They can't work here," exclaimed Hermione, despite the obvious evidence before her.

Harry brought the small jet to a full hover twenty yards from the entrance to the castle, then he gently lowered it to the ground. He paused just before touching down and small hatches opened in the bottom of the craft as he extended the landing gear. He touched down and killed the engines, which continued to whine as they powered down.

The twin seat jet had been slightly modified by Harry. He had run across a book on World War Two aircraft and fell in love with the idea of nose art. The nose of his jet was painted with vibrant red and yellow flames, contrasting with the silvery sheen of the rest of the plane. Near the flames was the name 'Dragon Flight', with a fire breathing dragon wrapped around the words, wings extended.

As Jean and Hagrid walked forward, the canopy opened and Harry stood up. He was wearing his flight helmet and a black single piece flight suit. With the helmet on, no one knew who he was. He climbed down from the cockpit and pulled off his helmet, then grinned rakishly at Jean.

"Hello, mum. Miss me?" he asked.

Jean stepped forward and hugged him. "You're a cheeky one today, aren't you? Did you have a good flight?"

He nodded and held her tightly for a moment. Giving hugs was still new to him, but Jean was different. They both knew that she wasn't his real mother, but it didn't matter to either of them. "I just thought I'd give them an entrance to remember," he replied, then he pulled from her embrace.

"It's Harry!" someone shouted. A number of the girls in the crowd gasped. Harry had grown a few inches and filled out a lot. Logan had made sure that, after a summer of working out, Harry was a fit example of a human male and the effort wasn't lost on the girls of Hogwarts.

Several of the students surged forward, including Ron, Hermione and Ginny. The three stopped a few feet from him, looking hopeful. Harry

glanced at them, then sniffed and turned away. He wasn't in a mood to deal with them now, and probably never would be.

Ron's expression darkened, while Hermione and Ginny looked crestfallen.

He turned to the jet and opened a side panel. He placed the helmet into the compartment and pressed a hidden button to close the canopy. Then he pulled his wand and gave it a negligent wave. The jet shrank down until it was only a few inches long. He reached down, picked it up and slid the jet into his pocket, then he turned to Hagrid.

"Hello, Hagrid. Everything all right?"

"Jus' fine, Harry. Mighty interestin' way o' comin' to school. Sirius would be proud."

Harry blinked and smiled up at his friend. "Yes, he would, wouldn't he? This is almost as good as his flying motorbike."

"Potter! What the devil was that contraption? What do you think you're doing, making that kind of noise?" snarled Snape. He had pushed his way through the crowd of students.

Harry glanced at Jean, who was watching the pair with a frown. He knew she didn't want him to start anything with the man, but he wasn't going to take his shit anymore.

"That, Professor, was a two seater supersonic jet aircraft powered by four GE F414-400 engines capable of producing twenty two thousand pounds of thrust per engine. It's capable of flying at Mach 2.1, has a maximum cruising range of seventeen hundred nautical miles and a ceiling of fifty eight thousand feet," Harry replied calmly, then he smiled and linked his arm with Jean. "Shall we do breakfast?"

Snape blinked at Harry in confusion, not understanding a word he'd just said.

Jean barely controlled her laughter. She nodded and pulled him towards the castle, leaving many of the students standing in shock.

Most of the students broke up a few minutes later, heading back into the castle. Three remained behind, feeling as though a part of their lives had been ripped away forever.

"Here now, why the long faces?" asked Hagrid.

"He hates us," Ginny said softly through her tears.

Hermione placed an arm around the younger girl's shoulders. As much as she wanted to deny Ginny's statement, she knew she couldn't. The look Harry had given her said it all, his expression echoing the hurt and anger he felt. She sighed and hugged Ginny harder as both girls sought comfort from each other.

Hagrid frowned. "Well, what did yeh expect? I suspect tha' he'll come around eventually, but yeh three hurt him bad. He trusted yeh, loved yeh like kin, an' yeh lied to him." He then pointed a huge, meaty finger at Ron. "Yeh know how much he hates seein' his name in the paper, an' yeh had to let tha' Skeeter woman know he's a mutant. I don' know where yer head is, Ron Weasley, but yeh might want to think about some o' the other infamous Gryffindors. Yeh don' want yer name to be remembered right up there with Pettigrew, do yeh?"

Ron stared at his feet. His conversation with Skeeter was the one act he regretted the most. Even more than losing Hermione as a possible girlfriend.

"I need to get down to the paddocks an' deal with a sick hippogriff, but I want yeh each to consider this. Harry feels like he's alone, Dumbledore's actions for the last year were almost as bad as what Pettigrew did. Pettigrew betrayed his parents, which resulted in their death. Dumbledore ignored Harry an' tha' got Sirius killed. Ask yerselves if yeh want to be lumped in with those two. Dumbledore's a great man, but he's blind as a bat an' nearly as dumb when it comes to Harry."

With one last, hard look, Hagrid turned and walked away. He sincerely hoped they would come to their senses, but he wasn't too sure about them.

"He's right," Ginny said. "It's time we start thinking for ourselves. We knew that lying to Harry wouldn't go over well, but we blindly followed orders. We all knew that he wasn't being treated well at home, and we did nothing. I'm not doing that anymore."

Taking a deep breath, she straightened her shoulders and walked back into the castle with Hermione and Ron close behind her.

Dumbledore stepped from the shadows next to the castle, his face was wet with tears.

Muggle Studies Office, Hogwarts (September 2nd)...

"Come in!"

The door opened and Ginny walked into the office. Jean turned and spotting Ginny, she moved to sit behind her desk. She knew exactly who Ginny was, now all she had to do was find out what she wanted.

"Yes, Miss Weasley?"

"I'm sorry to disturb you Professor, but I'm worried about this class. The rumor is you don't want to use the standard textbook," Ginny replied softly. "I might have problems getting the book you want us to use."

Jean frowned seeing the regular textbook Ginny was holding, it looked like she was the fiftieth student to use that book.

"I don't want to use the standard textbook because the book was woefully inadequate, Miss Weasley. I have a number of texts and magazines here which we'll use instead. But you didn't come here just because of a textbook did you?"

"No, ma'am," Ginny said in a whisper.

"Why don't you tell me what's on your mind then, Ginny. It is Ginny, correct?"

Ginny nodded and she looked down at her feet for a moment. Jean frowned and did a quick surface scan of her thoughts. She was surprised at how much the girl was hurting over the loss of Harry's friendship and more. She sucked in a breath when it dawned on her.

"You're in love with him and you never meant to hurt him," Jean said, surprised.

Ginny gasped and looked at her in surprise. "How?"

Jean shrugged. "I'm a telepath. Just a very brief surface scan showed me what the problem was."

Ginny nodded, but she really didn't understand the words, then she looked at her feet again. "I don't even know how to approach him anymore, Professor. He's not talking to Ron or Hermione, so I can't ask them. I know he'll never love me, especially now, but I owe him a life debt and I need my friend back in my life."

Jean leaned back in her chair. "I'm not sure what I can tell you Ginny and I certainly don't want to raise your hopes falsely. My son is not ready to forgive just yet. Besides, Harry thinks you're dating someone else."

Ginny looked at her perplexed. "I'm not dating any... Oh, Merlin! He believed me what I said to Ron on the train?"

"I don't know about that, but he thinks you're dating Mr. Thomas," Jean replied. "I take it that isn't the case?"

Ginny shook her head vehemently in denial. "No, I only said that to annoy my brother." Then something the Professor said sunk home. "Wait... Your son?" she gasped.

Jean smiled broadly. "Yes, my husband and I adopted Harry. He's going to keep his name, but I'm his Mum."

"If anyone deserves that kind of happiness, it's Harry," Ginny said softly.

Jean leaned forward on her desk and looked at the girl for a moment, then she made a decision. "Ginny, you need to understand that while what you and your friends did, in the grand scheme of things, was pretty minor. It came at a point in his life when he had just about given up. It was another straw on the back of a camel that had already broken.

"I won't give you any false hope, but Harry will come around. He's still working it out in his mind, separating things into little bits so he can understand what happened. Don't crowd him, give him time and let him work it out for himself.

"Finally, if you hope to share any part of his life, you need to understand that he is no longer just a wizard. You saw how he arrived at school today. He is embracing the fact that he is a mutant with a vengeance. When he graduates from this school he will most likely try to live a life that combines what he thinks are the best pieces of Muggle and wizarding life. It is a good thing that you are taking this class, but you'll need to study beyond what will be offered here if you want to really be a part of his life."

Ginny nodded thoughtfully. "I'll do my best, Professor. I want my friend back."

"I'll give you one final word of advice then, Ginny. Harry isn't like other boys. In some ways he's more mature and in others, he hasn't a clue what to do. If you intend to sit back and wait for him to say he likes you, you'll wait for a very long time. He's never really experienced any love that he can remember. When the time comes, the girl that wants him is going to have to take the lead and show him what love is, and what he can and can't do."

"That should give you something to think about. Now, off with you." Jean said with a smile.

Ginny smiled shyly back and left the office.

The Great Hall, (September 3rd)...

Harry sat at the empty end of the Gryffindor table. He hadn't spoken to any of his dorm mates since he arrived yesterday. In fact, other than speaking to his Mum and Hagrid, he had barely said ten words yesterday.

Now he sat, working on some physics problems that Professor Xavier had given him. His friends sat at the other end of the table looking at him wistfully. He ignored them, instead opting for the challenge of exploring the laws of thermodynamics.

"So. Potter, despite being a freak, you decided to return to Hogwarts anyway. One would have thought you'd learned your lesson after you got your dogfather killed, but I guess mutants aren't capable of learning," said a hated voice.

Jean, watching from the staff table, tensed, waiting for Harry's response.

She could feel Snape's smug attitude from his chair several places down and she suddenly realized, Snape was in charge of all the Death Eaters in the castle. Malfoy was just following orders.

Malfoy waited joyfully for Harry to explode in front of everyone. His comments were pitched to carry to every corner of the hall.

Harry's eyes narrowed for a moment, then he did something no one expected. He started to laugh.

Malfoy blinked in shocked surprise. No one laughed at him.

"Christ, Malfoy, you're pathetic. All these years I thought it was part of my job to keep you in your place, but I just realized you never left your

place. You're a pureblood waste of space that someday soon will be fertilizer. I don't know why anyone is afraid of you. You couldn't spell your way out of an unlocked room. I've seen Muggles more frightening than you."

The hall fell silent as Harry continued to laugh. Finally, he waved a hand at Malfoy as if he were shooing him away. "Go away, Malfoy. You're not worth the effort. Tell your master to send someone with talent next time and stop pestering me with amateurs."

Several students at other tables started to laugh nervously and Malfoy looked around wildly. Snape glared at him as if trying to will him into some sort of action. Harry sat, his nose back in his book, scribbling in a notebook and occasionally tapping some numbers on a calculator.

Malfoy snarled and reached for his wand. In a blink, Harry was out of his seat and had Malfoy's arm in an iron grip.

Draco's eyes widened in fear. He never even saw Harry move. No one had.

"You haven't got what it takes to take me on, little boy," Harry hissed quietly enough that only Malfoy could hear. He pulled up his magic behind his eyes and they started to glow menacingly. "Fuck with me and I will make you vanish. This is the only warning you are going to get, Malfoy. Heed it, or die."

The hall watched as Harry held Malfoy by one hand. He whispered something in Malfoy's ear and the boy's already pale complexion turned white. Harry paused and then said something else. That was it for Malfoy, the final straw. He started to shiver violently and his bladder let go.

Harry backed away in disgust. "Go away, little snake. Go find some children to play with," Harry said in a low tone that carried throughout the hall. Several shivered hearing those words said so coldly by the golden boy of Gryffindor.

Harry turned and walked around the table taking his seat again. Malfoy whimpered, his eyes darted around. He could see everyone staring at him and whispering. He whimpered again and ran from the hall.

Harry packed up his books calmly, then he stood and started to walk out of the hall.

"POTTER!" shouted Snape, shoving back from the Head table and standing. "Detention with me tonight!"

Harry continued walking, but as he did he lifted one hand with the middle finger extended. Snape frowned as most of the half-bloods and Muggle born broke out in laughter.

"I'm canceling that detention, Professor," Professor McGonagall said. "I will remind you of what Professor Dumbledore said concerning Mr. Potter. In addition, he did nothing to warrant being punished. In fact, I think he showed admirable restraint. You can tell Mr. Malfoy that he has detention with Mr. Filch for the coming week, and he's lost fifty points for his house. Never have I seen more reprehensible behavior!"

Snape scowled, not use to having anyone override his punishments. Minerva, however, was the only person other than the Headmaster, who could do so. Wrapping his cloak around himself, he stormed from the hall.

Minerva leaned back in her chair and allowed herself a slight smile. Dumbledore had told the staff that under no circumstances were they to allow Snape to be alone with Harry Potter. Dumbledore didn't explain his reasons, but the staff accepted his edict without question.

"Thank you, Minerva. I know Harry well enough to know he would not have gone to that detention, which would have only caused further problems," Jean said softly.

"He cannot continue showing such disrespect, Jean. I know what Albus asked us to do but..."

She stopped when Jean placed a hand on hers. "Before you jump too harshly on Harry, ask the Headmaster to explain. Tell him I said it was alright for you to know."

Minerva looked at her uncertainly, then she nodded. She would speak with Dumbledore about this.

At the Gryffindor table three friends stared at Harry's retreating back and worried.

"What did that mean? That bit with the finger?" asked Ginny.

Hermione blushed. "It wasn't nice, Ginny. Let's leave it at that."

Ginny nodded doubtfully. She knew Hermione knew what it meant and didn't understand why she wasn't telling her.

"Did you see what he did to Malfoy? He scared him so bad he pissed himself!" Ron chortled.

"Ron!" Hermione and Ginny both said at the same time.

"I'm more interested in how he managed to get from the table to holding Malfoy's wrist so quickly," Hermione said softly.

"Hermione?"

"Yes, Ginny?"

"We know Harry is a mutant, but has anyone said what his power is?"

Hermione's eyes narrowed and she looked at the area where Harry encountered Malfoy. The mess had already been cleaned up by some house elves. She picked up her wand and walked over to that spot, casting several detection spells, but they didn't give her any clues. Frowning, she walked back to her spot.

"Nothing," she huffed.

“Well, what did you expect? If he used his mutant power, would any magic detection work on it?” Ginny asked.

Muggle Studies Class, First day of classes (September 4th)...

Jean waited patiently while her third year students filed into the class. This was her first class of the year, and these students were taking Muggle studies for the first time.

“Good morning, class. I'm Professor Jean Summers, your instructor for this class. I'm also an accredited Doctor, what you would call a healer.”

Jean walked over to the board and started writing.

Britain

65,000 Wizards

61,000,000 Muggles

World Wide

4,900,000 Wizards

4,500,000,000 Muggles

She stopped and turned to face her class. “Many of you wonder why Muggle Studies is taught at Hogwarts, a few of you may even think Muggles are beneath your notice. But for every wizard, there are roughly one thousand Muggles. Think about that for a moment. Now, think about this. You, with your wand, have the ability to kill one person at a time. The Muggles, on the other hand, have invented ways to kill people by the thousands. You can talk to someone on the other side of the country, the Muggles can talk to someone on the other side of the world. Your brooms can carry you several hundred meters in the air, the Muggles have machines that routinely travel thousands of meters higher and hundreds of kilometers per hour faster than your broom.”

She walked over to a small television and video deck that Harry and Hank had fixed to work at Hogwarts and she popped a tape into the player. The class gasped when the screen flared to life and images started rolling across the screen. A crowded Manhattan street, a B52 bomber taking off, the space shuttle, a plane landing on an aircraft carrier, a shot of an audience watching star wars. She pressed a button killing the audio while the images continued to flash across the screen.

“In the past two hundred years, mankind has made advancements in science and technology that have brought us further than any advance made in the previous two thousand years. Man has walked on the moon,” she said, then paused as the class giggled.

She smiled back at them. “You laugh, but he's walked on the moon, his machines have landed on Mars and explored the depths of the oceans. He's harnessed energies beyond your imagination.”

Someone raised a hand and she nodded at the girl. “But Professor, my father says that we need to understand the Muggles only enough to keep them fooled about our world. If they are as numerous as you say, how can we do that?”

Jean leaned against her desk. “Miss Murphy, the only answer I can give you is, you can't do it for much longer. The wizarding world is going to split. On the one hand there will be people like yourselves, people who have some knowledge of the Muggle world and know that we can't hide for much longer. There will also be those who refuse to believe that the Muggles will find out about us. Those of you who are smart, will learn enough that you'll be able to function in their world.

“The Ministry would have me teach you that the Muggles are still using horse drawn carriages and gas lamps to light their homes. They would like you to believe that electricity is only a fad that fade away in a short time.”

She stood and walked over to the combination Television/Video tape player and placed a hand on it. “There are two hundred and eighty million people in the United States, and more than five hundred million televisions. That's nearly two televisions per person, all powered by electricity. And that, boys and girls is no fad.”

Jean walked back over to her desk. “Now in this class we'll explore some of the machines the Muggles use. There's no way we'll be able to look at everything, so instead we'll investigate the life of a mythical family living in a typical home. We'll look at the machines and knowledge needed to live in such a home and we'll read from a selection of books, magazines and catalogs which I have up here,” she said pointing to a bookcase filled with books.

She walked back to her desk and opened up two small boxes. “Everyone come up here and pick up a notebook and a pen. If you were in a Muggle school you'd already have these items. For this class, I will not accept homework on parchment. You will be given Muggle paper and I expect you to use the pens to write with.”

One by one the students came forward, taking the pen and small notebooks, some even seemed afraid of the objects.

Jean turned back to the blackboard and started to write, as she did, she said, “The first thing we will look at is power generation...”

Defense Against the Dark Arts Class...

Harry filed into the classroom and scanned the seats for a moment before picking one furthest from Ron and Hermione. Both looked at him wistfully for a moment before turning back to their books.

When the door closed and Dolores Umbridge stepped into the room, Harry's eyes widened. No one had told him she was still teaching this class! Frowning, he turned and reached into his bag, pulling out a small recorder.

Hermione glanced over at his desk and did a double take, spotting the recorder. She looked at Harry questioningly, but his face was expressionless. He sat with his recorder running and his text book open.

"Good morning, class," Umbridge said.

"Good morning, Professor Umbridge," mumbled several of the students.

"Now now, that wasn't good enough. Let's try it again," she said. "Good morning, class."

"Good morning, Professor Umbridge," replied most of the students. Harry remained silent.

"Excellent. This is NEWT level Defense Against the Dark Arts. Since so many of you did so well on your OWLs, the Ministry felt I should return this year. We shall continue the class the way we did last year, since that worked so well."

Harry scowled at the woman. She was talking about the students doing well because of the DA, not her teaching.

"Now, open your books to chapter one and begin reading," Umbridge said.

The class did as instructed and Harry shook his head. Reaching into his bag, he pulled out another book to read. He dropped his textbook back into his bag.

It took Umbridge thirty minutes before she realized that Harry was not reading the standard textbook.

"Mr. Potter! I thought I told you to read your textbook?" she asked in a sweet voice.

Harry looked up at her, his expression hard. He let a little of his magic slide up behind his eyes to give them an eerie green glow. "I've already read the text for this year, Professor," he replied calmly.

"Don't take that tone with me, Mr. Potter! I don't know how you managed to obtain the scores you did, especially when I failed you last year. Obviously you cheated on your exams to earn your fifth place rank."

Harry sat with his arms crossed and his expression stonily neutral, listening to her rant.

"You're not going to get away with things like you did last year, Mr. Potter. I want you reading your textbook. If you don't, I'll see you get expelled and your wand gets snapped!" Umbridge said smugly.

Harry smiled frostily at the woman, then he waved a hand. The book on his desk closed by itself, lifted and moved back into his book bag. His defense book lifted out of the bag and floated into Harry's hand.

The class gaped at the display of wandless magic and Umbridge took a step back.

"Wandless magic is impossible!" she sputtered fearfully. Then her eyes widened as she realized her threat of snapping his wand was empty. He had no need of a wand!

"Funny, they said the same thing about Voldemort's return. But there you have it," Harry said coldly, then he opened his book and pretended to read.

The class broke out in muffled laughter, causing Umbridge to glare at them.

The Great Hall...

Harry sat down at an empty end of the Gryffindor table. He was bored out of his wits. So far not a single class had presented him with any sort of challenge.

"You've finally stopped hiding."

He looked up to see Luna sitting down across the table from him.

"Hello to you, too, Luna. Now, what are you on about?"

"All these years you've been hiding, Harry. I knew it; I could see it. You pretended to be a poor student when you really weren't."

Harry frowned at the girl and she giggled. "Oh, don't be angry, Harry. I didn't tell anyone your secret. We all hide to some degree. You just did it better than most."

"What about you, Luna? Are you hiding also?" he asked, intrigued by the idea. It made sense in a way. With the Dursleys, he went out of his way to achieve mediocrity, but with Jean and Scott he wanted them to be proud of him so he did his absolute best. He thought about his OWLs and realized that he did as good as he did because he had come to understand that the Dursleys never cared what grades he got at Hogwarts.

"I don't need to hide," she replied with a sad smile. "Most people never see me anyway."

"That's not true," he protested. "I see you."

She leaned closer, smiling at him. "That's sweet of you, but look around. Everyone is buzzing about your wandless magic, but few of them see you as you really are. Hermione is pleased that you did as well as you did, but she's also worried that you may pass her by."

Harry's eyes narrowed. "Did they ask you to speak with me?"

She gave him a stern look and he immediately felt ashamed of himself. He knew Luna would not approach him just because someone asked

her.

"You know me better than that," she replied softly.

He dropped his gaze. "I do and I'm sorry."

She smiled brightly at him. "Apology accepted. Now, do you want to know what Hermione's biggest worry is?"

Harry sighed and nodded. When Luna was this determined, there was no derailing her.

"She's worried that you won't need her anymore, academically or as a friend. It's tearing at her and she's terribly unhappy."

Harry sat back and scowled at her, crossing his arms.

Luna looked at his expression and smiled sadly. "I think she's not the only one that's hurting. Come talk to me when you work things out better. I don't like seeing you hurting like this," she said, then she stood and walked back to the Ravenclaw table.

Harry looked around and saw that Luna spoke the truth, as usual. A good many students were staring at him and whispering about his use of wandless magic today.

"Was that a wise move, Harry?"

He glanced back to see Jean standing behind him. She moved to sit next to him. "Was it necessary to show off like that?" she asked again.

He reached into his bag and handed her his recorder. "Listen to this tape. You'll find about thirty minutes of silence, then her threatening me because I read the text book already. Most of the sheep will think, wrongly mind you, that I just demonstrated my mutant ability."

Jean frowned at his sheep comment.

"Mum, she was threatening to snap my wand over nothing, I had to show her that she couldn't threaten me," he told her.

"I don't know. I mean, I know you didn't do it to show off, but still, everyone is talking about it," she replied.

Harry shrugged. "It can't be helped. Besides, I'm used to them talking about me. Mostly, I just ignore it. They'll believe whatever the latest rumor is anyway, no matter how hard you show them the truth."

She nodded slowly. She didn't like his attitude towards the others, but she could understand it. She stood and ruffled his hair fondly. "Do be careful," she said with a grin.

"Mummm," he whined and moved to fix his hair.

With a laugh, Jean walked up to the staff table.

At the other end of the table an entirely different conversation was going on.

"He wasn't in bed when I got up this morning," Ron said softly.

"Half the world wasn't in bed by the time you got up, Ron," Ginny grumbled. "I spoke to Neville, who got up at seven, and he said he wasn't there then either."

"One of the third years got up at five for a run to the loo. She said she saw him out the window, running around the pitch," Hermione said, then she added. "I still can't believe he achieved fifth place ranking. He had to have really good scores to get that."

"Highest score ever recorded in Defense," said a voice.

The trio looked up to see Luna standing there. Ginny motioned for the girl to sit.

"How do you know that? Scores are supposed to be confidential!" hissed Hermione.

"Oh, come on, Hermione," said Luna with a roll of her eyes. "I'm a Ravenclaw. When two of the top spots are taken by Gryffindors, we Ravenclaws do anything to find out exactly how well they did. Knowing the scores of your mates is part of the package when you're a Ravenclaw. So when you and Harry bumped two Ravenclaws out of the top ten, the entire house went to work trying to discover your scores."

Hermione leaned closer. "And?" she demanded.

"You did really well, but Harry beat your scores in Defense, Charms and, surprisingly, Potions. He received the Governor's award in Defense, while you took the award in Runes and Transfiguration. His other scores were quite good, but not record breaking," replied the blond.

Hermione leaned back, looking thoughtful.

Luna leaned in and looked around carefully to see who might be listening. "They expected you to push a Ravenclaw out of the top ten Hermione, but no one expected Harry to do it also. They really are quite upset by it all," she whispered.

Hermione looked annoyed and Ginny started to laugh at her expression.

"Fine," she snapped. "What about his wandless magic then?"

Luna glanced up the table and saw that Harry had already left for class. "You know, Hermione, for a bright girl you can be really stupid at times. The papers were full of news about Voldemort, Harry and that prophecy. Your friend has had to face him more times than anyone else. Can you

really begrudge him any sort of advantage? He didn't sit down one day and say 'I think I'll develop a very rare talent just to annoy Hermione'."

Ron started laughing until Luna shot him a dark look. He gulped nervously and looked down at his plate.

"Keep still, Ron. I'm not ready to deal with you, but I will break you of your habit of speaking without thinking," Luna said softly.

"Lots of luck," muttered Ginny darkly.

Luna smiled at her. "Don't give up hope, Ginny," she said airily, then she stood up and went back to her table.

"That one is barking, I tell you," muttered Ron.

"Maybe, but she sees more than most," Ginny replied thoughtfully.

Headmaster's Office...

Dumbledore sat back on his chair and stroked the feathers of his familiar. "A most interesting day, my old friend. Young Harry locked horns with our Defense Professor and now she's afraid of him. And from what I can find out, all he did was levitate some books!"

Fawkes trilled and Dumbledore grinned. "Yes, I know, wandless magic. It is an amazing development. Ah... we have company."

Dumbledore turned to face the door and waited ten seconds.

"Come in, Severus," Dumbledore called from his desk. The old man tensed slightly. Now that he was aware of Snape's treachery it was hard for him to maintain a congenial facade.

Snape walked into the office and sat heavily in one of the chairs.

"I find a nice lemon drop is always comforting after a difficult day." Dumbledore asked, offering the dish of candies.

Snape just stared at him for a moment.

Putting the dish down Dumbledore looked at him. "So, how was your first day of classes?"

"I thought you said that Potter had achieved an outstanding in Potions?"

Dumbledore blinked. *So, that is what this visit is all about,* he thought.

"Yes, he did. In fact, he received the third highest score for last year. You should be proud of that. You taught him well," Dumbledore said with a smile.

Snape scowled darkly. He didn't want to do anything well with Potter, except to make him bleed.

"Then kindly inform Mr. Potter that he has detention with me tonight for skipping the first day of class," Snape said smugly, then he stood.

"I'm afraid I can't do that, Professor," Dumbledore said mildly. "Harry didn't skip your class. He is not taking potions at Hogwarts."

Snape whirled to stare at Dumbledore. "What do you mean?"

Dumbledore's expression darkened slightly. "I mean what I said. He is receiving outside tuition in the subject from an accredited Potions Mistress every Saturday. Therefore, he did not skip your class and the detention is unnecessary."

"And you allowed this?" he asked incredulously, pacing angrily.

"Indeed. His taking Potions with another teacher was a requirement of his returning to this school. Had I not allowed it, he would have enrolled in Beauxbatons. I'm afraid you didn't make a good impression on Harry's mother," Dumbledore replied.

"That woman!" he snarled. "She's got half my third years terrified, and the other half telling people that the wizarding world is doomed."

"Does she now? Well, she did say she was going to bring Muggle studies up to date with reality," Dumbledore replied with his eyes twinkling.

"Reality? She's lying to the students! She's telling tales of men on the moon and weapons that can kill millions!"

"She isn't lying, Severus."

Snape stopped his pacing and stared at him. "Eh?"

"I said, she isn't lying. The Muggles have sent men to the moon, and do have weapons that can kill millions. When it comes to war, the Muggles sadly outperform us at every turn. You'd do well to take a turn outside of your dungeon once in a while and see what the real world is like. We walk around thinking we're better than Muggles and in their ignorance they have surpassed every thing we have achieved."

Dumbledore smiled gently. "Now, unless there was something else, Professor, I will let you get back to your Potions. Don't worry about Mr. Potter. I'm sure he's being well taught."

Confused, Snape walked from the office wondering what, exactly, had just taken place.

Transfiguration Office...

"Come in, Mr. Potter," Professor McGonagall said from her desk.

Harry walked in warily and sat down. To his surprise, McGonagall stood and walked over to a tea service. She poured herself a cup of tea, and then handed Harry a chilled butterbeer.

“I suppose you're wondering why I asked you to stop by today?” she asked.

“Yes, Professor.”

McGonagall sat down and leaned back in her chair. “Mr. Potter... Harry, I wanted to tell you how impressed I was with the tutoring you provided for your Aunt.”

“My mother,” Harry said flatly, his expression hardening.

McGonagall nodded. “I apologize, Harry. She is your mother and that is all that matters. Forgive me, it will take me some time to get used to the idea. Your mother... Lily, was a close friend of mine. She will always be your mother in my mind, but I'm getting off the point. Your tutoring, taking her part way into third year subjects, was well done and her excellent skills are a testimony to your teaching skill. I also commend you on your decision not to teach her Potions.

“Teaching is a rare talent, and it's even more rare to discover a teacher who knows his or her own limitations. You did exceptionally well in Potions on your OWLs, but still didn't feel comfortable teaching the subject. That was a smart move on your part. I would hope you consider teaching as a possible profession. The ability to pass information along and do it well is quite rare.”

“Thank you, Professor.”

“I also noticed in class today that you seemed to have no problem with the Transfiguration problem.”

Harry smiled slightly. “America has no silly underage magic restriction, Professor. I managed to get plenty of practice in this past summer, plus my magic seems to work easier now.”

“All your spellcraft is coming easier to you now?” Minerva asked, intrigued.

He nodded.

“Would you be willing to undergo a simple test, perhaps this weekend, Mr. Potter?”

Harry frowned. “I'm sorry, Professor, but I'll be out of the castle from Friday evening until Sunday afternoon.”

Minerva sat up and stared at him. “What do you mean?”

“I'm surprised the Headmaster didn't inform you. I'm taking private Potions tutoring over the weekends instead of taking Snape's class.”

“Professor Snape...”

Harry shook his head, then looked at her. “Professor, you can deduct all the points you want, you can issue detentions even, but I will not give that Death Eater any respect. The only thing Snape deserves is a Dementor's kiss and hopefully I'll be around to see it done. No matter how much you might wish it, not you, nor the old fool running this school can force me to give Snape one iota of respect,” he said angrily, then he stood. “Now if you'll excuse me, I have homework for two different schools to complete.”

McGonagall watched in astonishment as Harry stalked from her office. She frowned and walked over to her fireplace. Throwing some floo powder into the flames stepped. “Headmaster's office!” she shouted and vanished from the fireplace.

Dumbledore looked up and smiled when Minerva stepped out of his fireplace. *It seems that Severus is not the only one upset this evening*, he mused. *I wonder what has ruffled her fur tonight?*

“Good evening, Professor. This is an unexpected surprise,” he said. “Lemon drop?”

“Why didn't you tell me that Harry Potter wasn't taking Potions with Severus? I know you said you were keeping them apart, but I didn't know it had gone that far.”

Dumbledore leaned back and sighed heavily. “Sit down, Minerva, and tell me what has happened.”

Minerva sat stiffly in one of his chairs, glaring at him. “I had Mr. Potter in to talk to him. I wanted to try to arrange for us to test his levels again. He informed me that he would not be spending a lot of time in the castle come the weekends because he was getting independent tutoring in Potions.”

Dumbledore winced.

“When I tried to correct him about giving Severus the respect a Professor deserves, he nearly exploded. He said the only thing Snape deserved was the kiss and he hoped he'd be there to see it done, then he stormed out of my office. Really, Albus, I understand he's had a rough time and he's recovering from that, but we cannot allow him to show any form of disrespect towards the faculty.”

“Minerva, it is important that we do not press Harry on this particular issue. I know it sets a bad precedent, but...”

“But nothing, Albus! You cannot allow this to continue.”

Dumbledore sighed and then he picked up his wand and cast several powerful privacy charms.

Minerva arched an eyebrow at him.

Last Christmas holiday when it became apparent that Harry, through no fault of his own, had a link to Voldemort, I thought I was right in my decision to push the boy away, to keep him at arms length. I ordered Severus teach the boy Occlumency in order to protect his mind. I was afraid that I would encounter Voldemort in Harry's mind during a session if I taught him myself. It never occurred to me that Severus would do anything but teach him."

"And we all know how well that turned out," Minerva said sarcastically. "He didn't learn it nearly well enough."

"That is because he was never taught Occlumency, Minerva. I trusted Severus to be man enough to push his hatred for Harry's father aside and teach him what he needed to know. Instead, he used his abilities to torture him, forcing him to relive his worst memories. Severus pulverized his natural defenses, opening him up for attack. Through my own arrogance, I allowed an innocent boy to get pushed to the very brink of insanity and I did nothing about it!" Dumbledore exclaimed, his hand slapping the desk hard. "I will use every means at my disposal to fight this war, Minerva, and yes, I knew the Dursleys would be difficult, but there is no way I would sanction Severus' mistreatment of Harry Potter. He was told to teach the boy, not abuse him."

He took a few calming breaths, then he looked at the shocked McGonagall. "The only reason why I even tell you this now is because you are trained in Occlumency. You understand the meaning of what I'm telling you, and why this cannot be told to anyone."

"But... Harry... Albus! He mind raped him!"

"Yes, Minerva, I know," he replied tiredly.

"But what... why are you keeping Snape here then?"

He shook his head sadly. "I can only say that it is important in our efforts to defeat Voldemort. But it's equally important that we make sure that Harry and Severus do not come into close contact. Now you understand why Harry hates him so much. He is recovering from that, and you know it is not an easy process. He has a lot of anger, much of it justified. I cannot stress this enough, Minerva; if you come across Harry when he is having problems controlling his emotions, send for his mother. Do not try to intervene yourself."

Minerva nodded unhappily. "I never did manage to arrange testing for him."

"I'll see if Filius can manage something in the next week or two. From what Mrs. Summers has told me, his powers have increased. She suggested that somehow they were tied to his other abilities."

"Has she said anything about his other abilities?"

Dumbledore frowned. "No, she hasn't, and other than his altercation with Mr. Malfoy, we have no real idea of what they are. I am reluctant to ask, but I also know his abilities could very well be the power needed to defeat Voldemort."

Minerva stood and glared at him angrily. He had once again managed to sidetrack her from the issues. "I don't like this problem with Snape, Albus. What he did to Mr. Potter is criminal. How many more students do you have to endanger before you realize that man is a menace?"

Minerva turned and exited his office using the floo.

Dumbledore bowed his head. "Too many more, old friend, but it's necessary," he said sadly.

Headmaster's office, (Friday, September 8th)...

Dumbledore rapped on his desk, calling everyone to attention. All of the teachers settled in their seats and faced the Headmaster. It was time for their weekly staff meeting.

"It's been an interesting first week. Ponomo, had you had any luck with your first year girls?" Dumbledore asked.

"No, Headmaster. At first I thought they were leaving the castle. It's not uncommon for a first year to attempt to run away if they've never been away from home before. Three years ago I had a boy try to run home again. These girls are just missing."

Dumbledore frowned. "I see. Filius, do you think you could give Professor Sprout a hand in attempting to locate her wayward Hufflepuffs?"

Flitwick nodded and made a note on a piece of parchment in front of him.

"Pardon me for saying so, Headmaster, but you don't seem overly concerned about these missing students," Jean said.

Dumbledore smiled benignly. "I'm not concerned, Professor, because I know the girls are in the castle and are in no danger. You see, everyone at Hogwarts, students and Professors, are linked to the castle. At any given point in time I can query the castle and find out if the person in question is all right. Had Hogwarts not reported that our missing students were in the castle and happy, I assure you, I would have Aurors searching the grounds even now."

Satisfied, Jean nodded and leaned back in her chair. Several of the teachers smiled at her, but a few frowned. Notably Snape, Trelawney and Umbridge.

"On another note, Professor Sprout, once again the Board of Governors has turned down your funding request for an additional green house, I'm sorry to say," Dumbledore said consolingly.

Sprout scowled and nodded at the Headmaster.

"Next Order of business. Madam Hooch, the Ministry has approved the plan to provide security during Quidditch matches, so you may contact the team captains and arrange for practice sessions."

Hooch nodded, then she looked up. "Gryffindor still hasn't picked a captain for this year."

"I want Potter as captain," McGonagall said loudly.

"Impossible! I banned him for life!" snapped Umbridge.

"You did what?" exclaimed Jean. She turned in her chair and eyed the toad like woman.

"That's right, I had him banned for life and you can't do anything about it. Bloody mutant shouldn't even be allowed in this school," Umbridge said with a sneer.

"What did he do to deserve such a punishment?" Jean asked through clenched teeth.

"He and one of those dreadful Weasley twins struck Draco Malfoy, a son of a noble and important man," Umbridge replied silkily. "He got what he deserved, the little sneak."

Snape sat in the corner smiling to himself.

"Well, lord knows we must cater to the sons of acknowledged Death Eaters," Jean said scathingly. "Not that it matters, Harry wasn't planning on playing anyway."

Both McGonagall and Umbridge frowned, but for different reasons.

"How dare you call someone as upstanding as Lucius Malfoy a Death Eater," Umbridge said angrily.

"Oh, please. The man was pardoned for being a Death Eater. All that means is that the government decided to ignore his crime. He should have been executed, but Fudge was nearly as corrupt as Malfoy is," Jean replied.

"What would you know?" Umbridge sneered in a haughty tone. "You're an unwelcome half breed like your bastard nephew."

Jean smiled at the woman. Several of the teachers were now openly laughing and Dumbledore was knocking on his desk trying to gain everyone's attention.

"At least I'm human," Jean said mildly. "What species were did your mother breed with? I'm guessing toad or maybe some kind of lizard."

McGonagall barked out a laugh and Umbridge stood. She pulled out her wand and stared at it unhappily. Before she could even point it at Jean, she noticed the wand had been snapped. The wand was broken near the midpoint and tilted at an angle, barely holding together.

It had been a trick that Harry had drilled into her. Using her telekinesis she could snap a wand pointed at her in a split second now.

"You must of sat on it. Someone of your size should be more careful where you put your wand, Professor," Jean offered. "Now please, stop interrupting the good Headmaster. He is trying to run a meeting."

Flitwick fell off his chair laughing while Jean turned back to Dumbledore. "I'm sorry, Headmaster. Please, do continue."

Dumbledore stared at Jean for a moment, then nodded. Umbridge glared at the red head who ignored her.

"Yes, well, I've reviewed the point activity for the past week and approved all outstanding detentions. Also, I would remind those of you on patrol duty to start checking the broom closets. I understand Miss Brocklehurst has started early. She was caught, along with Mr. Finch-Fletchly, in the astronomy tower in a rather shocking state of undress. So please be diligent. It's been more than twenty years since we've had a witch become pregnant under our watch. I'd rather not have to repeat that."

Several of the teachers snickered, while McGonagall's lips compressed into a thin line.

Dumbledore smiled at them. "Unless someone has some new business, I'll call this meeting to a close?"

"Professor? I would like to request the opportunity to take my classes into the field sometime during early October," Hagrid said.

Jean smiled knowingly. Like Harry, she had developed a soft spot for the large half giant. She made it a point to visit with him every few days and he delighted in showing her some of the more interesting creatures he collected for his classes.

Dumbledore turned to the large man. "A field trip? It must be quite a beast if you are willing to take the children to it."

Hagrid nodded fervently. "Oh, aye, it is, Professor. I can't tell you the location, but the owners have promised portkey access in order for me to show off an ancient North Sea Sea Dragon that is clutching."

Dumbledore's eyebrows nearly merged with his hairline. "An ancient Sea Dragon? How extraordinary! Make sure you get the necessary permission slips," he replied, then he paused. "Do you think the owners of the property would mind my visiting as well, Hagrid?"

"I'm sure Harry won't mind, Headmaster," Jean said with a grin. "But he does have a few security precautions for the visit that I'll discuss with you at a later date."

Hagrid smiled broadly and chuckled while Dumbledore blinked owlishly in surprise. Shaking the surprise off, he stood.

"If there is no further business, I'll let you all go, but I ask Professors Summers, McGonagall and Vector to remain behind for a moment."

Jean sat back down and considered using her abilities to find out what the old man had up his sleeve.

Dumbledore waited until the others had left before he turned to Jean. "Professor Vector brought to me an interesting tale which might interest

you. Vivian, if you would please?"

Vivian Vector nodded and turned to Jean. "Yesterday I was walking around the fifth floor corridor, not far from the Charms classrooms when I came upon several Slytherin students roughing up a first year Hufflepuff. I stopped them from hurting the boy any further and issued them detentions."

Jean frowned. "And what does this have to do with me?"

Vector sighed. "The problem, Jean, is that barely twenty seconds earlier, I passed Harry walking the same corridor from the opposite direction. There was no way he could have missed the problem and he did nothing about it. Today the story was all over the school about how Harry Potter walked by some Slytherins beating up on a Hufflepuff and didn't do anything about it."

Jean leaned back in her chair and sighed. "Did someone make him a prefect without telling me?"

Vector looked shocked at the question. "No, he's not a prefect."

"Then tell me by what right should people expect Harry to be their defender? This is part of what I have been trying to tell you, Headmaster. Harry does not believe the wizarding world is worth saving. You did that to him and you continue to do it to him."

"Now Harry is being trained to defend himself, but he's also being taught to avoid a fight whenever possible, and not to fight unless it's absolutely necessary. Tell me, was the boy in danger of dying or severe injury?"

"No, but..."

Jean shook her head. "No, there are no buts in this. Be thankful he didn't get involved. Harry's form of fighting is brutally efficient and very lethal," Jean said. "I am not going to yell at my son for avoiding a fight. And if you want him to fight for your world, you better start showing him that it's worth fighting for."

Dumbledore leaned forward in his chair. "What do you mean, Jean? Please explain."

Jean sighed. "You still don't see it. You expect him to leap to your defense and that isn't going to happen anymore. He is Harry, not some special weapon, not some creature of destiny. Tell me, Headmaster, did it occur to you that a letter from you to that rag, the Prophet, might have put an end to those hateful articles and opinions? Even if it didn't, it would have shown Harry that you actually cared about him. I can assure you, it occurred to Harry that such a letter would stop the cruel things being said about him."

"Both Harry and I have been forced to register as dark creatures because we're mutants. You're the head of the legislative body in this country. Tell me, have you even tried to put aside those insane restrictive laws? Doesn't it embarrass you to know that Britain is the only country in the world to consider mutants, and other humanoid species as animals, lower than humans? Believe me, it embarrasses Harry."

"The Americans are crowing because the famous Harry Potter has been granted political asylum and citizenship. They granted him protection from the oppressive British Ministry. The American Department of Magic is wooing Harry in the hopes that he will live in America when he leaves school. Politically, it would be a feather in their cap and a snub to the British. Harry doesn't want to give up his citizenship, but he is ashamed of his country and he knows that the other countries won't put up with Voldemort and his Death Eaters."

"What have you done to improve security for this school? Everyone says Hogwarts is the safest place in Britain and we all know that, for Harry, that's a complete and utter lie. And I'm sure Cedric Diggory's parents would agree with me. Harry's in almost as much danger here as he was with my abusive sister. The only difference is that, now, he can and will fight back if provoked."

"He's making plans already for post Hogwarts. He wants to attend a Muggle university in America. He's already thinking about relocating all of his Gringotts accounts to the States and liquidating his British holdings. Think about that. The Potter and Black fortunes moved overseas and their holdings in Britain liquidated. Harry doesn't know it, but the move will push your stagnant economy into a collapse. Ragnok told me that himself, Gringotts is already taking steps to secure their position, should Harry move his holdings overseas."

"This week has been especially hard on him. He's very lonely and he feels the isolation most keenly. He'd like to make up with some of his friends, but he doesn't know how!"

Jean leaned back in her chair and let out an explosive breath. "He is turning into a fine young man, one which my sister and her husband would have been inordinately proud of. I know Scott and I are. But in some ways, especially in those involving other people, he's emotionally stunted. Petunia and her family went out of their way to show Harry as much hatred and anger as possible. Those two emotions he is an expert at."

Jean paused and glanced at Vector. "He's lost and groping for a path. You keep shoving him in a direction he refuses to go in. And he won't go in that direction until he believes in it."

She stopped talking to listen, through the open window she could hear the building whine of jet engines. Harry was heading back to Blackmoor Castle for his Potion lessons. He could have taken his portkey, but he preferred the time in his jet. It was one of the few times he had to himself.

She stood and walked to the door. Before opening it, she paused and turned. "Consider it carefully, Headmaster. Harry won't wait forever. Every time you hear that sound, a little piece of Harry Potter, the wizard, dies," she said softly, then she turned and walked out of the office.

Dumbledore leaned back in his chair, unhappy with what he had been told. He looked out the window and saw Harry's jet receding in the distance at high speed. He was shocked at how fast it was.

"Thank you, Vivian, Minerva. That will be all for now," he said, dismissing them.

The two women left the office and Dumbledore stared out the window long after the aircraft lights had vanished in the distance.

Hogwarts Library (Sunday, September 10th)...

It was the clicking sound that first impinged on her consciousness. She was trying to write an essay on the uses of boomslang skin in skull bleaching potions and the clicking kept interfering with her concentration. Following the sound back to the source she walked into a rarely used corner of the library. There, sitting at a table next to a window was Harry Potter. The clicking sound had a surprising source, although in retrospect she shouldn't have been surprised. Harry was typing, poorly, on a small notebook computer.

Seeing Harry alone, Hermione decided it was time to confront him and get this out in the open.

“Harry?” she said quietly.

Harry paused his typing and bowed his head. “What?” he said tensely.

She took a few steps closer. “I was hoping I could talk to you?” she asked in a hopeful tone. “I don't have many people to talk to anymore.”

Harry looked up at her for a moment then back down at his work. “I don't know Hermione. Too much has changed. The Harry you knew doesn't exist anymore.”

Hermione choked back a sob. “Please?”

Harry sighed and tapped a few keys on the keyboard before closing the lid, then he gestured towards an empty chair.

“I heard about that Hufflepuff,” she said, sitting. She was groping for a topic that would be fairly neutral. Sadly this topic wasn't neutral.

“Hermione, it's not my job to save the world. So some Slytherins were roughing up a Hufflepuff, it's not like they were going to kill him. You once complained to me about my 'people saving thing', and that isn't the reason why you're here now,” he replied flatly.

She glanced at him, his expression was a blank mask. For the first time Hermione truly didn't know what Harry was thinking and that bothered her more than anything else.

“You've grown hard.”

Harry glared at her. “Yeah, well, being sent back to an abusive home every year will do that to a person,” he replied angrily, then he stood. “Look, I'm not about to sit here listening to you rattle off complaints about what I've become. If people don't like what I've become, then they need to change what they are doing because I became what people made me.”

Hermione lunged in her chair, grabbing his hand. “Please, I'm sorry... I really wanted to talk to you.”

“You have a funny way of showing it. First you complain that I don't save some first year and then you call me hard? Might I remind you that you asked to talk to me, not the other way around. At this point, I think I could live quite happily without you in my life.”

“I'm sorry,” she whispered.

Harry reluctantly sat back down and crossed his arms in front of him. “Talk then. Don't insult, don't complain. Talk.”

Hermione nodded several times, then she looked down at her hands clasped in front of her on the library table. “When Professor McGonagall asked my parents if I wouldn't mind extra classes over the summer, I admit I was surprised to find that I was supposed to keep that a secret from you.”

Harry frowned and leaned back in his chair.

“I wasn't happy with the requirement, Harry, but Professor Dumbledore thought you would take it bad if you discovered that Ron, Ginny and myself were getting extra training and you weren't.”

Harry snorted. “I didn't take your training nearly as bad your lying to me. How do you think that made me feel, Hermione? That you would be willing to cheapen our friendship because some old egotistical bastard told you to? He's turned you into a follower. Did you even question his decision?”

She shook her head and several tears rolled down her cheeks. “I didn't and I know I should have. I'm sorry, I hurt my best friend.”

Harry leaned forward and took off his glasses, then he wiped his face tiredly and chuckled softly. “Mum and Professor Xavier have been making me examine why my friends did what they did. And how I feel about it. You need to understand how far I had fallen, Hermione. When I got home I could have gleefully killed the Dursleys or myself. It didn't matter in my book.”

Harry spoke in a whisper, refusing to meet her eyes. “All my life I have been a tool for people to use. A pawn, a puppet, something to be trotted out to do a task. Clean the house, mow the lawn, let Dudley and his friends beat me, don't dare complain about being hungry. Save the stone, save Ginny, save the school, save the prophecy... Gee, thanks for the effort, now go back to live with people that feed you three times a week if you're lucky and beat you when they feel like it. We'll come back for you in a couple months and let you escape those Muggles. We'll let you attend school where people can fear you and hate you and the government will call you insane and dangerous.”

“Every so often you get trotted over to the Weasleys where, for a few blissful weeks, you get to see what has been forever denied you; a family, people who love unconditionally. Then you lose the one chance you had a family of your own, and that manipulative bastard tells you to be a good boy and go back to the Dursleys again. Oh, and did I forget to tell you, Harry, that you really are the savior of the wizarding world? Only you can kill Voldemort.

“Well, the wizarding world can go burn in hell. If they're willing to allow a child to be treated like I was, they don't deserve to be saved. Let Voldemort have them.”

Hermione shivered listening to Harry, his voice was so cold and flat. He glanced up at her and she could see the pain in his gaze. It nearly killed

her knowing she helped put it there. His words and emotions were so shocking to her that she never even registered his cursing.

"The really ironic thing," Harry said bitterly, "is that I learned that it came down to me and Voldemort less than a hour after Sirius died. And that old fucker had the balls to say that my ability to love is what will destroy Voldemort. What a pile of dung! What do I know about love? I still flinch when my own Mum hugs me. Love is a cruel myth, Hermione; it doesn't exist. If that's the power he knows not, then the wizarding world is truly fucked because their Chief Mugwump arranged for me to never experience it."

Harry stared at her, his gaze piercing her, pinning her to the chair.

"What you, Ron and Ginny did was pretty minor. Had it come at any other time, I'd probably be a bit annoyed at you and I'd yell and scream for a bit before telling you not to do it again. It caught me at a time when everything was piling up to a breaking point.

"I read your letters, already knowing that my friends were being trained and they all told the same lie. It made me feel like someone had placed a stone on my chest, crushing me," Harry gestured, making a crushing gesture with his fist. "The pain was real, Hermione, as real as any cut you've had, or ache after being cursed. At that moment I knew I was totally alone, I wasn't Harry. I was just a tool of Dumbledore's prophecy."

Harry lowered his gaze, staring down at the table, his voice dropped to a whisper.

"Things simply cannot go back to the way they were. Too much has changed and I don't know if I will ever be able to forgive Ron for talking to Skeeter. He's betrayed me twice now and I'm not willing to give him another chance to hurt me."

Hope surged in her chest.

"And Ginny and myself?" she asked hopefully.

He sighed and looked at her again. "Do you know how much what you did hurt?" he asked plaintively.

Hermione nodded, her expression anguished. "I'll give you my oath not to do it again," she whispered.

Harry nodded his head. "Your word has always been good enough for me, Hermione. Just don't do it again. I don't think I could handle it happening again."

Hermione lunged out of chair, grabbing Harry in a hug and sobbing against his shoulder. He held her stiffly, awkwardly patting her back.

After several minutes she pulled herself together. Harry wandlessly conjured a handkerchief, causing Hermione's eyebrows to nearly merge with her hairline.

He handed it to her with a sheepish expression. "Just a little trick I picked up," he said quietly, as if it were totally ordinary.

Hermione gave him a look he recognized very well and he couldn't help but smile. "Yes, Hermione, I'll tell you about it. I'll even loan you the book I used, but don't expect much. I got the impression that the author expected it to be a lot harder than I found it."

She returned his smile, then her expression turned serious again. "Actually, Harry, there is something I would like to ask of you," she said timidly.

Harry eyed her warily. "Yes?" he replied, wondering what she could possibly want, especially so soon after making up.

"Do you think I could use your mobile phone to call my parents once in a while? I spent most of the summer away from them and didn't get to spend much time with them."

Harry started laughing softly.

She pushed his shoulder. "Don't laugh! You could earn a fortune selling electronics that works around magic! And that jet! Where did you get it?"

"Why, do you want a ride in it?" he asked grinning broadly.

She frowned at him uncertainly. *He wasn't serious, was he?* she asked herself. *He's not a professional pilot, but this is a jet and not a silly broom, and he did fly it rather well.*

"Er, perhaps another time, Harry," she replied weakly.

Harry's expression fell slightly, then he brightened again. "Right, well to answer your other questions, the electronics are shielded, then powered by batteries that I've enchanted to never run out. Even my jet is shielded. A friend and I developed a carbon polymer shielding that we could spray the electronics with. Well, to be honest, he developed it, I just provided the magic to test against it."

"I'd like to talk about this more, but you realize that you need to speak with Ginny?"

Harry scowled and rubbed his temples slowly, trying to ease the building headache this conversation was causing. Ginny was another topic that seriously troubled him.

Hermione reached across the table and clasped his hand in hers. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't be pressuring you."

"I'll talk to her, or you can tell her I won't bite her head off if she wants to talk to me. I'm just not sure I can relate to her anymore. The same goes for nearly every pureblood in this school."

Hermione looked perplexed by his remarks. "What do you mean?"

Harry reached into his pocket and withdrew a small device, he placed it on the table. "What is this?"

"It's a calculator," she answered promptly.

"Right, would Ginny know that? Or Ron or Neville?"

"No," she admitted reluctantly.

"I'm working on my homework for my other classes, the ones I'm not taking here. Would Professor McGonagall know about natural selection and the theory of evolution?"

"No, she wouldn't. None of them would. But they don't need to know those things, do they?"

"Look around you, Hermione. Their world is doomed. If Voldemort doesn't destroy it, the Muggles will. It's inevitable."

"Their world? You sound like you're not a wizard, Harry," she replied disapprovingly.

Harry shrugged. "I'm a mutant, according to the Ministry mouthpiece, a dangerous dark creature. I'm tolerated, like Hagrid or Remus, but that's all. When I'm done at Hogwarts, I intend to attend a real university and live among the Muggles. I don't want to be part of this society when it collapses and if you're as smart as I think you are, you won't stick around either."

"You are not a dark creature, Harry Potter!" she snapped.

He could only shrug in reply. The simple fact was, no matter her opinion, Wizarding Society believed otherwise.

The two were silent for a long while, then Hermione spoke again. "She loves you, you know. Not the Boy-Who-Lived. You. She knows you'll probably never love her the way she wants you to, but she'll happily accept being your friend."

Harry shook his head. "It's too soon, besides, can you imagine little Ginny Weasley living among the Muggles?" he asked with a slightly bitter laugh.

Hermione leaned forward. "She would for you, Harry," she replied hotly. "As long as you didn't take away all her magic, she'd live just about anywhere with you. Just because you live with Muggles doesn't mean you need to renounce all your magic, you know."

Harry glared at her. "I said I'll talk to her. That's the only promise I'm willing to make at this point, Hermione. And for your information, just because I'll live among the Muggles doesn't mean I intend to act like one, or live like one. Muggles are little better than Wizards in my book."

He stood and placed his books and his computer in a space charmed book bag. "Listen, we can argue about this all day and the only purpose it will serve is to make us mad at each other again. We just made up and the wounds are still too fresh to start another fight. If we do, there'll be no turning back."

Hermione slumped back in her chair and nodded. "Can I at least sit with you during meals?" she asked.

He smiled weakly and nodded, then turned and walked out of the library, leaving a very worried Hermione behind. He had changed over the past summer, becoming harder, more cynical and disillusioned with the world. It wasn't a change for the better.

Gryffindor Girls Dorm, later that same night...

"Ginny?"

Ginny looked up from her homework. She sat cross legged on her bed. "Hi Hermione, what brings you down to the fifth year dorm?"

Hermione smiled and peeled off her robe before climbing onto Ginny's bed, then she cast a privacy charm.

"I spoke to Harry today... He seems changed, a lot," Hermione replied.

"Can you honestly blame him? Considering what the summer was like for him, I'm not surprised he's changed," Ginny replied, then she looked at her friend anxiously. "Did he say anything about me?"

"He said he won't bite your head off if you talk to him, but he also thinks that too much has changed... He's stopped thinking of himself as a wizard."

Ginny looked down at her hands which were nervously twisting her blanket. "He's going to push us away, isn't he?"

"Only if we let him. But I'd approach him carefully, if I were you. He's not very fond of your brother at the moment and from what he said, I sort of doubt he'll be forgiving him anytime soon."

Ginny's expression fell, then she nodded. "I knew I should have killed him when I had the chance," the girl muttered angrily.

For once, Hermione had nothing to say.

Bob's Special Note:

Recently I've posted a number of short stories while I work to get back into the groove of writing. A lot of people have made comments about wanting to see more of this story. I haven't abandoned it, but I will admit that I have lost a fair amount of interest in it.

The reason for that is simple. Voldemort.

Harry Potter and Dumbledore's Army
Harry Potter and the Spiritus Crystalis
Sunset Over Britain
Sunrise Over Britain

All of those stories have dealt with the issue of Voldemort. In fact I have a number of very large plot bunnies that will never see the light of day because of Voldemort. Frankly it's become rather old and hard to come up with new and interesting ways of killing off the bugger.

Other story lines, aka Wizards Fall, are more interesting to me as a writer because they aren't constrained by the mighty dark lord. The marriage law fic was another example of a post Voldemort world in which I had a greater freedom to play.

Mutant Storm is not abandoned. But it will probably go in directions that few will anticipate solely because I'm tired of dealing with Voldemort. The update schedule will be sporadic, but hey, it's not like you can demand a refund eh?

Mutant Storm

Chapter 06 - Weasley Woes

Standard Disclaimer:

Alyx stumbled out onto the stage and looked around with a scared look.

“It's time for another chapter of Mutant Storm,” she said hesitantly.

“YOU ARE NOT PREPARED!” shouted Illidian, dread lord of the Black Temple.

Alyx squeaked and whirled around. Seeing the dread lord she backed up. “But we're prepared!” she sputtered.

“You are not prepared!” Illidan repeated while slowly pulling out a fifteen foot long glowing sword. The sword of unpreparedness.

“BOB!” screamed Alyx. “Are we prepared?”

Bob looked up from his attempt to sap the boss when the raid wasn't looking. “Eh? I'm prepared! See?”

Bob opened his wallet and showed her a trojan condom that had to be at least thirty years old. “I'm always prepared, just in case.”

“You are not prepared!” shouted Illidan again.

Alyx squeaked and ducked as the massive sword just barely missed her. “No,” she gasped, “I meant are we prepared for the chapter.”

“Did you tell the people that we don't own Harry Potter?” Bob asked calmly. While the raid looked at Onxyia he calmed targeted a whelp and threw a dagger. *Let them survive this, snobbish raider bastards*, he thought to himself. *Armory me? I'll showthem!*

“No I didn't tell them that!” Alyx said with a whine, then she fell to the floor, just avoiding the burning blade.

“You are not prepared!” shouted Illidan”

“Bob!” shouted Alyx.

Bob looked up from his screen. “You are not prepared, you're so screwed,” he replied smugly.

Alyx glared at him, then hit Illidan with her Frying Pan of Infinite Attacks. “You're next buster,” she growled.

Bob looked up from the monitor and he paled and swallowed nervously. “Ummm on with the chapter while I see if I can escape the country quickly.”

Mutant Storm Chapter 06 Weasley Woes

Gryffindor Boys Dorm, (Monday, September 11th)...

Harry walked back into the dorm to change out of his work out clothes and take a shower before getting ready for the day. He was tired and sweaty.

“Where have you been, Harry?” asked Neville timidly.

Harry turned to look at him. He hadn't spoken with any of the boys in his room since school started. He was so busy ignoring Ron that he ended up ignoring the others as well. That had not been his intention, but it was the effect.

“Running, Nev. I get up early to do my exercises in the morning before classes start,” Harry replied, then he bent over to unlace his sneakers.

Neville looked at him for a moment in puzzlement. “But why?”

Harry glanced up at him and realized he was serious. He sat on the edge of his bed. “It's like this, mate. I want to be decent shape for the next time I get into a fight and the only way to do that is to exercise.”

“But why? You have a wand, isn't that enough?”

Harry shook his head, his expression serious. “Nev, at the Ministry, your wand was broken. If your wand gets broken again, how will you fight? Do you know how to fight without a wand? The Death Eaters won't wait for you to go get a replacement. They'll kill you if you don't defend yourself. If you're not in good shape, how will you be able to cast when your puffing like a bellows? If you want to survive this war, you need to be able to outlast your opponent. Every morning I run and do exercises to increase my speed and endurance, and I do some hand to hand fight training.”

Neville sat on his bed silently thinking about what Harry said while Harry stripped down to his boxers and grabbed his clothes for the day, along with a towel.

Harry?"

"Yeah, Nev?"

"Could I start running with you in the mornings?"

Harry turned to stare at him. Seeing the earnest appeal in Neville's eyes, he smiled. "I'd like that. Let me take my shower, then we'll go down to breakfast and talk about what you need. I think we can transfigure most of it, at least until I can have it sent in by owl."

"All right. I'll wait for you in the common room," Neville replied.

Harry went off to the showers. Twenty minutes later he met up with Neville in the common room. The few Gryffindors in the room seemed shocked to see Harry smiling and talking animatedly with Neville as they left.

Down in the Great Hall, Harry sat talking with Neville when Hermione and Ginny approached him. Hermione took her customary spot across from Harry, next to Neville. Ginny hesitated for a second, then sat next to Harry. He glanced at her for a moment and his eyes narrowed slightly.

She looked down at the table for a moment, hurt, then she lifted her chin staring at him defiantly. "I'm not Ronald, Harry," she said softly.

He dropped his own gaze in reply. "No, you're not," he replied softly, then he whispered to himself. "You're even more dangerous than Ron is."

Ginny smiled slightly to herself, then she pushed down her romantic feelings. She promised herself she would be Harry's friend and that was all she planned on being no matter how much it hurt her.

"Good morning, Harry, Neville," Hermione said, reaching for a pot of hot tea. "Have you two finished your Transfiguration essays? They are due this morning."

Neville nodded warily. He was always a little nervous around Hermione.

"Yeah, four parchments worth," Harry replied. "It would be so much easier if she'd accept normal paper."

Hermione's jaw dropped and she wasn't sure how to react. The essay was supposed to be only two parchments long. She had managed to extend it to three parchments and Harry had somehow managed to beat her!

Ginny grinned at her friend. "There's a new genius in town," she said with a laugh.

Hermione turned to scold at the red head when she realized that all three of them were smiling at her and laughing. They were teasing her and to her own surprise, she found it felt good. She sniffed loudly and turned back to her breakfast, trying to pretend it didn't bother her.

"Harry, have you thought about restarting the DA?" asked Neville.

Harry shrugged. "I haven't given it any thought, to be honest Nev. I'm swamped with two different set of classes, plus Potions. Someone else is going to have to worry about that this year."

"Wait a moment," Hermione said, her eyes narrowing. "You're not taking Potions."

Harry grinned at her. "That's right, I'm not taking Potions... at Hogwarts. I'm taking it elsewhere under a Potions Mistress. I understand Snape is quite miffed about it."

"So that's where you go all day Saturday and most of Sunday?" asked Ginny.

He nodded. "Yeah, we covered the freckle removal potion this last class," he said with a straight face.

Ginny's eyes lit up, then she looked at him hard. "Hey! There's no freckle removal potion!"

"There isn't?" Harry asked incredulously. "Perhaps Hermione can invent one then."

Ginny's eyes narrowed dangerously. "Are you making fun of my freckles, Potter? Just remember, I'm better than Fred and George."

Harry gulped and pretended to cringe back before grinning at her. He had to admit this was far better than sitting alone.

Just as they were finishing up breakfast, they were interrupted again, this time from an unwelcome source.

"So, Potter, I see you have finally hooked up with the rest of the misfits."

Harry looked up from his breakfast to see Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle standing there.

"Argh! Malfoy, get away, you're turning my stomach! I can't believe there isn't a spell to fix your ugliness." Harry said in a loud voice.

"Potter, you freak..." Malfoy snarled.

"Go ahead, wizard," Harry said, slurring the last word making sound like an insult. "Take your best shot, but it better be fatal, because mine will be."

A gasp ran through the hall and several teachers stood up, alarmed. Jean watched on with a smug grin on her face.

Malfoy reached for his wand, his expression full of anger.

Hermione, Ginny and Neville looked on, shocked at how quickly the situation had turned deadly.

“I’m waiting, wizard,” Harry said coldly. After five years of school, he was very familiar with Malfoy and his goons, and their wands.

Malfoy’s expression changed to one of confusion as he patted himself down, trying to find his wand. Crabbe and Goyle were both in the same boat, unable to find their wands.

Harry stood and let some of his magic pool behind his eyes. He loosened his grip on it such that everyone around could feel the magic radiating off him.

“You came here to fight me unarmed? Malfoy, you’re a bigger moron than I thought! I swear if you’re the type of wizard that Voldemmonkey is recruiting, it’s no wonder he hasn’t won yet. Go away, little wizard, go find your wand,” Harry said scathingly.

Harry let his magic push just a little. It wasn’t much, just a gentle puff of air, but it hit Malfoy in the face and he screamed then turned and ran. A moment later his two goons followed him from the hall. The Gryffindor table broke into laughter, followed by the other two tables. The Slytherins glowered at everyone.

He reigned in his magic and sat back down, satisfied that Malfoy would steer clear of him for at least another week.

“See what happens when you have no wand, Nev?” Harry asked.

Neville nodded, his eyes wide. “You don’t have to convince me, Harry. I’ll be there with you.”

“I wonder what happened to their wands?” Hermione mused. The incident startled her. Harry was much more powerful than he was last year. They had all seen the glow in his eyes and they couldn’t help but feel the power flowing off him. “It’s not like Malfoy to be without his wand.”

Harry grinned and pulled his book bag up off the floor, opening the bag he pulled out three wands.

Ginny started to giggle. “You summoned them?” she exclaimed.

Harry shrugged. It was better to let them think he had summoned the wands than for them to know the truth. Perhaps he’d tell them someday, but not today. It was the first time he tried to teleport an object to another location instead of his hand and he hadn’t been sure it would work.

“What are you going to do with them, Harry?” asked Neville.

He thought for a moment, then he grinned. “Hermione can you transfigure three napkins into small flags that say ‘Moron’? Just to be nice, put them in the Slytherin colors of green and silver.”

Hermione pulled out her wand and made the three flags. Harry took one wand and attached a flag using a sticking charm.

“Now, a levitation charm, followed by a follow-me charm and an avoidance charm,” he muttered, casting the spells to the astonishment of his friends.

Ginny started giggling again and he looked up to grin at her, then he banished Malfoy’s wand back to Malfoy. A few minutes later he had done the same with the other two wands.

“Levitation, follow-me and an avoidance... Oh, I get it! The wands will float over their heads for hours, just out of reach, and the flag...” Hermione’s eyes widened and she started to snicker.

Harry nodded, then he turned and stared at the staff table. Snape was attempting to use Legilimency on him. Harry’s eyes darted to Jean and he could feel her gentle presence. He let her in enough for her to see what Snape was doing.

Harry let Snape slither around, unable to even find his mind, then just to annoy the man, he winked at him.

Snape paled and trembled with impotent rage. Harry had done nothing that he could punish him for.

Harry turned his back on the man secure in the knowledge that he couldn’t break his shields. But he was going to have to do something about Snape.

Sitting next to Harry, Ginny smiled to herself. While they hadn’t exactly been holding hands, it had been a thawing situation. He had welcomed her back in his own way by teasing her. Unfortunately, it was more of a reaction she expected from her brothers than she expected, or wanted from Harry.

Across from Harry, Hermione was also thinking hard. Harry had been demonstrating a level of competence that outstripped her and she was beginning to wonder if he’d ever need her the way he used to. It saddened her knowing that her friend might not need her like that anymore.

Headmaster’s office, Hogwarts, (Wednesday, September 13th)...

Dumbledore turned away from Fawkes when the door opened. “Ah, come in Professor,” he said to Jean. “Lemon Drop? I assure you, these are the unadulterated kind.”

Jean sat in a chair and shook her head. “No, thank you, sir,” she replied politely.

“No doubt you are wondering why I asked to see you. First off, let me say that while I’ve heard mixed reviews on what you are teaching, I am rather pleased with the results myself.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Jean, I find myself with a problem and I'm hoping you might be able to provide a solution," he said, then he reached into a drawer and pulled out a blackened, ink stained book with a hole in the center and handed it to her.

Taking his own seat behind his desk, he let her examine the book for a bit. "Back in his second year, Harry battled a memory of Voldemort from his days when he was Head Boy here at the school. This shadow of Voldemort was contained within that book and it was slowly draining the life force of one of our first year students when Harry stopped him."

"Ginny Weasley," murmured Jean, turning the book over and over in her hands.

"Ah, so he's told you about that then?"

"No, he and I... shared memories. He let me see what his life had been like. I wanted to know about Voldemort and that was the quickest way for me to discover what I needed to know," Jean replied. "I also shared my school memories with him to help him catch up to where he should have been."

Dumbledore nodded. "Yes, that would be useful indeed. What Harry didn't know, and what I only found out in the past year is that this book was more than just a charmed copy of Voldemort at age seventeen. Voldemort has done something unspeakable. He created a Horcrux."

Jean frowned; she had heard that term before. "I know that word, but I don't know what it means, Headmaster. What is it?"

Dumbledore smiled sadly. He knew he'd have to share information in order to get information. "A Horcrux is a vessel in which a piece of a person's soul is placed. It is evil magic of the blackest kind. In order to create a Horcrux, you must split off a piece of your soul by killing someone in cold blood."

Dumbledore pointed at the book. "That book was a Horcrux, one of six which Voldemort created to house pieces of his soul. And until all five remaining Horcruxes are destroyed, he cannot be killed. Unless the Horcruxes are totally destroyed, Voldemort will continue to return, over and over again. He is, in a word, immortal."

"Five? But you just said..." Jean stopped seeing him raise a hand.

"Five Horcruxes, plus his own body, Jean. Originally the number was seven, but Harry took care of this Horcrux."

Jean leaned back in her chair, listening carefully.

"Harry destroyed that book by plunging the tooth of a basilisk into it. The same tooth that had been used to poison him. Fortunately, Fawkes saved Harry's life by weeping tears into the wound.

"I haven't had the opportunity to research it, but Madam Pomfrey told me that he now carries the magic of both the Basilisk and the Phoenix in his blood, both continually warring with the other. And now Fawkes shows Harry more courtesy than any other human he knows" Dumbledore paused and sighed before continuing. "But I'm getting off the track.

"My problem, and one I hope that perhaps Charles and you might be able to help with, is finding these other Horcruxes and destroying them. You see, you and your people have abilities we do not and you seem to be able to bypass some magical safeguards, like the ones on my door. And until all the Horcruxes are destroyed, Voldemort is unbeatable."

He leaned forward in his seat. "Can you tell me where you heard of the term?"

"From Snape," Jean said, thinking hard. "Remember I said that Voldemort had a hold on him?"

Dumbledore nodded worriedly.

"Snape seemed to be concerned that Voldemort had something of his. After that thought he castigated himself for ever being interested in creating a Horcrux. I didn't understand the word at the time, but now it makes sense. I do not dip into people's minds very often because the process can be unsettling, but I have done some brief scans of the man." She paused for a moment, then shuddered. "His mind is like a sewer." She straightened up in her seat and looked at him intently, trying to get back on track. "So, Voldemort has protected his Horcruxes?"

He did his best to remain outwardly calm. The information she'd given him about Snape was alarming, but he wouldn't consider it in front of this particular witch.

Dumbledore held up a hand and she noticed for the first time that there was a bandage covering the back of it. "I found one Horcrux, a ring, and in the process of destroying it this past weekend, I was very nearly caught in a trap that has ruined a piece of my hand. Madam Pomfrey says she's not sure if it will ever heal properly. No magic she has can help it. Had I been a little slower, the trap might have caught all of me."

Jean stood and walked around the desk. She took his hand in hers. "Do you mind?"

Dumbledore looked surprised, but nodded. "I forgot, you're trained in Muggle medicines."

Jean nodded and she carefully unwrapped the bandage revealing the back of his hand, burned badly. She turned it to examine the burn, then she pulled her wand and cast a lumos to examine it in detail under better light.

"That's a bad burn, second and third degree, covering most of the back of your hand. And while I'm sure Madam Pomfrey is an excellent healer, she didn't do anything to help with this. Are you in much pain?"

"Madam Pomfrey makes an excellent pain relief potion," Dumbledore replied, his eyes twinkling.

Jean frowned. "Ordinarily I'd suggest taking you to a burn treatment center, but somehow I doubt that's an option."

"Hardly," Dumbledore replied with a laugh.

"Very well, Headmaster, I'm going to summon Harry here with my medical kit. That will hold you over for the moment. Tomorrow, you, Madam Pomfrey and myself will sit down and I will show her a Muggle way to care for this burn, which will speed the healing, reduce the scarring and help prevent secondary infections. Left to heal on it's own it could be nearly a year before you're fully healed, if you don't die from a secondary infection first. Follow my method and your hand will be well on it's way to healed by the time a month has passed and you will retain use of your hand because we'll minimize the scarring."

Jean leaned back and frowned. "Now how can we send a message to Harry asking him to bring me my medical kit?"

"Why not have an elf bring it?" Dumbledore asked curiously.

"Would you trust an elf with something Muggle and as dangerous as my kit can be?" she asked rhetorically.

"I see. Very well, let's use an elf to summon Harry then," he replied.

Dumbledore summoned an elf, who appeared a moment later.

"Ah, Binken. Excellent! He'll take your message to Harry and his teacher will know he's been sent by me."

Jean turned to the little elf. "Gentle Elf, please find Harry Potter and tell him to bring my medical kit from my room to the Headmaster's office."

The elf nodded and vanished.

"While we wait, let me find out if Charles can come here for a visit," Jean said. She pulled out her mobile phone and pressed two buttons. Dumbledore's eyebrows rose in shock when she began speaking a moment later. He had heard rumors about her phone, but this was the first time he saw her using it in the castle.

She was just finishing her phone call when the door opened admitting Harry, carrying Jean's medical kit. Harry frowned, seeing the Headmaster.

"It's all set, Headmaster. Professor Xavier will arrive tomorrow along with a few others. We can discuss it then," Jean said, then she turned and smiled, seeing Harry.

"What's going on?" he asked, tensing up. He couldn't think of any reason why Professor Xavier and the X-Men would be coming to Hogwarts.

"It's nothing bad, Harry. You can attend the meeting, as well, if you wish. It does involve you in a way," Jean replied, holding her hand out for her medical kit.

He nodded, then his eyes widened seeing the blackened patch of skin on the back of Dumbledore's hand. "Madam Pomfrey couldn't fix that?" he asked incredulously.

Jean gently applied a cream, then she placed a self sealing bandage over the wound and wrapped it in gauze. "This needs to be cleaned and redressed three times a day, Headmaster. Tomorrow, after breakfast, I will meet you in the infirmary and I'll show Poppy how to do this. I'll also arrange to ensure we have enough cream on hand. If Poppy can help manage the pain I'm sure we have have this mostly healed in a month or two," Jean said, then she shrugged. "Muggle methods aren't the fastest in the world, but they can fill in the gaps in wizarding medicine."

Dumbledore looked at his bandaged hand, then he turned to Harry. "I'm afraid that not everything can be easily healed, Harry. Madam Pomfrey did her very best, but the curse that caused this injury was too resistant to being healed. Your aunt offered an alternative."

"My mother," Harry said flatly.

Jean shot him a warning look and he calmed down somewhat.

"Harry, I know I have made many mistakes in regard to your life and I see now how deeply I hurt you. I'm more sorry than you'll ever know and I hope you'll let me try to make it up to you," Dumbledore said softly. He knew that no matter what happened, he needed the boy on his side.

Fawkes opened his eyes and trilled in surprise, seeing Harry. The large bird took to the air and glided over to rest on his shoulder, singing softly. Jean was shocked at the calming effect the bird was having on everyone present.

Harry struggled for a moment before giving in to the Phoenix song. He looked at Fawkes, who gazed down at him smugly. "Smart arse uppity bird," he muttered to himself.

Jean started to laugh which broke the tension even more. Fawkes jumped into the air and glided over to his perch again. The expression on the large bird clearly said he was pleased with himself.

Harry looked at Dumbledore, then his gaze dropped. "I can't promise anything anymore," he whispered, then he turned and fled the office. Fawkes trilled softly, it sounded almost sad to their ears. He had eased the tension, but not the conflicts and emotional storm Harry was experiencing.

Jean glanced at Dumbledore apologetically.

"Don't apologize for his behavior, Jean. He is still hurting, although he's been hiding it well. Only time will heal his wounds, like my hand. Go find him and make sure he's all right. I don't need to use Legilimency to know right now his emotions are close to overwhelming him."

Jean closed up her medical kit and let the office in search of Harry. She finally found him in a classroom on the third floor, thanks to a helpful house elf.

"Harry?" she called upon entering the room.

He sat on the floor staring at a covered mirror.

“Here, Mum,” he said softly.

She walked over and sat down next to him.

“What’s under the sheet?” she asked.

“The Mirror of Erised.”

“How about repeating that in English this time?” she asked, nudging him with her shoulder.

He grinned. “I don’t know, Mum. I speak English, what you speak is debatable.”

“Hey now! I may be a colonial heathen, but you’ll show me respect,” she replied laughing. “Now, what is the Mirror of Erised?”

Harry’s happy mood vanished. “It’s a mirror that shows you what you desire more than anything else in the world. Back in my first year I found the mirror and I saw myself and my Mum and Dad. I used to come here every night to look in the mirror until Dumbledore found me one night. He told me it doesn’t do well to dwell on dreams...”

Harry paused then he looked away from Jean and took a shuddering breath. She could see he was struggling to maintain control over his emotions. “Back there, in his office, I wanted to yell and scream. I wanted to cast my most dangerous spells, I wanted to hurt him like he’s hurt me, but I couldn’t. Not with Fawkes working his phoenix magic.

“How can I make him understand what he’s done? I don’t think he ever will understand,” he said in a whisper.

Jean wrapped an arm around Harry and he let her hug him, but he was feeling decidedly uncomfortable about it. His empathy was picking up conflicting emotions from her that made him uncomfortable.

“I think it would be best for all if I don’t attend tomorrow’s meeting, Mum,” he said softly.

She pulled away enough to look in his eyes. “Are you sure?”

He nodded, then stood. “I’d better get back to class.”

“All right,” she said dubiously. Something was bothering him badly but she didn’t dare press him on it.

As Harry left the classroom, Jean stood and walked over to the mirror. She pulled aside the sheet and gasped. She dropped the sheet and hurried from the room, her complexion pale.

Hogwarts, (Thursday, September 14th)...

Harry was just sitting on the edge of the field when his friends caught up with him. Neville, Ginny and Hermione approached from the school. Harry nodded to them in greeting, then he went back to looking upwards. At the opposite end of the field, a small transponder pinged automatically. He had placed the unit there a few minutes earlier.

“Harry, what are you looking for?” asked Neville.

“The Blackbird,” he replied.

“Harry,” Hermione protested. “We passed nearly a dozen blackbirds on the way down to this field. Wouldn’t any of them served your purpose?”

Harry grinned at her and placed a finger next to his nose in salute. “Not that kind of blackbird, Hermione,” he said, then he paused to listen. In the distance, he could hear a muted whine approaching fast. “The Blackbird I’m looking for is about to arrive.”

All three of his friends flinched as the grasses in the field suddenly flattened by a blast of hot wind. The sky above the field shimmered and the all black jet aircraft appeared. Landing gears were extended and it slowly lowered itself down to the field.

Harry stood and brushed off the grass and dirt on his pants, then he walked out to the now cooling aircraft. His friend followed warily behind him. He stopped while the ramp lowered from the rear of the aircraft and several people exited the plane, including Professor Xavier.

Harry walked over to his mutant friends, grinning. Seeing Scott, he broke into a run.

Scott’s expression was one of surprise when Harry hugged him, but he smiled as he embraced the young man.

“Harry, would you introduce us to your friends?” asked Xavier.

“Guys, I want you to meet Professor Xavier, Logan and my dad, Scott Summers. This is Ginny, Hermione and Neville,” Harry said pointing people out.

“Are they all witches and wizards like you, Wiz?” asked Logan in a growl.

“Yeah, they’re all magical like me, Logan, so watch yourself with them, or they will turn you into a fluffy bunny rabbit,” Harry said with a grin.

“Harry!” Hermione admonished. “We wouldn’t do that.”

“That’s right,” Ginny added. “Today is Thursday, so we’d turn you into a cow because it’s a beef for dinner night. Rabbit is Sunday nights.”

Logan did a double take, then he glared at Ginny, who looked back at him innocently. She was at least a foot and a half shorter than he was.

“You talk mighty big for someone so short,” he growled at Ginny.

Ginny smiled prettily up at him, then turned to Harry. “Is he a werewolf? He seems awful grumpy.”

Logan extended his claws under Ginny's nose and she took a step back, then she waved her wand and muttered something under her breath. The claws lost their frightening appearance when Logan found his hand clutching a bouquet of flowers. Scott started laughing and Ginny grinned at him.

Logan growled low in his throat, but Harry stepped in front of Ginny. “Now, Logan, she's only showing that size can be deceptive. Isn't that one of your lessons you teach in the Danger Room?”

“I'll show you deceptive, Wiz,” he muttered, then he backed off and grinned at Harry.

“Harry, are you attending this meeting with us?” asked Xavier.

He shook his head. “I don't think that would be a good idea, sir. Frankly, I'm not sure it's a good idea getting involved at all with whatever he's scheming,” Harry said darkly.

Xavier frowned for a moment, then he nodded.

“Mum's waiting up by the entrance for you, sir,” Harry added.

“Thank you. Come along Scott, Logan.”

Scott paused. “Will you be here? Otherwise I'll lock up the Blackbird.”

“I'll lock her up when I'm done. I want to use the diagnostic bay to check out my jet's inertial guidance module. It seemed a little wonky the last time I took it out,” Harry replied.

Scott nodded and followed the others up to the school.

Harry motioned to the others to follow him up the ramp. “You can't hurt anything. Most of the systems are shut down and I'll be shutting the rest down in a bit.”

Neville and Ginny followed Hermione bravely, but they were clearly awed by the bright lights and shiny consoles.

Harry walked over to one section and opened his book bag. He pulled out a small black box, which he plugged into the console.

“Harry, how come this plane is so much quieter than yours?” asked Hermione.

He tapped a few keys on a keyboard and lights started to flash as the module ran through it's tests. “The Blackbird is designed to be quieter. My jet has a whisper mode, but not nearly as good and I sacrifice a lot of power and speed using it.” He grinned at her. “Besides, what you heard that first day was me deliberately breaking the sound barrier. My way of saying, Honey, I'm home.”

Hermione nodded thoughtfully, while Neville and Ginny looked confused by the purely Muggle reference. Harry used them more frequently these days and the two pure bloods often resorted to having Hermione explain his turn of phrase.

He pulled the module from the docking plug and waited a minute while the results were printed on a small slip of paper. He looked at the results, then shrugged and placed both the paper and the module back in his book bag.

“Come on, let's close up, then we can head back to the school.”

He led the others down the ramp. At the bottom of the ramp he pressed a few buttons under a hidden panel which caused the ramp lift back into the body, then the plane faded from view.

Hermione grinned at him. “Disillusionment charm?”

“Adaptive Optics,” he replied with a smirk.

“How did you learn all that stuff, Harry?” Ginny finally asked, her curiosity getting the better of her.

Harry paused and turned to face his friends. “I could say that it came from several sources. Professor Xavier and my Mum are powerful telepaths. They were able to pass enough information to me to get me started. I'm a very weak telepath, more of an empath really, it's not my main talent, but I had enough of the ability to build shields to protect my mind from Voldemort, and to be able to link with the Professor and Mum. Outside of that, I'm more empath than telepath.”

“So, what is your main talent then?” pressed Hermione.

Harry shook his head, his expression becoming serious. He looked around carefully to see if anyone was listening. Hermione, Ginny and Neville leaned in close. “It's a secret,” he whispered, then he walked away, laughing.

Hermione scowled and resisted the urge to stamp her foot in annoyance. A moment later Ginny was laughing and Neville was grinning.

“So, let me see if I get this right,” Logan said. “This guy, Voldiemart, made a bunch of whore crutches and you need our help in finding them and destroying them before anyone tries to kill Voldiemart. And why would anyone want a whore on a crutch?”

“Logan!” hissed Jean, blushing furiously.

Dumbledore flinched several times as Logan spoke, then he nodded. “That’s basically correct, Mr. Logan. Each Horcrux is guarded. What I’d like to find out is if you might have means of destroying them that would differ from what we would do. The chances are good that the Horcrux is hexed to protect itself against magical attacks.”

“I think perhaps a demonstration might be in order for the good Headmaster. Scott? Would you do the honors?” asked Xavier.

“I’d love to, but on what?” Scott asked, looking around at all the knick knacks in Dumbledore’s office.

Realizing the problem, Dumbledore hastily conjuring a drinking goblet. “Would this suffice?” he asked, placing the metal goblet on the desk.

Scott nodded, then he reached up to open his visor. A bright beam of energy lanced out and less than ten seconds later, the goblet was gone, totally vaporized. The desk underneath was untouched by the energy.

Dumbledore sat back heavily in his chair. “My word!” he exclaimed. With a shaking hand he reached forward and touched the spot on his desk. It wasn’t even warm!

“My X-Men have a variety of talents, Albus,” Xavier said softly. “I daresay we can find a way of destroying your Horcruxes.”

“Yes, I can see that,” Dumbledore replied, eying the spot where the goblet once lay. Then he turned back to his guests. “My thought was to team up some of your people with mine, Charles. I have a very smart curse breaker who can locate and disarm most traps around the Horcruxes and then your people can destroy them.”

“Do you know where they all are, Professor?” asked Jean.

Dumbledore shook his head. “Sadly, we do not. I have several people that I trust researching the matter, but we have little to go on but memories of Riddle’s interactions with others. What I propose is that once I have a suspect location, I’ll ask Jean to contact Charles and we’ll set up a trip to visit the location. William Weasley, our curse breaker, will check the object, if it’s there, then test it for traps. The traps may require destroying the Horcrux in place.”

“All right, if that’s settled, will someone tell me why Harry didn’t attend this meeting?” asked Xavier. “He really should be here.”

“I think he’s still hoping not to get himself involved in this fight, Professor,” Jean said. “The past weeks have been difficult ones and he’s had several encounters with Death Eaters. He’s holding in his temper, for now, but he’s feeling pushed. I’m doing all I can to ease the pressure on him, but the people around him seem to expect him to take a leading role in this war. So far, he’s been refusing it.”

“Encounters with Death Eaters? Where?” Dumbledore asked in confusion.

“I’m referring to Malfoy and his cronies, Headmaster,” replied Jean.

“Draco’s not a Death Eater,” protested Dumbledore.

“I’m afraid you’re wrong, Headmaster. He took the mark this summer. Harry probably sensed the charm on his arm to conceal the tattoo. Over the summer he developed the ability to see magic. That’s another reason why Harry refuses to trust you. You’ve done nothing to remove the enemy you have within these walls. He thinks your insane, trying to give everyone a second chance, and he’s convinced you will lose the war because you refuse to fight it.”

Logan shook his head and whistled low.

“Do you have something to add, Logan?” asked Xavier.

“Yeah, don’t let the Wiz get into a fight with these guys, not unless you have some body bags handy. In every simulation we ran this summer, he killed Death Eaters. He didn’t take a single prisoner if he knew they were Death Eaters. His fight at the Ministry taught him a valuable lesson; don’t leave live enemies behind for other enemies to rescue.”

Dumbledore shook his head in dismay. He could not afford to have the Boy-Who-Lived killing Death Eaters! Society needed that blood!

“I hate to say this, Headmaster, but they aren’t the only students with marks. Most of the seventh and sixth year Slytherin boys are marked and a couple in Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff. There’s even one in Gryffindor. But many of the Slytherin girls are rejecting Voldemort, probably because of his attitudes towards women,” Jean said.

Dumbledore sighed heavily and wiped at his face tiredly. “Can you provide me with a list of names, Professor?” he asked Jean.

Jean nodded.

“Is Harry safe here? Should we consider pulling him from school?” Scott asked worriedly.

“It’s not just Harry, Scott. There are nearly one hundred Muggle born students and even more half bloods at risk. Granted, Harry is especially at risk, but he can take care of himself in a fight,” Jean said confidently.

“I’d like to see that verified,” Dumbledore stated quietly. “I’m not doubting your word, but it would ease my own mind if I knew he could take care of himself.”

Scott shook his head. “That won’t be possible, Headmaster. If he doesn’t trust you, then he won’t trust anyone you ask to check his skills. You

put him into a fight with one of your people and you're likely to lose that person."

"Perhaps you are right, I will think about it more," Dumbledore replied with a sigh. *This poses considerable difficulties*, he thought. *These children need to be shown that their path is wrong. I can't do that if they are killed.*

Gryffindor Boy's dorm...

Harry sat on his bed, finishing his essay on cellular mitosis for Professor Xavier. Most of the other boys were already asleep and he'd soon join them. He made a face and stared at his notebook screen. He really didn't like Biology very much. While he enjoyed the sciences in general, he seemed more drawn to things like Physics and Math than Biology.

He tapped a few keys on his keyboard, content that the other boys couldn't hear him thanks to his silencing charm. A sudden movement caught his eye. Placing his notebook aside he picked up his Marauder's map.

Malfoy, he thought. *What could he be doing out of Slytherin house at this hour of night? He's not a prefect anymore.*

He's heading for the Room of Requirement. I don't think he's meeting anyone. I don't see any other names moving on the map and there's no one in the room.

He placed the map down once Malfoy had entered the room. There was nothing more to see and even if he got to the room, it wouldn't show him what Malfoy was up to.

"I'm going to watch you like a hawk this year, ferret," he whispered to the map, then he turned back to his essay. He'd deal with Malfoy and his mystery another time.

Jean's quarters, Hogwarts...

"Something is bothering you babe, what is it?" Scott asked gently.

Scott had stayed behind while Logan and Professor Xavier returned to Blackmoor Castle. Jean was glad he had, but she wasn't sure how to broach the subject.

She paced in front of him while he sat on the couch watching her walk back and forth arguing with herself. Finally he had had enough and he grabbed her by the hand, pulling her into his lap for a searing kiss.

She struggled in his arms for less than two seconds before giving in. When they were done, she moved back slightly, her eyelids fluttering. He laughed softly and kissed her forehead.

"Now, tell me what is bothering you?" he asked again.

Jean sighed and snuggled closer to him.

"The other day, Harry stormed out of Dumbledore's office," she said, then she held up her hand motioning him to be silent. "I went after him to find out if he was all right. He wasn't and he isn't, but that's another issue. The point is, I finally caught up with him in an unused classroom on the third floor and I found him sitting on the floor staring up at a covered mirror.

"I think he was afraid to see what the mirror had to show him. He called it the Mirror of Erised, and said that it showed people what they desired the most in the world."

"So what did you see?" asked Scott with a grin.

Jean looked at him and laughed softly. "You know me too well, don't you?"

Jean's mood sobered and she dropped her gaze. "You're right, I did look after Harry had left the room. I thought it wouldn't show me anything different but it did, and I can't get it out of my mind now."

"So, what did you see?" Scott asked, suddenly becoming worried.

"I saw us, Scott. You, me, Harry, and two more children. A little girl maybe three or four years old, with hair almost as red as mine, dressed in a pretty green dress and in my arms another child, wrapped in a blue blanket. We were all a family," Jean said in awe.

"You sure this mirror wasn't showing you some kind of vision of the future?" Scott asked carefully.

She shook her head. "It can't be. The last time Harry looked in the mirror he saw his parents. It was showing what my heart desires."

Scott kissed Jean's neck softly and she sighed against him. His hand slid up her flank, slowly caressing her.

"I guess I better get started," he murmured in between kisses.

"What are you talking about?" she asked.

He stopped and looked at her. "Jean, I promised you I'd do my best to give you as normal a life as possible and if it were in my power, I would deny you nothing. The mirror says what your heart desires and I'm not going to go against it. I think Harry is going to like having a little sister and maybe a little brother."

As Scott spoke he was busy unbuttoning her blouse. She wrapped her arms around him, holding onto him tightly. "Oh, Scott," she breathed in his ear.

Hogwarts, (Monday, September 17th)...

Harry wasn't sure what prompted him to dive to the floor, but he was glad he did. The green light arced through the space he had just occupied. Someone had sneaked up behind him and fired off a curse!

He tried to flex his wrist to release his wand from his holster, but his hand wasn't working properly. His hand flared in pain, instinctively he teleported. The teleport was only a few feet, but it reoriented him in the direction of his attacker and placed him in the shadows. Harry stayed in that strange phase space while staring up the now empty corridor. Any sign of another curse and he'd teleport to Blackmoor castle.

It wasn't that late, but there was no one to be seen. Whomever had fired the spell didn't stick around to see the results. He ground his teeth in anger and glanced down at his hand, which was rapidly swelling. In his dive to the floor he had damaged his hand beyond a simple bruising. He had a choice, he could go to Madam Pomfrey or go to his Mum. Madam Pomfrey would contact his Mum, so going straight to Jean would short circuit part of the process. Gathering up his book bag with his good hand, he slung it over his shoulder then pulled out his wand.

He thought about teleporting to his mother's apartment but he wanted to use his abilities as little as possible in Hogwarts. He wasn't ready to let people know what he could and couldn't do. That left him with little choice but to travel down the four levels to his mother's apartment. Down four floors in what he now considered dangerous territory.

He moved silently and carefully, stopping often despite the pain in his hand. He stopped to listen and examine the corridors and stairs. Occasionally he'd cast detection charms for traps and wards. It was slow going because the castle was full of magic and he was using his wand in the wrong hand. His wandless magic wasn't up to casting the complex detection charms.

Finally he reached her door and banged on it loudly with his foot. He was facing away from the door, scanning the corridor for threats when Jean opened the door.

"Harry? What are you..."

He pushed his way in. "Not here, Mum. Close and seal the door, behind me," he said tersely.

He stepped past her, still favoring his injured hand and entered the small sitting room. He stopped seeing Professor McGonagall sitting on the couch.

The Deputy Headmistress looked at Harry sternly. "You know students aren't allowed in staff quarters," she said in a disapproving tone.

"Yeah, well, when the staff starts enforcing the rules with the other students, then see me about coming to my mother's quarters," Harry snapped.

Jean stopped in the entrance, shocked by Harry's rude comment. "Harry! Apologize at once to Professor McGonagall!"

He turned to stare at Jean. "No! Not until they start doing their job! I'm not here for a social call, I'm here because your apartment was closer than the infirmary."

Jean stepped up to him. "What? Are you hurt?"

Harry nodded and held out his hand, which was very swollen. Jean's eyes widened and she examined his hand carefully.

McGonagall saw the hand and stood. "I'll floo Madam Pomfrey," she said, stepping to the fireplace.

"How did this happen, Harry?" Jean asked.

He looked at her and she sensed he was willing to let her see his memory of the event. He carefully lowered his shields and pushed the memory forward so she could find it easier.

McGonagall turned away from the fireplace to find Jean and Harry staring at each other. When Poppy stepped through the fireplace, she motioned for her to be silent for a moment.

Finally, Jean blinked and stepped back, her expression deepening into a scowl. "I see."

Poppy stepped forward and waved her wand over Harry's hand. Above the hand an image of the bones formed. Poppy and Jean leaned closer to examine the image.

"Two dislocated fingers and a dislocated wrist. I must say, Mr. Potter, when you do something you do it right. I need to pop the bones back in place. Do you want something for the pain?" Poppy said.

Harry shook his head and looked away.

Poppy frowned and took his hand in hers. She gently massaged his hand for a moment, then there came a series of sharp pops. Jean looked on, appalled by his lack of reaction. Professor McGonagall flinched with each pop.

Harry flexed his hand slowly, wincing slightly. "Thank you, Madam Pomfrey," he said softly.

She cast several more spells on his hand, then reached into her bag and handed him a small single dose vial. "This will help you sleep tonight. By tomorrow your hand will probably only ache a little."

Harry smiled shyly at her and nodded his head.

Jean stepped up to him. “Go straight back to your common room for tonight. No side trips, all right?”

McGonagall frowned and opened her mouth to speak, but Jean shook her head slightly.

“I got it, Mum,” he replied.

Jean smiled and hugged him tightly. She was trying to control her emotions but she was having trouble after reviewing the incident in his memory.

He hugged her back, then turned and left the small apartment.

“Why did you send him away, Jean?” asked McGonagall. “We need to know what happened.”

“I already know what happened,” Jean said absently. She shook her head and turned her attention back to Professor McGonagall. Poppy moved to sit next to her on the couch.

“Harry hurt himself, dodging a curse flung at his back. I'm not sure, but I think someone tried to kill him tonight. He didn't see who it was. He was coming back from the library when it happened.”

“Did he hear the incantation?” pressed McGonagall.

Jean shook her head. “No, he didn't. But it was a bright green. The same color he has nightmares about. He's seen that light too many times.”

“We should contact Professor Dumbledore,” Minerva said softly. “He'll need to be told.”

“We should be doing our jobs,” Jean said bitterly in reply. “You know as well as I do that the sixth and seventh year Slytherin boys are dangerous. But we're not allowed to do anything about it! Harry was right, we expect him to follow the rules, but we're encouraged to look the other way when it's a Slytherin breaking the rules.”

“You know why, Professor,” Minerva replied unhappily. “Lucius Malfoy might have lost a lot of his political clout, but he's still on the Board of Governors for this school. Besides, Professor Dumbledore wants to give these children a chance to redeem themselves.”

Jean walked over to a large armchair and sat down heavily in the chair. “Minerva, I know you will tell the Headmaster what happened. So you should also pass along a warning from me. If Harry had seen who had fired at him, he would not have hesitated to kill the assailant.”

McGonagall frowned and shook her head in dismay. Surely it wasn't that bad, was it?

“Oh, Jean, Harry wouldn't do that,” Poppy said softly.

Jean nodded. “He would. He'd hate it, but he'd do it. He spent the summer training to fight as though his life depended upon it. When he passed the view of what happened to me, he also told me to not bother fighting over this. He felt it was a waste of time, since he knew the Headmaster would ignore it, then he told me he'd kill his assailant next time.”

Poppy and Minerva exchanged unhappy looks, knowing there was very little they could do.

Slytherin Boy's Dorm...

Blaise Zabini crawled into his bed, unhappy with himself. He had a perfect shot and somehow he had missed! He was incensed. He'd had the opportunity! Potter had been alone and it still hadn't mattered!

He growled in the back of his throat. He wanted Potter, badly. The Dark Lord gave him permission to do whatever it took to hurt Potter and he was going to have his pound of flesh for what Potter did to his family.

Unlike the other pure blood families who got caught up in Harry's financial vendetta this summer, his had the money, but bankrupted itself paying off the debt. His father's business was gone and he was struggling to keep a roof over their heads. All because Potter enacted some ancient law!

He punched his pillow viciously and rolled over on his bed, fuming and berating himself for missing what was a perfect shot.

“You'll pay, Potter,” he swore softly. “I swear it!”

Headmaster's Office, Hogwarts (September 20th)...

Jean stepped into the office and paused, seeing Professors Sprout, Flitwick, Snape and McGonagall.

“You asked to see me, Headmaster?” she asked Dumbledore.

“Yes, Professor. Please come in and sit down. We have a problem which I think you can help us with.”

Jean took a seat next to Minerva. “Oh?”

“You remember us talking about the missing Hufflepuff girls?”

“Yes, I remember. Have you managed to find them?”

In a manner of speaking, it took Filius several days to figure out the problem. Mind you, part of the problem is these girls were handing in their homework on time and, being first year students, no one really knew what they looked like.

"It was Filius who discovered they had been turned invisible. We've since charmed the girls so that we can see them, so that problem is at least partially resolved."

Jean looked at Dumbledore in confusion. "Excuse me, Headmaster, but I fail to see how I can help in this matter. Can't you simply reverse the spell?"

Dumbledore looked sheepish. "Yes, that was our first thought also, but it turns out they weren't turned invisible using a spell. The only remaining visible Hufflepuff first year girl is Cynthia Creevy. I believe I mentioned her to you before?"

Jean leaned back in her chair when she realized what he was asking. "Ah... The mutant witch you told me about. You think she's the cause of the girls becoming invisible then?"

Dumbledore lifted a hand helplessly. "If not, then we are running out of answers."

"Professor, what can you tell us about mutants at her age?" asked Filius.

Jean turned and smiled at him. She liked the little man and greatly enjoyed the few lessons she had with him.

"A mutant's abilities can be awakened in one of two ways, Filius. In the case of Cynthia, she's growing into her powers, so they activate slowly over time and usually begin to manifest themselves when she first begins to undergo puberty, although there may be some sporadic incidents before puberty begins.

"The second way requires a trauma to invoke the powers. Something terrible happens and the powers surge to the surface as part of the survival instinct. Harry is one such case. His abilities awoke at nearly full power over the course of days, not months like they should have, had they developed normally.

"Harry fits into a category which we call a survival mutant. His abilities awoke because his survival depended upon them. Had Harry gone through his teen years without such a trauma, they never would have awoken. There are no records of anyone older than nineteen awakening their powers. Without his powers, he would have merely been a carrier of the X gene.

"If Cynthia's powers are just coming to the surface now, they will be erratic for a while and she probably does not yet have the ability to turn things visible. I know some exercises she can do which will strengthen her control over her powers."

"Excellent!" Dumbledore said smiling broadly. "Will you need to give her any other special instruction?"

Jean thought about it for a moment. "That depends on how well her control develops, Headmaster. If necessary, I can ask Charles to come visit for a while to help her. Learning control is the most difficult thing a mutant must do, especially when the mutant's abilities are destructive in nature. Scott had a terrible time learning to control his abilities in the beginning. From what I understand, the damage was extensive. On the other hand, Harry had excellent control almost right from the start, but that's because they switched on, fully developed."

"Oh, this is ridiculous!" Snape said with a sneer. "Headmaster, if the girl is being that much of a nuisance, just expel her and be done with it."

"No!" protested Professor Sprout. "She's just a little girl. She didn't even know that she was turning her friends invisible!"

"Clearly compassion is not one of Professor Snape's leading qualities," Jean said frostily, then she turned to Professor Sprout. "Don't worry, Ponomia. I will work with her and if needed, call in more experts to help her."

"More freakish mutants?" Snape growled. "That's all we need, another like precious Potter."

Jean turned and glared at Snape. "I warned you once before, Professor, I'll not warn you again. Curb your tongue or I'll curb it for you."

"Enough!" barked Dumbledore. He threw an angry look at Snape, who shrank back under his glare. "No one is being expelled. And especially not for this. The mutant issue is going to continue in the wizarding world. I am already aware of four more possible mutant wizards that will be arriving at this school in the next few years. Ignoring it won't make it go away. These students are witches and wizards with an extra ability. And that is exactly how we will treat them. Am I clear on this issue?"

Everyone nodded, although Snape did it very reluctantly.

"Minerva," Dumbledore said in a gentler tone, "will you sit in on Professor Summer's sessions? I would like us to learn what we can so that we can handle future students with special abilities."

"Of course, Headmaster," replied Minerva.

"Excellent then," he said, then he nodded to Jean. "Thank you for your help."

"Jean," Flitwick said, stopping her. "I notice that you have carefully avoided mentioning exactly what Harry's powers, or your own, are."

Jean nodded. "Yes, I have Filius. Please do not take offense, but Harry has been told to keep that information strictly secret. As to myself, I am a telepath. That is a broad term which covers several mental abilities. The more powerful a mutant, the more he or she can do within the restrictions of their abilities. There are several things I can do because my talent is quite strong. Harry is also a very powerful mutant. Harry and I tend to refrain from using our abilities unless absolutely needed. The Headmaster knows of one of my abilities and I'll have to ask you to leave it at that. Perhaps another time, Filius, we can invite you to Professor Xavier's school for a visit if you're interested in learning more about mutants."

Filius nodded happily. It would be a trip he'd love to take!

Jean smiled, then stood and left the office with Professor Sprout close behind.

“Jean?” Ponoma called.

Jean turned to wait for her.

“Will you be able to help her? When it became apparent that she was the source of the other girls becoming invisible, she panicked. She's terrified that she is going to be sent away.”

Jean smiled and patted Ponoma on the arm. The older woman was clearly worried about her student. “Don't worry, we'll be able to help her. But if you think it will help, why don't you sit in on the first few sessions I have with her?”

“Can I? Really?”

Jean nearly laughed at Professor Sprout's earnest look. “Yes. I think you'll find it nearly as helpful as Cynthia will.”

“Oh, thank you! I must go tell Cynthia about this. She will be so relieved!”

Professor Sprout rushed away, leaving Jean standing there shaking her head in amusement.

“This won't last, you know. Sooner or later you and your kind will be thrown from this school,” said a hated voice.

Jean turned slowly to stare at the man. “You know, you ought to go look up what happened to the dinosaurs, Professor. If you're not careful, the same fate awaits you and those that share your beliefs,” she said, then she turned and walked away from Snape.

Snape shook his head and scowled. He was beginning to think both Jean and Potter were daft, talking about nonsense.

Muggle Studies Office (September 22nd)...

“Come in!” Jean shouted over her shoulder. She and Harry were struggling with a computer that she wanted set up. Harry was currently under the table hooking up cables and muttering to himself.

“Did we come at a bad time, Professor?” asked Professor Sprout.

Jean turned to spot Professors Sprout, McGonagall and a frightened little first year girl.

“Oh, no, please come in,” Jean said smiling at the student. She hoped she'd be able to put the girl at ease. It was bad enough learning she was a witch and now she had to deal with another ability on top of that.

“Mum, jiggle that mouse cable will you? Oh, wait, I think I found it,” said a voice from under the table.

McGonagall's eyebrows raised nearly to her hairline. “I take it there is a reason why Mr. Potter is under the table?”

Jean smiled wanly and nudged Harry with her foot. “I apologize. I had problems setting up my computer so Harry offered to help me,” she replied.

Harry peeked out from under the table, his eyes widened and he scrambled out, then stood brushing off his pants.

He reached over and flipped the power on the computer and watched as it started up.

The girl eyed the computer with interest. Her parents were Muggle born, so she was no stranger to electronics and computers.

“Harry, take a seat. You'll probably find this interesting,” Jean instructed as she sat down and motioned the girl closer.

“You're Cynthia, aren't you? Don't be afraid, you're not in trouble,” Jean said softly.

The girl approached Jean and the other two Professors sat down to watch.

Jean offered a hand to Cynthia, smiling at her.

“Do you know what I am, Cynthia?”

“You're a witch?” asked Cynthia uncertainly.

“I'll say,” Harry muttered with a smirk.

Jean shot him a glare and he shrank back in mock fear.

“Yes, I'm a witch,” Jean said, turning back to the girl with a smile. “But I'm also a mutant, like Harry is, and like you are.”

Jean summoned a paperback book from the shelf and held it out to the girl.

“Can you make this invisible like you did with your friends?”

Cynthia reached out shyly and pressed a finger to the book. It slowly faded from sight.

“Astounding!” exclaimed Professor Sprout.

"Yes, good work, Cynthia! Ten points to Hufflepuff," agreed Jean.

The little girl smiled broadly and preened a little under the praise.

"Cynthia, do you know what a mutant is?" asked Jean.

The girl nodded, then shook her head and dropped her gaze.

Jean chuckled and leaned back in her chair. "A mutant is a regular person with one tiny little change in their DNA makeup. One gene that activated your powers..."

"Professor, you're confusing her," Harry complained, seeing the girl's glazed look.

Jean looked up at Harry. "Then you explain it."

Harry stood, walked over to Cynthia and put his hand on her shoulder. She looked up at him with huge eyes. As a Creevy, she had heard all the stories about Harry Potter from her brothers.

"All you need to know right now is that you have an ability that came from your parents. They loved each other so much they created you by mixing pieces of themselves together, like making a potion. They loved each other and you, so much that they made you extra special by giving you an extra ability. Professor Summers will teach you to use that ability. It's not magic, so you don't have to worry about the Ministry during the summer months. You can continue to develop your skill."

Harry's expression hardened. "What you tell your friends is up to you, but you are no different than any wizard or witch in this school. So don't believe them if they say otherwise."

Harry's expression softened and the girl looked at him nodding. He turned back to Jean. "She won't need to know about genetics yet, Professor, not until she gets the Talk."

"You're a mutant too, Harry, aren't you?" asked Cynthia shyly.

Jean hid a grin. It was obvious to her that the Creevy brothers weren't the only ones in the family crushing on the famous Harry Potter.

Harry nodded, oblivious to the girl's obvious infatuation.

"So you can make things invisible also?"

Harry smiled and shook his head. "No, I can't. Our abilities vary from person to person. I know people that can shoot laser beams from their eyes, or fly. I know one very nice lady that can control the weather. Maybe someday you'll meet her. Everyone is different, even though there is some overlap and from time to time people have more than one ability."

Cynthia looked up at Harry. "So, what is your ability then?"

He leaned closer to her. "It's a secret, but someday I'll tell you."

Both Sprout and McGonagall looked disappointed at hearing that.

Harry winked at the little girl and she giggled and smiled back at him shyly.

Harry glanced over at the two professors. "Sorry, Professors, but I don't think I should let that information out yet."

"We understand," Professor Sprout said, to Minerva's displeasure.

Harry turned to Jean. "Mum, we need either to bring Hank here, or take Cynthia to Hank."

"Oh, why?"

He frowned at her. "We need to know exactly what she's doing when she turns something invisible. I can think of several ways to accomplish that, and at least one of them is quite destructive."

Jean frowned and nodded reluctantly. "Maybe. I'll talk to the Headmaster. Hank will probably want her to visit him," she replied, then she turned to the Professors. "What Harry just pointed out is that there are several ways you can make something invisible. It's important to find out what method she's using. If her method is dangerous, we need to know about it."

"That's one of the drawbacks of being a mutant," Harry said, jumping into the conversation. "You need to know your limitations and your abilities perfectly, or you can hurt yourself and others. My Dad, for example, he can heat your cup of tea in a second, or vaporize the cup, the table it sits on, and the floor under it. Learning about your talent is important."

"Right now I don't think Cynthia is hurting anyone. But we should play it safe."

Jean turned back to Cynthia. "For now, Cynthia, I don't want you to turn anything invisible, especially your friends or anything alive. Can you do that for me?" she asked the girl.

Cynthia nodded wide eyed at her.

"Excellent, take another ten points for Hufflepuff. And don't worry, we'll be turning plenty of stuff invisible when you come for your lessons," Jean said.

Cynthia shot a look at her Head of House, who smiled broadly. It wasn't every day that one of her first years picked up twenty points.

"Excellent work, dear. Why don't you run back to the common room and your friends now?" Sprout said.

Cynthia nodded and walked from the room.

"Who is this Hank you spoke of?" asked McGonagall after the girl had left.

"Doctor Hank McCoy. He's one of Professor Xavier's people. He's also one of the smartest people you'll ever meet. He should have no problem figuring out what Cynthia is doing," replied Jean absently.

"When he's not hanging upside down from the ceiling reading Shakespeare," Harry muttered. Jean shot him a warning look and he shut up.

McGonagall stood. "I'll speak with the Headmaster. How long do you think this Hank would need? And how far away would she have to go?"

"Southern England, I can't be more specific because I don't know the exact location," Jean said apologetically. "But I don't think Hank would need more than a day. Perhaps a weekend would suffice?"

"She'd need a faculty escort," murmured Sprout.

"I can supply that unless you want to come Ponomia, or perhaps you, Minerva," Jean offered.

"No, nothing should be decided just yet. I must speak with the Headmaster, and we'll need to get parental permission for a trip of this nature," Minerva said.

Jean nodded while Sprout looked disappointed. Harry stayed in the background, checking out Jean's computer. The conversation no longer concerned him.

Malfoy Manor (End of September)...

Severus Snape slipped out of the door and hurried past the main gate until he reached the boundary of the wards. There, he apparated away. He had a meeting to attend to.

Up in the Gryffindor tower, Harry watched from a window with narrowing eyes. He didn't trust Snape at all. That wasn't saying much; there were a lot of people he no longer trusted. But Snape was something special. Snape was an evil git, and more. Of that he was absolutely certain.

Snape walked to the door and lifted the heavy gold knocker making it fall loudly against the door. An elf opened the door a moment later and stepped back, letting Snape enter the large foyer. He removed his cloak, tossing it at the elf.

"Master says you are to go straight in, sir," said the frightened elf.

Snape's eyes narrowed and he felt a twinge of fear. His Lord must want to speak with him personally if he was to go straight in. Ignoring the elf, he walked quickly into a library, heading to a particular bookcase. He reached for a particular book and pulled; the bookcase moved into the wall and slid aside, revealing a staircase going down.

As he walked, he slipped on his robe and mask. It wouldn't do to walk into the Lord's presence without being properly attired.

He slowed, hearing screams coming from the audience chamber. Someone had invoked the Dark Lord's wrath. Opening the door to the chamber, he slipped inside, hoping to remain inconspicuous.

Voldemort looked up from the man writhing on the floor and smiled. It was a hideous smile. It made his visage even more frightening and it was aimed directly at Snape!

"Ah, Severus," Voldemort said in a croon. "Approach me."

Swallowing nervously, he approached the throne Voldemort sat upon. He stepped over the man on the floor, who was still convulsing.

"Malfoy," Voldemort said.

"My lord?" Malfoy said, stepping forward.

"Dispose of that," he said with a gesture to the man on the floor. "I no longer need his services and he has displeased me."

Malfoy bowed, then pulled his wand and turned to the man. "*Avada Kedavra!*"

The green beam struck the convulsing man and he went limp. Then Malfoy levitated the body and walked it from the room.

Satisfied, Voldemort turned back to Snape. Snape swallowed nervously. The newly created corpse being removed had been one of the most promising new Death Eaters. Snape had been sure the man would soon be elevated to Voldemort's inner circle of trusted followers.

"Well now, Severus, I have not heard from you in a while. I was wondering if you would respond to my summons," Voldemort said in a dangerous tone.

Snape dropped to his knees and groveled. "I live only to serve you, my lord."

Voldemort nodded absently and fingered his wand. "If that is the case, then why have you not been in contact?"

"My lord, things are in an upheaval at the school. I fear Dumbledore may suspect me, as I find myself being excluded from key meetings. The old fool is taking even more precautions than usual, and the inclusion of these mutants..."

"Yes... the mutants. Why I do believe they could be as useful to us as the werewolves," he said with an evil laugh.

Several others in the chamber joined him. The werewolves had been promised equality and better treatment if they sided with Voldemort. He had no intention of giving them what they wanted however, and every intention of seeing that most of them were killed in the process of taking down his enemies.

"What can you tell me about these mutants, Severus?"

"Not much, I'm afraid. The one mutant that Dumbledore hired as a teacher is firmly backing Potter. In fact, all of the mutants I've met so far are backing him. On the other hand, they do not seem to be exactly on Dumbledore's side either. Potter no longer trusts Dumbledore and refuses to work with him or his people."

"Interesting," Voldemort murmured. He motioned for Snape to stand and continue talking.

Snape gratefully rose. "There are three mutants in the castle now. Jean Summers, Potter's aunt and adoptive mother, Potter himself and a first year Hufflepuff. Dumbledore says that the number of mutants with magic will increase in the coming years. As to their abilities, I can't say what they are. Potter keeps his secret. His mother says she's a telepath, but she hasn't demonstrated any abilities that I've been able to discern. Both Potter and his mother are immune to Legilimency. I am unable to penetrate their minds. And the Hufflepuff girl is apparently just coming into her powers. She is still a child with no control over her abilities.

"There have been other mutants visiting the castle, meeting with the Summers woman or with Dumbledore. But I have not been included in those meetings."

Voldemort made a disappointed noise and he looked at Severus mournfully.

"I shall do my best to make sure they include me from here on, my lord," Snape said hastily.

"Succeed, Severus. I want to know what Dumbledore is up to. I also want to find out who is leading these mutants. Perhaps he would be amenable siding with us. If not, we'll kill him."

"Yes, my lord."

"Now, Severus, I want you to remind young master Malfoy that he has a task assigned to him. Remind him that the consequences for failure would be... unpleasant. And also tell Master Zabini that I expect results," Voldemort said.

Snape nodded, all the while wondering what tasks Draco and Blaise were given.

"My lord, is there anyway I can assist either of them?" he asked, trying to find out more information.

Voldemort gave him a piercing look, then shook his head. "Remember your place, Severus. You are in charge of my servants in that school, but I still command them. Both Malfoy and Zabini have high priority tasks, which should not require your assistance. However, if they should choose, they may ask for your help."

Voldemort paused, glanced around the room, then turned back to Snape. "Now, what else is happening in the school?"

"Well Lord, it seems that Potter and the Weasley boy have had a major falling out as a result of that newspaper article. Also, there is almost always an Auror presence in or around the school. Next month's Quidditch match will have a large number of Aurors present.

"I have spoken with the older girls of Slytherin and they have again refused your call. Conditions are tense in the house, as the girls and boys are close to open warfare. Perhaps if you moderated your stance on involving women in your service..."

"*Crucio*," Voldemort whispered.

Snape fell to his knees screaming in pain. Voldemort stood, keeping his wand and the curse trained on Snape. "Do not presume to question my methods, Severus. Fortunately for you, I still have a use for you. As to the women, they will come to join my forces willingly or unwillingly. Either way, they will serve as mothers to the army I will build."

Voldemort released the curse on Snape and he collapsed to the floor, whimpering and panting painfully. Voldemort slashed his wand, casting a privacy charm so only Snape could hear him.

"I own you, Severus; never forget that. You thought yourself capable of being above me, now I own you. Or have you forgotten?"

Voldemort reached into a pocket and removed a small leather pouch. Untying the laces, he upended the pouch and a silver ring bounced into the palm of his hand. "I own you, Severus. I own your mind, your body... and your soul. You who once thought to put himself above me. I possess your Horcrux, never forget that."

Snape crawled forward and kissed the hem of Voldemort's robe, while most of his mind gibbered in terror. He was Voldemort's. Of that, there was no doubt.

Just after graduation, he had joined Voldemort's service because he wanted to learn more about the dark arts. While in his service he stole a book about Horcruxes and created one for himself. Then Voldemort discovered what he had done, and had found the Horcrux which he now dangled cruelly just out of Snape's reach.

Voldemort knew more about Horcruxes than anyone and he had enchanted Snape's Horcrux. Should it ever be destroyed, Snape would be destroyed. Not killed, destroyed. His soul would be torn asunder and he would cease to exist. There would be no afterlife for Snape.

“My lord, I am your humble servant. I beg your forgiveness,” Snape murmured, still kissing the hem of his robe.

“Enough! Return to that school and carry out your orders!”

Snape climbed painfully to his feet and bowed before backing out of the chamber. *Sometimes*, he thought, *life really sucks*.

The Great Hall, (Beginning of October)...

He paused in the entrance way and looked around. His friends were busy talking at their customary place at the table. Jean sat up at the staff table talking with Madam Pomfrey. Not far from his friends sat Ron, looking both angry and miserable.

Harry sighed and looked down for a moment. He knew that the situation between himself and Ron couldn't continue as it was. The level of tension in their dorm room at night was becoming unbearable. His empathy was picking up on the tension and making it even worse than it was.

Jean looked up sharply and sucked in her breath when she saw Harry approach Ron.

A hush fell at the Gryffindor table and it quickly spread to the rest of the school as they watched the two former friends face each other.

“Ronald,” Harry said softly, catching Ron's attention.

Ron looked up in surprise and his expression became guarded. “Yes?” he replied warily.

“I think we need to talk. Someplace other than here.”

“Just talk?” Ron asked warily.

Harry smirked. “Yes, just talk.”

Ron looked ruefully down at his dinner, then he pushed the plate away and stood. “Where to?”

“Let's go outside. It's not that cold out yet.”

Ron nodded and followed Harry out of the Hall.

Ginny and Hermione watched the pair with tears in their eyes. Both knew what Harry was experiencing by trying to make peace with Ron. Jean, up at the staff table, looked extremely pleased with her son.

Harry led Ron down the path towards Hagrid's hut until they reached a set of benches at the halfway point. Harry sat for moment in silence. Ron sat a few feet away, unsure of what to do now.

“What did I ever do to hurt you, Ron?” asked Harry softly.

Ron blinked at Harry and he shook his head. “What? No, Harry. Look, I've mucked things up for sure. You'd be right to hex me and I wouldn't even try to stop you,” Ron replied.

Harry moved to speak but Ron shook his head.

“Please, just let me say this straight through, then we can go on our separate ways. For the longest time, I've been Ron Weasley, youngest of six sons. Nothing I owned was new. When I came to Hogwarts and I met you, I became Ron Weasley, Potter's friend. Despite our adventures, I was still in your shadow just like I was in the shadow of my brothers.

“Why can't you be more like Percy, the Head Boy? Or like Bill, also Head Boy and a curse breaker,” Ron said in a fair imitation of Molly Weasley.

“I've always been hidden, in the back, invisible, or known for being the person that knew the one that did it all. I was jealous, Harry. So jealous I couldn't see reason, all I saw was your fame and wealth. I ignored the scars on your back and pretended they didn't matter. I ignored the fact that your clothes were in even worse shape than mine. I knew what it cost you to have those things, but I was too stupid and too wrapped up in my own problems to care.

“When you released Percy and brought him back to the family, you angered me so much. Here was Harry, who wasn't even part of my family, returning Percy to us because you didn't want to see Mum and Dad hurting. I couldn't make Percy come back, but you could.

“And then Dad said you had proven yourself a friend of the Weasley's forever. I'm convinced that if you hadn't found your Mum, my parents would have been clamoring to adopt you themselves. I stormed out of Dumbledore's office, hating you and hating myself even more.

“I didn't have any plan, I didn't know what I was doing. I just knew I needed to think. I hated you and I couldn't see a valid reason for it. I wandered into the Hogs Head pub and bought a fire whiskey. I planned on sitting there and thinking about things until they were straight in my head. The server kept bringing me more and more drinks, and next thing I know I'm talking to Rita Skeeter like she's a long lost friend.”

Ron paused and he looked away, his eyes were suspiciously wet. “I should have known something was up. All those drinks couldn't have been bought with just one galleon,” he said angry at himself. He turned to look at Harry. “In the course of a single hour, I threw away the best parts of my life. And I hurt my best friends. If there was a way to take it all back, I would in an instant. I lost my two best friends and my family hates me even more than they hated Percy.”

Ron stood, looking miserable. “I know it's not nearly enough, Harry, but I'm more sorry than I can ever say. Try not to hate me too much...

please?"

"Sit down, Ronald," Harry said softly.

Ron sat with a surprised look on his face. He hadn't expected Harry to accept his apology, so he had no idea what Harry was going to do.

Harry looked up, surveying the gathering dusk for a moment.

"I nearly killed myself at the end of last term, Ron, that's how bad off I was," Harry said flatly.

Ron turned to stare at him incredulously.

"You've been jealous of me and I've been nearly as jealous of you. Do you know how much I envied you and your family. Sure, you may not be rich, but you had something even better than money, Ron, you had the love of your family.

"When you sent me letters saying you were at the Burrow and I knew you weren't I was so angry. Angry and hurt. And then that article was printed and you said I wasn't even human. How am I supposed to react to that, Ron? Should I just forget what you've done until the next time?"

Ron shook his head in dismay. "I don't know, Harry. I don't have any answers, not for your problems or for mine. I've only just realized these past few weeks that I have no one to blame but myself for most of my problems. I wish you could say the same, but we both know a lot of your life was out of your control."

Harry looked down at his feet, then over at Ron. "Damn, this can't go on. We need to end this fight before the others in our room tie us down and make us kiss and make up."

Ron shuddered at the thought. "Somehow, I doubt you'd allow yourself to be tied up."

Harry smirked. "Depends on what she had in mind," he replied, then his expression darkened. "You're a git and a chump, Ron Weasley. We may never be best mates again, but I can't spend the rest of my life hating you, either. Where we go from here is your call. I don't trust you and there's no friendship without trust. I can't tell you how to rebuild what we've lost; that's something you're going to have to figure out yourself. But I will tell you, here and now; pull another stunt like talking to Skeeter and I'll turn your sister loose on you."

Ron sagged on the bench and looked away. Harry could feel him struggling to contain his emotions, so he stood. "I'll catch up with you later," he said softly.

Ron nodded gratefully, afraid to say anything. Forgiveness was something he had not expected from Harry and it humbled him. Tears threatened to fall unchecked and he knew if he said anything, he'd lose it entirely.

Harry turned and trudged back up the path towards the school. He felt emotionally drained by the conversation.

He was surprised to be met by Jean, Hermione, Ginny and Neville.

Jean had taken a liking to the shy Gryffindor whose life paralleled Harry's in many ways. She was helping him improve his school work by teaching him basic memory exercises to improve his concentration. They were similar to what Xavier taught Harry when he first started to learn to shield his mind from attack. Surprisingly, it was doing wonders for Neville's class work and spellcraft.

Harry stopped, seeing all four waiting for him.

"Well?" asked Ginny impatiently.

He grinned and looked at Jean. "Are all red heads this impatient? I thought it was just you, but she's the same way. Was my Mum like this too?"

"Potter," growled Ginny warningly.

Harry pretended to take a step back in alarm. "All right all right, cool your jets and ground. He's alive. I can't say I've forgiven him, but I can't keep hating him. He was stupid, but he was also ambushed by Rita Skeeter, so it's not entirely his fault. He's got a lot of work ahead of him before I'll trust him with my dirty laundry, let alone anything important. But I've told him he has this chance. It's up to him to do what he can with it. I also told him if he blows it, I'll turn him over to you, as punishment."

Ginny nodded in satisfaction, while Neville and Hermione grinned.

Jean stepped up to Harry and hugged him. He stiffened in her embrace and she looked at him curiously.

"What is it?" she asked.

"When are you planning on telling me?" he asked, trying hard to keep the bitterness out of his voice.

"I'm sorry? What are you talking about?" she replied.

"I'm not a good telepath like you Mum, but I can feel your anxiety every time you see me. You're afraid I'm going to find out something you've been holding back from me. I'm an empath, remember?"

Jean looked shocked, then her expression changed as she realized that her hiding things from him had left him doubting her.

Harry's friends stared wide eyed at the two.

"Harry," Jean said carefully. "I didn't hold anything back to hurt you. There are things I haven't told you because I know it would upset you. And I

can't tell them to you here, in front of your friends. They have no protection from a Legilimencer."

"We could learn!" blurted Hermione.

When everyone turned to look at her, she blushed and shuffled her feet. "Well, we could. I haven't been a good friend of Harry's these past few months and that has to change. I need him in my life. And if that means I have to learn a skill to protect him and his secrets, so be it."

Ginny and Neville nodded in agreement.

Jean looked at his friends, then turned back to Harry. "Well? Can you hold off until they learn? It could take a while."

Harry nodded reluctantly. "I don't like it."

Jean stepped closer and wrapped her arms around him. "I know you don't, sweetie, but you need your friends. You'll need them close to help you when I tell you what I know."

He relaxed in her embrace. He didn't sense any deception on her part.

His friends smiled seeing Harry relax. They knew that Jean was the best thing to ever happen to him.

"Hugging is a great way of preventing a spontaneous Grigger attack."

Harry looked up to see Luna standing nearby, smiling at him. He stepped back from Jean. "Hello, Luna."

"Hi Harry, Ginny, Hermione, Neville, Professor Summers. Harry, have you finished cleaning out Ron's fuzzy thinking?"

Harry blinked and tried not to smile. It didn't help that Ginny was suppressing a giggle. "Yeah, I have, Luna."

"Oh, good. Now it's my turn. I need to teach him not to open his mouth without making sure he has no kite ticks in his ears," Luna said, then she went skipping down the path in the direction of Ron.

Jean blinked and stared at Harry. "Is she sane?" she asked incredulously.

"More sane than anyone is willing to believe, Mum," Harry answered seriously. "People make fun of her and treat her cruelly because she sees the world differently than the rest of us. It's a shame. She's really a sweet girl. I think she fancies Ron."

"How did you know about Luna?" asked Ginny with a touch of jealousy.

Harry shrugged. "She's been bullied for most of her time here at school. She told me about it last year while you guys were at the leaving feast," Harry said, then his voice dropped. "It's something I can relate to. Most people tend to overlook Luna, but those that know will pay attention to her. She can, with a single sentence, change your entire attitude."

Harry motioned for the others to move into the castle. It was dark and getting chilly.

Jean moved to sit at a bench nearby just inside the castle entrance. "What did she say to you?" she asked Harry.

"She told me she was glad I had stopped hiding. And I was, I guess, in my own way."

Jean nodded, having already made the connection Luna was referring to. But his friends hadn't.

"Hiding? How were you hiding?" asked Hermione.

Harry sighed and stared at the floor for a long time. Finally, he raised his head and looked at Hermione. "Your parents praised you for good grades. If I beat Dudley's scores, I got beaten, and Dudley wasn't a good student. It wasn't until I nearly got to our OWLs before I realized the Dursley's didn't give a damn about my Hogwarts grades," he replied in a soft tone. "Before Hogwarts, I was a good student, except when it came to homework or tests."

Hermione gasped in horror. In her mind, nothing was worse than being forced to get bad grades.

Neville scowled and muttered, while Ginny grabbed Harry in a hug.

Jean watched Harry's face carefully. Shock and surprise flitted across his expression before settling onto a look of bemused confusion.

"Er, right. Anyone for dinner?" Harry asked awkwardly, unsure of what to do next.

Author's Notes:

For those that had no clue what was happening in the disclaimer, I'll point you to the following url.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EVPZIJV_xGg&feature=related

It's a bit of a joke for those that play warcraft about being prepared, all thanks to that three minute video.

Mutant Storm

Chapter 07 - Eroding Support

Standard Disclaimer:

Alyx peeked over Bob's shoulder and grinned. "Well it's about time! I was beginning to wonder if you ever planned on posting another chapter."

"Oh please, I just wanted to make sure enough of our readers whined about another chapter before giving them some measure of relief," Bob replied airily. "Besides, it's not like we haven't posted anything else."

Alyx nodded. "Yes, I know, my Harry Potter and the Dancing Llama Drama is coming along nicely and soon I'll be able... wait... isn't that the memory stick I saved my files too?" she asked in consternation.

Bob was busy crushing the memory stick in a vise. "Oh this? Dunno, I found it sticking out of your computer and thought it was an odd growth that had to be destroyed."

Alyx clutched at her head and tugged on her hair. "Oh my story! Now the readers will never know about Harry and his love affair with an alpaca!"

"I'm counting on it," Bob muttered.

"What?" she screeched in reply.

"Nothing dear, why don't you tell the good readers about our disclaimer so we can play the chapter for them."

Alyx nodded tearfully then turned to the audience. "We don't own Harry Potter, or his Llamas!"

Bob shook his head and sighed heavily. "It could be worse folks, there was an attempt to make him an orphaned Orc from Orgrimmar, and then she wanted to make a Harry Potter Death Knight cross over. Fortunately I swapped her save and delete buttons on her word processor."

Suddenly Alyx's expression brightened. "Wait! I printed out my story, I can rebuild it!"

Alyx turned and raced off the stage while Bob started a barbeque using sheets of Alyx's printout. "So anyone want a burger to eat while you read?"

Mutant Storm

Chapter 07

Eroding Support

The Room of Requirement...

Draco hit his thumb with the hammer, dropped the offending tool and cursed. Assembling the cabinet was not going well. He was no carpenter and the instructions he had been given made little sense.

The cabinet had been smuggled into Hogwarts piecemeal in order to bypass the wards. He'd been ordered to assemble the cabinet and then activate it by casting a series of charms on it. His Lord had been generous in the schedule, but he was going to need every extra day in order to put the thing together.

His father had given him strict instructions: finish the cabinet by May, or be disowned, disinherited and quite likely killed. The last part had been a bit fuzzy, but Draco wouldn't put it past Lucius.

He glanced longingly at his wand once more, but knew it was useless. The cabinet had to be assembled by hand or the enchantments would not work properly. He had to put it together the Muggle way and he was hating every minute of it.

It wasn't helping that the large cabinet contained a lot of ornate woodwork in separate pieces, and every piece was essential.

He was also hating Blaise Zabini at the moment. Both boys had tasks to perform for their Lord, but Blaise had the more satisfying one, in Draco's opinion.

Draco's job was to annoy Potter and get the cabinet assembled.

Blaise's job was to find a way to eliminate Potter.

It just isn't fair! Draco thought angrily. *I should have that job! But no, I have to play Muggle carpenter.*

In frustration, he picked up the hammer and tossed it amidst the still unassembled pieces and stormed from the room.

Harry shrank back into the shadows when the door to the room flung open. If nothing else, Draco was running true to form. He'd been in the room for just under two hours before he stopped doing whatever it was he was doing.

Draco was already on his way downstairs when Harry looked again. Growling under his breath, he teleported back to his bed. He was no closer to solving this mystery than when he first discovered it. He was going to need help.

He had tried phasing and just walking through the wall. It was then he discovered that the Room of Requirement was more capable than he

thought. Walking through the wall had simply led him to a large empty room.

The Great Hall (October 3rd)...

“Potter.”

Harry paused just outside of the Great Hall and turned to face Severus Snape.

“What?”

Snape sneered. “Twenty points from Gryffindor for not showing the proper respect for a Professor.”

Harry shrugged and started to turn away, but Snape grabbed him roughly by his arm.

“I want to know what you've been doing, Potter. I know you're up to something and I'm not letting you go until I get an explanation.”

Snape pushed Harry back into a wall and the young man grunted in pain and dropped his books.

A small crowd began to form to watch the impending fight.

Harry glared at the hated Professor, quickly losing his patience.

Unknown to him, he wasn't the only one losing patience. Voldemort had sent Snape a precisely worded message to find out what Potter's mutant ability was, even if it meant blowing his cover. The Dark Lord was upset that Snape wasn't delivering the information he wanted.

The pressure Voldemort had begun to apply was causing Snape to make some bad decisions.

Harry broke free of the Professor's grip and moved sideways, then crouched down, waiting for the man to make a move toward him. If Snape took another step, he'd show him exactly what Logan had taught him over the summer.

“What is going on here?” asked a frosty voice.

Snape turned and scowled, seeing his chance to get anything out of Potter vanish. “Nothing, Professor,” he replied to Minerva. “Potter and I were just about to have a conversation. I wanted to quiz him on what he's learning from his potions tuition.”

Minerva glanced at Harry, who looked ready to kill, then she turned back to Snape. “Professor, I will remind you that the Headmaster has given you strict instructions to leave Mr. Potter alone this year.”

Snape bent his head slightly, acknowledging the point. “Of course. I merely wished to ensure that he's being taught properly.”

Minerva looked at Snape for a moment, then turned to Harry.

“Mr. Potter, your friends are waiting for you to join them for lunch. You're dismissed,” she said.

Harry blinked in surprise and looked at her for a moment, then he looked down. She was one of the few teachers he still had some respect for. “Yes, Professor,” he mumbled, then scooped up his books and hurried into the hall.

Minerva watched Harry's retreating back for a moment, then she turned back to Snape. “The Headmaster may grant you a fair amount of latitude with the students, Professor, but I will not. If I find you have accosted Mr. Potter again, I will go over the Headmaster's head and take it directly to the Board of Governors,” she snapped. With one final glare, she turned and followed Harry into the hall.

Snape stared at her in astonishment, then noticed the crowd of students still watching him. “Well?” he snarled. “Get out of my sight before I start deducting points and issuing detentions!”

The crowd melted away almost instantly, leaving the dour potions Professor alone to wonder why McGonagall was so antagonistic towards him.

Hogwarts (October 4th)...

Harry sat with his back leaning up against a tree. Most of the students were out taking advantage of the unseasonably warm day. He didn't expect the weather to last, as his radio had already reported a large cold front sweeping in from the North Sea earlier in the day. It was probably the last mild day they'd have before the winter storms started.

He closed his eyes, lifted his face to the sun and smiled. He felt her nearby, something he'd felt often of late, but she rarely interacted with him if he was alone. It was as if she were going out of her way to avoid him.

“Hi, Ginny,” he said softly and heard her small gasp of surprise.

“How do you do that?” she demanded, moving in front of him and sitting down a few feet away.

He opened his eyes. “I'm a empath,” he replied, as if that answered everything.

“You've said that before, but I don't really understand it. Your mum talks about being a telepath and she makes it seem like there are a lot of things to it. But neither of you have explained anything.”

Harry looked at her for a moment, then shrugged. His empathy wasn't much use to him. It was simply a hold over from his mother's abilities. As it wasn't his primary ability, there really wasn't any reason to keep Ginny in the dark about it. “I feel the emotions of people. The more I care

about a person, the more I'm able to sense what they're feeling. Sometimes I can even feel the emotions behind a magical casting."

"You're reading our minds? Like Legilimency?" she exclaimed, alarmed.

Harry made a motion for her to lower her voice. "Of course I'm not reading your mind! There's a difference between knowing what someone is thinking and what they're feeling."

Ginny hitched in a breath and stared at him, wide eyed. "Y-Y-You know how I feel?" she stammered.

"Yes," he said softly.

The silence between them grew heavy.

Looking down, Ginny finally broke the silence. "I see."

Harry closed his eyes. Her pain was like a living presence beating at him.

When she stood up, he resisted the urge to reach for her.

"Don't go," he said quietly.

She turned to look at him incredulously. "Why not? You don't share my feelings. I'd like to be your friend still, but I need to figure out how to get over you."

"You're asking me to give you something I don't know how to give!" he retorted. This conversation was harder than he thought it would be.

She stared at him for a moment, dumbfounded. "What?"

Harry looked toward the lake. "You want things from me, Ginny, and a big part of me wants to give them to you. But another part of me keeps asking what I know about love and relationships? Nothing, that's what. My brief thing with Cho last year proved that. That part of me says I'm only going to mess up again and I don't want to do that to you. The last thing I want to do is hurt you," he said, his expression troubled.

Ginny sat back down, looking at him with an indecipherable expression.

Finally, he turned and smiled weakly at her. "I don't know how to give you what you want," he whispered.

"If I asked you a question, would you promise to answer truthfully?"

He eyed her warily. "That depends on the question. There are some things I'm not ready to reveal just yet."

Ginny nodded. "Fair enough. Do you like me?" she asked bluntly.

He stared at her for a moment, then nodded.

Doing a mental victory dance, she decided to press her luck. "I can't hear you," she said softly.

"You know I do," he mumbled.

"Well, why don't we just take things slowly, then? Maybe hold hands once in a while or something like that? I promise I'll do my best to help you through the rough spots," she offered gently. Her thoughts were spinning, trying to figure out how to coax him from his shell without scaring him. Jean's comments about Harry being unused to this kind of human interaction came back to her and she realized she'd have to lead for a bit, until he become more comfortable.

Harry searched her expression carefully, then did something he hated doing. He reached out with his empathy, testing the measure of her sincerity and found no deceit. Exhaling the breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding, he smiled. "I'd like that."

Ginny sat back. For the first time since summer she felt as if things were looking up. "So, what now?"

Harry looked around, then checked his watch. They had an hour to kill before dinner. "Would you like to go flying?" he asked shyly.

Ginny grinned. "I'd love to, but I left my broom up in my dorm room."

Harry laughed and pulled his jump jet from his pocket. He stood and walked a way from her a bit, then bent down and placed the little plane down on the ground. Removing his wand from his pocket, he waved it at the jet, causing it to expand to normal size.

Ginny looked at the jet with a touch of fear in her expression. "Fly in that?"

Harry glanced at her, a challenge in his look. "Afraid?"

She swallowed nervously. "In your dreams, Potter. We Weasleys were born to fly," she replied bravely.

"Excellent!" He waved his wand at her, changing her robe into a flight suit.

She looked down at the strange, tight fitting garb. She was about to comment on it when she saw him transfigure his clothing to match. Then he walked over to the side of the plane and opened a hatch on the side, pulling out two helmets. He handed her one, then he reached inside again, pressing the button to open the canopy.

He couldn't help but notice that her flight suit was revealing curves that weren't normally visible with her school robes. One thing was certain, Ginny Weasley was growing up.

Ginny noticed his glance and couldn't help the slow blush appearing again, but this time there was a feeling of genuine satisfaction to accompany it. She didn't need empathic senses to know he liked what he saw.

“Put the helmet on, then I'll help strap you in.”

She stared at him for a moment, then she placed the helmet on her head. It felt heavy and very weird to her. The cable dangling from one side caught in her hair.

He led her over to the rear seat access and helped her climb into the cockpit. Hanging on the edge of the plane, he connected her four point harness, then he reached in and flipped several switches on the console, deactivating the rear flight controls.

“I've turned nearly everything off for now, Ginny, so you don't have to worry about touching anything you shouldn't. If you enjoy yourself, then I'll show you the controls and what they do at a later point. For now, sit back and just enjoy the ride, all right?”

Ginny nodded. She was tight lipped and holding onto her harness so he wouldn't see her hands shaking.

He reached in and pulled the cord from her helmet, plugging it into a socket on her seat, then he lowered the boom microphone down.

“You'll be able to talk and hear me normally, once I get in.”

Another nod.

Satisfied, he climbed into the front seat and strapped in, then he put on his helmet and turned on the intercom.

“Can you hear me all right back there?” he asked.

“What did you get yourself into, Weasley? I'm a Gryffindor! We're not afraid... Whoa... wait.. you can hear me now?”

Harry laughed and fired up the engines. “I can hear you just fine. I'm going to take this real easy at first.” he said, lifting the aircraft into a hover.

He slowly raised the plane until they were fifty feet above the ground.

He glanced at a monitor, which displayed an image of the rear cockpit. Ginny had her face plastered to the canopy. He laughed and then put the plane into a side slip. Ginny gasped as the ground slid past underneath.

“I didn't expect it to be this quiet!” she exclaimed.

“The helmets absorb a lot of the sound.”

As the jet slid out over the lake, Ginny pointed out the window. “Look! There's Ron and Luna!”

Harry glanced out the window and saw the couple standing on the lake shore, gaping at the jet.

Looking at the backseat monitor, he smiled. She seemed to have lost her fear of the machine. At least, for the moment.

“Hang on,” he called, then he raised the nose of the jet and switched over from hover to cruise mode. The jet shot forward, rapidly accelerating to over six hundred miles an hour. He kept the nose up and they rocketed skyward.

Ginny screamed with surprised pleasure.

After a few minutes, he brought the plane back to a modest four hundred miles an hour and started a gentle turn. “Ginny, if you look at the console in front of you, you'll see a screen, like the one attached to my computer. Do you see it?”

Ginny tore her gaze from the canopy and looked down at the console. “I see it. It's got a lot of numbers and things on it. It looks more confusing than the one on that machine you showed us. The laptop, I think you called it?”

“Right. The monitor in front of you will make a lot more sense once explain the details to you. For now, there are only two numbers you need to know about. In the top left hand corner you'll see the altimeter display. That tells you how high how up we are in feet. And right underneath that number is our airspeed in miles per hour. That's how fast we're going.”

There was a long silence.

“Ginny?”

“Harry are we really at twenty thousand feet, doing four hundred miles an hour?”

He laughed. “Yes.”

She looked out the canopy again. “Everything looks so small. And here I thought my Cleansweep went high!”

She turned to look at the back of Harry's head in the front seat. “I thought you were going to fly this thing, Potter. We're poking along aren't we?”

He grinned. “All right, Weasley, you asked for it. Just don't say I didn't warn you,” he replied, then he fire-walled the throttles and banked sharply. The jet surged forward to the sound of Ginny's laughter.

On the lawn in front of Hogwarts, Ron and Luna joined Hermione and Neville, who were sitting on a bench talking about a Herbology project.

“Hi, Ron, Luna, have you seen Harry?” asked Hermione.

"We saw him in his flying machine a little while ago," replied Luna. "It went off that way," she said, pointing up.

From far above they could hear the muted cracking sound of a sonic boom.

Hermione grinned. "It's not a weekend, so he's out flying for the fun of it. Professor Summers says he loves flying that jet."

Neville snorted. "Maybe," he said dubiously. "But I'll be hanged if I'm going to let him get me into it."

Ron and Luna nodded in agreement. Hermione frowned at them. "Oh, come on. It's just a jet. Thousands of them take to the air every day. It's safer than flying on a broom!"

"You would say that," Ron said. "You nearly flunked flying class back in first year. You barely qualified and haven't been on a broom since."

The crack came again, only this time louder. Harry had the jet in a straight, low altitude, run over the lake. The jet wash threw up twin plumes of water on both sides of the plane. He pulled up, gaining altitude and bleeding off speed.

Hermione could tell he was changing something in the plane by the way the engines changed their pitch. She could also see someone waving frantically from the rear seat of the plane.

"Who is that?" asked Neville.

"I'm not sure," Hermione replied, then she waved back.

"Someone insane enough to get into that thing," muttered Ron.

Harry put the craft in hover mode and moved sideways until the plane could touch down not far from the group on the bench. As usual, whenever Harry used his plane, a small crowd of students formed to watch.

Touching down, he killed the engines and raised the canopy. The person in the back undid the straps and fumbled in the cockpit for a moment before Harry pressed the button extending the ladder steps. Then she climbed down.

"No, it can't be," Hermione whispered in shock.

Ginny removed her helmet and shook out her hair. "That was incredible, Harry!" she nearly shouted. The little red head was bouncing on her toes.

Harry stood up in the cockpit and grinned. His visor was down, but there was no mistaking the grin. He climbed down the same steps and popped open a panel on the side of the jet to stow away his helmet. He turned to Ginny, who reluctantly handed him her helmet.

"I'll take you flying again, don't worry," he said shyly. Her reaction to the flight had surprised and encouraged him. Maybe there was some common ground, after all.

He closed the canopy and shrunk the jet down to pocket size, then he put it away and turned to his friends.

"Harry? My robes?" Ginny prompted.

"Oh, yeah. Sorry," he replied, then he returned them to normal with a absent wave of his hand. Although he still tended to use his wand in class, most of the time he often forgot and did it wandless outside of class.

Ron, Luna and Neville stared at Ginny in horror.

Hermione grinned. Ginny was far too happy for her to be excited by just a plane ride.

"You've got to try that sometime!" Ginny gushed, bouncing up to them. "It was incredible. We were so high, we could barely see the school!"

Harry walked up next to her. "We didn't go as high as we could. At maximum height, there is just a hint of the earth's curvature on the horizon. Now the Blackbird can go a lot higher, but it's got the engines for it."

"There's no way I'd go up in that thing," proclaimed Ron.

Ginny noticed the hurt that flickered across Harry's face and she moved to stand closer to him. Their hands brushed and Harry grabbed hers in his. He looked down at his hand in disbelief and Ginny grinned at him.

Hermione's eyes narrowed as she watched them. "All right, what's changed?"

Ginny looked at Harry, who blushed and nodded at her. "Harry and I have decided to try dating," she replied.

Ron frowned for a moment, then he shook his head and turned to Harry. "I guess she has to grow up sometime, but if you hurt her, I'll kill you," he said with a heavy sigh, then he turned and grabbed Luna's hand, dragging her away from the group.

Luna giggled and happily followed him.

"Well, that was unexpected," Hermione commented, then she walked back to her bag, sat down and pulled a book from her bag. Opening it, she flipped through the pages, wanting to find the information Neville had told her about.

Harry watched Ron's retreating back for a moment before turning back to join Neville and Ginny, who had followed Hermione. "He's trying. I've got to give him credit for that," he said as he sat down on the grass next to Ginny. "He knows he's made mistakes. As tempted as I am to punch him, I still have to admit he's trying."

"He's growing up," Ginny said sadly. "I just wish it hadn't cost him so much."

"It cost us all more than we wanted to pay. Growing up sucks," Harry said softly.

Hermione frowned. "Harry, language."

Harry grimaced. She would never be comfortable with the changes in his vocabulary, most of which he attributed to Logan.

The group descended into an uneasy silence, as if waiting for Harry to explode at Hermione, who was busy flipping through her book, unaware of the undercurrent.

Harry shook his head. "I'm not going to scream just because Hermione doesn't like my vocabulary, guys," he said with a wry grin. "She's heard worse from me and didn't correct it. It's like an automatic response from her. Watch."

He grinned at them and winked. "Hermione, it sucks."

Hermione, who hadn't been paying attention to the conversation, murmured, "Harry, language."

Both Neville and Ginny laughed and Hermione looked up from her book, peering at them suspiciously.

"Now that I have your attention, Hermione, there's something I need to talk to you guys about. The other night I spotted Draco in the Room of Requirement after hours. He was alone. I didn't think much of it at first, but since then, I've caught him several other times in the room. I think he's up to something."

Hermione frowned and put her book away. "Have you told anyone else about this?"

"No," he replied shaking his head. "I thought I'd tell you guys first."

"I don't know, Harry. After last year, I think it might be better if you told someone." Her eyes darted to his and she winced when his expression turned stoney.

"And who would you suggest, Hermione?" he asked, coldly. "The Headmaster who let us be tortured last year, or perhaps the other teachers who ignored how we were treated? Perhaps we should also tell them about the fact that most of the Slytherin sixth and seventh year boys wear the Dark Mark. Oh, but wait. They're supposed to ignore that, just as they did Umbridge and her blood quill, right?"

All three of his friends stared at him, shocked.

"If you don't start thinking and looking out for yourself, Hermione, you're going to end up going to the slaughter along with the rest of the sheep. I knew I shouldn't have come back to this place."

Harry turned stiffly and walked away.

"Way to go," Ginny said sarcastically. "You know how badly Dumbledore has messed things up, yet you keep turning to him as if he'll fix everything. Harry will never turn to one of the teachers, not now. He doesn't trust them. And after this summer, I can't say I blame him."

"He's got to start trusting them sooner or later," Hermione retorted.

"Why? You know, I am beginning to see Harry's point of view in all this. Voldemort thinks for his people, and we're letting Dumbledore and the Ministry think for us."

Jean walked up to the group, smiling, but her expression faltered when she sensed the heightened tension among them. "What's going on? Where's Harry?"

Hermione abruptly stood and walked quickly in the direction that Harry had taken.

"Hermione said something that made Harry angry. He's noticed some funny things going on in the school and she wanted him to talk to a teacher," Neville said.

"I think she's going to go find him and apologize," Ginny added. "At least, I hope she is," she said in a mutter.

"He could talk to me," Jean replied, sitting in the spot Hermione had just left.

Ginny turned back toward Jean and frowned, then she shook her head. "No, Professor, he can't. I know Harry well enough to know how he thinks. He knows you're holding stuff back from him and that puts you almost in the same category as Dumbledore," Ginny said softly.

Jean looked at her in surprise.

"Don't you get it, Professor? Dumbledore held a lot of stuff back from Harry, about the prophecy, about his life and his parents, *and about you*," Ginny added. "Now you're doing the same thing. Oh, I don't mind learning Occlumency, but if Harry's trust means anything to you at all, take him away from the castle and tell him what he needs to know. He can fill us in after we've learned to protect ourselves."

Jean sat pensively for a moment. "I see what you're saying, Ginny. I'll wait here a bit to let Hermione talk with him first, then I'll go find him."

Ginny nodded and looked down by the lake, where she could see Harry facing Hermione.

Hermione, for the first time, found herself at a complete loss for words. When Harry noticed her approach, he stopped walking and waited for her.

"You know, I used to think that Ron was the one who spoke without thinking. What's happened to you, Hermione?" he asked bluntly.

Her mouth opened and closed a few times, but she could seem to find the words she was looking for. Finally, she looked down, unable to meet his gaze.

Harry stepped closer and lifted her chin gently with a hand. "We used to be able to tell each other anything. What's happened between us, Hermione?"

"I'm not sure. I think the war happened. I'm not a good Gryffindor, Harry. I'm terrified! When I was hurt last year, it stopped being an adventure," she whispered.

He conjured a large bench with a wave of his hand and motioned for her to sit.

"It stopped being an adventure for all of us," he replied, then he looked at her bleakly. "When you were hurt at the Ministry last year, I was terrified that I'd gotten you killed. I couldn't think straight. If Neville hadn't found your pulse, I probably would have surrendered to them, just so that you could get to a healer safely."

"No! You wouldn't have done that, Harry. You wouldn't surrender," she protested weakly.

"If it meant getting help for you, I would have. Don't you understand yet? You and Ron were like family to me. That's why your lying to me hurt so much. At that point, you were all the family I had. And while I may have parents now, that doesn't mean I don't still think of you like a sister."

She sighed softly and looked out over the lake. "I just wish we were like normal kids. It would be nice to have nothing more to worry about than grades, who to date and which broom closets were empty."

Harry chuckled. "I know how that goes. I'd give all my fortune to be normal, but normal isn't an option for me."

Harry turned to face her on the bench. "Hermione, for good or ill, you became my friend. Now you're faced with a choice. Help me, or get out of my way. My friends will help me, the others will be pushed aside. And that includes people like Dumbledore, who expects me to fight this war with both hands tied behind my back and blindfolded. *If* I decide to fight, it's going to be according to my rules, which means I'm going to be ruthless. My enemy won't hesitate to kill and neither will I, regardless of what Dumbledore says. It's my life and I'm fighting for my survival."

He stood and walked a few feet toward the lake. "I won't do it. Not his way," he whispered, then he turned back to her. "I can't do it alone, Hermione. I'm not going to just push at Dumbledore, either. I wouldn't be surprised if it means defying the Ministry, as well."

She stared at him for a moment. "You know I'll be there for you, but if I think you're doing something wrong, I'm going to tell you."

He smiled softly. "I'm counting on it. I'm also counting on that excessively independent streak of yours and your drive to prove yourself. One way or the other, you have to stop relying on people who are no longer trustworthy."

"Dumbledore," she replied unhappily.

"He left me with a family who abused me most of my life. How can you possibly trust his judgment after that? Ginny wants things from me and I'm at a loss about it. I don't have the experience needed and I'm groping blindly. Don't tell her I said this, but I'm terrified that I'll do the wrong thing, or say something badly and ruin it. This is what I have to show for Dumbledore's kindness. This is what his guidance has given me. I'm not stretching things when I say that I'm not sure who my enemy is, Dumbledore or Voldemort."

Hermione sighed and looked at her hands for a moment. "It's hard," she said softly. "I always looked up to him as an example of what a wizard or witch should aspire to become. He's done things that make me want to doubt him and that's a hard habit to break."

Harry reached down and plucked a stone from the ground, then threw it into the lake. "I know it is," he replied. "Merlin knows I thought of him as some sort of benevolent grandfather figure, until that horrible night when he revealed the prophecy to me."

He looked down and shook his head. "I was in shock over Sirius' death and denying it, and then he tells me it's all up to me, even killing Voldemort. Then he admitted that he knew about the abuse from the Dursleys. Professor Xavier thinks that was the last of a series of shocks that unlocked my mutant abilities at full strength. It's something they call survival mode, where the abilities turn on in a flash. I thought I was dying at the time."

The pair fell silent for several minutes, then Hermione took a deep breath.

"If we can't rely on the adults, then we have to rely on ourselves, Harry. We need to spread the word among the other houses."

He nodded thoughtfully. "That might work, if we can find enough people to commit to our cause. I'm not sure about this, Hermione. You nearly died," he said uncomfortably. "I don't think I can live with myself if I lose someone else close to me."

"We made a mistake in going to the Ministry. We all know that," she said. "But I also know we tried everything we could think of to contact someone. If anyone is to blame for my injury, it's me. I thought I was being clever by silencing Dolohov. No one ever told us that spells could be cast silently."

"Silently, wandlessly and without gesture," he told her. Suddenly the area they were in came alive with fairy lights.

"I see your point," she said sheepishly.

"I'm not doing it to make you feel bad," he said.

She smiled "I know, you're not. Harry, like it or not, you're the Boy-Who-Lived, touched by a greater destiny. I am not going to begrudge any ability you have that may result in your surviving this fight."

Harry nodded and the fairy lights faded away. "Shall we go back, then?"

She stood and the bench vanished from view. She arched an eyebrow at him. "Can you at least pretend that it's hard to do?" she asked in a resigned tone.

Harry grabbed her hand with a laugh and pulled her up the path toward the castle.

Muggle Studies Class, (October 7th)...

"Professor," Ginny said. "I still don't understand this bit about nuclear power. I can understand the bits about steam powered generators. They're kind of like the Express. But I get confused by this bit about atoms and such."

Jean smiled. "It's not necessary for you to understand all the details of nuclear power. But to break it down to its simplest terms, nuclear power is just another form of steam power. Unlike normal steam generators, which burn oil or coal to make steam, nuclear power relies on a different mechanism to generate heat. The heat turns water to steam to run the turbines. Now, if you really want to understand how that heat is created, see me after class and I'll give you some material that can help you understand it."

Ginny nodded.

Jean turned back to the board. "Now that we've discussed how electricity is created, and how it can be stored in batteries or sent via cables called transmission lines, we're going to... Yes?" she asked as Susan Bones entered the room.

"I'm sorry Professor," Susan said softly. "Headmaster Dumbledore asked me to give you this." She held out a small, sealed scroll.

Jean smiled and took the scroll from the Hufflepuff Prefect. "Thank you. Does the Headmaster require a reply immediately?"

Susan shook her head.

"Very well. Thank you, Miss Bones," Jean said, then she broke open the scroll and scanned it quickly.

She walked over to her desk and pulled out a video tape she'd purchased from the Public Broadcasting Service in America about the fight between Edison and Westinghouse. She popped the tape into the player.

"I need to attend to something in my office for a while. Miss Weasley, as a prefect, you're in charge until I return. In the meantime, I'd like you to watch this because we're going to be talking about it when it's done," she said.

After starting the video, she walked into her office and pulled out her cell phone. She pressed a few numbers, then held the unit to her ear.

"Scott? How soon can you and Logan come up here?" she asked.

There was a moment's pause. "I'm not sure, hon. We're installing a radar dish and it's pretty sticky work. Tomorrow at the earliest."

"Tomorrow's fine. You might want to let Charles know that Professor Dumbledore thinks he's located a Horcrux," she replied.

"In that case, I'm going to need Harry."

"Harry? But why? He's still in class!" she exclaimed.

"Think about it Jean. He could probably remove the Horcrux from any trapped area without disturbing the trap," he said.

The connection fell silent for a minute.

"Jean?"

"I don't like it," she replied, worriedly. "You know how hard he's been trying to avoid getting pulled in deeper. I have a bad feeling about this."

"Do you want me to talk to him?"

She sighed. "Maybe you can get through to him. But if you do, let him know I intend to come home on Saturday. I need to tell him a few things I can't tell him in the castle."

"All right. Expect us by early afternoon, then. I'll speak with Harry before we talk to Dumbledore. Tell him to have his people ready to go. If he can't, then call me back."

"Right. I'll see you tomorrow. Bye Scott." She snapped the phone closed, cutting the connection.

Looking down at Dumbledore's note, she scowled. Moving to her desk, she grabbed a pen and began her reply to the Headmaster.

Defense Against the Dark Arts Class and Dumbledore's Office, (October 8th)...

"Yes?"

"Excuse me, Professor, but I need to speak with Harry Potter," said the man.

Harry woke up and glanced at the door in surprise. Scott stood in the doorway wearing his X-Man uniform. He had been dozing, pretending to read his textbook.

“And you are?” Umbridge asked in her sickening sweet voice.

“I’m his father,” Scott said dryly.

Umbridge scowled. “Oh, you’re one of the freaks, like Pott...”

She was cut off as her bright pink cardigan snarled and began to twist around on her torso. Shrieking, Umbridge began to beat at her chest and dance about the room.

Harry closed his book and stuffed it in his bag. “Looks like class is dismissed early,” he said, grinning.

Hermione looked at him disapprovingly. “Did you do that?”

He raised an eyebrow. “How could I, Hermione? My wand is put away, and as we all know, wandless magic is impossible,” he replied. He wasn’t about to admit that he had cursed Umbridge days ago. Anytime she said the words ‘freak’ and ‘Potter’ in the same sentence, her wardrobe would retaliate.

Hermione’s eyes darted towards the Slytherins and she stepped closer. “What about them?” she asked quietly.

Scott stood nearby, watching them closely.

Harry tapped his nose. “They never saw a thing.”

It was part of the curse. Only Umbridge, Harry and a few others in the castle were strong minded enough to see through the enchantment. To everyone else, Umbridge was jumping around and screaming for no apparent reason.

He turned to Scott. “What brings you here?”

Scott frowned a little. “We need to talk. Is there someplace we can go that would be private?”

Harry nodded. “I know a place,” he replied, then he lead Scott from the room.

Hermione looked around at her fellow Gryffindors and shrugged. Picking up her bag, she left the room and headed for the library.

The others followed her out, leaving a thrashing Umbridge to escape her possessed jumper.

The Slytherins slowly filed out, uncertain why the Professor was bouncing around the classroom.

The Room of Requirement...

Harry opened the door and motioned for Scott to enter.

Scott stepped in and looked around. “What makes this room any different from any other room?”

“This is the magical version of our Danger Room. The difference is that, unlike the Danger Room, you could wish for a room full of tigers and get real tigers,” Harry said as he sat down on one of the chairs the room has created. “So, what’s up?”

Scott moved to a seat across from him and sat down. “Harry, your Mom says things aren’t perfectly safe here, so I’ll try to speak in general terms until we can get into the Blackbird, where we’ll fill you in on the details.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed and he nodded.

“I know you don’t trust Dumbledore or his people. That’s fine, but we need your help. Dumbledore is involved in a project concerning Voldemort. It’s dangerous, but I think your talent could be of help. Professor Xavier has decided to help Dumbledore because he recognizes the threat that Voldemort poses to the world. We do not believe that it’s going to result in your fighting him alone and we still reject that idea.

“But Dumbledore has managed to convince us that what he’s doing is absolutely necessary. Without completing this task, Voldemort *can’t* be killed. And I think we’re going to need your help to do this.”

Harry stood and walked over to stand in front of the fireplace. “I don’t like this. Dumbledore could talk the Pope into becoming Buddhist.”

Scott chuckled softly behind him. “I promise you, you won’t be alone in this. Logan and I will be there, and there will always be more X-Men around in the future. Hank and Storm arrived at the castle last night. They’re anxious to see you.”

Harry turned to face his father. “How will we be able to keep my abilities a secret if you’re going to rely on them for this project?”

He frowned and slumped a bit, disappointed. “I hadn’t thought about that.”

Harry sat back down and thought for a moment. “Exactly what do you think you’ll need me for, Dad?”

Scott smiled. Hearing Harry call him that always cheered him. He found that he rather liked being a parent. Good thing, since Jean wanted more children. “I had thought we could use your power to retrieve an object that might be protected by magical traps,” he replied.

Harry ran a hand through his hair, thinking quickly. “Hmm. Misdirection?” he asked, grinning.

Scott blinked. “Eh? Come again?”

"What is it the Professor always says? 'Show them one thing while doing another'? If I make a show of pulling my wand and doing something with it, they'll think that somehow my ability is related to my magic. I could even spout something about nullifying the magic. To top it off, we make them give a wizard's oath beforehand, not to tell a soul what they see. This way, even afterward, they'll be thinking the wrong thing." He almost laughed. The idea of tricking Dumbledore and the Order seemed very attractive to him.

Scott did laugh and shook his head. It was a smart idea. He checked his watch, then stood. "We need to get up to Dumbledore's office in ten minutes. That will give you time to go change into your flight suit. If we take the Blackbird, I'll be acting as your check pilot."

He looked up in surprise and his smile lit up the room. "Really?" he exclaimed. He had been studying the flight systems of the large plane since he had qualified on the jump jet, but hadn't had the chance to fly it, except in simulation.

"Really," Scott replied with a matching grin. "Now, go change, then come to Dumbledore's office."

Harry was already heading for the door. He'd put up with Dumbledore for a chance to fly the Blackbird!

Headmaster's Office, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry...

Jean sat in the back of the office. She wasn't going on this mission, but since Scott was bringing Harry, she wanted to be present for the meeting. She nodded at Scott when he entered the office and he smiled in reply.

She reached out and caressed his mind.

He was used to the intimate contact and enjoyed it, even if he couldn't speak directly back to her. He thought about his meeting with Harry, which brought those memories forward so Jean could review them.

She grinned, seeing the carrot he'd offered Harry.

So far the meeting consisted of herself, Dumbledore, Logan, Remus Lupin and William Weasley.

"Ah, welcome, Mr. Summers. As I was telling your lovely wife and Mr. Logan, our planned destination is in Dover, on the shore actually. We were just discussing the logistics of the trip. He said you had that taken care of?" Dumbledore asked congenially.

"Yes. We'll take the Blackbird. It might not be as fast as your portkeys, but it won't trigger any magical alarms, either," Scott replied.

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled, but Remus and Bill looked a little alarmed.

"Will it fit all of us?" blurted Bill.

"She'll hold fourteen comfortably, twenty one in an emergency," said a voice from the doorway.

Jean turned and nearly slid from her chair in shock. Harry stood in the doorway dressed in a black flight suit. He wore his black cloak over that, to which he had added a blazing red X on the right breast. She noted the X was made from crossed wands.

Logan grinned appreciatively and Scott shook with silent laughter.

"Like the look, Wiz. Sort of a medieval X," Logan said.

Harry grinned back at him, then turned to Dumbledore. "The Blackbird will handle the load, no problem. Flight time from here to Dover is thirty eight minutes. The distance is too short for us to go any faster."

"Did I mention Harry will be helping and will also be our pilot for the flight?" Scott offered.

If possible, Remus turned even paler than he normally was.

Dumbledore frowned. "Is he really needed?"

"Yes," replied Scott firmly. "Harry has enough experience and has been studying the flight systems for a while now. I'll be his check pilot, so there's really nothing to worry about."

Jean suppressed a laugh. She knew Scott had deliberately evaded the question.

Dumbledore sighed and nodded. "Very well. Let us be off, then."

"Wait," Harry said, then he looked pointedly at Scott.

Scott blinked, then it dawned on him. "Right. If it becomes necessary for Harry to use his mutant abilities, we need a wizard's oath that you won't reveal what you saw."

"Do you think that's necessary?" Dumbledore asked in a voice tinged with annoyance.

"Absolutely," Harry replied coldly.

"Oh, this is ridiculous," Remus said, pushing past Bill. He pulled his wand. "I solemnly swear on my magic that I will not reveal anything you wish to show us."

The tip of his wand flared brightly for a second, then went out.

"Thanks, Professor," Harry replied softly. *There may be hope for Remus yet*, he mused. He genuinely liked the old Marauder, but felt he was too close to Dumbledore to trust implicitly.

Bill stepped forward and gave the same oath, then Dumbledore, although he looked less than happy about it.

Jean stood and hugged Scott. "Be careful and watch out for Harry," she whispered, kissing his cheek, then she turned and hugged Harry. "I don't care if you have to expose your ability. You do what you need to stay safe tonight," she whispered to him.

Harry smiled and hugged her back. "I will," he promised.

Five minutes later, the strange group were climbing up the ramp of the Blackbird. Harry nodded to several of his friends on the way through the castle, but didn't speak to anyone.

He slid into the pilot's seat and strapped in.

"Are you sure you can work this thing?" Bill asked nervously. He was copying Logan's actions as he strapped into the seat. Next to him sat Remus, who had already strapped in, as he was familiar with muggle seat belts.

Harry grinned at the three wizards. Remus sat in a seat looking decidedly unhappy with the situation. Harry couldn't help himself, he shrugged slightly. "We'll find out, I guess. This is my first real chance to fly this baby. Say, Dad, isn't there a start button around here somewhere?"

Remus turned white, then slumped over in his seat as he fainted. The only thing keeping him from crashing to the floor was the harness that held him firmly in his seat.

Bill paled and stared at Harry. When Scott and Logan began to laugh, he frowned and looked at the two X-Men. Realizing that Harry was just joking, he shook his head and sighed in resignation.

Harry grinned, then turned back to the console to start his preflight checklist. His movements were precise and his hands flew over the controls, activating systems aboard the large aircraft.

Scott leaned close to Harry. "I know you're enjoying this, but let's not make this ride any rougher than it has to be."

Harry nodded. "I know. No deliberate acrobatics."

"Unless you can think of a way of doing them accidentally," Logan said in an undertone.

Harry grinned at Logan, who was eyeing Remus' slumped form, and laughing to himself.

"Ramp secured," Scott called out.

"Starting engines," Harry replied. He pressed a few buttons on the panel and slowly advanced the throttle forward.

The large plane gently lifted up.

"Logan, check the stealth generators and radar suppression systems," Harry said. He had green lights on his panel, but they couldn't afford for those units to give out.

Logan glanced over at a display panel on his side. "Stealth and radar suppression operational, Wiz. Remind me to ask the Professor about putting some missiles on this thing."

Scott shook his head. It was an age old argument between Logan and the Xavier.

He nodded absently, concentrating on the controls. He pushed the nose of the craft up, then adjusted the thrusters from hover to cruise mode. The large plane shot forward, gaining altitude as it left Hogwarts.

Several minutes later, he leveled the plane out and dialed in the coordinates for their destination before switching on the autopilot. He pushed his seat back from the controls and turned to Scott. "All right, we're on our way. Now, would someone mind explaining to me what's going on?" he asked.

"Shouldn't you be holding onto that wheel thing?" Bill asked in a strangled voice.

"Auto pilot, Bill. The plane is flying itself. It will warn me when we're five minutes out or if there is a problem like a wing falling off," Harry replied.

Bill nodded unhappily, barely understanding what Harry was saying. As nervous as he was, he couldn't help but think how much his father would love flying in the muggle craft.

Dumbledore watched with a slight smile on his face and his eyes twinkling brightly, while Scott explained the concept of a Horcrux to his son.

Harry's expression grew grimmer as they approached Dover.

An alarm chimed and Harry turned away from Scott to check it. "We're five minutes out and the radar is clear. Someone wake up Remus," Harry called.

The information about the Horcruxes disturbed him. He wanted to know how long Dumbledore knew about them, and why he was only going after them now, but he kept his mouth shut. He decided he would hang back and only get involved if absolutely necessary.

The plane descended and bled off air speed until they were within a mile of the target coordinates. Then he shifted the plane from cruise to hover while watching the GPS system. He slowly came to hover over the precise coordinates that Scott had given him.

"We're over water. I can set her down, but we're too close to the shore. The surf would smash us up against the rocks," he said tensely to Scott.

The plane rocked in the turbulent air around the cliffs and Harry gripped the controls tighter, gently increasing power to give him some airspace under the plane.

"Circle around and see if you can find a spot to put down," Scott replied, then he leaned forward and flipped a switch, activating a flood light.

The powerful beam shot out from the plane and he fiddled with it for few moments before finding a cave entrance. "See that? That's our ultimate destination."

"There's no beach here. It's all rock. We're going to have to land on the top of the cliff," Harry replied.

He scanned the cliff carefully for a minute. "Look, there's a trail cut into the cliff over there," he said pointing.

Scott adjusted the beam, then he leaned back smiling. "Good catch. Let's find someplace to put down."

Harry nodded and pushed the throttles forward a hair so they could rise above the cliff.

"Over there. See the clearing?" Scott asked.

"I got it."

Two minutes later, the large plane had landed and Harry started shutting down the systems.

"Excellent flying, Harry. I'm most impressed," Dumbledore said in the now quiet cabin.

"Thank you, sir," Harry replied formally. Scott shot him a warning look, but then he realized that Harry wasn't being rude. He had responded automatically, his mind still on shutting down the large aircraft. His hands were darting over the controls, throwing switches, shutting off the various systems.

Bill cast an enervate on Remus and then helped him to his feet. As soon as he understood they were on the ground, his color came back and he looked much better.

Harry opened the ramp and climbed out of his seat. "All right, let's do this. I still have a transfiguration essay to do tonight."

Bill and Remus laughed and Dumbledore shook his head. "If we get back too late, I'll give you an excuse, Harry," the Headmaster promised.

Logan joined Remus and Bill, who stood examining a map. "This is the spot. Apparently, Voldemort's orphanage used to come to this spot frequently for outings. We detected a large amount of dark magic coming from the cave entrance, but we haven't entered it."

Scott stepped up to them. "Bill, you're the one skilled in detecting traps. You and Logan will lead. I'll follow with Dumbledore and Remus, and Harry will bring up the rear."

Hearing the order, Harry fell into step next to Remus.

"I'm glad you're here, Harry. I wanted the chance to talk to you," Remus said softly. Like Harry, he was watching both in front and behind.

"Oh?" Harry replied noncommittally.

"I wanted to apologize. For everything. James and Lily are probably most disappointed in me by now. I haven't done right by you."

Harry sighed and slowed his pace even more, letting the group ahead of them pull away.

"Remus, a lot has happened and I don't think any of us can go back to the way things were. If you want to be my friend, you'll have to learn a new talent. Personally, I don't think you'll have as much of a problem with it as some of the others, but little surprises me about wizards anymore."

They walked for a bit more in silence, then Remus broke it. "What talent do I need to learn, Harry? I'd like for us to be friends."

"Tell me something, Remus. When you were with Sirius and the Marauder's, were you a follower or an equal partner?"

Remus blinked in surprise. "None of us were really in charge, Harry. I'd say we were all partners, even after your Mum joined our group."

"Then why have you started following Dumbledore? Have you forgotten how to think for yourself?" he asked quietly.

Stunned, Remus stopped and stared at Harry, who kept walking. Finally realizing he was being left behind, he broke into a trot to catch up.

"Do you really believe that?" he asked.

Harry glanced at him. "What do you think, Professor? When was the last time anyone questioned a decision he made? Or, for that matter, this Horcrux hunt. How long has he known about Horcruxes and why is he only going after them now? Why am I the only one questioning what he's doing? I'm not trying to knock the man down, but he's only human and he's made plenty of mistakes. If you don't believe me, take a closer look. You're walking next to one of his biggest."

Remus scowled and stepped behind Harry as the trail narrowed too much to walk side by side. "What do you mean?"

"I'm not convinced the wizarding world in Britain is worth fighting for. Considering his actions of late, I doubt I ever will be," Harry said simply, then he stopped. "Look, the trail flattens out at the rocks. We're only a few feet from the cave entrance."

Harry and Remus stopped a few feet short of the entrance and waited while Bill and Dumbledore cast some detection charms on the entrance.

When they were finished, Bill turned to the others. "We can't detect any traps, but there is considerable dark magic emanating from the cavern."

Scott glanced at Harry, who nodded slightly. He could see the flows of magic rushing from the cave entrance like a geyser. He wasn't looking forward to entering that maelstrom of dark energy. They hadn't even entered the cave and the energy was already beating on his senses.

Logan unzipped a carry bag and pulled out several flashlights, which he passed out. Bill, Remus and Dumbledore looked at the lights intrigued. Remus turned to look at Harry, who flicked his on.

Smiling, Remus copied his actions.

"Come on, Red," muttered Logan, then he turned and entered the cave, Bill behind him.

Scott and Dumbledore entered after them, with Remus and Harry bringing up the rear.

"These are really handy and they provide more light than a *Lumos*," Remus said in a whisper. By unspoken agreement, no one wanted to talk too loudly.

"Yeah. And unlike regular Muggle electric torches, these won't run out of battery power," added Harry. The torches carried his rune enhanced batteries.

The passage wasn't long, but it was narrow and difficult. After ten minutes and much complaining from the Wizards about needing to exercise more, they stepped out into a large chamber. The sound of dripping water filled the chamber with soft echoes.

Logan played his flashlight beam out to see that they stood on the edge of a large underground lake. In front of them were a series of flat stones that they could use to cross the water.

In the center of the lake was a small rock outcropping.

Harry shivered. His empathy, weak as it was, was filling him with anger and terror and it was coming from all around them. "I have a real bad feeling about this."

"You and me both," Bill replied uneasily.

Harry walked over to the edge and shined his light straight down. He sucked in his breath and involuntarily took a step backwards. "Shit! There are bodies in the lake!" he swore.

Dumbledore stepped forward and looked down, his expression growing grim. "Inferi; animated corpses. They are obviously part of a trap. Somewhere up ahead must be the trigger," he said, then he turned to the others. "If the Inferi awaken, normal spells will not work against them. They feel no pain. The only thing that works is fire and dismemberment."

"What will trigger them to awaken?" asked Scott eyeing the masses of bodies in the lake with disgust.

Dumbledore shrugged. "They have not come to life yet, so presumably something up ahead is warded to waken them."

"Should we continue?" asked Remus nervously.

Again Dumbledore shrugged. "I cannot think of anything we can go back and obtain that would make fighting Inferi any easier."

"How about a nuclear weapon?" muttered Harry.

Logan chuckled loudly. "Yeah, or a flame thrower," he said, then he jumped onto the first stone in the lake. He looked around to see if anything changed, but the water remained calm. He turned back to the others. "Well?" he growled. "Are you waiting for an invitation?"

One by one they moved from stone to stone, stopping periodically to see if the Inferi showed any signs of life, but all remained quiet. The only sound in the chamber, besides their breathing, was the steady drip of water into the lake.

They approached the rocky outcropping warily, becoming more vigilant and cautious. Finally, they stepped onto the small islet. In the exact center of the island was a raised stone column nearly chest high, and inside that was a depression filled with a dark, smoking liquid.

Bill reached for his wand, but before he could touch it, a vise like grip grabbed his hand. He looked at Logan in alarm.

"You might set it off. I don't need to be a wizard to see that this has booby trap written all over it."

"We came all the way here for that?" Harry asked.

"No, I don't think so," replied Dumbledore. "I suspect that what we want is in the liquid. Now the question is, how do we get it out?"

Remus' nose crinkled. "It's not water. I smell dragon blood and crushed brimstone."

"Really?" Dumbledore said, his bushy eyebrows raised in amazement. "Then it is a highly caustic liquid."

When Scott glanced at Logan, the man growled, but nodded. "I'll try," he said.

He stepped up to the bowl like depression and stuck a fingertip into the liquid. Swearing, he yanked his hand away and began to curse a blue streak. The flesh had been stripped to his silvery bones.

Remus and Bill started to move forward to help him, but Scott stopped them.

Swearing still, Logan held his wounded hand up and watched with jaded eyes as the flesh began to grow.

The three wizards stared at Logan in amazement.

Ignoring the others, Harry stepped up to the bowl and shined his flashlight into it. At the bottom he could just make out a golden object.

"I suppose we could try moving the liquid out," Scott said dubiously.

"Maybe, but I think there's probably a reservoir of the stuff," Bill said, still staring at Logan and his now fully healed finger.

"So, what now?" asked Harry.

Dumbledore rummaged through his pockets for a minute before pulling out a goblet. "I suppose one of us could drink the potion."

Logan blinked and turned to stare at the old Headmaster incredulously. "Are you insane? No wonder you wizards are a minority. You breed stupidity! Didn't you see what it did to my finger? And you want to drink it?"

"Logan!" Scott said warningly and Dumbledore shuffled his feet uncomfortably. He slid the goblet back into his pocket.

Harry stared at the two of them, then decided to get the group focused back on the task. He pointed at the depression filled with potion.

"There's a piece of jewelry of some sort at the bottom of this bowl. I take it that's the Horcrux?" he asked. With all the ambient magic in the large chamber it was impossible for him to see if the object itself was enchanted.

"That is what we believe," replied Dumbledore, still somewhat smarting from Logan's comments.

Harry stared down at the bowl again.

"Harry? What are you thinking?" asked Scott.

"I might be able to get it out, Dad. But we can't just pull it out. It's going to be dripping with that stuff. We need to put it into something," he replied.

"I have just the thing, Wiz," Logan said. He pulled an empty metal canteen from his carry bag, and using his claws, sliced it in half. Then he walked down to the water's edge and filled it.

"Mr. Logan no!" Dumbledore shouted, but it was too late.

The water started to ripple.

"Oh, shit," Harry exclaimed. "Time to boogie! Logan, hold onto that cup, I'm summoning the item into it."

He pulled his wand and faked a gesture, while teleporting the piece of jewelry to the cup Logan held. "It's done! Let's go!"

Harry took off across the stepping stones, leaping like a gazelle with the others following. The water boiled and undead rose to block their passage.

"Down!" barked Scott.

Harry dived to the ground on one stone and Scott blasted the way clear ahead of them.

"*Incendio!*" shouted Dumbledore, setting several Inferi that were closing behind them on fire.

With the way clear ahead, Harry continued on until he reached the mouth of the passage, then he turned and started laying down fire, covering the others.

Remus had just stepped onto the last stone before the mouth of the passage when an Inferi surged through the wall of fire Harry created. Still on fire, it lunged out and grabbed Remus with both arms. He screamed in pain from the fire and fought against the implacable grip. Claws flashed and the Inferi staggered back, missing both arms from the elbows down.

Bill and Harry leaped to help Remus, who had been burned along his back and sides.

Harry reached him first. "Hang in there, Remus," he said, pulling his arm over his shoulder.

Not bothering with his flashlight, Harry wandlessly cast a light spell and plunged into the passage, still half carrying, half dragging Remus.

From behind he could hear more shouting, then he heard Dumbledore shout something and the cavern rumbled. Harry's magic flared and suddenly Remus weighed nothing against him. He put on a burst of speed and shot out of the mouth of the cave. Panting, he paused and turned, waiting for the others to exit the cavern.

After a minute the others stumbled out of the cavern, coughing. "Is everyone alright?" Harry asked.

"We're fine. How is Remus?" replied Bill.

"He needs Madam Pomfrey, but I don't think the burns are very serious," he replied worriedly.

"Then let us leave this place and get him back to the school," Dumbledore said, panting hard.

"Do you have a portkey he can use?"

"No... no portkey," gasped Remus.

"He's right, Harry. With those burns, the portkey will jostle him too much," Bill said.

Logan stepped over to Remus and lifted him on his shoulder. "Let's get outta here," he growled, then he took off up the path at a trot.

Harry fell in step behind Logan, easily keeping pace with him. Scott was only a few steps behind.

Bill and Dumbledore shared a look, then Bill started jogging up the path as well. Dumbledore frowned and moved as quickly as he could back up the trail.

By the time Dumbledore arrived back at the jet, its engines were already powered up. He climbed up the ramp to find Remus strapped to one of the bench seats with a blanket covering him. He was laying face down. Bill sat nearby, watching over him.

Harry turned to Dumbledore. "It's best if you strap in, sir. We're going to be in a bit of a rush on the return trip home, so it might get a little bumpy."

Dumbledore nodded and quickly took the seat next to Bill. He glanced over at Remus, surprised to see that he seemed to be sleeping.

"Harry cast a pain numbing charm on him before we strapped him in," Bill said in reply to his unasked question.

Dumbledore nodded. "Excellent."

Harry moved into the pilot's seat and closed the rear hatch. The plane lifted quickly and shot forward with little preparation or advance warning.

Scott pulled out his phone and pressed two numbers.

"Jean? It's Scott. Listen, we're inbound, ETA," Scott paused and looked at Harry.

"Twenty five minutes. It's too short a trip to go any faster," Harry said.

Scott nodded and turned back to the phone. "ETA, twenty five minutes. Alert Madam Pomfrey that we're bringing Remus Lupin in wounded. He's been burned.... No, Harry's fine, just tired like the rest of us. Right now he's got us in super cruise. You know what that does to the stealth capabilities, so he's busy."

Scott paused and listened for a moment, nodding at the phone. "Yes, we'll see you soon."

He closed the phone and pocketed it, then glanced at Harry and the flight readings when the craft hit a turbulent patch of air. He was surprised at how well he was doing keeping the flight steady, especially at the low altitude they were flying.

Harry ignored Scott, keeping his eyes on the heads-up display and the radar display in front of him.

"Excuse me, Mr. Summers, but what is this super cruise you spoke of?" asked Bill.

"Call me, Scott," he replied absently. He reached up and flicked several switches, activating the holographic map.

Scott turned in his seat and gestured toward the map. "Normally, the Blackbird either flies very high, or under stealth mode, which prevents detection by the Muggles. Because of Mr. Lupin's injury, Harry's using the fastest speed of travel we can do at this low altitude. We're flying faster than most military jets can follow, but we're also generating a huge heat signature, and that means someone with an infrared seeking missile would have no problem targeting us.

"I don't expect us to have any problems. As you can see from the map, we're already approaching the Scottish border. Harry will start slowing the plane down any moment," Scott said, then he turned back to the console.

Harry flipped some switches, applying the air breaks and everyone could feel the large plane rapidly slowing.

"Amazing. Dover to Scotland in less than a half hour," Dumbledore said.

Bill could only nod. Scott's explanation hadn't explained anything, but he was too much of a Weasley to admit to it.

Just about the time that Hogwarts appeared on the holographic map as a blinking green light, Harry throttled back the engines. He scanned the board for a moment as the airspeed dropped even further, then he rotated the engines.

"Switching to hover mode, I've got the landing beacon," he said absently. "Gear down?"

Scott flipped a few switches. "Gear down and locked," he replied.

The heads up display on the cockpit window showed Harry his landing target. He dropped his forward momentum to nearly zero, then slipped into position.

Jean watched the large craft land smoothly. Madam Pomfrey and Professor McGonagall stood next to her.

"I don't think I'll ever get used to that," Minerva said with a touch of disapproval in her voice.

"It took me a while to get used to it, Minerva," Jean replied. "But you will."

Poppy started to move forward, but Jean grabbed her by the shoulder.

"Wait until the engines are shut down and the ramp is lowered. It's safer," Jean said.

Poppy stared at her for a second, then nodded. Just then the engine's started to whine down and the ramp began to lower.

As soon as the ramp touched the ground, Madam Pomfrey took off running. Harry and the others met her at the bottom of the ramp, with Logan carrying Remus.

"Remove your hands from him. I'll take him from here," Poppy commanded firmly.

Logan blinked at the short woman and slowly released him. She waved her wand and Remus floated off of his shoulder and onto a stretcher she had waiting. She gave him a quick look over, then she waved her wand again and the stretcher floated towards the castle.

Poppy turned to look at Logan and the others. "Is anyone else hurt? What about you, Mr. Potter? You seem incapable of avoiding injury."

"I'm fine, Madam Pomfrey," Harry replied, ignoring the chuckles from Logan and Scott.

"I can fix that, Wiz," muttered Logan.

"Only if you want us both to go to the infirmary tonight, Logan," Harry said with a forced grin, then turned back to Madam Pomfrey. "Really, Madam Pomfrey, I don't even have a scratch on me."

Poppy harrumphed and turned to head back to the castle with Remus floating behind her.

Jean stepped forward and hugged Harry and Scott. "Did you find it?" she asked.

Bill held up the half canteen and nodded.

Harry stared at it for a moment, then frowned fiercely.

"Harry?" asked Bill worriedly.

"It's a fake," Harry snarled. "There's no magic at all coming from it." Turning away in disgust, he walked a few feet from the group, muttering under his breath and shooting angry glances at Dumbledore.

"What do you mean, it's a fake?" exclaimed Bill.

"Just what I said! There's not a damn bit of magic coming off that thing," Harry asserted.

Bill turned to Dumbledore and held out the canteen.

The old wizard frowned at the sudden turn of events. "Let us go up to my office and figure this out," he said.

Everyone nodded and followed Dumbledore. Harry reluctantly followed, still muttering to himself.

Jean dropped back to walk with him. "Are you all right?"

"I'm angry. Remus could have been killed over nothing!"

"Harry, isn't it possible that this is as much of a surprise to him as it is to everyone else?"

He scowled. "The last time he made a mistake like this, Sirius died, Mum. I knew getting involved with him wasn't a good idea."

Jean stopped him with a hand on his arm. "Stop it. Right now," she said firmly. "We get the idea. You don't trust the man. But like it or not, we have to work with him, if for no other reason than to make sure you're safe."

Harry's scowl deepened, but he nodded. "Fine. You guys work with him, but don't ask me trust him. You have no idea what that place was like tonight and he took us in blind," he replied, then he shivered. The oppressive atmosphere of the cave had greatly upset him. It had beat down on his empathic senses the entire time. He could still feel it, even with the distance. The trip to the cave had greatly unsettled him.

Jean slipped her arm around his shoulders. "We won't. I don't think any of us really trust him, either."

Harry lowered his head. "I'm sorry. I'm snapping and being unfair to you. It's just that this is so typical of him. Remus got hurt for nothing. They never entered that cave until tonight, so they had no idea what to expect."

She stopped him just before the open entrance to the Headmaster's office. "Harry, you've got a good set of instincts. Trust them and us." When he looked at her, she touched his cheek, then nodded her head toward the open entrance. "Are you ready?"

He looked up the stairs and sighed. "No, but let's go get this over with."

In Dumbledore's office, they found themselves sitting and waiting to hear back from Madam Pomfrey concerning Remus before anything else. Harry sat on a conjured couch with Jean next to him, while the others sat around Dumbledore's desk. The only other person present that had not gone on the trip to the cave was Professor McGonagall.

"For what it's worth, Headmaster, I think Harry was correct, Remus' injuries looked to be painful, but not life threatening," offered Jean.

"We'll know shortly. Madam Pomfrey knows to contact us concerning his condition," Dumbledore replied.

He leaned back in his chair pensively, looking at Harry.

Harry, aware of Dumbledore's scrutiny, refused to look him in the eye. Instead, he decided to take a closer look at the room and the magic flowing within it.

"Since we're waiting, how did he do?" Jean asked Scott.

"Quite well, actually. I don't think it will be long before he starts thinking about buying a Blackbird for himself," Scott said with a grin.

Jean frowned. "Harry, can't you be like a normal teenager and just want a car?"

He grinned at her. "Where is the fun in that?"

"How did who do?" asked Minerva.

"Harry," replied Jean. "He was the pilot for the flight there and back. It was his first real time flying the Blackbird."

Minerva blinked and turned her attention to Harry, who was staring at something on one of the shelves on the wall.

"You seem to have several remarkable talents, Mr. Potter," she said.

"Yes, Professor," Harry replied absently. He had spotted several objects in Dumbledore's office that had flows of magic leading out of the room. He wasn't sure of their purpose.

Jean turned to look at him. "Harry? What's the matter?"

Harry's eyes widened as he realized what the objects were doing. He looked around wildly for a moment, then spotting a blank parchment on Dumbledore's desk, he lurched to his feet and grabbed it. Pulling a pen from his back pocket, he scribbled a note and held it out to Jean.

Say nothing! Room is bugged by at least three listening charms!

Jean scowled and passed the note to Scott, who handed it to Logan. The note made it around the room, eventually coming to rest on Dumbledore's desk, and he stared at it in consternation.

Minerva whispered a charm under her breath and three objects glowed brightly: a snow globe on the shelf, a quill and a potions book.

Dumbledore blanched when he saw the potions book glowing. It had been a gift from Snape!

Harry picked up the note and wrote on it again, then gave it to Dumbledore.

We need to change rooms. What about the Room of Requirement?

Dumbledore nodded and handed the note to Minerva, who read it and passed it on. A moment later, they were filing out of the office, with Harry in the lead. He stopped in front of Barnabus the Barmy and paced back and forth three times until the door appeared.

Minerva gasped and looked at Dumbledore. "Albus, did you know about this room?"

"No, not entirely. I stumbled upon the room once and found filled with the most marvelous chamber pots. This was, of course, before the indoor plumbing was installed. But I never learned the secret of how to bring the room back. It seems our Harry has more secrets than we ever suspected,"

He followed the others in, then stopped, slightly awed by what he was seeing. Harry had recreated a room the X-Men knew well.

The table was a gleaming chrome and glass and the seats were all high back plush leather. A fireplace sat against one wall with a fire merrily burning away. Against the other wall, a long window looking out on a grove of apple trees. It was exactly the scene from the east conference room of Xavier's school.

"Nice digs, Wiz," Logan commented. "It feels just like home. Now, would someone mind telling me what is going on? First our little trip tonight was a waste of time? And listening charms? We've met in that office before."

"We have," said Dumbledore. "But normally I invoke a privacy charm that would block any one trying to listen in. I am more curious about your conclusion, Harry. How do you know that the locket isn't a Horcrux?" he asked, gesturing to the half canteen Bill still held. "No one has had time to examine the object, as yet."

Harry shrugged. "The same way I could tell there were objects in your room with tendrils of magic flowing outward. I can see the magic and it's flows. Inside the cave, there was too much magic to see if the object was enchanted. Speaking of which, the silver spinning device that puffs smoke? Why is it tied to me?"

Dumbledore blinked in surprise. "That device is linked to your magic. It tells me roughly where you are and whether or not you are healthy."

Harry stiffened and crossed his arms scowling. He walked to a spot as far away from Dumbledore as he could get, then sat down.

"Harry?" Jean asked, alarmed by the sudden anger radiating from him. It reminded her of when they first picked up his distress back at the beginning of summer.

He shook his head and stared at the table. His emotions had been on the ragged edge since the experience in the cave and he felt pushed to an extreme he hadn't felt since the end of last term. His control was rapidly crumbling.

Scott leaned forward in his chair. "I think we can assume you will disable or turn off that device, Headmaster?"

Dumbledore nodded, though reluctantly, and Scott breathed a sigh of relief. He thought the issue was put to bed

"What did I ever do to make you hate me so much, Headmaster? Did my parents hurt you in some way? Or my family?" Harry asked quietly. He looked up and Dumbledore and the others were surprised to see the tears rolling down his cheeks.

"I do not, and never have hated you, my boy," Dumbledore replied carefully.

Harry surged to his feet and pounded the metal and glass table with a fist. "You knew!" he shouted, and a burst of magic pulsed outwards. The burst itself was uncontrolled, but its aim was not. The table crumpled and melted.

Logan jumped back from the table and instinctively his claws extended.

"You knew! Every beating, every broken bone would have shown up on that thing," Harry said brokenly. He trembled and his eyes became wild. He backed away from everyone. "No Uncle," he muttered. "I'm sorry."

Jean stepped over to him and Harry looked at her blankly, not recognizing her. He stepped back, his breath coming in great gasps.

Recognizing the signs of a panic attack, she reached for him and he flinched violently back, raising his arms over his head to ward off the blow.

"No, Uncle Vernon. I'm sorry!" he moaned. He backed into a corner and crouched down low, looking more like a wounded animal than a person.

Minerva, Dumbledore and Bill watched in horror as Jean approached him.

"Harry sweetheart," she said softly. "No one is going to hurt you."

His eyes darted around wildly, looking for an avenue of escape. He was so confused, he'd even forgotten about his own mutant abilities. Jean was profoundly grateful for that fact. With his ability, he could teleport anywhere on the planet and they'd be weeks looking for him.

She reached out to touch him. He flinched away from her again and whimpered. Undaunted, she embraced him and began whispering calmly to him, trying to sooth him. When he finally began to relax against her, she tightened her grip and blinked away her tears.

Minerva summoned a house elf and spoke to the little creature for a moment. It vanished only to return, clutching a small potion vial.

She took the vial from the elf and moved towards Jean. "I have a calming draught here," she murmured. "It should help."

Jean nodded and took the vial from the older witch. She uncorked it and held it up to Harry's lips. Instinctively, he drank the liquid, then closed his eyes for a moment. She began to relax as he calmed.

He opened his eyes and looked at her, trembling in her arms from fatigue. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "I've been fighting that off all night. The atmosphere in that cave was downright oppressive. I could feel it dragging me down."

Jean tightened her grip around him. "Next time, tell us. We love you and will always be here for you. Are you feeling better?"

He nodded. "Just tired."

Jean stood and then helped him to his feet. He looked at the crumpled mess that used to be a table and looked down at his feet in shame.

Dumbledore pulled out his wand and fixed the table.

"Harry, my boy, I am so very sorry. There aren't words enough to say how much I regret what you've gone through. I won't make any excuses, but in my own defense, I'll say that the monitor only went off in the evenings. When I checked it the following morning, usually before I planned to leave to check on you, it showed you healthy again."

Harry sighed and nodded. "I'm sorry, too, sir. Just so people know, if I'm injured and the injuries aren't attended to, my magic will step in and heal me. It usually takes five or six hours and it's not a...pleasant process."

He sighed and hunched his shoulders. "I lost control. I'm sorry."

"Lost control? Mr. Potter, you could have killed someone, with that outburst. Instead, you somehow managed to contain and confine it to destroying a table! Considering what I saw tonight, control is not a problem you suffer from," exclaimed Professor McGonagall.

"Indeed," Dumbledore agreed. "Now, please, Harry, sit and rest while we discuss what we've learned this evening."

Bill levitated the jewelry out of the half canteen and placed it on the table. It was a locket with an ornate snake carved into it's lid.

Dumbledore waved his wand several times, muttering under his breath, then he leaned back on his chair, looking old and tired. "It is as Harry says. A clever forgery of Slytherin's locket and not a Horcrux."

Bill pulled his wand and cast a cleaning spell on the locket, then he reached for it. He examined it for a minute before passing it over to Scott.

"It's obvious that the real locket is probably a Horcrux, it's just a matter of finding it," Dumbledore murmured.

Harry took the locket from Jean and stared at it. "I've seen this before," he murmured. He placed the locket down on the table and leaned back thinking, his eyes closed. "Where did I see this?"

A hush fell around the table and all eyes turned to him. His eyes sprang open and he grinned, then reached with his right hand. His hand seemed to blur, becoming indistinct for a brief second, then the effect was gone and another locket lay in the palm of his hand, causing

everyone to gasp. Harry quickly dropped the second locket, as if it were hot. He shuddered and looked at the thing with revulsion.

"Don't touch it," he hissed, holding his hand.

Jean moved to examine his hand.

Dumbledore waved his wand at the locket, which glowed a sickly green in response. He turned to look at Harry. "How did you get this?" he asked in surprise.

Harry shrugged. "It's part of my talent. I saw that locket at headquarters, so I called it to me. Whatever you do, do not try to open the locket. That will trigger the Horcrux. Ginny found that out when she opened the diary."

Dumbledore nodded and levitated locket off of the floor where it landed when Harry dropped it. He moved to the table, then turned to Jean. "Did he injure his hand?"

Jean shook her head. "No, he seems to have dropped it in time." She turned to look at Harry. "I'm confused. Did you handle the locket you found at headquarters?"

Harry nodded. "Yes, we all did. We were trying to pry it open, but couldn't."

"Why didn't you hurt yourself then?" asked Scott.

"It's his Mage Sight," Dumbledore said softly.

Minerva nodded. "Yes, that makes sense."

She turned to Jean and the others. "Mage Sight isn't true eyesight. It's another sense, and Mr. Potter's Mage Sight is a recent development. He can 'see' magic and feel it. The Horcrux is created by evil intent. To someone who is not evil, it would be distressing, even to the point of causing pain while holding it. His mind interprets the flow of magic around him and presents it as if he were really seeing it. In a way, the sense is more akin to touch. The locket has powerful magic that is the opposite of what he is, and it causes his sense distress."

"So someone who doesn't have this Mage Sight wouldn't even know they were holding a cursed item like the Horcrux?" asked Jean.

"That's why Ginny never knew until she was already trapped by Riddle," murmured Harry.

"Yes, that is the reason," agreed Dumbledore. "It is likely that you would not be able to touch the diary were it in one piece today."

Dumbledore noticed Harry fighting his exhaustion.

"Might I suggest that we all retire for the evening? It's been a long day and it's been full of surprises. If we could all meet tomorrow after breakfast we can talk about how we can destroy this locket," he suggested.

Everyone agreed and stood. "Minerva, would you remain behind a moment?"

Dumbledore and Minerva waited until everyone filed out. He summoned an elf, who brought them tea.

"I know you have class, but I think it would be for the best if you attend tomorrow's meetings with us. Also, I told Harry that he may be have some extra time to finish the essay you assigned."

Minerva frowned at him. She hated when he interfered with her classes, but at least this time she could see the reason for herself.

"I am concerned about Mr. Potter," she said softly. "Until tonight, I had not seen the extent of his power. He destroyed that table, Albus, his power is truly awesome."

Dumbledore sighed. "Yes, it is. As is the ability to bring an object to him from hundreds of miles away. His abilities will make finding the Horcruxes much easier for us, though harder on him."

Minerva looked at him with a steely gaze. "Albus, I won't have you manipulating him again. Didn't you see what he went through tonight?"

"Of course I saw it, Minerva! And believe me, it tears at my very soul to witness him so tormented. I am the cause of that! But I cannot sit back and simply let him ignore the plight our world is in. Without him, we are lost," he replied heatedly.

"I would do anything to ease his burden, but I cannot," he said in a milder voice. "He has a destiny that will come for him, regardless of how he tries to escape it. It's our job to see that he's prepared for it."

Minerva stood. "No, it's our job to see he is capable of surviving beyond Voldemort, Albus. And you can start by being completely open and honest with him. To my shame, I don't know him as well as I should, but I know him well enough to know that he doesn't trust us, and you in particular. If he discovers so much as a single falsehood, he's liable to run and then where will we be?"

"Yes, yes, of course. You are quite correct, Minerva," Dumbledore replied, sounding unconvinced. "I'll see you at breakfast?"

She nodded, biting back a scathing reply. She was beginning to understand what Harry saw in the Headmaster, and it bothered her greatly.

Dumbledore sighed and watched her leave the room. He was worried about Harry and worried what the war might do to wizarding society. So many were now at risk, despite his efforts to prevent it. He wasn't really a pure blood purist, but he was intent on saving as much magical blood as possible, no matter what the source.

Author's Note:

Yes, we finally get some Harry/Ginny action! To all you Ginny haters, we do not want to hear about your hatred of Ginny. You've been warned in nearly every chapter. Don't like? Find a Ginny bashing story, I'm sure there are some out there.

Please, if you don't like the ship, ignore the review button.

Mutant Storm

Chapter 08 - Minister Stupid

Standard Disclaimer:

The lights came on slowly and the curtain rose. Bob waited anxiously in the wings to see if Alyx had followed his directions for this very special disclaimer.

He blinked his eyes in disbelief, then he blinked them again, and again. Nope he wasn't seeing things.

Angrily striding out onto the stage he walked over to Alyx who stood there looking confused.

“What are you doing?” asked Bob.

“Erm... wondering why you wanted jello for the disclaimer?” she replied.

Bob glared at her. “I said Cello,” he snarled. “I lined up Leonard Nimoy to tell everyone that we don't own Harry Potter and I wanted him accompanied by a Cello quartet. What did you come up with? FOUR QUARTS OF JELLO!!!”

“Excuse me?”

Bob and Alyx turned. Near the jello stood Leonard Nimoy. “I wasn't aware you were serving dessert with this disclaimer, do you have a spoon?”

“ARGH!” shouted Bob.

“Do you like Lime Jello Leonard?” asked Alyx.

“It's my favorite!”

Bob ran off the stage pulling at his hair and Alyx blinked, then smiled brightly. “Good, more for us then.”

“Fascinating,” replied Nimoy.

Mutant Storm Chapter 08 Minister Stupid

Decisions and Chances lost (October 9th)...

Harry stumbled into the Great Hall the next morning, exhausted from the night before.

His friends looked up as he entered. Noting their concerned expressions, he ran a hand over his face tiredly and sat down next to Ginny.

“Here, Harry, this will help. You look exhausted,” she said as she placed a cup of tea in front of him.

He gratefully accepted the cup and sipped from it. After a moment he smiled his thanks.

“Yeah, mate. You didn't show up for our morning run.” asked Neville.

Ron sat nearby with Luna, watching carefully, but otherwise keeping to himself. Harry didn't fully trust him yet, and probably wouldn't for a long time to come, but he was at least speaking with him again.

“I think I'm too tired to be exhausted,” Harry mumbled to the amusement of the others.

“Didn't you sleep well?” asked Hermione.

He shook his head. The stress of yesterday evening kept him up for most of the night. “It was a bad night,” he replied.

Hermione frowned and leaned in. “Where were you last night, Harry?” she asked pointedly. “You weren't in the House when we closed up for curfew.”

Harry peered at her for a moment. “How's your occlumency coming?”

She blinked in surprise, not expecting the question. “It's coming along all right, but my shields are no where near strong enough, according to Professor McGonagall. She says I need more time. Ginny is the most advanced of us.”

Harry lifted an eye brow at her in shock. “You went to McGonagall to learn Occlumency?”

“Well, yes. It's not like we could go to Professor Snape, you know. And you say you can't teach us the craft,” she replied.

Harry closed his eyes and sighed for a moment, then he shook his head. “How much does Professor McGonagall know?”

“Only that we need to learn it to help you,” she said softly. “Ginny's shield is the most developed.”

When Harry looked at Ginny, she smiled. "What can I say?" she asked with a shrug. "Wanting to help you is enough motivation for me to work on it, despite this being my OWL year."

He looked shocked for a second, then he leaned in and hugged her. "Thank you," he whispered. The effort she was putting into this, especially in her OWL year, touched him deeply.

Ginny blushed as she began putting food on his plate. "Eat. It will help wake you for class."

His unexpected and spontaneous show of affection pleased her, but she was annoyed to feel herself blushing. Without thinking, she slipped into her mother's habit of feeding people when stress levels were high.

He scooped up some food with a fork, but shook his head. "It will wake me," he said, smiling at her, "but I'm probably not going to class today. I have to attend a meeting in the Headmaster's office after breakfast," he finished with a grimace.

"What class do you have this morning?" asked Hermione. "I can take notes for you."

"I doubt it. It's Transfiguration, and Professor McGonagall is supposed to be at the meeting, as well."

Hermione frowned. If there was one thing she hated it was a disruption in her classes. It didn't help that Harry was grinning at her about it.

He turned away from Hermione and began to eat once more. When he finished, he pushed his plate away and sighed contentedly.

Smiling, he nodded his thanks to Ginny. "Unless something happens at this meeting, I'll see you at lunch," he told her quietly as he picked up his book bag and stood up. Reaching down, he touched her shoulder gently, still a bit unsure.

She smiled. "I.."

"So, the Weaslette finally bagged herself a Potter. It's bad enough that she has to sleep with someone just to get out of poverty, but can't she at least pick someone human?" Malfoy said from nearby.

Ginny squeezed her eyes shut and nearly groaned. *Damn Malfoy! The Ferret has the worst timing!*

Hearing the muttering of her friends, her eyes snapped open and she stared at Harry. His expression was unreadable.

Harry slowly turned to face Malfoy, releasing his restraints on his magic as he turned. Seeing that Ron was climbing to his feet, scowling, he held up a hand.

Ron froze.

The other students in the hall realized a confrontation was coming and fell silent.

"I didn't realize you had a death wish, Malfoy," Harry said softly. "Sooner or later I am going to kill you, your family and everyone else who follows Voldemoney. What I'm curious about is why you're rushing things. Insulting my friends is a sure fire way of pushing up your execution date."

Malfoy took a step back, bumping into Goyle standing behind him. "You can't threaten me, Potter," he snarled.

Harry chuckled, his eyes never leaving Malfoy.

Draco stared back and his hand twitched. Harry's gaze was unnerving him. For the first time he noticed his eyes had turned to a dark green. Little flecks and flickers of light back lit his pupils.

"I'm not threatening you, Malfoy. I'm making you a promise. Renounce Voldemoney and turn yourself over to the Aurors and I'll let you live. Otherwise..."

"Otherwise?" asked Malfoy warily. He had turned away from Harry slightly, unable to bear that hard gaze any longer.

"Otherwise I'll hunt you down, wizard, and show you the same mercy my parents were shown. Only you'll die slowly and painfully," Harry said calmly. His eyes flared brightly and Malfoy lost his nerve.

He gasped and turned, stumbling into Crabbe then fell to the floor. He reached for his wand and found it was missing again, despite the anti-summoning charm placed on it. On all fours, he scrambled down the aisle, trying to get away from Harry.

Harry dampened his magic down and looked at Malfoy's goons. "You might want to make sure he cleans up before class. The Professors do so hate an untidy student."

The two hulking boys looked at him stupidly for a moment, then turned and lumbered after Malfoy

Harry watched them for a moment, shaking his head at their stupidity, then turned back to the table. "Are you all right Ginny? Don't let what Malfoy said bother you. He's big on talk, but couldn't find his way out of a paper bag if someone gave him a map."

She smiled up at him. "Normally I don't, but I can't expect you to fight all my battles for me," she countered.

Harry leaned down and reached into his bag. "You're right, but you can't expect me to sit silently by when he's saying things like that, either. But if it's revenge against the ferret that you want, why don't you, Luna and Hermione figure out what to do with this?" he said, placing Malfoy's wand on the table.

All three girls stared at the wand for a moment, then grinned at each other.

Have it ready by lunch and I'll see it gets returned," he added, then he stood and looked towards the entrance. Logan was watching him, grinning around an unlit cigar. He straightened and waved, then left his friends to join Logan.

Logan nodded in the direction that Malfoy ran. "Your work?"

He shrugged. "He was annoying me."

Logan raised an eyebrow. "I could talk with him if you want."

Harry laughed. "That, I would pay money to see."

Logan put his cigar away and motioned toward Dumbledore's office.

With a mental sigh, Harry fell into step beside Logan. He hoped he had taken care of the spying devices, but he'd check when he got there.

"So, is this guy going to be a problem for you this year?" Logan asked.

"They all are, to one degree or another," he replied.

"Even that pretty little red head? She kinda looks like a younger Jean."

Harry grimaced and paused. Logan turned to look at him.

"There's already been one attempt on my life, but because I didn't see the shooter, Dumbledore did nothing. Most of the Slytherin boys in the sixth and seventh years are marked Death Eaters. I know it, Mum knows it, and I know she's given Dumbledore a list of names.

"Malfoy... he's changed in some ways and still the same in others. He's a bug, but now he's a dangerous bug. He's been doing something late at night in the castle, but I don't know what. His family is extremely dangerous, but he has an over inflated opinion of himself. I am pretty sure he wasn't the one throwing that spell that night, though. He's not the type to get his hands personally dirty. He'd rather pay someone to do it for him," Harry said, then looked fully at Logan.

"That little red head is the most dangerous one of all. We're dating... I think... I'm not sure," he added with a confused look. "The Death Eaters are simple. They want to kill me. To keep them from doing so, I'm more than willing to kill them first. End of story. But Ginny? She wants things. Things I'm not sure I know how to give her."

Logan slapped Harry on the back. "All part of growing up, Wiz. I'm sure little Red will be happy to show you."

He winced from the blow and nodded uncertainly. "Yeah, I know. That's what keeps me up at night."

Giving Harry a small shove to get him moving, Logan began to laugh.

Snape's Quarters, Hogwarts...

Severus Snape was in an incredibly foul mood.

Last night the quill he had next to the receiver for his listening charm started writing what looked like a meeting between Dumbledore and the mutants. And then, for no apparent reason it inexplicably ended with no further conversation.

He gnawed worriedly at one fingernail and wondered if the charm had been discovered.

It would have been the second meeting with the Mutants that day, and the only meeting he would have caught that wasn't shielded by a privacy ward. Dumbledore was nearly as paranoid as Moody that way and it was a rare day that there wasn't a ward in place. Most of the time he picked up innocuous conversation about school matters.

To add insult to injury, the Potter brat had been present at the meeting. Somehow this was his fault, he was sure of that.

Turning, he checked several of the other quills he had tied to other objects. He was surprised to learn that there was nothing for Minerva's office. She was normally in her office before breakfast and spent the time muttering to herself. Mostly about school issues and some of her comments were quite amusing.

One of the other quills had hit pay dirt, however.

Dolores Umbridge was in a rage. Apparently he wasn't the only one with a listening charm going to Dumbledore's office and she was quite upset that the charm now seemed to be nonfunctional.

Snape grimaced, at the thought. Obviously the charmed items had been found and disposed of. Now the next question was what could he say to relieve Dumbledore's suspicions?

He paced the room, slowly building his lie. He'd claim he was unaware that there was any charm on the book. Only that he had bought the book in Knockturn Alley and someone else must have charmed it before he got his hands on it. Knockturn Alley wasn't the most reputable place, of course, but the shopkeepers knew well enough not to press their luck with Snape. As such, it had been years since he'd felt the need to check the items he bought in the Alley.

That he checked every item he bought, regardless of its source, was beside the point. Albus didn't know that, and the lie should work.

He sat and gnawed on his fingernail again. Yes, the lie should work, but he was now back to square one again. Dumbledore was still not letting him attend the meetings with the mutants, claiming they didn't trust him. And his master wanted him to find out what was going on in those

meetings.

He glanced at the clock on the wall, then stood. It was time for class.

Perhaps I can find out what's happening from one of Potter's friends, he mused. And perhaps it's time to start looking into this Professor Xavier. He's the one who sent the letter to the old fool.

Office of the Minister of Magic...

If Dumbledore had been paying attention, he would have been surprised to note that Professor McGonagall wasn't the only teacher not attending classes. Snape was uncharacteristically late, but Dolores Umbridge hadn't shown up at all!

Instead, she was cooling her heels outside of the Minister's office. At one time, the door had always been open to her and she'd been welcome at any time. Now, she was forced to wait impatiently, reduced to the position of supplicant.

"The Minister will see you now, Miss Umbridge. He says you have five minutes," said the pretty, young secretary.

Dolores stood, smiled at the woman and nodded. Internally, she was fuming. Once she had commanded respect and was second only to the Minister himself! Now, she could only get five minutes? And grudgingly given, at that?

She stepped into the room and Rufus Scrimgeour looked up from his desk with distaste. "What do you want, Dolores? I sent you to Hogwarts with the hope that you wouldn't return here anytime soon."

Umbridge blinked, then squared her shoulders. "There are problems in Hogwarts, Minister," she said sweetly. "Problems that require your attention. Dumbledore has been consorting with those filthy mutants. It's bad enough he hired that mutant witch, who has completely ignored Ministry guidelines on teaching Muggle Studies, but now he's got several other mutants running around the castle!

"And that Potter brat! The things he's allowed to get away with are downright shocking. You simply need to get involved, Minister, before they ruin the school for everyone!"

Scrimgeour arched an eyebrow and recalled the notice he'd received that the monitoring device had ceased functioning this morning. He was still frustrated by the fact that the Unspeakables had been unable to get much out of the attempt to listen in to the old man's office. While Voldemort was an undeniable problem, Dumbledore was a political threat that he wanted monitored.

He picked up and fiddled with a quill for a moment, not speaking. Finally, he leaned back in his chair. "Dolores, your attitude towards half breeds and other non-pure bloods is well known. I don't know why I'm surprised to see it transferred to the mutant community. The same can be said about your hatred of Harry Potter."

"But you don't know what he's done to the Malfoy heir! It's a disgrace!"

She squeaked and backed up a step when Scrimgeour leaned forward suddenly and hit his desk with the palm of his hand. "The Malfoy heir is the son of a convicted Death Eater. If I could, I'd see Cornelius kissed for accepting the bribe that pardoned him. So you'll forgive me if I don't seem too upset about any discomfort someone gives that arrogant little monster."

Scrimgeour paused and took a deep breath. "Your complaints about Hogwarts are duly noted. I will be making an inspection tour of the school in the near future, but not entirely for the reasons you point out. And I can assure you, I will be asking Dumbledore about his dealings with these mutants. Thank you for the information," he said coldly.

Dolores nodded and turned to the door. Just as she reached it, Scrimgeour stopped her.

"Oh, and Dolores? You might want to consider finding yourself a solicitor. We've fielded a number of complaints concerning your actions last year, and the DMLE may start looking into them soon."

She swallowed nervously and her body broke out into a cold sweat. Nodding she fled his office as quickly as she could.

Headmaster's Office, Hogwarts...

"So the last time you tried to destroy one of these things, you were injured?" asked Scott. He eyed the locket on the desk as if it were a poisonous snake.

Harry glanced everywhere but the desk, not wanting to look at the horcrux. There were a number of charmed items in the office, though even with his mage sight, it took him time to sort them all out and realize that none were going outside the office anymore.

He stiffened slightly when he found the tracking device. The charms had not been removed. He flicked his wrist and his wand dropped to his hand. With a single, silent cast, the device exploded.

"Harry!" exclaimed Jean, standing in alarm.

Scott turned in his chair and looked at Harry. "I hope you have an explanation?" he asked icily.

Harry shrugged. "It was still tied to me," he replied angrily, glaring at Dumbledore. "As he couldn't be bother to get off his ass long enough to ensure that I wasn't neglected, beaten or starved, then I can't be bothered with annoying tracking charms he had no business placing on me in the first place."

Scott was silent for a moment, then nodded, accepting his explanation. He turned back to Dumbledore, noting the man staring at Harry in

shock. "Well, Headmaster? You did say you'd remove that charm."

Even Professor McGonagall was now looking at him with annoyance.

"I meant to. I just hadn't gotten around to it yet," Dumbledore said defensively.

Harry snorted and moved to sit in the back of the room. He knew he was once again close to losing his temper with the old man. He struggled with his anger, but he was tired, making it more difficult than it should have been.

"Yeah, well, now you don't have to worry about that pesky little detail," Logan growled. "So, about the ring? You were going to say something?"

Dumbledore frowned and turned his attention back to Logan. Harry's actions disturbed him on a number of levels. He was upset that he'd lost a valuable magical artifact and a monitor on the boy. He was also unhappy with the fact that his so-called parents were so quick to accept Harry's explanation.

"Yes, the ring turned out to have powerful dark magic protection. It would have killed me if I were a bit slower in getting out of the way. As it stands, it managed to injure my hand, despite my speed. The only other Horcrux was destroyed by Harry in his second year. As far as I know, there were no protections on the diary," replied Dumbledore.

"Or maybe there was and Mr. Potter is immune to them?" murmured McGonagall.

Harry blinked and looked at her. "Are you serious?" he asked in a strangled tone. "Why would I be immune to them?"

She frowned. "I am sorry if it makes you uncomfortable, Mr. Potter, but we must consider the fact that the destruction of the first Horcrux was completely uncontrolled. And yet you were not injured while destroying it. There could have been many protections on the diary and we simply don't know about them. Was it because of your link to Voldemort? Or was there some other protection we don't know about. Like Fawkes, perhaps. Was he singing at the time?"

Harry shook his head, his complexion paling slightly. "I don't... It's hard to remember every little detail, Professor," he said. "Ginny was dying. I had to save her," he added plaintively.

McGonagall scowled for a moment, then she stood and conjured a mug of hot chocolate. She handed it to him and patted his shoulder, trying to ease his discomfort.

"If I remember correctly, you were bitten by the basilisk and healed by Fawkes. Phoenix tears and basilisk venom mixed together. I can't recall ever reading about such a mixture and I don't claim to be an expert on potions. But both liquids are magically very powerful. Combining them might give you some form of protection.

"I do not mean to make you uneasy, Mr. Potter. I am just saying that we have two incidents of destroying a Horcrux. One resulted in injuries, the other did not. We need to examine both incidents in detail."

Harry took the cup and smiled weakly up at her.

"Professor McGonagall is correct, but I think we are getting ahead of ourselves a bit. Destroying the Horcrux is a priority, but it doesn't have to be done today. I'd like to take the time to do some more research. Not much is known about Horcruxes in regular wizarding literature, but there are sources we haven't checked yet. If at all possible, I'd like to avoid any further injuries to anyone else."

Harry breathed a sigh of relief and closed his eyes. When he felt a hand on his forehead a few moments later, he opened them and looked into green eyes, identical to his own.

"Are you alright?" Jean asked worriedly. "You're not running a fever."

"I'm just tired. I couldn't sleep last night," he replied. "You know how bad my dreams are after I have a flashback."

"So you stayed up all night?" Jean asked with a frown.

Harry nodded and Jean sighed softly in exasperation.

The others remained silent, listening to Jean and Harry.

"I'll send an elf to Madam Pomfrey to ask her for a light sleeping potion. Just something that will let you have a few hours maybe? I don't want you to throw off your entire schedule," Jean said softly. "Next time, come to me, or go to Poppy."

"Before you do that, Jean, might I impose on Harry for a few more minutes? I'd like to ask some questions concerning how he managed to summon the Horcrux."

Jean met Harry's eyes and he nodded tiredly before looking at Dumbledore.

"You summoned the locket over a distance of hundreds of miles. I understand this is somehow related to your mutant abilities, so I'll try not to press for too much information. But can you explain it better? How were you able to summon the locket?" asked Dumbledore.

"It's not as simple as it appears, Headmaster," Harry replied. "Last night I had an exact replica of the item to help me visualize, and a vague idea as to its location. I need to know what the object is, in detail, or precisely where it is."

Harry paused and ran a hand through his hair. "I could bring Nagini here to this room right now but I don't think you want to upset Voldemort like that just yet. Now that I think on it, I doubt I could bring a person to me. The locket was nice and small, easy to bring here. Nagini's pretty large. That might be troublesome, but worth the effort eventually."

Dumbledore leaned back in his chair and absently stroked his beard as he considered Harry's words.

"So if you knew what an object looked like, you could bring it here?" McGonagall asked incredulously.

He nodded.

"So that's why you wanted Harry to go with us last night. In case it proved too difficult to remove the Horcrux," Dumbledore said, eying Scott.

Scott grinned. "That, and he wanted to pilot the Blackbird. He's been studying it since he first learned to fly."

"And an excellent job of it he did," Dumbledore replied with a hint of a smile, then his expression changed. "Harry, I'm grateful for the information you've given us. With your help, finding the Horcruxes may have become a whole lot safer."

He wrote something down on a parchment and held it out to him. "Take this to Madam Pomfrey. She'll give you something that will help you sleep for a few hours, though I suspect she'll insist you stay in the infirmary. You're excused from attending class today, but I expect you to make up the work and do all the necessary homework."

Harry pushed himself to his feet, more tired than he realized. A few moments later, parchment in hand, he left the Headmaster's office.

Jean watched the door close, then turned back Dumbledore. "You didn't mention anything about it, but I take it you've neutralized the listening spells in here?"

"And those we found in Professor McGonagall's office. I am troubled by the fact that in two of the cases, they were books given to us by Professor Snape. He must know the charms have been discovered and countered by now. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to determine where the other two objects went to. But I think it's safe to say that whomever put them here, now know their charms have been discovered, as well," replied Dumbledore.

"We could meet in the Blackbird. That would ensure privacy," offered Logan.

Scott shook his head. "Let's keep that idea in reserve for now."

"What about the Chamber of Secrets?" asked Jean. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but Harry is the only one who can open the way. We could reopen the Chamber and make portkeys to it."

"The Chamber would make an excellent, secure location, Albus," McGonagall offered. "And it's never been fully explored, has it?"

Dumbledore shook his head. "No, it hasn't. Since the incident in the Chamber, I was reluctant to ask Harry to take us down there. However, knowing what we now know, it would be prudent to make sure Riddle didn't hide a Horcrux down there."

Jean frowned. "I'll tell him about it. I'll be returning to the Blackmoor Castle for the weekend. I've been told, in very harsh terms, that I'm hurting my relationship with Harry by withholding certain items of information from him. As such, you should be aware that I will be discussing Snape's role, past and present, Headmaster."

Dumbledore winced. "Are you sure that is prudent, Professor? Harry's reaction to the news might be rather volatile," he said, concerned.

"I have little choice, Headmaster. By keeping this from him, I'm jeopardizing his trust in me and I won't do it any longer. I had wanted to wait until his friends could learn to protect themselves, but the longer I wait, the less he trusts me," Jean said unhappily.

Scott reached over and took her hand in his. "He'll understand, once you tell him. Of all the people in the world, I think you're the one person he wants to trust the most."

Jean nodded and smiled weakly at her husband. It had only been a few short months, but she found herself marveling at the fact that she couldn't imagine a life without Harry in it.

The Great Hall, Lunchtime...

Harry woke in the infirmary wanting to grumble. Dumbledore had been right. Madam Pomfrey had insisted he stay so she could monitor him.

She stepped from her office and moved to his bed. "Feeling better?" she asked.

He nodded. "A little. I still feel like I could sleep more, but I should be able to muddle through the rest of the day."

Poppy shook her head and made a clucking sound. "You'll do more than muddle," she said, producing a small vial from her pocket. "Drink this. It's an energy restorative. It will wake you up."

He took the potion and eyed it with distaste. Sighing, he opened the vial and drank the contents quickly, trying not to taste it.

Poppy smiled approvingly. "The next time you find yourself unable to sleep, I fully expect you to come see me."

"I hate sleeping in the infirmary," he mumbled.

"You wouldn't have needed to, had you come to me last night," she chided. "I would have sent you back to your dorm with a single dose vial. Now, you're free to join your friends. Lunch is about to begin and I expect you'll find them in the Great Hall."

Thanking her, he made his way down to the Great Hall. At the door, he found Ginny, Luna and Hermione waiting for him.

He eyed the three witches suspiciously. "Erm... what's up?"

Ginny grabbed his arm and dragged him into a empty classroom, the other two following close behind.

“Can you get Malfoy's wand back to him?” she asked quietly.

Luna giggled and Ginny tried hard to suppress a grin. She held Malfoy's wand in her hand.

Harry took the wand from her and eyed it for a moment. “Do you want it to just appear in his pocket? Or should I leave it on the table where he sits?”

The three girls looked at each other.

“The table,” Hermione said firmly.

Ginny and Luna nodded in agreement.

Harry slipped the wand into his bag. “All right. Now, what did you do to it?”

Ginny gave him an evil grin. “What makes you think we did anything to it?”

“We would never dream of doing anything with Malfoy's wand,” Hermione said breathlessly.

“Of course we wouldn't,” agreed Luna. “That's Crabbe's job!”

The three girls looked at each other and began to laugh.

It took a moment for Harry to realize that they weren't talking about Malfoy's magic wand. He rolled his eyes. “Fine, I'm going to lunch then.” He turned away from them, muttering, “Not that I can eat with *that* image in my head now.”

He left the classroom with the others following him and snickering among themselves. Harry paused for a moment at the entrance of the Great Hall and the three girls nearly bumped into him. He fixed Malfoy's position at the Slytherin table in his mind, then he walked over to his customary spot at the Gryffindor table.

The girls followed him, expecting him to do something. When he didn't, their expressions grew confused.

Suddenly Malfoy bounced up from his seat with a startled yell. He pointed at the spot on the table where his wand had just appeared. His exclaimed cry drew the attention of the teachers at the staff table.

“Mr. Malfoy? Is there a problem?” called Snape.

Malfoy looked up at the staff table. “My wand just appeared on the table, Professor. It's been missing all morning.”

Snape frowned, stood up and made his way to Malfoy's side. The other teachers and most of the students watched with interest.

Snape pulled his own wand, then he turned to Malfoy. “You say it's been missing all morning? Did you report that fact?”

Malfoy nodded. “I spoke to Professor McGonagall about it, Professor. She said it would probably turn up being charmed with a prank, like the last time it went missing.”

Malfoy glanced at Harry, who was studiously pretending to ignore the spectacle.

Snape caught the direction of his gaze and nodded to himself. “Very well, Mr. Malfoy, let's remove that prank, shall we?”

“Now, that's a bad move,” muttered Luna.

Ginny snorted, and Hermione bit down on one knuckle, trying to keep herself from laughing.

“FINITE INCANTATUM!” Snape bellowed, pointing at Malfoy's wand.

Luna immediately slipped under the table, followed by Hermione and Ginny.

Ginny reached up and grabbed Harry, pulling him under the table with them, but not before the first effect went off.

A blindingly bright flash of light caused those in the room to flinch and close their eyes. The sharp, cracking sound had most slapping their hands to their ears.

Ginny looked at Harry, noting his surprise, and she collapsed against Hermione, giggling. Harry's forehead, and only his forehead was tanned. It was the only part of him still exposed when the curse went off.

He glared at the three giggling witches, then climbed back out from under the table and stared in shock. Everyone at the Slytherin table, except for Snape, was covered in soot.

Snape's hair had turned snow white, and so had his robes. The wand, what was left of it, burned merrily on the table. Everyone else in the hall had tan patterns based on what part of their bodies got hit with the light.

Luna popped up from under the table and sat down. She calmly poured herself a glass of pumpkin juice, then looked at Ron appraisingly. “It looks good, Ron. Almost as if all of your freckles have merged into one big one,” she said.

Ginny, who was still climbing out from under the table, slid back under, laughing.

“You ruined my wand?” Malfoy asked his Head of House.

Those in the hall grew quiet, but all eyes turned to Snape.

Snape glared at the boy balefully.

Everyone turned to Malfoy.

“You ruined my wand!” the blond accused, glaring back at his Professor.

Harry watched as everyone turned to look at Snape again. It was like watching some demented tennis game.

When the murmuring and soft laughter started, Harry turned back to Snape and Malfoy. The blond's face was red – whether from anger or embarrassment, Harry didn't know – but it was obvious the Professor was angry. Harry was surprised the man hadn't gone up in flames yet.

“Ten points from Slytherin!” Snape snarled loudly.

The shock of those words caused an instant silence to descend on the hall. Malfoy took a step back from his Head of House and swallowed nervously.

“That explains why he doesn't like wand waving,” Luna said, her comment echoing in the silent hall.

Professor McGonagall laughed. She managed to control it and look stern for a few seconds before she gave up and began to chortle.

Snape glared at her, his lips pulled back in a snarl. Then, turning abruptly, he pushed passed Malfoy and stalked from the hall.

As he rounded the corner, the students, including a few of the Slytherins, began to laugh.

Blackmoor Island and Castle...

He leaned against the chilly pane of glass and stared into the darkness, wishing his head would stop pounding. He and Jean had arrived late from Hogwarts, and after spending some time with Logan and Scott, Jean took him into one of the small sitting rooms to discuss 'things'.

He sighed and pushed back the urge to scream.

“Harry, before I begin, I want to apologize to you for holding this information back. But there was a good reason for it.”

He looked at her warily, not liking how the conversation was starting. “Go on,” he urged.

“A few days before school started, I learned something about Professor Snape. When I informed Professor Dumbledore about what I had discovered, he told me that what Snape had done to you was illegal. He hadn't been aware of it or he would have put a stop to it. What Snape did left you emotionally vulnerable and probably was what started the process of triggering your mutant abilities.”

Jean walked over to sit next to Harry on the love seat and she put a hand on his arm. “What Snape did was a kind of rape. According to Dumbledore, he damaged you emotionally.”

Harry scowled.

“That doesn't mean your crazy,” she said in a rush to explain. “What it means is that often victims of this kind of attack have difficulty controlling their emotions. Your mood swings and the panic attacks all tie back into the damage he caused. Recovery from an attack like this is often long and difficult.”

Harry stood and walked over to the fireplace. He stared at the flames moodily, waiting for her to continue. When she didn't, he hunched his shoulders and put his hands in his pocket. “There's more, isn't there?” he asked quietly..

“Yes,” Jean admitted. “Snape has been spying for Voldemort even more than he spies for Dumbledore. The man belongs to the side he thinks has the best chances of winning. Right now, in his mind, that's Voldemort. For some reason, Voldemort seems to have a hold on Snape that Dumbledore can't match.”

Harry shook his head in dismay and another long silence ensued. “He's going to let Snape get away with it, isn't he?” he asked finally.

Jean dug the fingers of one hand into her thigh and wished it were Snape's neck. “Yes,” she confirmed. “They plan on using him to feed false information to Voldemort.”

He turned to face her and crossed his arms across his chest. “I think the only thing that surprises me about all this is that you would keep it from me. I've been expecting Snape to betray Dumbledore for years. As for me?” he shrugged. “What he did is exactly what I've come to expect from him.”

Jean shifted in her seat uncomfortably and opened her mouth, but Harry waved her to silence.

“I need time to think about this,” he said.

She nodded helplessly and watched as he turned and walked out.

He had replayed that conversation a dozen times in the past two hours. He had made plans, then thrown them out. He thought about running

away and leaving everything to burn. He thought about sneaking back into Hogwarts and killing Snape and maybe Dumbledore. He's even worked out a plan to sneak back into Hogwarts, kill Snape, punch Dumbledore, then leave the wizarding world and telling Jean to get lost. He's survived without family before, after all.

He compiled a list of all the students he knew were marked Death Eaters, carefully writing down each name. He thought about sending it to the Ministry. Or maybe the Daily Prophet. No, wait! The Quibbler!

In the end, he crumpled the parchment up and threw it into his book bag, disgusted with himself for being unable to make any sort of realistic plan.

He closed his eyes and leaned his forehead against the cool glass. Outside, an approaching storm pounded the island and moonlight reflected off the waves crashing against the rocky shore.

Slowly, his anger bled away, leaving him to feel as though he were sinking into a vast hole and he hadn't the energy, or the inclination, to claw his way out of it. With a heavy lurch, he jerked away from the window and kicked off his shoes. Crawling into bed, he pulled the blankets around him and just wished it would all go away.

He hadn't felt this alone since Sirius died.

Blackmoor Island and Castle (the next day)...

Harry rolled out of bed and stretched.

He knew his reaction to Jean's news last night had surprised and concerned her, just as he was sure it had surprised Scott, when she told him about it.

He looked out his window where he could see several house elves, on loan from Hogwarts, setting up chairs. He could also see Hagrid moving about, making sure everything was perfect.

The storm from last night had passed and the day was dawning, bright and sunny, though he was sure it would be chilly.

Harry frowned and considered what to do with himself today. His potions class had been canceled because of Hagrid's field trip, and that left him with some free time.

When news spread of Hagrid's intent to bring the students to visit with one of the few, rare species of sentient dragons, everyone clamored to be brought along. So the date for the trip was moved to a weekend and arrangements were made to bring the school to the castle in two groups. A morning group, consisting of the first through fourth years, and an afternoon group of fifth through seventh year students, escorted by several Professors.

The students would arrive by portkey and be taken directly to the edge of K'nor's lair. The castle was temporarily concealed behind a disillusionment charm.

Hagrid had spoken with K'nor and she had told him that she would bring out her fledglings to meet with the students. Her eggs had hatched two weeks earlier, giving her two male and two female dragonettes. The cow sized dragons were growing rapidly and could often be seen playing in the surf under K'nor's watchful eye.

A popping noise by his side alerted him to Dobby's arrival with breakfast. Once the meal had been arranged to the elf's satisfaction, Harry picked up a cup of coffee and nodded his thanks. He was still standing there when Jean found him, nearly a half hour later.

She opened the door, and seeing him dressed, walked over to stand next to him. "You seem awful quiet today."

He shrugged. News of Snape's betrayal and their acceptance of it left him numb. "What am I supposed to say?" he finally asked. "He tore through my mind and left me wide open to Voldemort. He got most of my friends hurt and got Sirius killed. But does anyone punish him for it? Of course not. Instead, they turn to me and ask me to make another sacrifice."

When Jean flinched, he turned to look at her. "What's next? Will you also tell me I have to fight Voldemort? I know you want to know how I feel." He tilted his head slightly, then shrugged. "The answer is, I don't feel anything."

He turned and walked to the door. Opening it, he paused and looked back at her, his eyes empty and his expression blank. "I don't think I have it in me to feel anymore," he told her calmly, then turned away and left the room.

Jean closed her eyes and bit her lip. She'd felt nothing from him.

Harry wandered through the castle aimlessly, no real destination in mind. When he reached one of the two towers, he sighed and sat down next to one of the windows, trying to find a way out of the mess he found himself in.

Several hours later, Professor Dumbledore arrived with the first batch of incoming students and Jean was there to meet him. His smile slipped, seeing her expression. She motioned for him to follow, then turned and led him away from the students, who Professors Flitwick and Sprout were leading towards the end of the island.

"I take it from your expression that your news was not well received?" Dumbledore asked.

"Did you expect it to be?" She asked waspishly, then sighed and looked away. "To be honest, his reaction wasn't what I expected. I thought he'd be angry. Instead, he shut down tighter than ever. His shielding is so absolute now I can't even detect a hint of an emotion from him."

"Yes, he's become quite adept at hiding his emotions. It wasn't until I reviewed some memories in my pensieve that I realized what he was

doing,” replied Dumbledore. “What do you intend to do?”

Jean crossed her arms, hugging herself. “I’m not sure. But I feel I must tell you, if forced to make a choice between Harry or your war, Harry is going to win every time.”

Dumbledore’s expression fell for a moment.

“There’s something you should keep in mind, Professor,” Jean said. “You denied me a chance to grow up in the cult of Dumbledore. So I don’t suffer from the awe and reverence that so many of the other wizards seem to hold for you. You are simply a man, and as fallible as any of us.”

“If you think it would help, I could try talking to Harry,” Dumbledore offered.

“That depends on what you intend to bring to the table,” Jean countered.

“What do you mean?”

“Professor, Harry will expect you to do something about Snape, at the least. What are you prepared to do?”

Dumbledore frowned. He wasn’t prepared to do anything about Snape. In fact, he thought he was quite clever in keeping Snape on and feeding him false information.

“Why don’t we discuss that?” Dumbledore replied with a smile, trying to stall for time. He motioned towards several chairs nearby.

Reluctantly Jean allowed herself to be led over to the chairs and sat down.

Dumbledore smiled and tried to remain calm and collected. He couldn’t allow their plans to change over something so minor, so he’d have to be persuasive.

Later that day...

It was the sound that first alerted Logan. The room was rumbling noisily when it shouldn’t be making any noise at all! He walked over and opened the door to the control room. Unlike the Danger Room in the Westchester manor, this one had its control room at floor level.

Checking the display, he blinked and wondered who was running what looked like a major battle scenario. Leaning over the console, he looked through the control room window to see what was going on.

Inside the Danger Room, Sentinels and Death Eaters alike were advancing on a single point. Harry’s wand flashed nearly continuously as he cycled through normal and phase space. Sometimes he’d cast with both hands, but not often.

Logan flinched as Death Eater stepped out from behind a body of a downed Sentinel. Harry raised a hand and a thick rope of energy hit the Death Eater in the chest. Another Death Eater vaporized into a blood red mist.

Seeing enough, Logan slammed his hand down on the panel, hitting the emergency shutdown and halting the simulation.

Harry turned and glared at him behind the glass. “What the hell did you do that for?”

“You’re not even attempting to capture these guys!”

“I’m not a policeman! I don’t take prisoners,” Harry spat.

Shaking his head, Logan walked to the door and opened it. “So you’re looking for a fight then?” he asked as he entered the room and walked over to Harry.

Not waiting for an answer, he hit Harry, or tried to. Harry phased just as the punch was about to land, then he swung with his own fist, turning it solid just in time to hit Logan in the stomach.

Logan grunted softly, then grinned and shook his head. “You need a lot more power behind those swings before they’ll bother me, Wiz.”

Harry laughed, then the two men went for each other. By unspoken agreement, both refrained from using their abilities. It had been part of Harry’s training during the summer months and something he’d missed while at Hogwarts.

The pair grappled for several minutes without either gaining an advantage over the other. The lack of abilities forced them to rely on technique. Logan was a mean fighter, with much more experience, but Harry was wickedly fast and wiry. He didn’t have a lot of technique, but what he knew, he used to his advantage. Despite Logan’s advantages, they were surprisingly well matched.

The door opened and Harry’s concentration was momentarily broken as he glanced toward it. Logan used the opportunity to slip inside his guard and throw him. He sailed through the air, twisting as he did. He landed and rolled back to his feet, crouching down.

“Got ya!” called Logan.

“You got lucky, old man!” Harry replied, knowing it would piss him off. He was right.

Logan growled and charged at Harry, who leapt to one side. Logan bounced off the wall and collided with Harry, pushing him to the ground. He pivoted on top of him, pinning him to the cushioned floor.

“Do ya give?” he growled.

Harry slapped the floor and Logan sprang to his feet. Harry climbed to his own feet and did his best not to groan.

"Damn, Logan, you've put on weight," Harry grumbled as he rubbed his aching chest. "Getting soft, are you?"

Logan growled at Harry, then turned to Scott and Jean, who were standing in the doorway.

Harry saw the two and stiffened. "I'll talk with you later, Logan. I should be with my classmates at Hagrid's demonstration."

He walked toward the door, stopping to pick up his towel. Draping it around his neck, he walked out of the room.

Jean watched him go, then she sighed sadly and shook her head. Scott and Logan shared a look between them.

"All right," Logan growled. "What hell's going on? I heard Harry running the Danger Room at a nearly suicidal level and now he won't even look at Jean?"

"He's just upset," Jean said.

Logan blinked and turned to Scott. "We need to get her back to the States. She's picking up on the Brit's liking for understatement. If Harry is upset, then Rodeo Drive's a strip mall!"

Scott placed an arm protectively around Jean and she leaned against him. "He's angry at the moment. Jean told him about Snape last night."

Logan scowled and pulled a rather smashed looking cigar out of his pants pocket. Surprisingly it had survived his sparring match with Harry...mostly intact.

"Let me go have a pointed talk with Snape," he said, extending the claws on one hand. "That will solve the problem and make Harry happy."

"We can't!" Jean snapped at him. "And when are you going to outgrow your reliance on violence?"

"But it works so well, and will make the Wiz happy," Logan protested, trying to look innocent.

When her eyes flashed angrily, Logan took a step backwards.

"Whoa, Jean, it was just a joke. Listen. He's got to work this through by himself. I know you're both hurting, but he's a smart kid and he'll find his way. But if you're bent on worrying about someone, turn your attention to Dumbledore and Snape."

"Snape?" Scott said, looking up from Jean. "You don't think he's going to go after Snape, do you?"

Logan chomped down on his cigar and smiled beatifically. "Not in the manner you're thinking. But Snape and Dumbledore are going to find that pissing off the Wiz is a really bad idea. If I know Harry, and I think I do," he added, rubbing an aching rib, "he now considers Dumbledore and Voldemort to be equal in his eyes. And if this world is telling him that he has to kill one bad wizard, it wouldn't be a stretch to add another corpse to the pile, now would it?"

Logan looked between the two, then laughed quietly as he walked out of the room. If Harry decided to go after Dumbledore, he could only hope the kid invited him along for the fun.

Care of Magical Creatures class, Blackmoor Island...

Harry wandered around outside of the castle for several hours before he approached the crowd of students, who were staring up the the huge head of K'nor in awe. Several students had cameras, while others were frantically sketching images either with pencils or charmed quills.

Hagrid stood to one side, while K'nor spoke telepathically to the students, telling them of the Dragon Age, the time when Dragons ruled the land, sea and skies. Hagrid's pleasure at seeing his students so engrossed in the lesson was obvious by the smile on his face. Even the Slytherins seemed to have lost most of their haughtiness in the face of the ancient and awesome creature.

"And then Migard battled Bahamut for supremacy of the world. Dragon fought dragon and the world rocked and shuddered from the battle. Fire consumed the world. For a thousand circles around the sun we fought with tooth, fire, claw and tentacle. And then it was over. Migard and Bahamut were slain and the clans broken."

Harry quietly joined the half giant, not wanting to interrupt the lesson. "Everything all right, Hagrid?" he asked quietly. The students ignored him as they listened to K'nor's tale. Curious, he lowered his shield slightly, then blinked, surprised.

He could see the imagery behind the words K'nor was projecting into their minds. He glanced at the students, surprised to discover that he wasn't the only one who could feel and see what she was describing. Hermione stood not far from Neville, who had a hand on her shoulder. Her eyes were filled with tears.

Hagrid turned to Harry, grinning "Just fine, Harry. This is one o' the finest classes I've ever had. Everyone, even the trouble makers, are behavin' 'emselves fer a change."

Harry nodded. He was happy that his friend's work was such a success. Ancient dragons were exceedingly rare and the younger dragons were losing their ability to communicate with man. Some thought that they may be losing their sentience, as well.

K'nor had explained to Harry and Hagrid that the dragons weren't losing their sentience, they were merely frustrated by Wizarding kind and their lack of respect for other magical beings. He looked at the students again, ignoring K'nor's tale. He had heard it before, although without the graphic imagery backing it up.

There were few of the older Slytherin boys present. The conditions Harry had imposed on the trip made it unappealing to the Death Eaters in the school. All of the students, including his friends, had to turn over their wands and submit to a magical scan before being allowed to portkey to the island. None of the Death Eaters had been willing to attend unarmed and without their toys.

Harry nodded towards K'nor. "She seems to be enjoying this almost as much as you are," he observed.

Hagrid nodded happily. "She likes to teach, she told me. She's says tha' by touchin' the lives o' the younger wizards, she's helpin' her own kind, since so many now rely on us fer protection from the Muggles."

Harry nodded and looked seaward. "I don't see the babies."

"They were out earlier," Hagrid replied. "When the first class came through, we fed 'em a bunch o' fish, while K'nor watched an' talked about baby dragons. There were several first year students tha' I think wanted to adopt the little tykes, but K'nor brought 'em back inside fer their nap."

He gestured to the older students. "This batch are learnin' more about dragons as they once were, rather than about the babies, but there will be plenty o' pictures an' photographs fer 'em to look at."

Harry grinned, watching Hagrid smiling lovingly up at a creature that could swallow him whole. He patted him on the arm. "I'm glad everything worked out all right, Hagrid. From the look on their faces, I'd say this was a big success."

Hagrid nodded happily, still staring up at the dragon.

Harry turned away from him and started to walk back towards the castle.

Seeing him, Neville nodded in greeting, then nudged Hermione gently.

She glanced at him, then looked at Harry, who smiled, but kept walking. He missed her incredulous look when she spotted the tattoo on his upper arm.

K'nor turned away from the students and hissed something, startling them.

"*You seem troubled, young dragon friend,*" she said in parseltongue.

He stopped and turned to look at her. "*I am, great one, but this is not the time nor the place for me to discuss such matters,*" he replied, hissing back at her.

"*Truly, and our conversation upsets your classmates. We will speak when we next meet.* Her great head tilted and she gazed at him for a moment. *For now, I would ask that you remember that not all problems are for you, alone, to solve. Nor can all problems be solved by one who is alone.*"

Harry nodded. "*I will consider your words, great one,*" he hissed.

"*Take them to heart, fledgling. A clan may begin with one, but can only continue with many.*"

Harry bowed to K'nor and backed away from the dragon respectfully. He paused next to Hermione and ignored the stares from his other classmates, then he made a snap decision.

"I want to talk to you, Ron, Neville and Ginny later tonight. It's important," he said quietly.

When Hermione and Neville nodded, he turned and walked back to the castle.

Gryffindor Common Room, (Later that evening)...

After he had left the students, Harry wandered around the island, thinking mostly, before returning to the small interior court where the students were assembling to return to Hogwarts. He spoke briefly with Jean, trying to signal that things, while not perfect, were getting better between them.

He still wasn't convinced that he needed to fight anyone. But he thought it would be a good idea to warn the others about the danger in the school.

He and Jean returned to the school, portkeying with one of the last batches of students. K'nor's comments had touched him deeply. Somehow, despite his shields, the ancient dragon seemed to know what was bothering him. She had told him something that, while making sense, he wasn't willing to fully accept, yet.

Harry waited until most of the younger students had retired for the evening before returning to the common room from the library.

Hermione looked up and smiled. She didn't know what he wanted, but his seriousness worried her.

He walked over to join his friends and wandlessly conjured a high backed armchair to sit in. Ginny, sitting on the large couch, frowned over his choice of seating arrangements. He stared into the fire for a long time not saying anything.

"Harry?" Hermione said softly.

He blinked and looked away from the fire. "Snape is a traitor. He's not working for Dumbledore like everyone thinks," he said bluntly. "He's in charge of the marked students in the castle."

He reached into his book bag and pulled out the crumpled parchment with the list of student Death Eaters. He handed it to Hermione and stood. "I strongly suggest you find a way of arranging for fatal accidents for these people. They won't use a jelly legs curse on you, if given the chance. Especially you, Hermione, you and the other Muggle born."

Hermione paled and took the offered parchment. "What is this?" she whispered.

"It's a list of every marked person in the school, including our illustrious Potions Master. Everyone that bears the mark is listed there, starting with Snape," he replied. "If you don't do anything about it, then you might as well go back to sucking Dumbledore's dick and waiting for the axe to fall on your neck."

Hermione looked up from the list, shocked by what he had given her and by what he hadn't said. "You're not going to help us?" she asked incredulously.

He shook his head. "No. This is a wizard problem. Oh, if any of these wizards attack me I'll kill them, but it stopped being my business when I discovered that I'm supposed to fight for wizards, but no wizard is willing to fight for me."

Harry turned walked up stairs to the boy's dorm. As soon as he was out of sight of his friends, he phased and vanished.

"What the bloody hell is going on?" exclaimed Ron explosively.

Hermione passed the parchment to Ginny. The number of marked students, including those not in Slytherin, terrified her.

Ginny took the parchment with a trembling hand, but she was upset for different reason. Harry hadn't looked at her once tonight, and his eyes, his expression, seemed so cold and distant. He was cutting ties and she knew it in her gut.

She quickly read through the list, paling when she saw Michael Corner's name, and Cormac McLaggen.

Neville bolted from his spot next to Hermione, running up the stairs to their dorm room. He returned a few minutes later with a puzzled look on his face.

"He's not there. I don't understand it. The window is closed and his broom is still leaning against the bed. Where could he have gone?"

Ron looked up from reading the list. "He probably took his cloak and slipped out."

"We would have noticed the Common Room door opening, Ron," Hermione replied with a shake of her head.

"Well then where is he? He couldn't apparate away. Merlin knows you've told us enough times that it isn't possible to apparate at Hogwarts," he replied.

"Well, it's nice to see you're finally listening to me," Hermione snapped.

"Will you two stop it? We have a big problem here," hissed Ginny. "Harry's cutting himself off from us. Something happened to him this weekend," she said worriedly, glancing up at the boys dorms before turning back to her friends, "and now we have to deal with having Death Eaters in every house!"

Hermione leaned back, looking pensive. "I told Harry the we'd not only support him, but try to bring in others, as well."

"What about the DA?" asked Ron.

"Perhaps, but we'd have to be careful," Hermione replied, pointing to the list. "There are a few ex-members who are marked now. Secrecy is going to be critical. This list is explosive."

The three pure bloods looked at her strangely and she frowned. "I mean it's dangerous. Just knowing the names is dangerous, and if we move against these students, Dumbledore could turn against us. He has to know about these students and he's allowing them to remain in the school."

Ron looked doubtful, but Ginny and Neville nodded.

"And what about Harry?" asked Ginny worriedly.

"I wouldn't worry about him too much, Ginny. He's angry right now and I think he feels alone. But he'll come around," offered Neville to everyone's surprise. "He just needs some time to think, that's all."

Everyone turned to stare at Neville who had become much more outspoken this year. During the summer months his face had lost most of it's baby fat and sharpened as a result. He was still soft spoken, but now spoke with confidence and a newly found sense of authority.

Hermione blinked her eyes and wondered where this Neville had been hiding all this time. Had he always been like this and she just hadn't seen it? She looked down at her hands, realizing to her own shame, that Harry had seen it all along, while she'd missed it.

Muggle Studies Office...

Jean read the paper for the third time and still couldn't concentrate on it. She had spent a tense Sunday trying to grade papers and today's classes hadn't been much better. She hadn't seen Harry since Saturday, when they returned to the castle.

The Muggles have power stations which are powered by adams. This is called knukleer power.

Jean stared at the line for a moment. It was part of a paper written by a Slytherin third year. In frustration, she threw down her pen and pushed

away from the desk.

"Are you all right, Jean?"

She started in surprise and looked toward the door. Smiling, she shook her head and waved Madam Pomfrey and Professor McGonagall into the room.

"We were just going to have tea in Poppy's quarters and thought we'd invite you to join us," Minerva said, then she looked down at the pile of papers on her desk and arched an eyebrow.

"I was just trying to grade these homework assignments," Jean said, staring at the pile.

Minerva walked over and took the younger woman by the arm. "And driving yourself crazy in the process, I bet. Come on. A cup of tea and some time away from the homework will make you feel better."

Jean nodded and let Minerva pull her from her office. After a short walk they ended up in Poppy's quarters, just off the infirmary.

Jean settled onto a large couch, while Poppy served tea. She sipped quietly and relaxed for the first time in nearly two days.

"I really need to start drinking more tea when I'm back in the States. Coffee only makes it harder for me to relax," she murmured with a sigh.

Poppy eyed her shrewdly. "Hmm, yes. I noticed you seemed unhappy when you were at breakfast this morning. Is there something wrong?"

Jean placed the cup on the table in front of her and looked at the two older women, then shrugged her shoulders. "I'm just worried about Harry. He and I had some necessary conversations this weekend and things didn't go well. He's barely spoken to me since Saturday afternoon."

"I guess that explains that comment," Minerva said softly.

Jean turned to her, curious.

"I was approached today by Miss Weasley, who asked if I had seen Mr. Potter today. I didn't have him in class, and I don't recall seeing him in the Great Hall, but in checking with Filius and Hagrid, I learned that he has been to class."

Poppy frowned. "I've known Harry since his first year. It's not like him to shut out his friends like that."

"He's upset..."

Minerva snorted and put her tea down. "Upset? He's been slowly pushing everyone away since the beginning of the year. I imagine what you told him only sped things up."

"He knew I was hiding something from him. I had to tell him," countered Jean.

"You did," Minerva said with a nod. "But now he needs to work through it."

"Would someone kindly tell me what has him so upset?" asked Poppy in exasperation.

Jean looked down at the cup sitting before her, debating with herself exactly what she could reveal. Fortunately, Minerva came to her aid.

"Harry was abused by several members of the staff last year, Poppy. Some of their actions weren't exactly legal," Minerva said guardedly.

Poppy glared at her friend. "You can't fool me, Minerva. I know you mean Severus, even with your alluding to Dolores and her damnable quill. Why the Headmaster asked him to teach Harry Occlumency and not you, still baffles me."

McGonagall looked at Poppy, shocked. "How did you know that I knew Occlumency?" she demanded.

Poppy leaned back in her chair and grinned. "I said you can't fool me, Minerva. I've been your healer for eighteen years, and your friend even longer. During that time, I've nursed you through sickness and injury. Some diagnostic charms work slightly different on people who have mastered Occlumency. I've known for years."

Poppy paused and her expression darkened. "I take it from both of your expressions that this wasn't just the usual Snape yelling at a student routine."

Jean sighed and her shoulders slumped slightly. "I suppose you should know. I've helped him medically several times, but it's not a good thing to treat your own family. You're the closest thing he has to a primary care physician."

She paused and looked at Minerva. She was torn. She didn't want to reveal Harry's secrets, but Poppy did need to know about this.

"Severus used his Legilimency skills to hurt Harry," Minerva said, jumping in. "Instead of learning to protect his mind, his natural defenses were damaged, making it easier for You-Know-Who to attack him. The Headmaster is keeping Severus in the school because he still believes him to be useful to the war effort."

Poppy nodded. "That explains why Harry isn't taking potions," she said, then she turned to Jean. "And you told him about it this weekend?"

Jean nodded unhappily. "He was upset at first, asking me what else he'd had to sacrifice. He thinks that I agreed with the decision to keep Snape in the castle and not demand justice be done. Truthfully, he's right. It seemed like a good idea at the time, but Harry doesn't see it that way. All he knows is that, once again, he's been put upon and denied justice."

"And now he's having trust issues," Poppy said quietly, then shook her head sadly. "I've been the school healer for nearly twenty years. I've seen

my share of students who've been abused. Trust is just one of the problems these children have. Harry's not all that much different. If you discount his abilities, he's trying very hard to be an average teenager."

"He's never been all that average," Minerva objected. "Until he took his OWLs, he always seemed to be a rather average student academically, though his practical skills have always far outstripped his classmates."

"Well, about his grades, it turns out there was a reason for them," Jean said.

When the two women looked at her, she sighed and rubbed a hand across her forehead. "Harry admitted at the beginning of the school year that, before coming to Hogwarts, he used to receive beatings if he did better in school than his cousin. His cousin was a particularly poor student."

Minerva frowned and sat straighter in her chair. A small pop signaled the arrival of a house elf.

"Binky is sorry, Professor, but the Headmaster is asking for you and Professor Summers. Mister Minister is here demanding to speak with Harry Potter."

Jean groaned and wiped her face with one hand. "This just keeps getting worse and worse. Harry's going to freak."

McGonagall ignored her and turned to the elf. "Do you know where Mr. Potter is Binky?"

The little elf nodded.

"Excellent. Please inform Mr. Potter that he's needed in the Headmaster's office. And warn him that the Minister is here."

Binky nodded and vanished.

Suspecting there was going to be a problem, Jean reached for her phone as she walked with Minerva. If the Ministry was going to be causing problems, she wanted to alert the American Embassy.

Headmaster's Office, Hogwarts...

Harry took a deep breath, then walked up the circular staircase to the Headmaster's office. The elf had been quite specific about the Minister wanting to speak with him. Harry knew that speaking was probably the last thing on Scrimgeour's mind.

He paused, then knocked on the door at the top of the steps.

"Come!"

Opening the door, his eyes darted to Jean, then moved around the room. He noted McGonagall's presence absently. Dumbledore was in his customary position behind his desk. Scrimgeour stood next to him, along with Dawlish, Shacklebolt and several other Aurors. Dolores Umbridge sat in one corner, looking pleased.

"You wanted to see me, Headmaster?" he asked.

"I summoned you, Mr. Potter," Scrimgeour interrupted. "Dawlish, take away his wand."

Dawlish pulled his wand, and to Harry's surprise, he snapped off a spell.

Harry teleported from his position to one immediately behind Dawlish.

Before Dawlish could move Harry had him screaming on the floor from a well placed kick to the back of his right knee. He then stepped forward and grabbed Dawlish's arm, breaking it at the wrist and the elbow. He followed it up with a blow to the back of the Auror's head, causing him to smash his face against the stone floor. Dawlish gave a strangled gasp and went limp.

Pivoting and pulling his wand, Harry covered the other Aurors, who seemed frozen in shock at both the intensity and speed of his attack.

"Harry, stop!" Dumbledore shouted, then he turned to the Minister. "You said you wanted to talk to him, not arrest him!"

Umbridge jumped to her feet with an inarticulate shout, causing most of those in the room to look at her. Her eyes blazing, she drew her wand on Harry, who was still watching the Aurors.

"Look out!" Minerva shouted as she reached for her own wand, but it was too late.

Harry glanced over his shoulder and saw the spell just before it crashed into his left shoulder. He groaned and blood fountained from a hole the size of a soda can.

He staggered and flicked his fingers at Umbridge. She screamed and fell into a heap, bleeding from dozens of wounds.

Several Aurors took the opportunity to fire off curses at Harry.

Jean stood and gestured. The curses hit a kinetic barrier and bounced upwards, gouging deep holes in the ceiling.

"HOLD YOUR FIRE!" thundered Shacklebolt angrily at his men. Most looked at him in shock, but they lowered their wands.

Harry had staggered into a corner, his body phasing in and out of normal space. Jean blanched, knowing that his survival instincts had kicked in, inadvertently revealing abilities he didn't want known.

The fact that Harry kept switching in and out of normal space was enough to freeze everyone as they stared at him, shocked by what they were seeing.

Leaning heavily against one wall, he turned enough that Jean was able to see his wound better and she gasped. Blood pumped from the hole Umbridge's spell had blast through his flesh and she feared she was watching him bleed out in front of her.

Fawkes trilled loudly and sprang aloft, gliding over to Harry.

He blinked at the large bird hovering before him, not comprehending what he wanted. He slid to the floor clutching at his shoulder and the large bird moved closer, dropping tears on the wound. Even with the help of the phoenix, loss of blood and pain forced him into unconsciousness.

Scrimgeour reached for his own wand, only to find himself facing down an enraged Albus Dumbledore. He held his wand right between the Minister's eyes.

"You were never the best student in Defense, and I am sure you have not improved over the years, Rufus" Dumbledore said mildly, though his eyes burned with anger. "Though you are welcome to try."

Jean and Minerva knelt by Harry's side. Fawkes had closed the wound, but he had lost a lot of blood. Jean carefully examined the wound as it was healing, noting that she could see the collar bone and that it was broken. Apparently Phoenix tears didn't help very much with broken bones.

When the Minister slowly moved his hand away from his wand, Dumbledore turned to Jean. "How is he?"

Jean and Minerva both glared up at him.

"How do you think he is?" Jean snapped. "He's been attacked by an agent of the Ministry. He needs a healer!"

"I've already sent for Poppy. I assure you that we will do everything in our power to see that he is well taken care of," Dumbledore replied calmly.

"Yeah, because that's worked so well for you in the past," Jean muttered under her breath.

Minerva grumbled her agreement.

Dumbledore turned back to the Minister. "Can I ask why you took it upon yourself to order an attack against my student?" he asked, in a much harder tone. "I think the Wizengamot is going to be very interested in these proceedings."

Scrimgeour winced. "I didn't order Dawlish to attack Mr. Potter," he protested. "But it's Ministry procedure to disarm a possible threat to the life of the Minister, and as you know, Mr. Potter is a registered dark creature."

"Mr. Potter is no more a dark creature than I am," exclaimed Minerva.

The door opened and Poppy entered, followed by two men in gray Muggle suits. Then men were sweaty and breathing heavily, having obviously been running.

Dumbledore's brow wrinkled in confusion as both men entered. He watched as one of the men approached Jean. When he knelt down, drew his wand and spoke quietly with her, the Headmaster turned to the second man and raised an eyebrow. "Excuse me, but who are you people?"

The other man, taller and with graying hair, glanced at Scrimgeour for a moment before stepping past him. "I'm Robert Wilkins, from the U.S. State Department, Magical Division. Mrs. Summers contacted me when she learned that the Minister of Magic wanted to speak with Harry Potter. Suspecting the possibility of an incident, I grabbed the Embassy healer and we came here as quickly as possible."

"What interest do the Americans have in this? This is a British matter!" protested Scrimgeour angrily. This meeting was not going as he had envisioned it!

"Actually, Minister, Mr. Potter is the adopted child of Mr. & Mrs. Summers. Mr. Summers is an American citizen and Mrs. Summers holds a dual citizenship in both the U.K. and the U.S. At the request of Mr. Potter, and with the approval of his adopted parents, he was granted dual citizenship under our political asylum laws."

Wilkins smiled thinly at the sputtering Scrimgeour. "As you can see, we have a vested interest in this matter."

He turned to Jean. "Can you explain what happened here, Mrs. Summers?" he asked gently.

Jean looked up from Harry and nodded towards Scrimgeour. "He came in here, demanding to see my son. As soon as Harry arrived, he ordered an Auror to disarm Harry. The Auror fired off a spell. He didn't ask for his wand, he just attacked. When Harry disabled him, Madam Umbridge attacked him from behind."

Scrimgeour stormed over to Wilkins, who was a full head taller than he was. "Now see here! Just because he's got some trumped up citizenship doesn't mean he doesn't have to follow our laws. You have no jurisdiction at all in this matter and he's a registered dark creature. For that matter, by our laws, she can't adopt him. Dark creatures aren't allowed to have or adopt children!"

"She's not a dark creature, you stupid, arrogant wizard," said a voice.

Harry was awake and he was spitting mad. He stood slowly and unsteadily. "Why have you attacked me, Minister?"

Poppy stood behind him, watching carefully as she finished up her bone knitting spell, fixing the damage that Fawkes could not.

Rufus smiled placatingly. It was obvious, even to him, that the boy was boiling mad. Magic rolled off him in waves, making the atmosphere in the crowded office oppressive. "Now, Harry, I assure you that was not my intent. I came here because I was intending to offer the services of the

Ministry in training you for your fight with Voldemort.”

“Wait a second!” said Wilkins, turning to look back at the Minister. “You told us *you* were taking care of Voldemort and that he was nothing to worry about. Why are you asking Mr. Potter to fight him? Are you saying this is more of a problem than you’ve told us?”

While the Minister and the American conversed, Poppy finished with Harry and walked over to Dolores, who was still on the floor, bleeding from numerous cuts. She looked around, then waved her wand sloppily, closing the wounds and leaving very obvious scars. She looked guilty and a little ashamed, when she spotted Minerva staring at her. But then Minerva’s lips thinned and she nodded firmly at the healer before turning away.

“How can you call it under control when you obviously don’t have it under control!” shouted Wilkins.

Rufus sputtered and fingered his hat. “It is under control, or will be, with Harry’s help,” he declared, then he turned to look at Harry hopefully.

Harry’s smile was almost feral. “Fuck you! I’d rather surrender to Voldemort than fight for you or this society,” he spat.

“Surely you don’t mean that, Mr. Potter?” Dumbledore asked quietly.

Harry sneered at him. “Try me.”

Harry turned to Wilkins. “Do you think Salem would be willing to accept a late transfer?”

“Harry,” Jean said warningly.

He shook his head at her. “No! This is the last straw. I’ve given up my parents, my godfather and my life. For what? Stupid people who label me a dark creature, restrict my rights within their society, yet still expect me to risk my life to save them?”

He looked at each person in the room, meeting their eyes one by one. “You’re all insane. All of you. I have no reason, not one, to risk myself for you. Voldemort can kill you all and burn your world to the ground. I no longer care. The other magical governments will keep him confined to Britain.”

“Enough!” Jean snapped. She wasn’t really angry at him, but she’d explain that later to him.

Harry blinked at her in surprised shock. Jean turned away from him, looking at the others. “Despite his rudeness, my son has a definite point, and one which I happen to agree with. You people are sitting on your asses doing nothing. The Ministry hasn’t caught a single real Death Eater, and the people working for the Ministry are more interested in maintaining their positions than they are in keeping their people safe.

“You unfairly classify both myself and my son as dark creatures because of a difference so minor in our makeup that you can’t see it without a electron microscope, a piece of equipment your backward world doesn’t know about and is incapable of comprehending! You discriminate against us, and tell us we can’t hold jobs or marry or adopt. Then you have the gall to demand Harry save you? Why should he?”

“Go, mum!” Harry muttered.

Jean ignored his comment, her anger driving her on. “Since we’ve come back to Britain we’ve been vilified and forced to register. This is the only government on the planet that considers mutants to be sub-human! What’s next? Will we be forced to sew a large M into our sleeves? Concentration camps? Gas chambers?

“I have been trying very hard to help Harry find reasons to help you people because I thought it was the right thing to do. And he’s been fighting me, telling me those reasons don’t exist. I’m beginning to think he’s right!”

Wilkins was grinning broadly. He’d been wanting for years to be there when someone took the British Ministry down a peg or two. The British knew the references and he could see her scoring with every comment.

Jean marched up to Scrimgeour, going nose to nose with the man.

“Back off! If you don’t want every media organization in the world to know what happened here, you will issue a public apology to Harry for what happened here today. You will also take that disgusting waste of human flesh you call a teacher,” she said pointing to the weeping Umbridge on the floor, “and toss her fat, toadish ass into prison. Last year, she tortured students and you, Minister, allowed her back in this school! Have you no sense? Where is the fabled British sense of honor? How could you allow that woman back in this school when she should be in prison?”

Scrimgeour backed up, and Minerva, along with several Aurors, smirked at the sight of the short red head cornering their Minister.

Shacklebolt gestured to one of the Aurors, who then stepped over to Dolores and snapped a pair of manacles around her wrists. Umbridge took one look at the magic suppressing handcuffs and wailed loudly.

One of the Aurors silenced her and Scrimgeour used the distraction to try to mollify Jean and Harry.

“Mrs. Summers, I assure you no one was supposed to get hurt or arrested today. Auror Dawlish overstepped his bounds and will be severely punished for it. As for Dolores, if your charges are true, we will, of course, see that she is properly punished. In fact, I’ll assign an Auror team to investigate your charges immediately. Shacklebolt, take her in.”

Shacklebolt nodded and gestured to the Auror who’d handcuffed her. The man grabbed Umbridge with one hand, then activated a special portkey to take them both back to the Ministry.

Scrimgeour sighed and shook his head ruefully. Yes, he had planned the meeting, but he hadn’t expected Dawlish to take his command as permission to curse Harry Potter. Nor had he counted on Umbridge’s actions.

With one last, searing glare, Jean turned away from the Minister and went to Harry’s side. She wrapped an arm around his shoulders and he

leaned unsteadily against her. At her gentle urging, she managed to get Harry moving toward the door. Poppy and the two Americans followed them out.

Wilkins turned at the door and looked at Scrimgeour for a moment. "I will try to report this in a favorable light to the Ambassador, but this will not look good, no matter how I tell it. You can probably expect my government to demand clarification on your Voldemort problem, as well as an explanation of why you expect one of our teenaged citizens to solve it for you."

When the door closed behind the man, Dumbledore took off his glasses, dropped them on his desk and rubbed his face tiredly.

"Minister, if you don't need us?" Shacklebolt asked. He knew from Dumbledore's expression that he really didn't want to hang around much longer.

"Yes, of course, Auror Shacklebolt. Take your men and return to headquarters," Rufus murmured, wishing fervently that he could join them. Suddenly being Minister wasn't as much fun as he thought it could be.

Shacklebolt nodded and stepped over to the floo with his three Aurors. Two of them were dragging an unconscious Dawlish between them. A moment later they were gone in a flash of green flame.

Minerva tugged on Poppy's sleeve, then signaled to Dumbledore, who nodded in return. They left the office to go in search of Jean and Harry.

"Have a seat, Minister," Dumbledore said softly.

Scrimgeour sat, looking about nervously. The recent events had unsettled him completely.

Dumbledore leaned forward, resting his elbows on his desk. "For just over a month I have been trying to convince Mr. Potter to help us. It's been a slow, painstaking process and I admit I haven't been altogether successful with it. Your actions today have jeopardized that. Whatever possessed you show up here with Aurors, as if you were going to arrest Britain's most wanted criminal?"

Scrimgeour leaned back in his chair. "You know the rules, Albus. Always disarm a sentient, dark creature before you talk with it."

Dumbledore shook his head. "Well, I'm afraid that wouldn't have worked very well where Mr. Potter is concerned. Forget for the moment what he did to your fully trained Auror without a casting a single spell. Even without his wand, he is quite capable."

Rufus frowned. "Nevertheless, our offer of training and support still stands," he replied, standing up.

"I will endeavor to make sure he is aware of that Minister, although I doubt he will take you up on the offer," Dumbledore countered. He stood up, put his glasses back on, then leaned over his desk, staring at Scrimgeour. "Understand something, Rufus. If you ever come to my school and threaten any of my students in such a way again, you will pay for it," he concluded quietly. His eyes bore into the Minister's and many of the trinkets and books on the shelves shuddered and rattled as the Headmaster released the restraints on his magic.

Scrimgeour nodded in terror and all but ran for the floo and the haven of the Ministry. Dumbledore watched for a moment before turning to his sieve. He wanted to examine this incident again, and in particular that strange fading that Harry had been doing.

Jean's Quarters, Hogwarts...

Jean turned and closed the door to her quarters. Wilkins, the man from the Embassy, had caught up with them and given them two portkeys to be used to bring them to the Embassy in case of emergency.

Harry had collapsed on her couch, looking pale and trembling slightly. Frowning, she cast a diagnostic charm that Poppy had taught her on Harry.

She leaned down and smoothed the hair out of his eyes and smiled gently, then she turned and pulled a chair with her telekinesis so she could sit.

"We really need to talk," Jean said softly. Noting his frown, she sighed. "I'm not mad at you, but it's time you face reality, however much you don't want to."

"Oh?"

"Harry, Voldemort knows what the prophecy says. He might not know the exact wording, but there has been enough information in the press about you being the 'chosen one' that he'd have to be stupid not to figure it out. Do you think Voldemort is stupid?"

He dropped his gaze and shook his head. "No," he muttered.

"Neither do I. Scott, the Professor and I all believe that, even if you don't want to fight Voldemort, even if you run away to some remote place and never do magic again, Voldemort will come looking for you."

Harry scowled. "You're just saying that because..."

"I'm saying that because if you don't fight him, he will hunt you down and kill you!" she snapped at him. "I don't want you to fight for these people! They are as bad as you have been saying. But if you aren't willing to fight for yourself, he'll kill you!"

She slid off her chair and knelt in front of him, cupping his face in her hands. "A few months ago I discovered I had a nephew, and then I had a family. I don't want to lose that, Harry. Don't fight for everyone else, but fight for yourself and your family."

"I don't know, mum. I understand what you're saying and it makes sense, it's just," he broke off and shrugged helplessly.

His eyes closed tiredly and she brushed the hair from his face again.

“You're tired. Close your eyes and rest.”

She watched him for a few moments longer, then went into the small kitchen to make herself a cup of tea. She glanced over at the sleeping form and smiled. For the first time in several days she felt they had really connected.

A knock at her door distracted her a few minutes later. She placed the cup on her table, then walked over to the door. Seeing Minerva and Poppy, she opened the door wider and motioned for them to be quiet. Poppy walked into the small living room and seeing Harry sleeping, nodded in satisfaction. Jean motioned them to follow her to the small kitchen.

“I'm glad to see he's sleeping,” Poppy said in a hushed tone.

“I'm rather surprised by it myself. It just seemed to hit him hard and down he went,” Jean replied.

Minerva frowned. “Shouldn't he be in the infirmary?”

“Ordinarily, I'd agree with you, Minerva,” Poppy said. “But he's asleep now and he needs to recharge.”

“Recharge?” asked Jean.

Poppy nodded and glanced toward Harry. “That was a bad wound. He lost a lot of blood and even with Fawkes' help it was terribly painful. He used his magic to sustain himself for a while, then I used even more of his magic healing what Fawkes couldn't. It's only natural that he'd be tired after that.”

Minerva flicked her wand in Harry's direction, and the couch he lay on transfigured into a small bed. Jean shot her a grateful glance.

Minerva turned back to Jean after a quieting glance at Poppy.

“Jean, can you explain that strange fading Harry was doing? I'd swear he was transparent.”

Jean grimaced. She'd hoped that, in the excitement of the evening, it would have been overlooked. “This has to remain completely confidential. I mean it. You can't tell anyone, even the Headmaster,” Jean said in a low voice.

Minerva frowned and looked reluctant, but Poppy nodded her agreement. After a moment's hesitation, Minerva nodded as well.

Satisfied, Jean leaned back in his chair. “Harry's a very powerful mutant. As with most powerful mutants, his talent extends over several abilities. One is what we call a legacy talent, which he inherited from Lily, and the other is his primary talent.

“He is a weak empath. He can feel the emotions of people around him. It's how he knew I was withholding information from him. He's also a teleporter.”

Poppy leaned closer. “A teleporter? Do you mean like apparation?”

Jean shook her head. “No, it's not the same, although he holds his license for apparation. What he does with his teleporting is something entirely different. He can travel to anywhere in the world in an instant. The reverse of that is that he can summon an object to him. The fading is part of the process and it's something he can control.”

Jean leaned back on her chair and closed her eyes for a moment. “How did he describe it? Oh, yeah. He said he phased, which is his word for turning transparent, then he tears a hole in the world, which he steps through.”

Poppy rocked back on her chair, stunned.

“He can do that without magic?” asked Minerva incredulously.

Jean nodded. “He can phase without teleporting. And when he does, he's still able to cast spells, but virtually nothing can touch him. During the summer, before I took him from the Dursleys, he was using his ability to keep them from abusing him anymore.

“It's a powerful ability. We ran him through a number of tests during our time in New York. It was important that he understand the limits of his talent. I nearly died when I watched Logan turn a Uzi on him while he was phased.”

Both women stared at Jean with blank looks and she grimaced. “An Uzi. You know, a machine gun? A gun that shoots a lot of bullets very quickly?”

Poppy gasped and Minerva frowned. “Why would anyone do that to Harry?”

“It was part of the training he received this summer. All mutants need to learn the limits of their talents. And knowing what he might face, we felt that he needed to learn to fight under deadly conditions. I couldn't help with that, as I've never been taught how to cast a dangerous curse. The best I could do were tickling charms and stunners,” Jean said with a shrug. “I wasn't happy with it and I'm still not happy with it. But I can see the need to teach him that sort of thing.”

She paused and sipped from her tea. “It was only a few days of training and I bit my nails to the quick while it was going on.”

“Are you saying that when he's 'phased' no spell can touch him?” Poppy asked in astonishment.

“We think so,” Jean replied. “But he's been taught to avoid the Unforgivables anyway.”

McGonagall looked at Harry speculatively. “I think I will speak with him tomorrow.”

“Gently,” cautioned Poppy. “Gently Minerva. Right now he’s really stressed.”

“I understand that, Poppy. But he needs to know that at least one of his teachers is willing to stand up and fight for him in this school. I want to make it clear to him that I can help him, if he'll allow it. But I'll make sure that he knows it's his choice to make,” the Professor said quietly.

Author's Notes:

Dear Alyx,
While in town today, remember to pick up the following;

- 42 gallons of whip cream
- 8 pickled herring
- 1 Four pound bag of M&Ms (all blue, if they don't have, open bags and make one from the opened bags)
- 1 box of catnip
- Mistletoe
- 1 head of lettuce, make sure it never ends up upside down.

Enjoy your day in court, email me if you're not coming home tonight or for the next couple of years. I told you the mailman wouldn't be thrilled with your electrifying the mailbox.

Bob

(Looks at the readers angrily) “What? You expect me to answer reviews or something?”

Bob walks away muttering to himself about ungrateful readers and the effects of knuckleer weepans on them.

Mutant Storm

Chapter 9 - A Pleasant Surprise and First Blood

Standard Disclaimer:

“So whats this all about?” asked Alyx. She was busy looking at the strange harness that Bob had strapped her into.

“It's part of the new disclaimer,” Bob replied.

Alyx eyed Bob nervously. “What new disclaimer and why does it need a harness?”

Bob reached down and lifted up one end of a curled rope which he then attached to the harness.

“This is Chapter 9 of Mutant Storm, you're going to tell the readers we don't own Harry Potter or any part of the Potter Universe,” he replied before walking over a trap door.

“Where does that lead?” Alyx asked suspiciously.

Bob looked up at her. “Ummm down?”

“Down where?”

Bob walked over to Alyx and took her by the hand, leading her towards the gaping hole in the floor.

“It goes to the center of the earth,” he replied smugly. “I dug that hole last week with the help of some gnomes and a legion of llamas.”

“That's a long way down isn't it?” asked Alyx.

“More than 2000 miles,” Bob replied.

“Ok so we have a hole and how does this harness fit into it? You better not be thinking of lowering me down there buster!” she blustered.

“I wouldn't lower you down,” Bob replied. “You're going bungee jumping.”

“Oh that's better. And I tell people the disclaimer while I jump?”

“Yep!” Bob replied, then he shoved Alyx into the hole.

She screeched as she dropped into the darkness, the plans for the disclaimer forgotten.

Bob glanced down at the coiled cord that was quickly playing out. “I wonder if I should have tied off the other end first?”

He shrugged, then turned to the audience. “It's a minor technical glitch, we'll have it fixed in time for our next disclaimer. In the meantime, on with the chapter.”

Mutant Storm

Chapter 09

A Pleasant Surprise and First Blood

Gryffindor Common Room (the next morning)...

Harry walked into the common room still deep in thought. He had talked with Jean before leaving her quarters and she had told him about his revealing his abilities in front of witnesses. She'd told him that she had explained his abilities to Professor McGonagall and Madam Pomfrey, only after they had promised not to pass the information on. She was sure that they would keep their promise, and she warned him that Professor McGonagall would want to talk to him later today.

He didn't remember much about the meeting in Dumbledore's office and had decided to trust his mum and her judgment. He was coming to realize that he needed others if he was going to survive this.

He was so engrossed in his thoughts that he didn't notice the large number of people blocking his path until he walked into Ron. He staggered a few paces and blinked owlishly. The room was full of people, all looking at him expectantly.

“Erm... what's going on?” he asked warily.

Ginny stepped in front of the students, with Hermione, Neville and Ron backing her up.

“With the exception of the traitor, who's currently taking a bit of a nap, this,” she said, waving to the students behind her, “is all of Gryffindor, from fourth year and up. We wanted you to know that we're with you to the end. No matter what.”

Hermione moved to stand next to Ginny. “When you left here the other day and became so distant, we knew what we had to do. We spread the word among the other houses and had a meeting last night with prefects, except Slytherin, of course. We're organizing.”

Harry looked down at his feet, embarrassed by the show of support.

Ginny moved close to him and lifted his chin until his eyes met hers. "We're not going to let you fight this war by yourself. You've been doing that for too long," she said softly.

He stared into her eyes for a moment longer, then looked around "McLaggen?" he asked.

"As Ginny said, he's currently napping," Neville told him, a smile tugging at his lips.

"Word is being passed quietly through the prefects we can trust," Hermione said. "We need to get rid of these students, but we'd like your help and ideas."

"My ideas would be rather brutal. I don't believe in resorting to stunners anymore," he said quietly, though his words carried to all those in the room.

"I can live with that," growled Neville.

Several people glanced at the normally reticent Gryffindor and nodded in approval.

"Harry, we're not just fighting to help you. It's our own lives we're trying to protect. I don't know about the others, but I want to grow up and have a life and a family," Ginny added.

Harry nodded and turned to Hermione, who he knew would be the biggest stumbling block. "And you?"

She sighed. "Last year I would have never dreamed of saying this, but after Dolohov used that curse on me and nearly killed me? I find myself in agreement. I still think we shouldn't kill anyone except in self defense, however."

Harry nodded thoughtfully. "All right, then. How about we meet with the prefects tomorrow evening in the Room of Requirement and we'll start organizing and making plans? In the meantime, watch your backs, and for Merlin's sake, this is for all of us. If you see a student from another house being roughed up by one of these people, do something! Even if that means just getting a teacher. The lower grades are prime targets. It's our job to protect them, most of all."

He looked around as the sea of faces nodded at him.

"Someone go wake up McLaggen. And remember, from here on until we move, do nothing to give away the fact that we know who the marked ones are," Harry said, then he moved to sit over on a couch near the fire. He closed his eyes to think. Things were happening so fast around him lately that he was having trouble keeping up with everything.

"Where were you last night, Harry?" Ginny asked softly. She sat down next to him, close, but not crowding.

He opened his eyes and looked at her, then his friends who had gathered around. Seeing the questions in their eyes, he sighed and stood up. "Why don't we go to breakfast? I think the old man will have an announcement this morning that will answer at least part of the questions I know you want to ask."

Curious, they nodded at him.

"Let me shower and change, then we'll go down to the hall. I'll be back in fifteen minutes," he said, then he turned and walked towards the stairway.

Before he could place a foot on the stair, a hand tugged on his sleeve. He turned to see Ginny standing behind him. "Are you all right?" she asked softly.

He could see and feel her concern. She was worried for him.

He smiled at her. "No, not entirely, but I think I'm getting there."

She nodded. "I want you to know something. The rest are fighting for their lives. They're afraid that if they don't, they'll end up dead. I'm fighting for yours. I don't think I want to live in a world where there is no you."

He tilted his head and stared at her.

Smiling at him, she went up on her toes, slid her hand behind his neck and pulled him down close enough to give him a light kiss on the lips. "I'm fighting for you, never forget that," she whispered. She released him, turned and walked back to join Hermione and the others.

Harry stood, stunned for a minute, then his fingers touched his lips. Her kiss was unlike anything he had shared with Cho.

Still bemused, he turned and wandered up the stairs.

"I think you broke him," Hermione murmured, as Ginny stopped beside her.

"He'll be fine. He just needs time to adjust," she said serenely.

"What was that all about anyway?" Hermione asked.

Ginny glanced over at the stairs to the boy's dorms, then back to her friend. "I told him what I'm fighting for."

"And what are you fighting for?" Neville pressed, leaning closer to the two girls.

Ginny paused for a moment. "I'm fighting for him. No one else seems to be. I'm not complaining about everyone wanting to get involved. But my reasons are simply so that Harry can live a full, normal life when this is over. Hopefully that life will include me, but that's secondary at this point."

Transfiguration Office...

"Come in, Mr. Potter," McGonagall called from the chair at her desk. She calmly closed her grade book and placed it to one side.

Harry entered and closed the door behind him, his eyes sparkling with amusement. Dumbledore had announced at breakfast that Professor Umbridge would no longer be teaching at Hogwarts. His friends would soon know the truth, even if the staff preferred to tell the students that she had left to deal with a pressing family emergency.

The Defense class would no longer be taught by one instructor, but many. He was extremely pleased that Jean had forced Dumbledore to omit Snape from the list of temporary teachers.

McGonagall looked up at him and her lips tightened into a thin line. "Have a seat, Mr. Potter. I am not going to bite you in this form."

He smiled and moved to sit in the chair placed in front of her desk.

She leaned back slightly and watching him for a moment. "You know that your mother told us about your mutant talent, but only after she made us promise not to divulge the information to anyone."

He nodded. "Mum told me, Professor. I mean, Professor Summers told me."

She smiled thinly. "I think you used the right word in the first place, Harry. Try not to judge her too harshly. She is trying very hard to balance what you perceive your needs to be, versus what she perceives them to be. On top of which, she's still learning what it's like to be a mother to a teenage son and... Well, it's not a easy job she has."

McGonagall sat forward. "I didn't ask you here to discuss your mother, however. I did want to talk to you about your talent and what you've managed to accomplish with it so far."

He looked at her curiously. "Professor?"

Her expression softened slightly. "Harry, I will be honest with you. The Headmaster looks at you as a means to an end, and despite my prodding, he seems unwilling to change that viewpoint. Frankly, I do not care if your talent will allow you to kill Voldemort or not. I am more concerned that it helps you survive this war so that I may someday again teach first year Potters in this school."

Harry's eyes widened slightly, then he took a deep breath. "What is it you wish to know?"

"Yesterday, you turned transparent. Jean says that it's part of your talent that allows you to travel from one place to another. Are you affected by wards?"

He shook his head. "I discovered the teleportation ability when I was trying to avoid Malfoy and his cronies last year. I teleported between floors in the school. After that, I discovered I could easily move between here and Headquarters."

"And nothing can touch you when you're transparent?" she pressed.

"Nothing has so far, but then I haven't asked anyone to shoot an Unforgivable curse at me. When I phase, it's like I'm not fully in this dimension, but in a way I am, because I can cast magic while I'm phased," he replied.

She nodded. "It's good to know you have a way of escape that cannot be affected by magic. Now, I'm wondering if you would be willing to add another ability to your list of things you can do?"

"I'm sorry?"

"I'm talking about Animagus training, Mr. Potter. Few wizards have power enough to become one, but since your parents were both capable, you should be, as well. I was planning on offering the chance to you and Professor Summers."

"My mother was an animagus?" he exclaimed.

McGonagall nodded and her expression darkened. "I apologize, Harry. Someone should have told you this before, but I taught your mother how to be an animagus in her sixth year. She was a ginger colored tabby, much like Miss Granger's familiar. I think it was one of the ways she managed to stay one step ahead of your father. He didn't learn her secret until after graduation."

He grinning at that, then shook his head. "But won't training take a long time, Professor?"

She smiled at him. "Not really. You're the same age your mother was when she started to learn, and although your theoretical scores have not been all that good until recently, your practical work has always been above excellent. You and your adoptive mother both have strong mental skills, which is a prerequisite for learning the art, and you are both excellent in Transfiguration, although you are further along than your mother.

"Your father, Sirius Black and Peter Pettigrew took three years to learn what I can teach in less than a year for a student starting from scratch. With you and your mother, I'd guess half that time would be necessary. Sirius Black, Merlin bless him, was an honorable man, but only a fair student. Your father was an excellent student who seemed to learn without much studying. The rat... Well, the less said about him, the better.

"Your mother was a remarkable student, and I tend to believe I am a better teacher than three students bumbling around for three years doing what should have taken them a year or less."

Harry looked undecided. "Professor, I don't want to turn you down, but to be honest, I don't think there will be much time for this sort of thing in the near future. Professor Dumbledore and I disagree on many points and I do not believe that problem is going to go away any time soon. In fact, I know it won't."

Her brow furrowed. "I see. Tell me, Mr. Potter, will this argument between you and the Headmaster spill over into the school?"

He looked at her. "With all due respect, Professor, I'm not going to answer that question. Your loyalties and responsibilities are a known quantity, and frankly, I respect them and you very much. But this no longer involves just me and Professor Dumbledore."

"I see," she replied. She was unhappy with his answer because it implied that he didn't trust her. Although she had to admit that she had done little of late to earn that trust. "You may go, Mr. Potter."

He stood and nodded. "Goodnight, Professor," he replied neutrally, then he turned and left the room.

Minerva dropped her stolid mask when he left and scowled. *Damn, Albus!* she swore to herself. *What have you done to that boy? I don't know what Harry's done, but he's planning on a confrontation. In fact, he seems almost eager for it.*

She stood and walked over to her floo. She needed to talk to Jean and Poppy.

The Room of Requirement (The following night)...

Ginny was one of the last prefects to enter the room. She had stationed herself outside the door, waiting and watching until everyone had entered.

Harry was right, she thought as she entered the room. Dumbledore had made an announcement concerning the termination of Dolores Umbridge. Harry had told her about Umbridge being arrested. She had been horrified to discover that Harry had been badly injured by the witch in an altercation in Dumbledore's office. She'd watched him carefully since learning of the incident and knew he was in pain, though he tried to hide it.

Ginny closed the door and leaned her back against it. She signaled to Hermione, who nodded and nudged Harry.

Harry walked to the front of the room and stood for a moment, looking nervous. He glanced at Ginny, who smiled encouragingly, before turning back to those in the room.

"If I can have everyone's attention for a moment," he said.

"You can have anything you want!" shouted Terry Boot, a Ravenclaw prefect, Muggle born and one of the few openly gay students in the school.

"Sorry, Terry, but I don't bat for the home team," Harry called back to the laughter of everyone present. The room grew quiet as he began to speak once more. "Look, you've all seen the list of names. It clearly says two things."

As he began to pace in front of them, he held up a hand, one finger raised. "One: Dumbledore doesn't care about our safety. He'd rather give marked Death Eaters a chance at redemption than safeguard this school and the students."

"Two: We are on our own, as the members of staff answer to Dumbledore and are following his direction. The staff are turning a blind eye to what the Slytherins are doing, leaving us without any authority we can turn to."

He paused and grinned at Hermione. "Since some people would prefer that we don't kill these people, despite the fact that they are already killers..."

Susan Bones gasped. "What do you mean?" she asked, interrupting him.

Harry stopped his pacing and faced her. "One of the things that both the Ministry and Dumbledore have hidden from the general public is that, in order to receive the dark mark, one must kill a Muggle," he said quietly.

Many in the room paled at the news.

"Why hasn't anyone said anything about this before?" Hermione asked, standing up suddenly.

"That should be obvious, Hermione. Politics," Neville said. "Take a man like Lucius Malfoy, who used an Imperius as defense against his actions in the first war. He had power, he had money to bribe the officials holding him and he hadn't killed anyone important in their eyes. But in order for the Imperius defense to be accepted, one had to forget that people were killed at all, because a controlled wizard cannot generate the necessary hatred and anger to cast the killing curse. The Imperius creates a sense of euphoria, which is completely opposite of what you need to cast either the killing curse or the Cruciatus."

Harry nodded in agreement. "I couldn't have said it better. Thanks, mate."

Hermione looked between the two, then she sat back down next to Neville. She glanced at him and noted he was looking at her. She looked down at her hands and blushed slightly, then looked up at Harry. "I think we should give Dumbledore a chance to clean up this mess on his own, first."

Harry's expression darkened and she held up a hand. "No, hear me out. I'm not suggesting that we tell him and forget about it. I think we should give him an ultimatum. Either he cleans up the mess, or we will. And if we have to do it, he's not going to like the results."

"It has the advantage of being done semi-legally. I mean, at least he'll have a chance to do it," Neville added after some thought.

It would pit us firmly against Dumbledore, though. Are we ready to go against the Leader of the Light?" asked Ginny.

Harry snorted. "He's no leader, of the light, of this school or anything else. The leader of the light wouldn't keep a man on staff who revels in torture and rape," he said bitterly.

Those in the room fell silent and watched Harry as he paced in front of them. He seemed oblivious to everyone.

Ginny shook her head and walked to the front of the room, placing herself in Harry's path. When he reached her, he stopped suddenly and looked up in surprise.

"What are you saying?" she asked.

Realizing he had said something he shouldn't have, he quickly waved away her question. "It's not important. What I'm saying is that everyone has this great vision of Dumbledore as an infallible white wizard. Take it from me, the man makes mistakes. A lot of them. And while he's not as dark as Voldemort, he is not working for the light. He is working for himself. I think he has his own agenda. He likes to say that he's working for the greater good. What I think he means is that he is working for the greater good of Albus Dumbledore, not the wizarding world."

"If we do this, Dumbledore is likely to punish us severely. He will almost certainly strip most of you of your prefect status. Are you sure you want to risk that?"

Hermione stood up. "It's no secret that I've wanted to be Head Girl since I first arrived. But I have to be alive to be Head Girl. Leaving these Death Eaters in place puts that at risk."

When she paused and took a deep breath, he cringed a little inside. From experience, he just knew she was going to spring something on him.

"At this point, Harry, for your own sake, I think it would be a good thing if you weren't so visible in our efforts. I'm not asking you to bow out, but I don't think it would be a good idea for you to lead us."

Ginny's head whipped around and she glared at Hermione. "Why not?" she demanded angrily.

Harry moved to stand next to her, slipping her hand in his. "I think she has a point," he told her. "There's too much friction between the Headmaster and I. We'd fight over this and I can almost guarantee that we'd be hexing each other. There's also the chance that he wouldn't take anything you say seriously, as he'd assume that I put you all up to it."

She looked at him and something in his expression caused her gaze to soften. Reluctantly, she nodded and smiled apologetically at Hermione. His earlier comment nagged at her and tickled something at the back of her mind, something she remembered from a class.

"How about this?" Neville asked. "Let each house choose one person. Together, they will draft a formal letter to be delivered to McGonagall as a collective, along with the signatures of everyone involved."

"The more people we can get involved with this, the less likely they'll be to punish us. House points only mean so much when the entire house doesn't care. All of Gryffindor is in, except for our resident Death Eater," Hermione added.

"Sounds like a good idea," Susan Bones offered. "The Puffs will go for it."

"I'm for it and I think I can convince most of the Ravens," agreed Cho.

"Hermione," Harry said quietly. "I have one more job for you."

She turned to him.

"Figure out a way to enter this room and find out why Malfoy comes here several times each week," he said. "He's up to something and we need to know why, preferably before anyone confronts Dumbledore. I don't know why, but something tells me it's really important that we find out what the Ferret is up to."

She nodded.

"All right then, I'll let you guys figure out among yourselves what you're doing," Harry said, then he turned and walked towards the door.

"Harry," Cho called.

He turned to look at her quizzically.

"Thanks. Just knowing who isn't on our side makes life simpler," she said softly.

Several others nodded their heads, but Ginny gritted her teeth and tried not to be jealous.

Gryffindor Girl's Dorm (Later that same night)...

"Hermione?"

"Hmm?"

Hermione sat at a desk in the sixth year dorms and was absently brushing her hair while looking over her notes.

"What do you think Harry meant by that comment tonight?"

She lifted her eyes and looked up at Ginny. "Which one?"

"The one about rape," Ginny said, shivering slightly.

Hermione frowned. "I don't know. I mean, how would Harry know about that sort of thing? All of the girls in school are accounted for, and as far as I know, none have been attacked."

Ginny nodded absently and sat on the edge of the desk, thinking hard. "What if he wasn't speaking literally?"

"You mean he was speaking metaphorically?"

Ginny nodded. "Yes. What if he didn't mean rape in the usual sense?"

Hermione scowled and looked down at the desk. She jumped when Ginny grabbed her shoulder.

The younger girl gasped, her expression paling.

"Ginny?"

"Remember what McGonagall said about Legilimency? Remember how Harry looked coming back from those lessons with Snape? Don't they remind you of something?"

Her eyes widened in remembrance and her expression fell. "This explains so much," Hermione whispered. "Oh, Harry."

"We can't say anything. Merlin, he'd be mortified if he knew we'd figured it out," Ginny said

Hermione's expression hardened. "No, you're right about that. We won't say anything to Harry, although this does explain things. Snape, on the other hand..."

Ginny nodded. "He has to pay," she replied grimly. No one was going to hurt Harry and get away with it.

Hagrid's Hut (Mid October)...

"Hagrid, are you there?" called Harry.

He stood outside his friend's hut. There was a lit candle inside, so he assumed that Hagrid was home.

The door opened. "Harry!" the half giant exclaimed, smiling. "Come in! Come in!"

Harry entered the small cluttered hut. It wasn't so much that the hut was small as much as it was Hagrid was so large. He grinned at his friend.

"How about a cuppa?" Hagrid asked.

He nodded. "Please. My mum will be by shortly. I wanted to talk to you both. And I happen to know there are no spying charms on this cabin."

"Spying charms, eh? I don't think anyone wants to listen in on me, Harry."

"Oh, I don't know, Hagrid," Harry teased. "I know the fifth years have a betting pool on what creature you'll bring to class next. No one thought you could top the Acromantula, but then you showed up with a Gorgon. Now they're betting on all sorts of things. They even have a pool on whether or not Colin Creevy will survive your class."

"Harry," Hagrid said softly. "Tha' only happened once. How was I supposed to know the Sphinx would step on him like tha'? We found all his pieces, an' Madam Pomfrey put him back together, didn't she? An' I'll have yeh know he found it really cool to be stomped on like tha'."

He chuckled and shook his head. A knock at the door drew their attention away from the conversation and Hagrid went to open it. Jean walked in a moment later. She sat next to Harry and Hagrid poured her a cup of tea.

"All right Harry, what is it you wanted to see us about?" asked Jean.

He looked between the two for a moment, then he let out an explosive breath. "I gave Hermione a list of names."

"Names?" asked Hagrid in confusion.

"You gave her a list of names!" exclaimed Jean in dismay. She knew already what he was talking about.

Harry turned to face Hagrid. "Yes, Hagrid, a list of names. There are more than twenty people in the castle wearing the Dark Mark. Death Eaters," he replied tensely. "I gave Hermione a list of names and she and a few others are organizing the school. It was suggested that I stay out of the coming conflict and I intend to try."

"Dumbledore wouldn't let Death Eaters stay in the school. He wouldn't endanger the students," Hagrid grumbled.

Harry turned to Jean. "Are you going to tell him or shall I?"

Jean sighed and rubbed her temples tiredly. She could see both sides of the issue and she wished that Harry hadn't given out the list.

"It's true, Hagrid. I informed the Headmaster at the beginning of the term and he's decided to do nothing about it. He wants to give them a chance to see the error they are making," she said, then she turned back to Harry. "So do you know what Hermione's planning?"

Harry shrugged. “I can't honestly say I do. Even if I did, I'm not sure I'd be willing to share that information. If I know Hermione, she'll start slowly with a series of carefully orchestrated requests of the Headmaster. At each refusal, she will escalate things until we have a full blown confrontation in the school. She has the backing of all of the prefects and they're passing the list around. I expect that, in a day or two, most of the unmarked students in the houses will know about it.”

“What the bloody hell is Dumbledore thinkin', lettin' tha' scum in the school,” Hagrid rumbled.

Harry sipped his tea then he looked at his oldest friend. “He's hoping they will change their ways, Hagrid, even if that means putting every other student in danger.”

Hagrid stood and walked over to his fireplace. Sitting on the mantle was the huge crossbow he normally carried for protection. He cocked the massive weapon and threaded a bolt into it before placing it next to the door.

As their conversation moved onto other matters, a small beetle moved away from window sill. It only flew the short distance into the tree line of the forbidden forest where it came to land on a tree branch. The beetle paused to consider it's next move.

The wolf spider had been hunting all day without much luck and lunch just landed on it's front door. With lightening speed, it pounced, sinking it's fangs into its victim and injecting it's paralyzing poison. Rita Skeeter, award winning Daily Prophet journalist, has just missed her last deadline.

Harry and Jean stood to leave Hagrid's when he stopped them. “Have yeh figured out what to do with the scale K'nor gave yeh?”

Jean and Harry exchanged a curious look, then turned back to Hagrid. “No. What should we do with it?” asked Jean. “I sort of thought about putting it in a frame and hanging it up somewhere. It's very beautiful.”

Hagrid rumbled in that characteristic low laugh of his. “Take it to Gringotts,” he said when he finally regained control of himself.

Harry blinked in surprise, then he nodded. “Of course! How could I forget that?”

Jean looked at him. “What?”

“The Goblin craftsmen could use the scale and make something you could wear, Mum. They're the best when it comes to making jewelry and armor.”

She frowned at him and wondered if she'd ever learn the things she needed to know about this world.

“Mum, I can take the scale to them on the next Hogsmeade weekend.”

“Now, Harry, yeh know the Headmaster won' allow yeh to go to Diagon Alley,” Hagrid rumbled.

Harry smiled at him. “Then I guess it's a good thing I'm not planning on telling him.”

Jean looked at him, her eyes narrowing. “And why are you going to Diagon Alley?”

He shrugged. “I want to go through my family vault to see if there's anything that belonged to my parents in it. Besides, Christmas is coming and I'd like to do a bit of shopping. Hogsmeade is all right, but if I want quality, Diagon Alley and London are the places to go.”

Jean folded her arms and stared at him. “Won't you need my approval for any withdrawals?”

“Only for the Potter accounts, Mum,” he said, smiling. “I have full access to the Black accounts. Look, I'm not going to go crazy, but spending a few thousand galleons on my family is something I want to do. Other than friends, I never had anyone to give a gift to.”

Jean nodded slowly. “All right, but nothing too expensive.”

He nodded, his eyes sparkling. Hagrid's suggestion fell in line with something he had been considering. “Excellent. Shall I swing by your quarters tonight to pick up the scale?”

Hogwarts Library...

Hermione was in her element, surrounded by books as she was. Since just after breakfast, she had been searching for something to use against Snape. She was joined not long afterward by Ginny, and then later, Luna. They had told Luna what they were looking for, but not why, though she seemed to have figured it out herself.

“It can't be a common curse,” she muttered.

“Something uncomfortable, like a Sneeper infestation,” offered Luna.

Hermione lifted her head from her book and stared at Luna incredulously. “Sneeper infestation?”

“You don't want to know,” Ginny said softly.

Neville walked into the library and approached their table. He pulled back a chair and sat down, then he reached into his bag and pulled out a glass bottle that had been sealed with wax for extra protection. He placed it down on the table along with a parchment.

Hermione snatched up the parchment and read it aloud for everyone.

“Bavarian Snowflake Flower. Location: Bavarian Alps.

This rare flower grows in mountain pastures or high plateaus and is usually found around magical springs. The blossoms, when culled fresh in January, produce a golden powder with many interesting properties.

“The most notable use of the powder is its uncanny ability to damage the mental shields of an Occlumencer, without them being aware of the damage. This little known fact came to light during the rise of Garblak the Gnarled in the Goblin Rebellion of 1091.

“The powder is odorless and tasteless and should only be handled by someone who does not practice mind arts. It can be absorbed through the skin or administered orally.”

Ginny looked up from examining the bottle. “So, that's why you've sealed it in wax.”

Neville nodded.

Hermione placed the parchment carefully on the table, stood up and threw herself at Neville, hugging him tightly. The boy turned several shades of red, each darker than the previous, while he awkwardly returned the hug.

Ginny and Luna exchanged smug, knowing looks. Hermione and Neville seemed to be clueless about what was slowly happening between them, but no one else was.

Ginny waited until the hug ended. “Neville, how did you know?”

He looked down at the table for a moment, then he looked up, his expression determined. “I suspected for a while now. And when Harry made that statement, it all clicked into place. A lot of pieces about Harry's life are falling into place.”

Hermione looked down, ashamed for not confiding in him. “Neville, I'm sorry, I should have...”

“No, you shouldn't Hermione,” he said, jumping in. “It's Harry's tale to tell, or for us to figure out by ourselves. I think I know him well enough to know he'd be embarrassed to death to know we figured it out.”

Luna leaned over and pulled the bottle from Ginny's fingers. “This alone isn't good enough. We need more if we want to accomplish the goal of ridding Hogwarts of it's resident spy. This is only the first step. We can start slipping it to him, but we need more than just this.”

Hermione looked up and stared at Luna. “What are you on about?”

Luna shrugged. “I thought it was obvious. This alone will weaken his shields. So what? No, we need to give Snape proof of his duplicity so his master will find it.”

Ginny's eyes widened and she nodded eagerly. “I have just the idea, but we'll have to learn how to Oblivate someone before we can try it.”

The four leaned in closer to make their plans.

From her position at the other end of the library, Madam Pince could barely make out the four students in the back, whispering about their assignments. They would talk for a bit, then all four would scribble furiously on parchment before talking some more. It was times like this that she felt especially happy that she could offer this sacred sanctuary to students dedicated to learning.

Charms Classroom...

Harry stood staring out the window, his eyes unfocused. His mind kept roaming over the same facts over and over and finding no resolution. He didn't want to fight for the Wizarding world, and yet, he was a mutant wizard. But Voldemort wouldn't let him live in peace either. He didn't want to kill, ever. That was the thing he dreaded the most. The fact that sooner or later he'd be forced to kill someone in order to defend himself. No matter how he approached it, it was a nasty vicious circle he had built for himself. And the solution escaped him.

He sighed and refocused on the empty classroom. He'd needed a bit of space to think, and the common room had been a little too crowded.

A pair of arms encircled him and he flinched hard before he realized who it was.

“I'm sorry,” Ginny said softly against his back. “I didn't mean to startle you.”

“It's all right, I just wasn't expecting it.”

She gently turned him in her arms until they were facing each other. “You aren't used to anyone touching you are you? That's why you flinched.”

“Not many have, Ginny. It's what I'm used to. The Dursley's touch meant only pain. I'm trying. Mum says I'm getting better.”

“But you rarely initiate contact on your own?”

He frowned, thinking about it. “It's hard to get used to the idea that someone actually wants me to touch them. Like that hug I gave you a few weeks back. As much as I wanted to do that, it felt weird. I thought for sure you'd yell at me or something.”

“I liked that hug,” she said smiling. “And I like it when you touch me. I'm not going to yell at you, or bite, or hit you for it.”

Harry's eyes widened in surprise. “Y-Y-You like it when I touch you?” he stammered.

She nodded and hugged him a little tighter. “If I didn't like it, I wouldn't want to go out with you,” she whispered.

He looked at her for a moment and his expression confused her. His eyes had darkened to a deep green. She couldn't recall ever seeing him look like that and it was beginning to worry her.

“Would... Do you... Can...”

He stopped and took a deep breath. Reminding himself that no one had ever died of embarrassment or rejection, he smiled slightly. “Can I kiss you?” he blurted quickly. Flushing, he realized how awkward that sounded.

Ginny laughed quietly, then slid her hand up behind his neck and gently pulled his head closer to hers.

As first kisses went, it wasn't spectacular. There were no fire works, no deep, burning passion. In fact, it was pretty ordinary, if a little clumsy.

But to the participants, it was everything they dreamed of and more.

Ginny melted against him as he backed off, then he leaned in and kissed her more seriously. She could feel her pulse speed up. A strange sensation washed through her, starting at her lips and radiating outwards. It was like Harry was somehow channeling his magic into her.

When he finally pulled back, she sighed. That kiss was better than any fantasy she had ever had.

He leaned his forehead against hers and chuckled softly, waiting for her to open her eyes.

“Where did you learn to kiss like that, Potter?” she said. She was shocked at how low pitched her voice had become. She could still feel his lips on hers. “Who taught you that? I want to thank her.”

He looked at her funny, then he released her and stepped away. “What am I going to do with you, Ginevra?” he asked, slowly shaking his head.

She blinked and stared at him, confused. How could the mood have shifted so quickly? “What do you mean?”

He ran a hand through his hair. “Just about every time I think I've finally convinced myself to let the British fight Voldemort without me, your face appears, or your mum's and everything gets all confused again. I don't understand this power you have over me. Part of me wants it so very much...”

He slumped against the wall and looked at his feet. “I don't want anything to happen to you or your family. But I don't want to be a killer, either.”

She stepped forward and wrapped her arms around him. “You're not a killer, Harry. Even if you do kill Tom, he's not human anymore. You said that yourself, after he was resurrected. He's not human.”

She looked up into his eyes and saw the confusion in them. “I don't think I really realized, until now, just what has happened to you.” She reached up and cupped his cheek, and he leaned into her touch. “You've been treated wrong for so long that you think you aren't capable, or worthy of being loved. Am I right?”

He nodded, his eyes still closed and she sighed softly. She reached out and caressed his cheek softly with the tips of her fingers.

“Harry, no one is more deserving of being loved than you. I'm going to show you exactly what being loved and being in love means. And I intend to keep showing you until you get it through your head.”

His eyes sprang open and he stared at her incredulously. “But... that... you...”

She smiled at his reaction and placed her fingers to his lips. “Yes, even that. That isn't going to happen today, or next week. But someday we'll share something very special. You don't have to worry about that for now. I'm not ready for that and you're even less ready than I am,” she grinned impishly at him. “I have a lot to teach you before we reach that point.”

He wrapped his arms around her and lowered his face, burying it in her hair. They stood motionless for some time, both content to just be.

“I'm sorry,” he whispered some time later.

“For what?” she asked, drawing away slightly so she could look at him.

“I'm haven't been very good boyfriend, have I?”

“Oh, I wouldn't say that. You get better at this every day and if I had known you could kiss as well as you do, I would have fought Cho to get my hands on you last year. You keep kissing like that and I think you'll do just fine,” she said, winking at him before turning serious. “No one starts off being good at this. As with many things, we learn from experience.”

“True. It's just that I'm starting out behind the curve. But I've been told that I'm a pretty quick study, when the subject is interesting enough.” He grinned at her, then bent down to kiss her once more.

Gringotts (October 30th)...

The last two weeks of October slid by without any major problems. Hermione, Luna, Neville and Ginny were deep in plans that they weren't sharing with anyone, including Harry. Ginny only told him not to worry, that they were going to take care of matters and that he'd be pleased with the results. It was a quiet time, a lull before the storm broke. It gave him time to concentrate on other, more pleasant things.

Thanks to the help of Senior Manager Pageknock, he had made arrangements to visit with the Goblin artisans.

He was surprised to be met at the door to Gringotts.

“Welcome, Mr. Potter. Or would you prefer I use your title?” asked the young goblin that met him.

Harry shook his head. "Please, just Harry, or if you must be formal, Mr. Potter is fine," he said. He looked more closely at the goblin. "I remember you. Didn't you take me to my vault the first time I was here?"

"I'm pleased to know I made that much of an impression on you, Mr. Potter," the goblin said, pleased to be remembered.

"Griphook, right?"

He nodded. "Yes. I am apprenticed to Senior Manager Pageknock. In time, I will assume his position as manager of your accounts. For now, he's assigned me to assist you in any way possible."

"Good. Then the first thing you can do for me is tell me when I screw up. I'm trying to learn more about your culture, but there isn't much written about it, I'm afraid."

Griphook nodded solemnly. "Wizarding printers seem reluctant to print anything about us. I will speak to Pageknock about obtaining some translated works from our own libraries, if you wish?"

"That would be wonderful," Harry said as Griphook lead him to a different cart than the one normally use to visit the vaults.

Seeing his inquisitive expression, Griphook explained that this particular part of the track led down to one of the largest goblin communities on the planet and was separate from the track that went to the vaults. He also cautioned Harry to remain by his side. All wizards had to be escorted when visiting the Halls of Gringalt.

Harry nodded as he listened to Griphook, then he pulled back his sleeve and deactivated his wand holster so it would not automatically extend his wand.

Griphook watched him from the platform. "What did you do, Mr. Potter?"

"I deactivated my holster. I understand the nervousness that your people have and I do not wish to offend. There are times during normal activities that my wand has been drawn inadvertently. I don't wish for that to happen today."

Griphook nodded thoughtfully. Climbing into the cart, he checked to make sure his passenger was secure. A few seconds later, the cart took off, hurtling downwards towards Gringalt.

After a long ride of nearly an hour, they entered an immense cavern. It was so large, Harry was unable to see the far end. Looking up, he found himself unable to see the ceiling of the cavern, either.

A blue mist hung just below the cavern ceiling, glowing brightly and illuminating the city. The city itself was amazingly neat looking, despite the large number of buildings, some of which were tall enough to rival Muggle skyscrapers.

When the cart came to a halt in a large terminal area, Harry climbed out with Griphook.

"We'll be meeting with Stonefist, one of our leading Master Artisans, Mr. Potter," the goblin told him.

Harry nodded, pleased that Pageknock and Griphook had gone to so much trouble for him.

As Griphook led him out of the terminal, Harry was tempted to slow the walk and sight see, but decided against it. He wanted to build a better relationship with the goblins before he asked for such privileges.

He couldn't help notice the wide variety of building materials used in the city. None of the buildings seemed to be made of wood, but stones of various types. There were buildings using the white marble similar to the Gringotts in Diagon Alley, as well as buildings that seemed to be made out of quartz crystals. There was even a building that looked like it had been constructed entirely from brass bricks.

After thirty minutes of walking, he found himself confronted with the oldest Goblin he had ever met. He was a good five inches shorter than Griphook and his back was hunched with age. His ears drooped, and one looked as though it had been partially bitten off at one time during his life.

"Lord Black," muttered the old goblin. "Manager Pageknock requested I meet with you."

Harry tore his eyes away from the perfection of the jewelry and metalwork that hung from the walls of the small workshop. He looked at the wizened old goblin and bowed. "May your enemies bleed. Master Artisan Stonefist."

Stonefist arched an eyebrow at him, then instinctively returned the formal salutation. "May your enemies feel the weight of your power against their necks."

He gestured toward a table with several chairs, then hobbled over to one and sat down. Neither knew just how prophetic their greetings would be.

"Stonefist, I come seeking the help of one who is capable of working with only the finest materials and enchantments," he said, then he opened a pouch at his belt and removed the dragon scale, placing it on the table.

Stonefist gasped and picked up the shimmering scale. "Sea Dragon, freely given and still imbued with the creature's power." He looked up at the young wizard. "This is a mighty artifact, Lord Black."

Harry nodded. "I understand that you can craft some suitable pieces for a red headed human female? My sources claim that the goblins are the finest jewelers and armorers in the world."

He was playing this extremely carefully. The scale was important, but equally so was this expansion of his relationship with the goblins. Even after he relocated his money to America, he wanted them to continue maintaining his accounts, so he needed their good will and trust.

Stonefist placed the scale down on the table reverently and looked at Harry with a shrewd eye.

“What is it you want of us?” he asked bluntly.

Harry smiled and pulled out a parchment, which described his ideas. He even included several rough sketches. “I dare not presume to tell you your job, good Master. However, this parchment describes what I hope to accomplish. By my own poor estimation, this would use less than half of the scale. I am willing to supply the materials, including the scale and the metal. You may keep the excess for your own purposes.”

Stonefist glanced down at the parchment, reading it briefly. “The metal?” he asked, curiously.

Harry reached into the same pouch that had held the scale and pulled out an ingot of True Silver, weighing nearly three kilograms.

Stonefist eyed the ingot greedily. Even if he made the jewelry extremely heavy, more than half of that ingot would be his!

“I note there are more pieces on this list than one person can wear,” he observed carefully. He wondered exactly what this strange human had in mind. He had never met a human wizard who was as respectful as this one appeared to be.

Harry smiled. “While my principle concern is for my mother, there are others that I would like to be able to give some small token of my esteem to.”

Griphook, who had been sitting quietly, watching the exchange, nearly laughed at the term “small token”. Harry was talking about commissioning pieces that would be priceless, one of a kind items.

“And the enchantments?” Stonefist asked carefully.

“I will leave that to your discretion, good Master. I would like the pieces to be protective in nature, perhaps even potential heirloom material,” Harry answered carefully. He knew he had just upped the ante. Heirloom magic was a specialty of the goblins and rarely done for humans. It meant that an item would tie to a family's blood line and only work for descendants of the person activating them.

“That might get expensive,” Stonefist said dubiously. It was magic beyond his skills and he'd have to hire the spellcrafters for the task.

“I understand,” Harry replied, then he placed a second ingot on the table.

Stonefist blinked in surprise. The second ingot changed everything! He'd be able to hire the best and still rake in a handsome profit, not counting what he could make on the follow on pieces from the left over scale and True Silver!

He nodded eagerly, then he reached for a standard contract, which he kept around for dealing with wizards. “Will you insist on using a wizarding contract, Lord Black? I have one such contract here,” he offered.

“I was under the impression that your word was as good as Gringotts,” Harry said frostily. He knew the goblins hated the wizards for forcing them into the binding contracts.

“My lord?” Stonefist said uncertainly.

“Is your word not good enough, Master Artisan?” asked Harry. “I accept the word and promise of Gringotts to manage my money, why should you be any different?”

Stonefist blinked and threw the contract over his shoulder with a grin. “My word has been good for three hundred and forty years. It's only wizards who insist on binding contracts.”

Harry laughed. “What wizards do and what I do are generally quite different.”

“So I am coming to understand. When will you require the pieces?” asked Stonefist, turning back to the job at hand.

“Will Mean Geimhridh be soon enough?” Harry asked, using the old name for the Druid Yule celebration. The Goblins and the Druids shared many similar holidays and their languages had mixed a bit over the centuries.

Stonefist nodded in agreement. “That will be suitable. I will inform Manager Pageknock when your commission is ready.”

Harry stood and bowed to the old goblin. “Thank you. May your gold flow, Master Artisan.”

Stonefist grinned. “May your gold flow as well, Lord Black.”

Griphook led Harry out of the building and back towards the track terminal.

“Griphook?”

“Yes, Mr. Potter?”

“Would it be possible someday to come back here and just take the time to visit in your city?”

Griphook stopped him with a touch and looked into his eyes. “You would wish to visit Gringalt because?”

“Because it's beautiful. I would like very much to see more of it. Perhaps to even share it with others that would appreciate it for the work of art it is.”

Griphook nodded in satisfaction. “I will speak with Manager Pageknock and see if some arrangements can be made.”

He entered the terminal building with Griphook and immediately stopped.

Griphook, caught by surprise, bumped into him. "Mr. Potter, is there..."

"Shh! Something is wrong. I can feel it," he replied harshly. Every instinct he had was screaming danger at him. The very hairs on the back of his neck were standing up and tingling.

"How dare they turn us down!" exclaimed a voice.

"The Master will make them pay," said another.

Harry sucked in his breath. He knew both of those voices intimately. He had dreamed of them many times in the past months. His eyes widened and he glanced back at Griphook, who was now listening intently. The goblin's expression had turned grim.

"I think, my dear Bella, that we should give them a taste of what is to come."

Harry peeked around the corner in time to see Bellatrix LeStrange grin madly, then pull out a knife and plunged it into the back of the goblin escort who had been warily watching Lucius.

Harry snarled and reached for the goblin, bringing the injured being to his spot, then he stepped around the corner.

"Reducto!" he snarled, casting wandlessly.

Bellatrix blinked in surprise, then she dove into the cart.

Lucius Malfoy was still turning to orient on the new threat when his head exploded like a ripe melon. A fine blood red mist expanded from where his head used to be.

Bellatrix screeched. "Crucio!"

The curse hit Harry, who was still trying to comprehend what had happened to Lucius, and he fell to the floor screaming in agony.

Griphook stepped around the corner and gestured, sending Bellatrix diving out of the way of his cutting curse.

Harry took several shuddering breaths, then slowly climbed to his feet.

"Avada Kedavra!" shouted Bellatrix.

A thick green beam lanced from her wand and Harry grabbed Griphook before he entered his phase space. He turned so that his back covered Griphook. The beam passed right through his back and through Griphook. Exhaustion washed through them both as the spell passed. It surprised Harry that the spell still had an effect, albeit not the intended one.

Bellatrix stared at the pair in shock, not understanding what had just happened.

That was all Harry needed. He was tired as hell, but wasn't going to let her get away again. This woman had taken too much from him and his friends. He wanted to kill her, but magic wouldn't do. He wanted to feel her die under his hands.

Without considering the consequences, he teleported Griphook to the entrance of the terminal, then he spun and leaped upon Bellatrix. Hitting her in the face with the heel of his palm, he shattered her nose. She screeched again and dropped her wand in an effort to drive him off her. He ignored her blows and his hands tightened around her neck, crushing the life from her.

"Time to die, bitch," Harry snarled, squeezing as hard as he could.

Bellatrix's expression turned to panic and she reached into her robe. She pulled out a small knife and plunged it into Harry's side.

He roared in pain and his hands burst into a coruscating aura of light. Bellatrix's eyes bulged and her head separated from her shoulders from the garroting effects of his magic. Blood fountained, covering Harry. Shock rushed through him and he stood up and staggered back to stare at the corpse still pumping blood.

He turned and vomited over the side of the cart, then he walked shakily back onto the platform. All around him goblins rushed into the terminal and an eerie siren sounded throughout the structure.

He fell to his knees and stared at the blood that covered him. Some was his, but most belonged to the two dead Death Eaters. He reared up on his heels and tried to vomit again. Several Goblins, armed with halberds, approached him carefully.

He looked at his hands again and howled in anguish, then he simply vanished.

Far above, Gringotts in Diagon Alley went into full lock-down as the alarm spread. The treaty had been broken. Wizards had dared to fight in Goblin territory, goblins were injured and someone would be made to pay!

Hogwarts, School of Witchcraft and Wizardry...

Dumbledore just reached for his cup of tea when Fawkes squawked unhappily and someone started pounding on his door. Alarmed, he pulled his wand and left his desk to answer the door. Whoever was on the other side was in a great hurry.

He opened the door and Ron Weasley stumbled in, wheezing and out of breath. "Headmaster... Harry... Showers..."

“Is something wrong with Harry Potter?” asked Dumbledore worriedly. As far as he knew, the boy was out of the castle today and not supposed to return until tomorrow morning.

Ron nodded. “You have to come, the tower...” he gasped.

Dumbledore nodded and glanced to his phoenix. The large bird sprang aloft, gliding across the office to land on his shoulder. He grabbed Ron and they both vanished in a ball of phoenix fire.

They appeared a moment later in the Gryffindor common room. A large crowd of students were gathered around the base of the stairs to the boy's dorms. The door to the common room opened and Hermione entered, leading Professor McGonagall. She paused to hold the door open for Jean and Neville.

“He's upstairs, Headmaster. In the shower,” Ron stammered.

Hermione went over to Ginny, who stood with tears streaming down her cheeks. They had already encountered Harry.

Neville had found Harry and called for the others to try to help, but Harry had been unreachable, even by Ginny.

With a determined look on his face, Dumbledore purposefully strode up the stairs to the sixth year dorm and turned into their bathroom. One of the showers was running at full blast and steam filled the room. A shimmering blue bubble filled the showers. It snapped and sparked malevolently and air thrummed with magic.

Slowly, Dumbledore approached the showers more cautiously. He could see Harry sitting on the floor, his clothing stained light red from the blood that had washed away. Harry paid him no attention, he kept making a motion with his hands, as if he were washing them. The hilt of a knife protruded from just under his ribcage, blood seeping from around the wound at an alarming rate.

“Harry!” shouted Jean.

Harry didn't look up, but kept washing his hands. Blood flowed from his nose and down his lip. His face was heavily bruised and one eye was swollen shut.

Jean started to walk forward, but Dumbledore grabbed her, holding her back.

“Let. Me. Go,” she said angrily.

“Jean, that shield is dangerous, possibly lethal,” he said in protest.

Jean turned to examine the shield, testing it with her psionics and found it prevented her from entering. Without approaching it she could feel the lethality of the shield.

Dumbledore turned to Minerva. “Professor, have a house elf turn off the water to the tower,” he said. The sound of the rushing water was making it difficult to hear himself think.

“Harry,” Jean called. She carefully knelt as close to the shield as she could without touching it.

Harry ignored her, continuing to wash his hands and mumble. Suddenly the water reduced to a mere trickle. With the showers turned off it was possible to hear the threatening hum of Harry's shield.

“Aclaró!” Dumbledore intoned, waving his wand. Almost instantly the steam swirled and vanished.

“Harry, drop the shield,” Dumbledore urged gently.

Harry looked up at him and his expression darkened. “You're like Vernon, always taking, hurting and pretending it's for my own good. You've made me like them. You put this blood here.”

He coughed and sprayed blood, then he tried to use the pool of water he sat in to continue cleaning his hands.

“Harry, it's mum, please drop the shield, sweetie. Let us help you,” Jean pleaded.

He shook his head. “It's no use,” he whispered. “It's going to end in death anyway, so why fight it? He wants me as his weapon,” he said, jerking his head at Dumbledore.

Dumbledore frowned and refrained from speaking. He didn't want to antagonize the lad any further.

“We must find a way through this shield,” Minerva said, her hardened facade crumbling. One of her Gryffindors was bleeding to death on the bathroom floor and she could only watch helpless.

Poppy entered the bathroom carrying her kit. “Let me through.”

Jean grabbed her, holding her back. “No, don't touch the shield.”

Poppy stopped and stared at the sparkling blue field uncertainly, then she stepped backwards. She wasn't used to having her patients surround themselves with dangerous magic.

Harry coughed up more blood and shook his head as if trying to clear it. The shield wavered for a moment, then firmed up again.

“Professor,” Jean said to Dumbledore. “I think I know a way to help him, but I need a portkey to the common room downstairs.”

Dumbledore blinked, then nodded. He grabbed a towel and murmured a quick "Portus" over it. It glowed blue for a second, then he handed the newly made portkey to Jean. "Tap it with your wand to activate."

She threw the towel over her shoulder, then twisted her ring, activating her Blackmoor castle portkey.

"Minerva, go down to the common room and clear the space in front of the fireplace. That is where they will arrive," Dumbledore commanded.

McGonagall turned and ran down the steps.

"He's seriously injured, Headmaster," commented Poppy.

"I am aware of that fact, Poppy. Yet he is managing to hold a lethal shield, despite his obvious confusion. He was not even supposed to be in the castle today," Dumbledore replied.

"So you don't know what happened?" she pressed.

Dumbledore shook his head. He was in the dark and it was a situation he did not like.

She frowned, then looked back at Harry. "Mr. Potter," she called, expression softening, "please let me through so I can tend to your injuries. I have your bed in the infirmary ready for you. You can relax there and visit with your friends."

Harry shook his head and looked at her, blinking rapidly. "It's no use," he said, then held his palms up so she could see them. "No matter how hard I try, he keeps getting me bloody. I'm going to be hip deep in blood before I die," he ended in a whisper.

Poppy leaned back on her knees, frowning. Clearly he wasn't thinking straight and she was getting very worried. His frame was wracked with tremors and his ashen complexion said he was going into shock.

For several more minutes nothing happened other than the pair of them watching Harry grow weaker, while he continued to wash his hands and mutter to himself.

A low pitched whine interrupted their vigil as Professor Xavier, Logan, Scott, Jean and Professor McGonagall entered the bathroom.

Logan took one look at the shimmering blue shield then turned to Jean. "You want me to go through that?" he asked incredulously.

Jean looked torn. She knew it was going to be painful, but there was no choice. "If there was another way, I wouldn't ask you, Logan," she whispered. "He's dying in there. The longer we wait, the worse he gets."

Logan nodded and turned to examine the bubble again, then he shrugged. "Oh, well. Here goes nothing."

Logan took a deep breath, then he jumped into the shield.

"NO!" yelled Dumbledore.

His bellow was echoed by Poppy and Minerva.

Logan screamed and collapsed on the floor inside the shield.

Poppy whirled on Jean. "How could you?" she demanded. "It killed him!"

Minerva took a step backwards, her face ashen, both hands covered her mouth in horror.

A low groan startled everyone as Logan slowly pushed himself up. "Damnit, Wiz, you know dying always gives me a headache. This better be worth it or I'm gonna beat the shit outta you for this."

Harry looked up from his hands. "Wolverine?"

"You were expecting Tinkerbell?"

Harry held up his hands to Logan, his expression tortured. "I can't get the blood off them. I killed them both to save that goblin and now I can't wash off the blood. I'm turning into a monster, just like Riddle."

Jean gasped at his words and choked back a sob. Xavier frowned and maneuvered his chair closer to the shield. "Logan, try talking to him," he urged.

Logan didn't look back, but he nodded and lowered himself to the floor. "Who did you kill, kid?"

Harry coughed hard, spraying blood down the front of his shirt. "Lucius Malfoy and that bitch, Bellatrix LeStrange. She stabbed a goblin," he said, then he lifted up his hands staring at them intently. "I wrapped my hands around her neck. She killed Sirius, she tortured Neville's parents into insanity and I wanted to feel her die. She was like a rabid animal. Maybe now Sirius will leave my nightmares and find peace."

His expression grew feral and he glared up at Dumbledore. "You did this to me. It was bad enough that you had to create Voldemort. But you couldn't stop there, could you? You had to repeat your mistakes with someone else. You weren't content to make one monster, you had to turn me into one, too," he snarled.

Harry's hands started to glow and Dumbledore stepped back, ready to cast a shield. The heavy smell of ozone filled the bathroom and the very air started to whine from magical overload.

"Sorry, kid," muttered Logan. "I'm all for revenge, but we need to get you patched up, first." Reaching out, he clipped Harry hard against the side

of the head.

Harry's eyes rolled up in his head and he slumped down. The shield wavered and vanished.

Poppy pushed her way forward and dropped to her knees next to Harry. She glanced over at Logan.

"I will deal with you next. Don't go anywhere," she commanded, then she turned back to Harry and cast a diagnostic charm.

"I'm fine," protested Logan.

"I'll be the judge of that," Poppy said absently. She was distracted, trying to assess Harry's condition. She pulled a potion from her bag and carefully administered it to her patient as Jean knelt down beside her.

"He's got a punctured lung, Poppy," she said softly.

"I know," Poppy snapped, then she sighed. "I'm sorry Jean, but I'm his healer. You're too close to him. You know the rules."

Jean nodded unhappily and stood up, then backed a few feet away. Scott stepped over to her side and wrapped an arm around her.

"Logan, come along," Xavier said softly. "Let her do her job."

Logan nodded and backed away from Poppy and Harry.

Xavier turned to Dumbledore. "Albus, given what's happened, might I ask that you put us up for a few days? Harry is going to need some help to get through this crisis."

Dumbledore nodded absently, agreeing to the request, while keeping his eyes fixed on Harry. He was most curious to find out how Harry had managed to arrive in the showers without anyone seeing him. And he definitely wanted more information about LeStrange and Malfoy.

Once she was finished giving him the potion, Poppy conjured a stretcher and floated Harry onto it before floating the stretcher. With him secured, she left the room hurriedly. Jean and Scott followed behind her.

Minerva exchanged a look at Dumbledore, then turned and went down to disperse her students back to their normal activities.

An elf appeared and whispered something to Dumbledore. His eyes widened and he nodded.

"It seems that Mr. Potter's adventure today has brought us more visitors. Minister Scrimgeour is downstairs with a small contingent of goblins and Aurors," he said gravely.

He was silent for a moment before coming to his decision. "I will ask the Minister and his guests to join us in my office. Charles, would you and Mr. Logan please join me? As much as I'd like to join everyone waiting for word of Harry in the infirmary, I'm afraid that won't be possible."

Dumbledore led the others to his office, surprised at how quickly and how capable Xavier's hover chair was. It easily navigated the steep Hogwarts steps, including the tight circular stair to his office.

"Minerva will escort our guests here in a few moments, then we'll get to the bottom of this. I must caution you both that the Minister is unused to dealing with Muggles, let alone Mutants. That he has goblins with him only confirms what Harry was saying. Whatever fight he got into, happened at Gringotts, which is considered part of the Goblin Nation and not subject to British Ministry law."

Xavier nodded. "You need not worry about us, Albus. My primary concern is for young Harry. I am curious to find out in greater detail what occurred to cause such a devastating break today."

"I am also," muttered Dumbledore in agreement. The level of hatred Harry had shown him exceeded anything he had ever experienced, except from Voldemort himself. His confidence was shaken. For the first time, he found himself unsure of events happening around him. From the sound of it, the elder Malfoy and LeStrange were dead. Dumbledore was conflicted over this loss. Given time and proper treatment, Malfoy and LeStrange might have been salvageable. Events were happening without his control and he didn't like it one bit.

Deviation from his plans could ruin everything.

The door opened and Minerva walked in. She was followed by Ministry Scrimgeour, Aurors Kingsley Shacklebolt and Michael Wood, and three goblins.

"Gentlemen, please, come in and make yourselves comfortable," Dumbledore said. He was standing behind his desk. With a casual wave of his wand, enough chairs appeared for everyone.

Scrimgeour noticed Xavier and Logan in the room and frowned. He didn't know who they were, but the last time he had been in this office he had been thoroughly humiliated. Remembering that, he opted for caution this time.

"Who are your guests, Dumbledore?" Rufus asked, eyeing Xavier and Logan.

Logan was calmly smoking a rather pungent cigar and leaning against the wall by the window, barely hiding his sneer.

"This is Professor Charles Xavier and Professor Logan, both of whom are friends of Harry Potter and his family," Dumbledore replied.

Logan nearly swallowed his cigar in surprise and Xavier smiled benignly at the Minister.

Scrimgeour nodded absently and dismissed them as insignificant. "Yes, well, I have important business to discuss. They can go elsewhere. I'm sure you recognize Minister Ragnok of the Goblin Nation? And this is Senior Manager Pageknock and his apprentice Griphook."

He paused and frowned, then he turned to Xavier. "I told you people to leave!"

Xavier smiled benignly. "No, you don't really want us to leave. You want us to hear your story."

Logan smirked. He had seen Xavier do this thousands of times.

Scrimgeour's frowned for a moment, then he nodded in agreement. "Yes, I want you to hear my story."

The two aurors grinned happily. The Muggles weren't a threat.

The three goblins exchanged a glance but kept silent.

Xavier nodded. "Please continue, Minister."

Scrimgeour turned back to Dumbledore, who was staring at Xavier in disbelief. "Right. Where was I? Oh, yes. It seems that Mr. Potter saved the lives of two goblins today, although one was seriously injured by Bellatrix LeStrange.

"Minister Ragnok is most upset by this breach of treaty by wizards and is concerned about Mr. Potter, who managed to vanish from the Gringalt terminal, despite the massive wards in place designed to prevent such a thing."

"We are merely concerned, Minister, Headmaster. Lord Black is one of our largest depositors. We have been made aware of his wish to relocate his holdings overseas and have no wish to see him accelerate that schedule over this incident," Ragnok added.

"What?" exclaimed Scrimgeour. This was the first time he had heard anything about the Potter/Black fortunes moving.

Ragnok smiled, the effect of which was rather chilling. The multiple rows of sharpened teeth were very disturbing to those in the room, except Logan, who looked bored by it all. Ragnok's smile wasn't helped by the fact that his teeth were painted with a blood red enamel.

"Yes. Harry has been considering that move, along with dropping his British citizenship in favor of his American citizenship," said a voice from the door. "He's interested in attending one of the Muggle American technical universities when he leaves here."

Everyone turned to see Jean, Scott and Poppy standing in the doorway.

"Ah, Jean and Poppy. Excellent. Please come in," Dumbledore called. An elf appeared and started to pass out drinks. Tea for the humans, chilled Dubog juice for the goblins.

"How is he, Poppy?" asked Dumbledore.

Poppy frowned. She didn't like talking about her patients in front of so many people. But it ~~was~~ the Headmaster asking. "He's exhausted magically. He also had multiple bruises, a fractured cheek bone and a punctured lung. He's resting comfortably now and no longer in any danger, but there are aspects of this that I do not understand. I scanned him to see what curses might have hit him. He's been under the Cruciatus and there's evidence of a killing curse, which I simply don't understand."

Minerva paled and grabbed at the back of a chair to keep herself upright. Scott's expression was grim and Jean seemed close to breaking.

"Let's just say that his other abilities allowed him to survive that curse and forget about it," Xavier said quietly.

Scrimgeour looked at him incredulously, then he nodded amicably.

Dumbledore and Minerva both stared at Xavier in shock. He was blatantly controlling the Minister and everyone seemed to be going along with it! Xavier had correctly surmised the Goblins wouldn't care one whit about his manipulations on the wizards.

Poppy glanced over at the Muggle, then turned back to Dumbledore. In a situation like this, she was going to let herself be guided by the reactions of the others. If no one else was complaining, neither would she. "He'll live," she concluded simply.

"All right, so he'll live. In the meantime, he killed two Death Eaters, and don't think I've forgotten about that business of him relocating. That's unacceptable! Such a move could cripple our economy," Scrimgeour said, puffing up his chest.

"It's always about you people, isn't it?" Jean said bitterly. "Lord! I now know why Harry didn't want to come back here. My son is lying in a hospital bed, he nearly died and all you assholes can do is think of yourselves again?"

"Jean," Xavier cautioned.

Jean's lip trembled and she turned against Scott, who wrapped his arms around her.

Scott agreed with his wife. For the first time since the whole affair started, he was seeing Harry's position. The only concern these people held for his son was in what he could do for them.

"Lord Black was kind enough to provide us with sufficient warning concerning his holdings," Ragnok said in an offhanded manner. "If he wants to move his holdings to Gringotts, USA, or to another branch, we will, of course abide by his wishes. In the meantime, Gringotts has prepared for such a contingency so that we can weather any fiscal upheaval here in Britain."

Ragnok looked around for a moment before continuing. He was greatly enjoying this rare opportunity to make the human wizards uncomfortable.

"As to what happened today, Lord Black was down in Gringalt, conducting business. His visit was remarkable, in as much as he treated one of our most expert craftsman with the utmost respect. It was refreshing to have a wizard of his statue and fame treat us as equals. He even went as far as asking Griphook if it would be possible for him to return someday to Gringalt and tour the city. Reviewing his visit with the High Council

left many with a very favorable impression of the young man. His request to visit our city will most probably be granted."

Ragnok paused and sipped his juice. "Contrary to that visit, we received two emissaries from the Dark Lord. Because they used the old forms, we had no choice but to receive them under the rules of parley. They demanded of the High Council that the Goblins align themselves with the Voldemort." He smiled when most of the wizards in the room flinched at his mention of the name.

"When they were rebuffed," he continued, "they decided to demonstrate their displeasure. Mind you, the attempt to kill their escort was sufficient to remove the protections they carried under the rules of parley.

"One of our kind was seriously injured before Lord Black could intervene. When he did, removing the injured goblin from danger, he was placed under the Cruciatus for his efforts. Griphook distracted Bellatrix long enough to break the curse. She then fired a killing curse, which Lord Black somehow negated before it struck them both, saving Griphook and himself."

Dumbledore's eyebrows raised nearly to his hairline before remembering the strange transparency Harry had demonstrated when Umbridge had attacked him in the office. It also hadn't escaped his notice that Ragnok was referring to Harry using his title. *Harry must have really impressed them. I can't even get them to call me anything but 'wizard'*, he thought sourly.

"Lord Black, then engaged Mrs. LeStrange, throttling her quite effectively. When she couldn't beat him off her, she stabbed him. Lord Black then used his magic to finish her off. It was a glorious way to kill an enemy! At close range, to feel their last heartbeat," Ragnok said, his eyes gleamed in appreciation of Harry's methods. The other goblins nodded in agreement.

"When Lord Black vanished from the terminal building, we immediately initiated a search and contacted your Ministry concerning the dead Death Eaters. Bellatrix's head now adorns a pike outside of Gringotts on Diagon Alley. Unfortunately, there was not enough of Malfoy's head to display, so we've impaled the body next to Bellatrix, with a sign identifying him."

Ragnok didn't feel it necessary to inform them that they'd nailed the sign to the body, along with a warning, informing the humans of the price to be paid when breaking treaty with the Goblin Nation.

Logan grinned appreciatively. These were his kind of people.

Jean listened from the safety of Scott's arms and she shuddered at the barbarity of it all. It was downright medieval.

"Legally, Lord Black's use of magic within the confines of the Goblin Nation constitutes a violation of the treaty of 1638. However, in light of his intentions, that is, of saving a goblin from certain death and killing the criminals involved, we are willing to overlook the matter. There are some on the High Council who consider his actions heroic. For myself, I am thankful. His actions saved the lives of one of my clan and the life of another goblin. For that, Lord Black has a friend among Goblankind."

Ragnok stood and faced Madam Pomfrey. "Please keep me apprised of his condition. Should you require any special treatments, please carry them out and bill Gringotts for the cost. It is the least we can do."

Poppy nodded helpless. Her experience with goblins was extremely limited. And to have Ragnok talk to her, even if it were to issue orders, was extraordinary.

Griphook and Pageknock stood and turned to face Ragnok, who held out his hand. They grasped it and the trio suddenly shrank from sight, as if receding at a high speed without actually moving.

Xavier glanced over at Dumbledore, his expression asking for an explanation.

"The Goblins have their own methods of transport. That was their version of a portkey. For a human, it is a most disturbing method of travel," Dumbledore explained.

Scrimgeour leaned back in his seat and let out an explosive breath. "This is serious, Dumbledore. When the press finds out what's happened..."

"Then they will learn that two wanted and dangerous criminals were killed in the act of attempting to murder someone," Xavier said mildly. "I would suggest you simply state the facts when asked about it, Minister."

Scrimgeour's expression grew blank for a second, then he nodded. "Yes, that would work, wouldn't it? Besides, everyone knew Malfoy was a Death Eater, despite Fudge's pardon."

Scrimgeour stood. "Well, now that we've settled everything, I'll take my leave. Keep me informed on Potter's condition, Dumbledore." Turning, he walked out of the office, followed by the two Aurors.

"Charles, he..."

"Relax, Scott. The good Minister will not say anything he shouldn't, nor will the Aurors. They have already forgotten the key facts of the case. The Goblins will keep the secret only because it is good business for them to do so. Most will, wrongly, assume the Goblins are responsible for the deaths of Malfoy and LeStrange," Xavier said soothingly.

"You manipulated the Minister's memories?" exclaimed Minerva in protest.

Poppy stared at the man in the hover chair in shock. Dumbledore had already suspected Charles was doing something to the Minister.

Xavier shrugged. "I do not like to play with people's memories, Madam. However, for Harry's sake, I felt it would be best if his abilities and his involvement are not bandied about in the press. The Minister will simply omit certain facts and Harry's abilities will remain a secret. His enemies do not need to know he survived another killing curse."

Xavier turned to Poppy. "You were properly concise concerning Harry's condition, but you left much unsaid."

Poppy nodded unhappily. “As I said, he will survive this latest attack, but I'm more worried about his mental state. Prior to receiving medical treatment he was nearly incoherent.”

Xavier nodded knowingly. “Yes, he was in the throes of a panic attack and disassociating himself from reality. I thought about shutting his conscious mind down at the time, but Logan decided to take more direct action.”

Logan turned to stare at Xavier. “You let me walk through that bubble when you could of done something about it?” he asked incredulously.

“But you seemed so determined, Logan. I have learned that once you convince yourself to do something, nothing I say can stop you,” Xavier replied with a small grin.

Scott started laughing. Even Jean grinned against his chest.

“Who are you people?” Poppy demanded.

“Ah, introductions. I think you know Scott Summers, Jean's husband. And I think you know Logan, who has been helping Harry this past summer, training him to be more physically fit. I am Charles Xavier, another of Harry's teachers and I also have been helping him with certain... issues.”

Dumbledore winced at that comment.

Poppy nodded and looked at Xavier with a critical eye. “What caused your injury?” she asked bluntly.

Xavier looked down at his legs. “They were crushed in a cave in. While there was no nerve damage, they are quite painful to stand on, or to walk.”

“But the nerves are intact?” Poppy pressed.

Xavier nodded.

“We can fix that, sir. It would take vanishing the existing bones and regrowing them, then conditioning the muscles to handle your weight again. It wouldn't be easy, or quick, but I can fix them. The bones can be regrown overnight. But strengthening and conditioning the muscles to allow you to walk would take a lot of hard work on your part.”

The silence in the office was deafening as his X-Men stared at him in surprise and wondered what his reply would be.

Xavier smiled. “It is an intriguing possibility you offer, Madam. I fear that current responsibilities would not allow me the time needed, but perhaps once our current crisis is passed, we can discuss it in greater detail?”

Poppy nodded in acceptance. He was a grown man and she couldn't force healing on him.

“What now?” asked Jean in a small voice.

Poppy shrugged. “We wait for him to wake up, then assess the hidden damage this attack has caused.”

Jean nodded unhappily and walked to the door. “I'll be with my son.”

Author's Notes:

So, Bob didn't do AN's on the last chapter and people were a tad bit upset over that. As a result, he's making me do them. Bastard.

Oh, and I'd like to say that this update is late due to all the people who reviewed to tell us to update. Yeah, I'd really like to say that and we'll pretend it's the truth, won't we?

So, let's see...

For those who keep mentioning it, or flat out asking – No, Magneto will not be appearing in this story. He has been mentioned in passing, and may be mentioned again, but that's all.

I'm not sure who you're quacking at, Animorpho, or why, but I'll send a growl back at ya. As for Bob's ability to 'handle' me, I should probably tell you that he self-medicates.

A Harry Potter/Jaina Proudmoore hook-up? How would that work? He's busy fighting Voldemort and all she wants to do is study. Wouldn't it be better to hook Jaina up with Hermione? Seems it would be a better.... Wait, never mind. Forget I said that. ACK! Bob, don't you dare!

Carolyn: you'll just have to wait and see. Telling would be against the rules (we have very strict rules and I wouldn't suggest breaking them...it usually leads to many Bad Things) and, really, if we told you, why would you need to keep reading?

To BJH – Okay, here's the deal. Give me Rickman and fry the llama. I've got more llama's than I know what to do with. The UPS guy's getting pissed as hell because people keep sending animals to me (never knew UPS delivered livestock!) and his truck smells...ripe. Torch Rickman and I'll bury the rest of this story in the darkest corner of the HD I can find and it will NEVER see the light of day. Oh, and I'll also be dropping a nuke on your house. I have several, and I know where ALL our readers live. You were tagged the moment you opened one of our stories.

So, what's it going to be? ~Taps foot~

00 Knight: Thanks, and you're welcome!

Nope, sorry. The Shi'ar are not in this story. No little alien friends for Professor X to run to when things get bumpy.

Mwinter: The judge was actually rather nice about the whole thing. Seems he belongs to the Fruit of the Month club and the post office had delivered one too many boxes of squished citrus to his door. For electrifying the mailbox, the judge told me not to do it again...and gave me a lovely box of apples. Bob's a bit peeved, though. He was hoping they'd toss me in jail for a few days so he could eat donuts and perv on porn :D

Sven: If we had the ability to disable reviews, we would have done so with the first story posted here. However, that option isn't currently available with this system. Also, please note: Bob's comment at the end of the last chapter about ungrateful readers was meant as humor. Most folks who've read our work before understand this. He doesn't think anyone is ungrateful...nor do either of us think anyone should be grateful to us for any reason. Gratitude, to me, implies a sense of obligation, and those who read our stories are not obligated to us in any way.

Now, for those who feel as though Harry could solve his "Voldemort problem" by working together with the US Ministry, or feel as though Jean and Xavier don't care about Harry, or that Harry should just pack up and leave and say screw it to everyone, or simply slaughter everyone and walk away....Yeah, not going to happen here. You know where the exit is. Use it. Or better yet, write your own story the way you want it and you'll never have to worry about being disappointed again! Of course, that would take some effort on your part, and we can't have that, can we? ~Smile~ I'll try to make it a little more clear for those who are new to class...we're not writing for you. We write what we like. We're happy if you happen to enjoy it as well, but we don't care if you hate it, loath it, think it's just plain wrong or unnatural.

I only say this to save you the effort of reviewing, as bypassing your review is as simple as a flick of the mouse. We do read most reviews so we can answer folks in the AN, but we're not here to try to convince you to read our work, as it's not worth our time to do so.

Read it, or don't. Like it or don't. Regardless of your feelings on the matter, we'll write what we want. Get it? Can I end my rant? Did I get my point across?

Excellent. Moving on then...

I think that wraps things up this time around. In coming chapters we have angst, canoodling, fights, much screaming, lots of blood and gore..and as a special treat, George W. Bush and the amazing technicolor troll.

We still haven't found those damn penguins...

Enjoy, or don't!

~Alyx and Bob~

Mutant Storm

Chapter 10 - A New Path

Standard Disclaimer:

Alyx glanced up and frowned. “Bob, why do you call it a standard disclaimer? If anything our disclaimers are totally nonstandard.”

Bob grunted sourly and glanced at the section heading. “Tradition,” he muttered.

“Tradition?” Alyx repeated drolly.

Bob sighed and put down the “Do It Yourself Home Lobotomy Kit” he was planning on sending to several pushy readers that had been clamoring for this chapter. He hoped that it would send the correct message about bugging authors.

“Yes, Tradition,” he repeated. “For the past two hundred years, since the founding fathers of fan fiction wrote the first spin off of the Declaration of Independence, we have always started with chapters with the STANDARD DISCLAIMER. We have told people time and time again that we don't own Harry Potter or the Potter Universe and we have tried to convey our displeasure at the canon versions by claiming the last two books were actually written by ghost writers. It is tradition!”

Alyx blinked. “Someone wrote a spin off of the Declaration of Independence?”

“Yeah,” Bob replied. “It was a crack fic, the Declaration of Incontinence.”

Alyx winced and frowned. “Alright, but why do we need to make such a big production over our disclaimers? We've had celebrity torture sessions, dancing hippos, the Dolly Llama, technicolor penguins.”

“Don't forget Snape on a rope,” Bob piped up happily. That disclaimer where they hung Snape was one of his favorites.

Alyx stamped her foot and glared at Bob. She didn't like any of the Snape torture disclaimers, and loathed any disclaimer that so much as touched a precious hair on Alan Rickman's head. The Dolly Llama was one of her favorites too, although she was willing to admit she couldn't understand a thing he said.

Bob sighed and turned to Alyx. “Look, you like the disclaimers where you get to use power tools on unsuspecting readers don't you?”

“Oh yeah,” she answered dreamily.

Bob handed her a power drill and pointed her in the direction of Tumshie. “Tradition, knock yourself out.”

He grinned as she bolted off the stage with the drill running at high speed. Turning back to the readers he gestured to the chapter below. And now that we have the traditional disclaimer out of the way, on with the story.”

Mutant Storm

Chapter 10

A new path

Hogwarts Infirmary (the next day)...

Jean walked into the infirmary feeling rather smug. The Daily Prophet delivered at breakfast had a front page spread about the death of two Death Eaters who'd been killed in Gringotts for violating the treaty of 1638.

Most of the Slytherin table seemed to be shocked at the gruesome images, while the Gryffindor's cheered the news. Draco threw down the paper and ran from the Great Hall, tears streaming down his face. Even Snape seemed to be subdued.

The article had been surprisingly factual for once. Well, factual to Xavier's facts, she thought to herself with a smile. No mention of Harry had been made, and the two involved had been identified by Gringotts, along with a detailed description of their crimes. It was also rumored that Gringotts had seized the Malfoy family vaults and was conducting an audit to see if there were any associated vaults under other names that should be confiscated as well.

One other piece of heartening news, at least to Jean, was a small announcement that the Prophet had terminated Rita Skeeter for failing to come to work.

She approached the curtains surrounding Harry's bed and was surprised to hear two voices coming from inside. Harry seemed distraught and Ginny was trying to calm him down.

“It's all right, Harry. You only did what you had to do to save lives. No one can fault you for that,” Ginny said softly.

Jean smiled. He must have explained to Ginny what had happened at Gringotts. It made her feel better to know that he was willing to talk about it.

“But-”

“No. Stop this, Harry. You're tormenting yourself for no reasons,” Ginny said firmly.

Jean sighed quietly and stepped behind the curtain.

He was sitting up and Ginny was sitting on the edge of the bed, hugging him tightly. She was rocking him slightly and smoothing his hair as his head rested on her shoulder.

Jean looked at him with a critical eye, noting his pallid color and the slight wet wheeze in his breathing. He was much better, but he wasn't completely healed yet. She shook her head in amazement. Yesterday, she would have had to take him to a thoracic surgeon and he'd be months in recovery. Today he was ready to leave the bed and by tomorrow, probably the infirmary.

She moved to the other side of the bed and Ginny looked up at her, startled. Jean held up a hand and shook her head.

She sat on the edge of the bed and Harry opened his eyes when he felt the mattress shift. She reached out and caressed his cheek. Unbidden, tears started to flow down her cheeks. "Hey there," she said. "You had me scared silly."

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

She leaned over and kissed his head. Ginny slowly released him from her grip and he looked at Jean and blushed.

"How are you feeling today?"

"Better. Tired," he replied. His speech was breathy.

She pulled up his pajama top to examine the site of the knife wound. All that remained was an angry red line of puffy skin that looked tender. It looked like it had been healing for a month! She gently lowered his top and shook her head in amazement.

"Magic," Harry said with a grin, then he started to lay back. Both Jean and Ginny jumped to help him, then grinned at each other.

"Now can you tell me what you were doing in Gringotts, mister? I don't recall saying you could gallivant around the country. And what happened to your potions class?"

"I was taking Hagrid's advice about the scale, Mum. And Madam Perotti canceled the class because her daughter had just given birth. She's going to spend two weeks with her, helping out."

Jean frowned. "I hope you didn't spend too much," she grumbled. "You know you're supposed to tell me when you spend over a thousand galleons."

He shook a finger at her. "Only if I spend it from the Potter vaults. The Black vaults have no such restriction. Besides, I didn't spend anything. I bartered for their services using some True Silver."

Ginny gasped. "True Silver! That's very rare!"

"It is," Harry said with a nod. "But there is some in my vault."

"They say Queen Victoria was given a ring made from True Silver and it saved her life from an assassin," Ginny added. "It was charmed to nullify poisons. I've seen pictures of the ring and a bit of True Silver."

He grinned slightly, then began to cough. His lungs burned and spots danced in front of his eyes. The next thing he knew both Jean and Ginny were holding him upright. He leaned against them, panting heavily. Madam Pomfrey stood at the end of the bed measuring out a dose of potion and looking at him worriedly.

"You need to be careful today, Mr. Potter," she ordered. "Your lungs are still healing, so I want you to keep the talking to a minimum."

She handed the dose to Jean, who helped him drink it down. Ginny laughed at his sour expression and handed him a glass of water.

Poppy ran a few tests, then she straightened and backed away with a slight smile. "You're doing much better today, Mr. Potter, but you'll be keeping me company until tomorrow at the earliest."

He nodded to her, too tired to talk. Ginny propped a bunch of pillows behind him and he smiled gratefully at her before leaning back.

"Harry."

He turned to look at Jean. "Do you feel up to showing me what happened?"

"Professor, I asked him not to talk yet," protested Poppy.

Jean turned and smiled at her. "I mean to see his memory, Poppy, not have him describe it."

Poppy looked uncertain, but Harry tugged on Jean's sleeve and nodded to her. She turned and they locked gazes, while Ginny and Poppy watched in wonder.

A minute later they looked away and Jean sat back. "I see," she murmured thoughtfully.

"You saw his memory?" Ginny exclaimed.

When Jean nodded, Ginny shook her head in amazement.

"*Someday he might be able to showyou memories also, Ginevra,*" a voice said in her head.

Ginny gasped and turned to look at Jean incredulously.

"You know, I heard that, though it was very faint," Harry whispered.

Jean turned to look at him and smiled broadly. "Good! Keep practicing and maybe you'll build up that talent."

Ginny stared at the two and she looked decidedly unhappy. Harry immediately knew what was wrong.

"Ginny," he said quietly, taking her hand in his. "Occlumency doesn't stop mutants. Mum's sending to you has nothing to do with shields. Professor McGonagall tested yours and says they're very good."

"So you can't read my mind?" Ginny asked looking between the two.

Harry shook his head and Jean nodded. "I can't," Harry replied. "All I can do is know if you're happy, or sad, or anxious or angry. Mum could tell you your life story, but she doesn't look at people like that unless she has a really good reason for it."

"I rarely look into the minds of others, Ginny. It's an invasion of privacy," Jean added. "But everyone has surface thoughts that are hard to block out."

Harry chuckled. "Yeah, so she won't know if you and I slip into a broom closet for a good snogging."

Ginny blushed. She and Harry hadn't gotten to that point in their relationship.

Jean looked at the two suspiciously, but a noise distracted her from commenting.

The whine of Xavier's chair announced his arrival. Jean stood and walked over to the curtains, parting them enough for him to maneuver his hover chair through.

Xavier smiled, seeing Harry sitting up and he looked relieved to see not only Jean, but another pretty red head who seemed more interested in Harry than anything else.

"Good Morning, Professor."

"Good Morning, Harry," he replied, then he looked over at Ginny.

"Erm, you remember Ginny. I introduced you the first time you brought the Blackbird to Hogwarts," Harry whispered.

Xavier nodded and smiled at the young girl.

"Charles, Madam Pomfrey has asked that he keep speaking to a minimum today. If you don't mind, I'll show you his memory of what happened."

Xavier nodded and the two fell silent.

"That's eerie," Ginny said with a slight shiver.

"It's not that bad, really. No worse than relying on a stick to do things. Think about it. Most of the human race has to rely on machines or muscle power. Mutants and wizards just have different options open to them."

Xavier broke contact with Jean and faced Harry. "We're all human, Harry. Remember what I told you? The definition of a species is a group of organisms capable of interbreeding and producing fertile offspring. Muggles, wizard or mutant, we're all human."

Xavier sighed and shook his head. "We'll get into this discussion another time. Right now, I'd like to talk about some of the things that happened yesterday." He then looked at Ginny, who was holding Harry's hand.

Harry spotted the glance and frowned. "You can speak freely, Professor. Ginny is one of the few I would trust explicitly, unless it comes to pranks."

Ginny blushed and looked down, smiling to herself. She knew Harry enough to know that for him, trust didn't come easily and was not given lightly.

Xavier and Jean both looked surprised at Harry's comment.

"Very well," Xavier said softly. "When you were hit with the Cruciatus curse, why did it affect you?"

Ginny gasped and her hand tightened painfully around his. He had told her he had killed twice yesterday, but hadn't given her any real details. And he certainly hadn't mentioned being hit with a unforgivable curse.

"I was still solid at the time, Professor," he explained. "Malfoy's head exploded and it caught me by surprise. I didn't expect that to happen. That gave Bellatrix the opportunity she needed to hit me with the curse."

Ginny looked torn. She wanted to question Harry to find out what he meant, but at the same time, she was horrified to discover he had been put under the torture curse.

"And you were phased when you were hit with the killing curse?"

Ginny gasped and lunged for Harry, wrapping her arms around him tightly. Surprised, he wrapped his arms around her. "Shhh... it's all right," he whispered in her ear. "I'm fine."

Xavier smiled, pleased with what he saw. Harry having a girlfriend, or even a serious relationship, was one of first normal behaviors he had

seen from the lad.

He looked up at Xavier, still holding Ginny. "Both the Goblin and I were phased at the time. The curse passed through both of us, but it wasn't without effect. I felt tired immediately afterward. I wouldn't be surprised if getting hit with several like that would put me to sleep."

Ginny pulled away slightly and looked at him intently. There were dozens of questions she wanted to ask and he knew it. Impulsively, he kissed her cheek and she blushed deeply.

"I'll explain it all to you later, Ginny. Once I've satisfied the Professor and Mum, we'll talk. All right?"

She nodded and sat up.

He turned back to Xavier. "I know I should have been more careful, Professor, but it was too late to dodge. Besides, even if I'd had the time, Griphook would have been killed."

When Xavier held up a hand, he fell silent.

"I'm not questioning your actions, Harry. What you did was fueled partly by the desire to save lives, and partly by anger. Bellatrix LeStrange took something critical to your life away and you wanted her to pay for that."

He paused for a moment, then he leaned forward in his chair.

"Being a civilized man does not mean being someone who will not take a life, if there is cause to do so. And when the act is complete, a civilized man will regret the actions taken. I remember the first time I was forced to kill someone in order to save the lives of myself and others. I spent weeks agonizing over what happened. But then a friend asked me a simple question. He asked what would have happened if I hadn't killed that day."

Xavier paused and looked at Harry intently. "Think about that. Had you not done what you did, would you be here now, to have this pretty girl hugging you? She doesn't think you're a murderer for killing two dangerous and ruthless people. You caught them in the act of committing murder and stopped them. In doing so, you saved not just one person. You've prevented them from killing anyone ever again.

"In the end, you did what was necessary to save a life and returned alive from a fight you neither asked for, nor wanted. I daresay Miss Ginny is quite happy to have you back alive and relatively in one piece."

Ginny nodded as she looked at Harry. "It's true. What you did was heroic."

He winced. He hated when someone applied that label to him.

Ginny's eyes clouded, knowing how much he hated being called a hero, and wanted to kick herself.

"She's right," Jean said quietly, seeing their distress. "I know you hate the term, Harry. But think of it this way. What you did was show that you hold goblin life with the same esteem that you hold human life. Ragnok from the Goblin Nation was most impressed by your actions. I know you still don't want to fight for the wizards and you weren't!" she hurriedly said to his glare. "You fought for yourself and to save that goblin. That it was also a benefit to the wizarding world is simply a side effect."

Harry glared at her a moment longer before looking away.

Jean moved closer and took his face in her hands. "I don't want you to fight for them anymore either," she said softly.

"Jean," Xavier said warningly.

She ignored him and plowed on anyway. "Don't fight for them, Harry. Yesterday I saw exactly how narrow minded and cruel they can be. I saw what you've been seeing all along. Don't fight for them, fight for yourself and for your friends. What will happen to Ginny and her family? Or Hermione and Neville?"

Xavier sat silently seeing where Jean was heading. It was a good tactic really and it was a more visible goal than trying to save a bunch of xenophobic Victorian era wizards.

Harry sighed heavily and refused to look at anyone.

"Harry," Ginny said, "Hermione, Neville, Luna, and even Ron, are willing to fight at your side. Not just *with* you, but *for* you. And you know where I stand."

"I know," he replied. "It's just that Dumbledore..." he trailed off, then he coughed heavily, clutching his ribs, the pain reminder that only yesterday he had a knife in his lung. After he managed to gain control of himself he looked up at Jean.

"When this is over, can I tell them to piss off?"

Xavier smiled, and Jean chuckled, shaking her head.

"You'd leave us?" Ginny asked in a strangled voice.

He tightened his grip on her hand and shook his head. "No, but if I do leave wizarding Britain, I can assure you I plan on taking the very best of it with me."

She flushed and looked down, his meaning was crystal clear.

"Oh, my," Jean murmured.

Xavier looked at her. “Jean?” She turned to face him and their eyes met for a moment. “Indeed.”

“Ginny? Do you know what your family has planned for Christmas?” Jean asked.

Harry looked up at her, confused.

“I don't know. The usual, I suppose,” Ginny replied.

“Would you ask your parents if they, and the rest of your family, would be interested in visiting with us over the holidays? We'll supply the portkeys needed.”

She nodded uncertainly. “I can ask, but if I know my mum she'll want to spend Christmas at home.”

“Ask her to write me, Ginny. I'm sure we'll work something out,” Jean said, then she turned to Xavier. “Charles, can we talk privately?”

Ginny turned back to Harry once the adults had left. She could see he was fighting fatigue. She brushed his hair out of his eyes and kissed his forehead. “Sleep for a while, Harry. I still have an essay to work on. I'll go do that and come back in a couple hours after you've napped.”

He nodded and gave up the fight. His eyes closed almost immediately.

Ginny stood and turned to walk out of the enclosed area when he stopped her.

“Ginny, tell Hermione not to do anything about the Death Eaters just yet. Everything has changed and we need to rethink things,” he said sleepily.

“I will, now go to sleep.”

“Mmmm.” he mumbled and she grinned, then exited the curtained area.

A moment later Poppy stepped in and ran a few tests. She was pleased to see him sleeping. His injury had been dangerous, and despite her healing, she was concerned about infection. His lung still had some blood in it and that could cause all sorts of problems if they weren't careful.

In an empty classroom near the hospital wing, Jean and Xavier talked in low tones about Harry and Ginny.

“Are you sure it's wise to invite the Weasleys to the castle, Jean?”

She crossed her arms and stared out a window for a moment, then she turned to face him. “Sure? No. But I know that Ginny is practically the first normal teenage thing he's done since we've brought him into our lives. She loves him, Charles. Really loves him. And he loves her. The difference is that he doesn't know it's love. He has the emotion but he has no real experience with it and can't recognize it for what it is.”

Xavier nodded slowly. “Yes, I think your assessment is spot on. Now explain the invitation.”

Jean sighed. “Haven't you ever wanted to be normal, Charles? Didn't you ever want to invite friends over, just for the sake of it? Harry yearns for normalcy with a passion like nothing I've ever felt before. His feelings for Ginny are real, and I'm certain that someday I'll be meeting her parents as parents of my daughter-in-law. I invited them because I'd like to meet them.

“Despite Ronald Weasley's overly large mouth, Harry has a lot of respect for the Weasley family as a whole. I thought it would be a nice gesture to invite a few of Harry's friends to the castle for Christmas.”

A frown wrinkled Xavier brow, but he nodded. “I, too, would like to meet more wizards. Before Harry came into our lives, we were a tight knit group, but he's forcing us to branch out. I don't necessarily see that as a bad thing, either. Very well, plan your celebration. We have enough room to put up with some visitors for a couple days.”

Jean nodded, pleased that he agreed. It had been a spur of the moment idea, but it still sounded like a good one to her.

Headmaster's Office...

“Come in!”

Scott and Logan filed into the room, sitting in the chairs in front of Dumbledore's desk.

“Ah, Mr. Summers and Mr. Logan.”

“You wanted to see us Headmaster?” asked Scott.

“Yes. I spoke to Charles briefly this morning and he mentioned I should talk with you two. I am wondering, are you up for a little experiment?”

Logan and Scott exchanged a glance, then turned back to Dumbledore.

“What do you have in mind Twinkly?” growled Logan.

Scott rolled his eyes and frowned at Logan, while Dumbledore grinned benignly at the pair. “What sort of experiment Headmaster?”

Dumbledore leaned back on his chair. “Our researchers have turned up little information concerning Horcruxes, or how to destroy them, I'm afraid. I think that whatever information may exist is probably unique and in the hands of Voldemort.

“Given those circumstances, I am wondering if you would help us try to destroy the locket we have in our possession?” He steepled his fingers

and surveyed the two men.

"Harry's not available to be opening that Chamber of Secrets," protested Logan.

"Secrets," prompted Scott.

"Whatever," Logan growled in reply.

Dumbledore shook his head and tried to refocus the pair. "I know. Madam Pomfrey is pleased with his healing, but the earliest he will be released from the infirmary will be tomorrow morning. She also thinks his emotional crisis is passed, for now at least."

"First kill, it's always a gut wrencher. I've seen grown men break down and bawl like babies over it," Logan murmured, then sat up a bit straighter. "He'll get over it. By the time his kill count is over ten, he'll not even notice it anymore. Hell, I stopped counting when I passed a hundred."

Dumbledore stared at Logan in surprise. He knew the man was rough but he had no clue how rough.

"Braggart," Scott mumbled.

"One eye," Logan retorted with a grin.

"Gentlemen, can we get back to the matter at hand?" Dumbledore asked. He was already nursing a headache from the dressing down that Poppy had given him, and these two interacted almost like James and Sirius, holding two conversations at one time.

"How do you think we should approach this, Headmaster?" asked Scott.

"I was thinking that perhaps we could go outside and use a large open area, such as the Quidditch pitch. I will, of course be, willing to provide the magic to shield you both from any magical backlash."

The two nodded and Dumbledore stood. He grabbed a small chest from a shelf behind his chair.

Seeing that Logan was looking at him curiously, Dumbledore shrugged a bit uncomfortably. "I don't have Harry's Mage sight, but I am concerned that too much handling might be harmful. Putting it in the chest at least lets me move it around easily."

Logan nodded and the three men filed out of the office.

Dumbledore led them down the stairs and out of the castle. When they reached the Quidditch pitch, he opened the chest and levitated the locket out. He moved the locket until it was halfway down the pitch. "Is that too far away for you to hit, Mr. Summers?"

Scott shook his head. "I hit what I look at, Professor, but can you conjure a strong stone wall behind it? I don't want to take out your goal posts at the same time."

The old Headmaster blinked as if the request surprised him, then he nodded and conjured the wall with a wave of his wand.

"Everyone ready?" asked Scott.

"Yeah, yeah. Just blast it, Cyclops. You always talk to damn much," growled Logan.

Scott reached for his visor and a bright red beam lanced out to hit the locket. There was a buzzing sound for a moment, then an explosion that knocked all three men over on their backs.

While the smoke cleared, Scott looked around. "Logan? Are you all right?"

"Stupid question, Sparky" muttered Logan. "When am I not?"

"There's always hope," Scott said with a wince, then he looked at Dumbledore. "Are you all right, Headmaster?"

"I seem to be in one piece," said the old man, then he stood and looked down the pitch. "Oh, dear. I hadn't counted on that."

The center of the Quidditch pitch was now a crater some thirty feet wide and nearly ten feet deep. In the center of the crater was the smoking remains of the locket, melted and barely recognizable.

Dumbledore summoned the remains to a spot at his feet, then he cast a spell which gave him temporary Mage sight. He looked down at the remains of the locket and could see no magic left in the piece. Stooping, he picked it up and smiled.

"It's done," he said in a relieved tone.

"Great! That means it's Miller time!" Logan offered.

Scott stared at him. "It's not even ten in the morning," he protested.

"It's never too early for beer."

Scott shook his head and turned away from him. "It's really destroyed?"

Dumbledore smiled. "Yes. With your help, we have eliminated another Horcrux. Only two more to go, then Voldemort can be dealt with."

Hogwarts Infirmary and the Muggle Studies Classroom...

Harry laced up his shoes, then slipped his school robe over his uniform. Madam Pomfrey had given him permission to leave and he was in no mood to stick around. She had kept him an extra day, so he had spent three days, rather than the expected two, in the infirmary, but at least now the threatening infection had been beaten off.

He looked up and grinned at Ginny and Hermione, who stood just inside the door to the infirmary, waiting for him. It was early still and he wanted to get to the Great Hall for breakfast.

Standing, he straightened his robe and walked over to them. Hermione handed him his book bag. "Still no sign of the ferret?" he asked.

Ginny shook her head. "No, and most of Slytherin seems fairly somber about the affair. But there has been one interesting fallout from it."

"Oh?" he said, holding the doors open for them.

Neville was on the other side, waiting for them. "Morning, Harry."

"Good morning, Nev. Ginny said something interesting has happened."

Neville grinned. "You'll get a kick out of it."

Harry stopped and looked at the three of them. "What? Voldemort has quit and decided to become a shoe salesman?"

The three stared at him like he was crazy. "Right. Forget I said that. Now someone start talking."

"I was in the library," Hermione said.

Harry's eyes widened. "Now there's a surprise."

Neville started to laugh.

"Do you want me to tell you or are you going to continue making snide comments," Hermione retorted, her hands on her hips.

Neville stopped laughing and bit his lip.

"All right, I'll shut up," Harry said placatingly.

She glared at him for a moment longer, then nodded in satisfaction. "I was in the library when Daphne Greengrass sat down next to me. She told me that most of the fifth, sixth and seventh year Slytherin girls are not supporting Voldemort and don't want to support him. She said that Voldemort seems to think they are good for one purpose only - breeding. They want to help in exchange for protection."

Harry paused and looked at her intently. "They want our help?"

Ginny and Hermione nodded. "To put it bluntly, Daphne doesn't want to be some brood mare for the Dark Lord," Ginny added.

He nodded thoughtfully. "All right, let's see what we can do about this then."

He reached into his bag and pulled out his mobile phone and flipped it open. Rather than dialing in a number, he threw a small switch on the side. Ginny and Neville stared in astonishment when the top screen went blank. A moment later, Jean's face appeared.

"Harry? Is something wrong? You don't normally use this channel," Jean said worriedly.

He shook his head. "No, not wrong, but we need to talk. Do you think we can arrange a private meeting for later this evening? Maybe after dinner?"

Jean frowned slightly. "All right, but you know Scott, the Professor and Logan are still here? The Professor and Logan were planning to leave soon. Should I ask them to stay?"

Harry was silent for a moment while he thought. "Maybe dad, but I don't think this affects the Professor or Logan, yet."

"After dinner then, in the Muggle studies classroom," Jean said. Having Scott stay over for a few days was something she was looking forward to.

"Got it. Talk to you later, mum," he said, then he closed the phone and clipped it to his belt.

"Could she see you too, Harry?" blurted Neville.

He nodded and grinned at his friend before turning to Hermione. "I need you to get Daphne to come to this meeting. Offer her a promise of safety if you must, but get her to come."

Hours later, Jean was surprised to see Harry walk into the classroom with his friends, who all took seats.

She stood, but Harry waved her to her seat. "Wait, mum, not everyone is here yet."

The door opened admitting Luna and Ron, and then a moment later Daphne Greengrass and Tracey Davis walked in.

Jean and Scott shared a confused look, then Jean turned to Harry. "You called for this meeting."

"Right," Harry replied, then he stood up. "Hermione says the Slytherin girls don't want to support Voldemort. And I suspect that they aren't all that

Keen about supporting Dumbledore, either?"

He paused and looked at Daphne and Tracey, who nodded in agreement.

Harry turned to his parents. "Even if the other Houses gather together and offer them protection, and I'm sure we will, these girls all suffer from the fact that they come from Death Eater families."

"Not all of our parents at Death Eaters, Potter," Davis said angrily.

Harry nodded. "Good, that will make it easier. What I propose is we open up the Eastwick estate and ask the Goblins to ward it, then provide portkeys. For temporary problems, we could probably offer them places to sleep in Gryffindor, Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff. But we need something more permanent if things get too hot for them, and they probably will."

The estate was one of the Black properties, it was large, and very secluded.

Jean nodded slowly, but something was bothering her about this. "What about Dumbledore?"

Harry shrugged. "He doesn't matter," he replied, dismissing him entirely. "He wants me to fight this war? Fine, I'll do it, but not with him leading or in any way involved. I won't follow his lead and if he doesn't like that I'll push him out of the way."

Everyone stopped and stared at him.

"Harry, you can't mean..."

"I do, mum. I will not play his games anymore. He can handle the search for those items he needs. But I'm not playing by his rules. This is my war and I'm not a member of his Order. He has no control over me anymore."

Jean stared at him and he shook his head in dismay. "Do you know what he did today?" he asked quietly.

She shook her head. "No, will you show me?"

"No. Everyone needs to hear this. If you still don't understand or feel you need to see it, I'll show you later," he replied quietly.

She nodded.

"I was in Defense class today. Shacklebolt was the Professor de Jour when a notice arrived sending me to the Headmaster's office.

"Ah, come in Harry, have a seat. Lemon Drop?" asked Dumbledore.

He sat and shook his head.

Dumbledore frowned for a second then plunged on. "I suppose you are wondering why I asked you here. But now that Madam Pomfrey has released you from the infirmary, I wanted to speak to you about your actions."

"Sir?"

Dumbledore stood. Walking to a window, he gazed out for a few moments, then turned to Harry. "You killed two people, Harry. I know how that must be bothering you."

Harry scowled. "At first it did, but Professor Xavier made me realize that what I did was necessary."

Dumbledore looked pained. "I have a lot of respect for Professor Xavier, but his ways are different from ours. Civilized people do not go around killing each other. You could have easily taken them prisoner had you wished to do so. I want you to consider that. You took the lives of two..."

"Two murderous scum. I killed two rabid animals, Headmaster. Unlike you, I do not hold any forgiveness in my heart for them. They were a danger to me and to everything I hold dear. What the hell do you expect of me? To kiss Voldemort on the cheek and ask him politely to surrender?" Harry demanded angrily.

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled and Harry felt him probing around the edges of his shields. Harry's lips twisted slightly, then he tweaked Dumbledore's probe, forcing him to withdraw

Dumbledore winced and massaged his forehead. "Harry, we cannot just go around killing these people. We need to put them in prison and see if we can educate them and bring them back into society as productive members," he said patiently, as if instructing a small child.

Harry stood, shaking his head in dismay. "You're nuts. No, that's too mild. You are completely stark raving mad! Logan would tell you to go fuck yourself, and I'd find myself having to agree with him. Let me make one point absolutely clear in your mind, Headmaster." He slurred the title making it sound like an insult. "If I decide to fight this war, it won't be on your side and I won't be taking orders from you.

"I may not actively seek out the Death Eaters, but if they come after me and mine, I will kill them. I. Do. Not. Take. Prisoners."

Harry turned and pushed against the door. It was stuck fast.

"I haven't dismissed you, Mr. Potter," Dumbledore said from behind him.

"No, I'm dismissing myself," Harry replied. His hand flashed white and the door suddenly flared, then crumbled to ash. He stepped through the opening and went down the stairs.

Dumbledore stared at his door in dismay. He had tried to reach the boy and had failed yet again. Sitting at his desk, he could only consider how he could convince Harry to see his point of view.

Harry turned to the others. "That's the difference between he and I. He wants to rehabilitate people. I want to live my life in peace and I'm not willing to give up my life for the likes of Malfoy or LeStrange."

"You killed Bellatrix?" Neville asked in a strangled voice.

Harry nodded. He hadn't been trying to keep it a secret from his friends, but apparently no one had told Neville about it.

Neville stood and stepped up to face Harry. His expression was full of anguish. Suddenly, he lunged and hugged Harry. "Thank you!" he chanted over and over. Harry awkwardly hugged him back as he shot a pleading look at Hermione, who stood and came over to the pair. Harry released Neville and guided him towards Hermione, who took him into her arms.

"I think we made the right choice, Tracey," said Daphne, who watched Harry and his friends with interest.

Scott eyed Harry for a moment, then nodded. "Logan said you'd probably get to this point."

Jean turned to her husband. "What?"

"He's rejecting Dumbledore and all he represents. From where I stand, I think I can see his point of view. Remember Scrimgeour? Not a single one of them really cared that Harry was badly wounded."

Jean pursed her lips and nodded slowly. She had noted the same thing, it just surprised her to see Scott coming around so quickly. She had thought it would take him longer. In a lot of ways, he was an idealist, like Professor Xavier.

Harry turned back to his friends and the Slytherins. "We'll give the Slytherin girls sanctuary, in school and out. I'll contact my goblin manager to get the manor house opened and staffed with some elves. They'll supply me with enough portkeys to go around. Is this acceptable to you?" he asked of Daphne and Tracey.

Daphne nodded, but Tracey frowned.

"What's in it for you, Potter?" she asked. "What do you want in return? I'll warn you now that none of us will accept a forced betrothal. That's what we're running from."

Harry's expression grew stormy. "You think quite highly of yourself, Davis," he snapped. "Frankly, when Hermione told me about your plight this morning, my first inclination was to let you rot in the mess you and the rest of you pure blood princesses created. However, I am not completely Slytherin. I'll settle for your neutrality in this war, although if anyone wishes to help by offering information or actually fighting on our side, they'd be welcome. As to betrothals, I think I'm capable of handling that aspect of my life without forcing someone into that kind of contract. The only people I intend to manipulate from hereon out is Dumbledore and Voldemort."

Tracey and Ginny blushed for two different reasons. Davis wasn't used to anyone talking to her so forcefully, and Ginny because Harry's eyes flickered towards her when he mentioned being capable of handling his own love life.

Greengrass stood and approached Harry. Ginny tensed and watched her warily.

"You've changed in the last few days. Why were you in the infirmary?" she asked bluntly.

"They should know the whole story, Harry," Jean said. "Or at least more than whatever whisper they've heard."

Harry nodded absently. "Fine, a little show of faith, then. I was recovering from a knife wound that Bellatrix LeStrange gave me. I killed her and Lucius Malfoy while protecting two goblins."

Daphne nodded in satisfaction and returned to her seat.

Harry shrugged. "I'm not proud of killing those two, but they were vermin. I dealt with it. There are going to be a lot more bodies before this war is over. Including the parents of some of you girls. I won't give any quarter to anyone who doesn't surrender."

Davis' eyes narrowed. "Good. I'll be happy if someone does in my father. I'm tired of being his plaything over the holidays."

Jean sucked in a breath and the other girls turned to look at her in horror. Davis shrugged. "He's a Death Eater. What more needs to be said?"

"We'll talk to the others, Potter," Greengrass said. "You'll get information at a minimum."

Harry nodded. "Fine. I'll contact my manager and hopefully have portkeys for everyone by the end of next week. Hermione will arrange pickup points to make sure none of you have to travel alone in the castle. We're already doing that with the third years and below."

Daphne nodded. "Come on, Trace, we have some people to talk to."

Davis stood and started to walk towards the door, then she stopped and turned to look at Harry.

"Potter."

"Yes?"

"I'm sorry. You turned out to be more than I thought you were. I'm sorry I doubted you."

Harry nodded. "It's all right, Davis."

She nodded and walked out of the room with Daphne.

Blackmoor Castle, in the English Channel...

The alarm woke up Logan. He rolled from his bed and trotted down to the control room. He had returned to the castle only last night with the Professor in the Blackbird.

Storm was monitoring the controls and displays when he arrived. Unlike the Westchester manor in New York, there was no school here to hide behind. The castle had a complex array of electronic and magical detectors to warn the occupants of intruders.

The school, if ever there was one, would come later, once they were finished with the basics of the base.

“What do we have, Storm?”

“Two wizards on brooms. They were following an owl, but the owl seems to have lost its way. They showed up on the infrared camera about four minutes ago.”

“Can you pick them on the long range camera?” Logan asked.

“I'm panning the camera around now.”

A moment later two figures came into view, each sitting on a broom. Nearby, an owl flew around in circles, hooting in distress.

“Zoom in on them, Storm. Let's see if we can get a face shot.”

Logan moved closer to the monitor, examining the picture. “I think one is a woman,” he said quietly.

“It appears so,” Storm agreed. “Aren't those Death Eater robes?”

“Could be. But neither is wearing a mask.”

Logan reached around Storm and flipped a few switches on a console. A speaker crackled and then the sound of a phone ringing was heard.

“Hello?” asked a sleepy voice after nearly a minute of ringing.

“Hey, One Eye,” Logan said loudly.

“Do you have any idea of what time it is?” grumbled Scott.

“Yeah. Funny thing though? It's just as early down here as it is up at that fancy magical school. Look, I ain't callin' to interrupt your beauty sleep or because I miss you. We have a couple wizzies floating around the edge of those award things. I don't think they can find the castle, but we managed to get a photo of them. I'm sending the photo to your phone now.”

Hundreds of miles to the north Scott sat up in bed and watched the photo download to his phone. Once it was finished he saved the image to the phone's memory. “I don't recognize them, Logan, but they look like Death Eaters.”

“I told you we should install some SAMs,” Logan complained, Storm rolled her eyes at his comment.

Scott shook his head. “Right, like Professor Xavier will really let us install surface to air missiles at the castle. Listen, let me go see if I can find someone to ID these people.”

“All right. Call us back,” Logan said, then he cut the circuit.

“Let's keep an eye on them, Storm. I don't think I like this.”

Logan picked up a headset and pushed a button. “Professor? I'm sorry to wake you, but we have a situation developing here.” He paused. “Right, we'll see you in a few minutes.”

Hogwarts, McGonagall's Quarters...

Scott had a problem. He had dressed and left Jean still sleeping and quickly found himself standing in front of the entrance to Dumbledore's office with no idea how to get in. Every time he'd been to the office previously, either Jean was able to extend the stairs or they were already in place. He did know the gargoyle that ran the stairs was password protected and the password was always the name of a candy.

Frustrated, he stormed off in the direction of the only source of help he knew he could reach.

Minerva McGonagall hurriedly put on her robe. “I'm coming!” she shouted at the incessant knocking.

“This had better be an emergency or so help me I'm going to turn someone into a pillow for my bed!” she grumbled, then she wrenched open her door.

“WHAT?” she exclaimed, then she blinked in surprise. “Mr. Summers?”

Scott looked very embarrassed. “Professor, I'm sorry for waking you, but I need someone to look at something and the Headmaster is locked in his office. You're the only one who may be able to help, unless I blow the gargoyle to bits,” he said with a tinge of annoyance.

Minerva frowned. She, too, had her own share of irritation at Albus over his gargoyle. “Come in, Mr. Summers,” Minerva said. “Tell me what is so wrong it couldn't wait until the morning.”

Minerva ushered Scott into a modest sitting room. She sat down on a chair. He sat down across from her on the couch and reached into his pocket. He pulled his phone, opened it and set it to display the image Logan had sent him.

Minerva's eyebrows rose seeing the small color display. She had seen Harry, Jean and the others operating electronics in the castle and had been impressed, but this was the first time she had seen any of it up close.

“Logan called me. We have two people on brooms skirting the edges of our island. According to Logan, they were following an owl that seems to be lost and highly distressed.”

He slid the phone across the coffee table between the two of them. “Logan managed to get a picture of them. Can you identify them?”

She blinked and hesitantly leaned in to examine the tiny image. Shaking her head, she reached into the pocket of her robe. Pulling out her glasses, she put them on and the image cleared. “The Carrows,” she muttered, then looked up at him. “These are Amycus and Alecko Carrow. They're wanted Death Eaters, murderers and very dangerous. If you wish, I'll call the Aurors for you.”

She paused when he shook his head. He reached over and picked up the phone. After a moment he spoke.

“Logan? Scott. Your visitors are named Carrow, Amycus and Alecko. They're wanted Death Eaters and highly dangerous.”

He listened for a moment, then sighed. “All right. I don't like it, but I agree it needs to be done. If Storm won't do it, use one of the Jump Jets. One high speed pass should unseat them. Keep me informed. Scott out.”

He snapped the phone closed and smiled weakly at Minerva. “I'm afraid Voldemort is about to lose two more of his people. All in all, it's been a bad week for him. Logan should call back soon.”

Minerva conjured some tea for both of them. “I take it your Mr. Logan is going to kill them?” she said distastefully.

“There really isn't much we can do, Professor,” Scott replied in an apologetic tone. “We don't have your magic and they know roughly where our base is. If Storm won't knock them from the sky, then Logan will.”

“Storm?”

Scott smiled. “Another of our X-Men, Professor. Professor Xavier found her in a west African city. She was stealing to live. He brought her back to the school and now she's one of our best teachers. She's called Storm because she can control the weather. If she wanted to, she could pelt them with hail the size of a Quaffle.”

Minerva blinked at Scott in surprise. “The weather!” she exclaimed, then her eyes narrowed. “Do all your X-Men come from similar backgrounds?”

He nodded. “It's probably one of the reasons why Harry fit in so well with us. Most of us have no family to speak of. And most of us can relate to how he grew up. I was effectively blind until I met the Professor. He spent the money to have my visor built. Storm was starving and didn't know how to read. Jean lost her family, and Logan doesn't even know if that's his real name. Harry came into that and we did what we normally do. We rallied around him, protecting and supporting him.

“Jean doesn't want him to grow to be an X-Man, but no matter what he does grow into, he'll always be part of the X family.”

Minerva nodded and sipped her tea. She was glad that Harry finally had people that put him first. It was something he needed badly.

Blackmoor Castle, in the English Channel...

Xavier entered the main control room and glanced at the screen. As much as Logan wanted to kill the two intruders, he didn't dare do it without at least talking to the old man.

“Scott identified these two as Death Eaters?” he asked softly.

“Yes, Professor. He said they're wanted by the authorities and considered extremely dangerous,” Logan replied.

Xavier closed his eyes, concentrating on the pair. They were outside of the wards, but that put them nearly two miles away. It was a very long distance for him to control one, let alone two people. Finally, he opened his eyes and shook his head. “I cannot control them from this distance. But I did discover they are looking for me. The owl they were following hit the owl confusion ward Harry told me about and got lost.

“They have orders to bring me before Voldemort, after killing everyone else in the castle. I suspect they think that will convince me to switch to their side,” Xavier said.

Logan growled. “What can we do about them? They know roughly where we are. We can't let them leave here. Too bad they're not near the dragon. They'd make a tasty snack for the critter.”

Storm looked at Logan and shuddered. She had seen the dragon from a distance and the creature frightened her. She felt that anything with that many teeth wasn't natural. Being non-magical, she was unable to hear the dragon when she spoke to her.

Xavier nodded reluctantly. “Storm?”

The woman turned to look at Xavier. “Are you sure, Professor?”

“I would not ask if I could do it myself.”

She nodded and her she looked at the monitor for a moment.

Outside the castle a strong wind whipped in the direction of the Death Eaters still circling behind the owl.

The wind flattened against the water and started whipping around in a circular motion. In seconds, the water spout was a hundred feet tall and barreling down on the two shocked Death Eaters. Alecto screamed and her broom caught the leading edge of the vortex. She pivoted and the broom was sucked in.

Amycus could scarcely believe his eyes. One moment she was there, and the next moment she was gone! He had time to inhale, the beginnings of a shout before the vortex pulled him in.

Amycus had the sensation of intense spinning before he mercifully blacked out. His body was carried high in the vortex while the crushing centrifugal forces stopped the flow of blood in his body. Then, to add insult to injury, tons of sand and rock, sucked up from the seabed floor pummeled and scoured the body until little of it remained recognizable as a being human.

Logan turned away from the monitor with a pleased smile. He flipped a switch on the panel and waited.

Hogwarts, McGonagall's Quarters...

Scott and Minerva talked pleasantly for a while. She was rather curious about him and his relationship with Jean. Scott catered to her curiosity, since she seemed mainly concerned that he would somehow interfere with Jean learning magic. He did his best to allay her fears in that regard.

His phone beeped. “Excuse me a moment, Professor,” he said, then he opened the phone.

“Logan? What’s the status?”

His expression grew set and he nodded. “All right, I’ll pass the word. Thanks.”

He closed his phone and slipped it into a pocket. “Well, I was right, Voldemort just lost two more followers. Professor Xavier said they were there to force him into cooperating with Voldemort. They were supposed to kill everyone else in the castle, then drag him before Voldemort.”

Minerva's lips tightened and she nodded unhappily.

Scott watched her carefully. “You disapprove, Professor?”

She placed her cup on it’s saucer then put that on the table. “No,” she replied heavily. “I suppose it’s necessary. That doesn’t mean I like the idea of killing. I know that the Headmaster will not approve of killing Death Eaters.”

Scott shrugged. “I can understand that point of view. But I, for one, am glad Harry killed those two Death Eaters. And the same can be said for the two that tried to find our base tonight. They will never kill again.”

He paused for a moment, then he continued speaking. “Harry saved three lives that day, two goblins and his own. I wish he hadn’t had to kill, but I’d rather not lose a son that I’ve only recently gained. He’s become very special to me.”

Minerva smiled. “You are an interesting man, Mr. Summers. I daresay Harry will do well with you and Jean raising him. How is he coping with what happened?”

“He’s dealing with it, Professor. Jean is keeping an eye on his emotional state, and so is that little red head who’s so fond of him,” he replied with a grin.

“Yes, Ginny Weasley is quite persistent.”

Scott stood. “Will you talk to the Headmaster and let him know what has happened?”

She nodded. “I will, in the morning.” She looked at him over the frame of her glasses. “For now, however, I intend to return to my bed. And I’d suggest you do the same, Mr. Summers.”

He smiled. She sounded remarkably like his ninth grade algebra teacher. “Yes, Ma’am. Good night. And thank you for your help, and for the tea.”

Malfoy Manor...

The loss of the Carrows was noted by only a few people.

Harry was satisfied with the outcome. It proved to him once and for all that his family would do what it took to protect themselves.

Dumbledore had been upset by their deaths, which he felt was unnecessarily harsh. He wasn’t happy with Harry, either. The deaths of LeStrange and Malfoy senior created holes in Voldemort’s inner circle and Dumbledore was concerned about who would replace them. He had spoken to Harry very firmly about refraining from using deadly force the next time he fought.

Harry’s response was a less than politely worded suggestion concerning self gratification and a notice that it was his war, not Dumbledore’s and Harry would do what ever it took to survive it. Needless to say, Dumbledore was not pleased. Nor was Jean, but only for Harry’s use of

language. Logan, had he been present, would have been proud of the vocabulary Harry had picked up from him.

The other person upset about the loss of the Death Eaters was Voldemort. Bellatrix was his bed warmer for those few times he felt the inclination, and Lucius was a major source of money. He lost access to that money and would have to live without it until Draco reached his majority, in nine months time.

"I want the goblins punished!" screamed Voldemort at his assembled Death Eaters. "And find Alecto and Amycus!"

Snape shivered and prostrated himself like the others, while Voldemort handed out Cruciatus curses like they were Halloween candy corn.

"Snape!" the Dark Lord snarled.

He lifted his head and thanked himself for having the sense to relieve himself before the meeting started.

He scuttled forward. "My lord?"

"What does Dumbledore know about this?"

Snape shivered. "Not much, my lord. I suspect that Dumbledore has lost faith in my services. He rarely tells me what is going on anymore and I find myself often omitted from meetings."

Voldemort's eyes narrowed and burned redly. "For your sake, I suggest you find a way of reestablishing your position with him. I have little use for those who cannot perform their duties."

Snape bowed his head. "I will, my lord."

Voldemort paused. "I think it's obvious that the Carrows have failed in their mission to procure the services of the mutants. Perhaps more direct action will be required."

"My lord?"

"Perhaps we can garner the attention of this Xavier by stealing Potter's new mother," the Dark Lord mused.

Snape grinned and stared at the floor. Stealing the mudblood bitch would devastate Potter and she looked enough like her sister that perhaps the Dark Lord would let him play with her.

"You are magnificent, my lord," he murmured.

Voldemort looked up and frowned at him. "Get back to that castle and earn your keep, spy, lest I lose my patience and decide to destroy you utterly!"

In terror, Snape bounced to his feet and stumbled from the room. It would be another hour before he calmed down enough to know he had soiled himself, despite his precautions.

"Send for Wormtail," Voldemort commanded. "I have need of his services."

"Parkinson, you will withdraw your daughter from that school. If she is to take Bella's place, she must begin her training," he added.

Otis Parkinson bowed deeply. "You honor my family, my lord. I will withdraw her immediately."

Voldemort nodded and continued to issue orders. The time was coming close for them to strike and strike hard against those fools following the Ministry and Dumbledore.

The Room of Requirement, Hogwarts (mid November)...

Harry stood in the room, looking around in confusion. "What is this, Hermione?" he asked. Around them, the room was a jumble of junk, books and other items.

"I'm not sure," she replied uncertainly. "I asked the room to show me what Malfoy was doing and this is what it gave me."

Harry groaned and Ginny looked at him with concern.

"Why didn't I think of that?"

Ginny slipped her hand in his and he smiled ruefully at her, while Hermione looked on smugly.

"All right so what among this trash is Draco playing with?" Neville asked. He looked around dubiously.

Harry's eyes took on an eerie glow and he looked around the room carefully. "There is so much magic here it's hard to make it all out."

"You can see magic?" Ginny asked in surprise.

He nodded. He wasn't keeping secrets from his friends any longer. He hadn't told them about his main mutant talent yet, but he had stopped hiding his magical abilities.

Hermione shook her head and stared at him. It irked her that he was so talented in magic and so deficient in the theory, and seemed to have no interest in learning it.

Harry walked down one of the corridors, glancing at objects. Many glowed with magic, but he was certain that whatever he was looking for, would jump out at him when he saw it.

Ginny followed, fingering objects, checking books and other items trying to see if there was something that Malfoy could be using, like a book of spells. Her attention was drawn to a strange looking globe that pulsed and glowed if she held up a hand to it and then she walked into Harry's back.

She fell on her bum and looked up at him in annoyance. "Warn a girl, will you?" she said.

He grinned and offered her a hand up. "Sorry, Ginny. It's just that I think I might have found what we're looking for."

She bounced to her feet and peered around him at the small pile of lumber, some tools and a partially assembled cabinet. It didn't make any sense to her.

"Hermione!" Harry called. "Over here! I think I found it."

Then he did something she never would have expected. He moved behind her and pulled her into a hug from behind, resting his cheek on the top of her head. She couldn't help but smile and revel in the warmth and strength she felt in his arms. She felt safe, and loved in his embrace.

She turned in his arms, wrapping her own arms around him, and snuggled as close as she could without removing his clothes and slipping under his skin.

"Hem hem."

Both looked up at Hermione and Neville, who were grinning at them.

"Don't do that, Hermione!" complained Ginny. "I about died."

Neville chuckled at them and Hermione laughed, then looked around. "What did you find, Harry?"

He released Ginny and walked over to the pile of planks and the partially assembled back piece. "Each piece of wood has a thin tendril of magic that extends out of the room in the same direction," he said, then he nudged the partially assembled piece with his foot. "This assembled portion has a single, thicker tendril of magic shooting off of it. It is as if the tendrils of the pieces have been combined."

Then he turned pointed to the hammer. "Finally, there is a residual magical signature on the handle of that hammer. I can't say for sure it's Malfoy's, but it's fresh, probably less than two days old. And we know that Malfoy was in here last night."

"Looks like a cabinet or a wardrobe," commented Neville. "A big one. I have a similar wardrobe at home that is big enough to walk in."

Hermione pursed her lips and looked around at the mess on the floor. "I think we might have caught a break here. At the rate he's putting this together, it will take him months to finish it. That gives me time to try to figure out what it is."

"Not too much time, Hermione," Ginny warned. "This can't be good."

Hermione pulled a sheet of parchment and looked for a flat surface to use.

"What are you doing Hermione?" asked Harry.

"I was going to sketch this so I could refer to it when I was researching it," she replied as if it were obvious.

"Wizards," Harry muttered. It had become an epitaph for him. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his mobile phone. He opened it and aimed at the mess on the floor. Ginny and Neville stared at him like he was crazy and Hermione suddenly grinned. He took nearly a dozen shots of the material before looking up again. "My mum has a color printer on the computer in her classroom. We can print these there."

"Harry," Ginny said uncertainly. "How can your phone take pictures?" She had been rather pleased with herself, she knew about the mobile phone and what it could do, but now he was making it do things she didn't understand.

"It's a phone and a camera," Hermione explained. "It takes a muggle type still photo. I can even use it for video."

"So, muggle photos don't move?" Neville asked.

"Not normally, but give it a few years and they probably will," Harry replied as he moved around the mess on the floor snapping photos.

Harry grinned and aimed the phone at Ginny and pressed a button, then he turned it around so she could see herself on the small screen. Neville and Ginny clustered around the small screen and Harry looked over to Hermione, who rolled her eyes at him.

He closed the phone and motioned for them to move down the corridor to the exit. Harry smiled to himself. He hadn't solved the Malfoy mystery yet, but he was one step closer.

Hogwarts Library (third week in November)...

Hermione sat with a pile of books surrounding her. Nearby were the printed photos Harry had taken of the pile of lumber, and there was also a line drawing provided by Harry's dad, Mr. Summers, of what he suspected Draco was making. The drawing was precise and listed the dimensions involved. To no one's surprise, looked remarkably like the wardrobe Neville had suggested it might be.

She bowed her head and sighed, her concentration lost. Neville. Just the mention of his name was enough to distract her from her researching. His marks had improved dramatically this year. He had started running and exercising with Harry in the mornings, including some rudimentary

self defense. As a result, he had become much more confident than he had been in previous years. He suddenly had an intensity about him that hadn't seemed to exist before.

She knew that part of his confidence came from Harry showing him that he wasn't a bad wizard, as he'd originally thought he was. The rest was all Neville.

She shook her head and turned a page, trying to push the distraction out of her mind, until that distraction showed up in the flesh.

"Hermione?"

She jumped and looked up at him in surprise. "Erm... Hi?"

He smiled at her. "Can we talk?"

Dumbly she nodded and he took a chair not far from hers and turned it so he could face her.

"I was talking to Harry and he said I should muster my Gryffindor courage," he said softly, then he grinned at her confusion. He raked a hand through his hair in a gesture he had picked up from Harry. "Merlin, this is harder than I thought it would be. But... well... I like you."

He leaned back in his chair and took a deep breath.

She smiled shyly at him while her insides were fluttering wildly. "You do?" she said, then blushed. She squeaked those words out. After she had lost interest in Ron, she had thought she'd never have any sort of relationship while in school. She had briefly considered Harry, but he was more her brother than a romantic interest.

To her surprise, her interest in Neville started to peak as he became more assertive. Between the lessons he received from Jean, and the workouts he partook in, he was really coming into his own. The days of shy, uncommunicative Neville were quickly becoming a thing of the past.

He nodded and waited for some kind of a reply. When she said nothing, he squirmed slightly. "I know I'm not Harry, or even Ron. I'm not very athletic or very smart, like you..."

She reached out and pressed a finger against his lips, stopping him. "You don't have to be those things, Neville," she said softly. "Just be yourself, loyal and true to your friends."

"Will you join me during the next Hogsmeade weekend we have?"

She smiled softly and nodded. "I think I'd like that very much."

Neville smiled widely and he leaned a little closer. He reached out and touched her hand. She turned it over, slipping her fingers between his. She couldn't explain it, but it felt very right.

They sat quietly for a few moments, looking at each other, before Neville finally nodded toward the books she had piled up.

"How goes your research?"

She sighed and released his hand. She spread out the photos on the table. "Not well. There are so many things this could be. Mr. Summers gave me a drawing of what he thought it might look like, once it was assembled," she replied as she slid the drawing toward him.

Neville picked it up and frowned.

"What?" she pressed.

He looked up from the drawing. "Do you remember the cabinet that the Weasley twins pushed Montague into last year?"

Hermione blinked and turned to her books. "A vanishing cabinet. Can it be that simple?"

"It's not just a vanishing cabinet, Hermione. They usually have a mate somewhere," Neville told her.

She looked at him in surprise, then thumbed through a book until she found the entry she was looking for.

"So it's not really a vanishing cabinet. A cabinet and it's mate are connected. It's a kind of portal!" she exclaimed after reading the entry. She nibbled on her lip worriedly. "Why would Malfoy be working on that?"

Neville scowled. "Because it's a way in that bypasses the school wards, that's why." He could already see the danger.

She nodded grimly. "I think we should take this to show Harry and the others."

He nodded and stood, while she gathered up her notes and the book that described the cabinet, then she did something that surprised them both. She moved closer and kissed his cheek.

"I think you're a lot smarter than you give yourself credit for, Neville."

He blushed and looked down.

Muggle Studies Class, (Later that day)...

When Hermione announced she had a lead on what Malfoy was doing, Harry suggested they all meet in the Muggle Studies class. He knew that Dumbledore was aware of the Room of Requirement and he didn't want to tip off the old man, so he kept changing the locations of where they met.

It was a small group, consisting of Harry and his friends, the Head Girl, Cho Chang of Ravenclaw, and the Head Boy Keith Bundy from Hufflepuff. Harry included Luna and Ron in the group, but he had privately warned Ron that one misstep would result in dire consequences. Luna had laughed at that and firmly told Harry that she'd keep Ron in line.

Also present were Jean and Scott. Harry debated about bringing Hagrid into the picture, but he opted not to include him in everything. Hagrid was his friend, but he couldn't keep a secret to save his life.

"So, let's take this from the top. Cho? Keith? How are the students doing?"

The pair shared a look and Keith motioned for her to speak. She turned to look at Harry, noting that Ginny stood next to him and that the two were holding hands.

"Most of the students we can trust have been told, Harry. Others that we feel are questionable have just been told that there is a nonspecific threat against the school. As a result, at least two upper class students are escorting the first and second years. The third and fourth years are traveling together."

She paused and consulted a parchment. "There's only been one incident so far. Two first year Hufflepuffs were attacked by four fifth year Slytherins. They were stunned by Dean Thomas and Ernie McMillan and left in the hallway for Filch to find. When you asked that we do not do anything just yet, we passed the word to stick with stunners for now."

Harry nodded, pleased with what he heard. The school was organizing right under Dumbledore's nose and he didn't have a clue.

"Anything else?" asked Harry.

"Yeah," replied Keith, the only Canadian in the school. His father was a member of the Canadian Embassy staff. "My father says he's heard that Umbridge has been sentenced to fifteen years in Azkaban, but most of the charges were dropped. The only charge that stuck was one concerning her attacking a student in front of Auror witnesses."

Jean almost growled.

Scott frowned at the noises his wife was trying not to make and glanced at Harry questioningly.

Harry could only shrug in reply. It was typical of the wizarding world, and a classic illustration of what was wrong with it.

Hermione and Ginny shared a distressed look. Both knew that every time something like this happened, Harry lost a little more respect for wizards.

"Thanks, Keith," Harry replied with a grateful nod. "As you all know, I've been curious about what Draco Malfoy has been doing in the Room of Requirement. A few days ago, several of us got into the room to see what he was doing. We found what looks like a disassembled cabinet, or rather, a partially assembled cabinet. And it looks like Malfoy is putting it together. That's the bad news. The good news is Malfoy is not a carpenter and it looks like his rate of progress is going to be very slow."

"Now, Hermione has been looking into what this cabinet does and she thinks she found the answer."

Harry motioned to Hermione, who stood and walked to the front of the room.

She held up a picture and with a wave of her wand, expanded it. Scott walked over to help hold one side, then Neville stood and went to hold the other. She smiled gratefully at both of them.

"This is one half of a mated pair of vanishing cabinets. It is patterned after the old muggle magician vanishing cabinet, except that the muggle cabinet hid things with trickery. These vanishing cabinets are actually tied portals. Step into one cabinet and you can come out in the other. The cabinets were first invented in the 1700's, and are identical to the ones used to access Narnia, except these don't perform a transdimensional shift."

"Neville reminded me that with a mated pair of these, you could move between some unknown location and Hogwarts, without triggering the wards. It would be possible to sneak a small army into the castle and no one would know before hand that it had happened."

She paused and looked around for a moment, then she pulled out her wand and started tracing numbers and symbols in the air. "I've worked out the Arithmantic equations to try to get a feel for the range of these things. If my estimates are correct, the distance is on the order of nearly two hundred miles. The mate could be nearly anywhere in Wales, Scotland or England."

Cho and Luna, who was sitting in the back, next to Ron, frowned as they examined the equations.

"Your equation is incorrect, Hermione. You misstepped in the second transform by a factor," Luna said.

Cho looked again at the equation and slowly nodded. These things had a range of thousands of miles. Hermione looked stricken and she stared down at her feet.

"It's not a problem, Hermione. You can't be expected to know everything. Besides, you've had barely a day to work on this. I'm sure you would have found the error when you double checked your work," Luna offered. "Besides, it's Monday. Everyone knows that Mondays are bad days for Arithmancy, due to the influence of the Lunar Mites."

Everyone blinked and turned to look at her, but she seemed unconcerned by their scrutiny.

Hermione shook her head, then turned and shrank down her photo, taking it from Neville, then she faced the rest of them.

"What are our options?" asked Harry.

She began to tick them off. "We could destroy the pieces, but that would tip off Malfoy. We could do nothing..."

"Yeah and come in one day to find the room full of Death Eaters," Cho muttered darkly.

Hermione nodded to her. "Yes. Not a pleasant thought. We could finish the cabinet ourselves and booby trap it."

"Booby trap?" asked Ron. Normally, he sat quietly in these meetings, just grateful to be included. His relationship with Harry had mended somewhat. Harry included Ron again in their group, but he was cautious around him, as though he expected Ron to turn on him again. For his part, Ron understood that and had promised that he'd die before deliberately hurting Harry again. His actions had cost him far too much and he recognized that.

"A Muggle term, Mr. Weasley," said Jean. "It means to do something to the cabinet that will cause bad things to happen to anyone using it. The term booby, in this reference, means an embarrassing mistake, because the trap should have been seen as at least a possibility and avoided."

Ron sat silent for a moment. "Booby trap," he muttered. "I like it!"

Luna leaned over and patted him on the hand. Ginny snickered behind her hand and Hermione rolled her eyes at him.

"We can't finish the cabinet without showing our hand to Malfoy. What if we knew where the cabinet's mate was? Would that make a difference to what we decide to do?" asked Harry.

Scott scowled. "Actually, it might make quite a difference. Knowing the location would also give us a chance to perhaps find their base," he mused.

"How would you figure out that, Harry?" asked Hermione. "You can't use Arithmancy to locate it, and even if you do locate it, it might be unplotable and hidden."

He grinned at her, then turned to Scott. "Do you think I can borrow a map, a compass and one of those portable GPS units? I'll only need an hour, at best, but someone will have to make sure that Malfoy doesn't come near the room until I come out."

Scott grinned. With Harry's mutant abilities and his mage sight, he would be able to triangulate on the other location.

"I can find out his schedule, or I'm sure Argus has a bathroom that needs cleaning," Jean murmured with an evil gleam in her eye.

"I'll have what you need by tomorrow, Harry. I'll call Logan and have him fly up with them."

Harry nodded. "All right. Unless there is something else to talk about, we're done here."

Late Night, Gryffindor Common room...

"Harry?"

"Yes, Hermione?" he replied softly. He sat on one of the couches thumbing through one of his Muggle textbooks. Ginny was in her pajamas and robe, curled up against his side. She was dozing lightly and he didn't want to disturb her.

"You never explained how you plan on finding out where the mated cabinet is."

He nodded, feeling Ginny stirring as the conversation became interesting enough to attract her attention. She was warm against his side and he felt strangely protective of her.

"It's simple mathematics, really. I can see the flow of magic, and it points to a particular direction. I'll take one piece of wood, and note the direction the flow goes. Then I'll move, say a hundred miles and note the new direction. When you draw a line from those two points they will intersect at the location of the mated cabinet."

"But even with your jet it will take more than an hour to take those measurements," Hermione protested. She leaned forward on the couch. Ginny and Harry both noted that Hermione held Neville's hand.

"My jet is faster than most commercial airliners, so there's no reason why I can't use it. I suppose I could apparate, I have an international license for it. But that would mean leaving the wards of the school and by now I'm sure that old fool upstairs has adjusted them to tell him when I leave."

"So you have another way of leaving the castle that he can't detect," Neville mused.

Harry grinned. "Cheers, mate. I knew you'd suss it out first."

Ginny craned her neck upwards so she was looking into his eyes. He swallowed nervously since this was giving him a spectacular view. "I don't understand."

He tore his eyes from the view and resisted the urge to swoop down and nibble on her neck. "It's my talent. I'm a teleporter."

Hermione, being familiar with the term nodded slowly. "You can move yourself around then? That can be handy."

Harry nudged Ginny into a sitting position and she pouted at him, but he stood and faced his friends. "No, you don't understand the implications.

Because there is a lot of power over my talent, it's given me several unique abilities, all under the aspects of teleportation."

He phased until they could clearly see the fireplace behind him. Ginny turned white and gasped. He smiled reassuringly at her. "I call this phasing and the best way I can describe it is that I'm not really here. It's the first step in the teleporting process. When I'm phased, I can take a direct hit from a killing curse and the only effect is that it makes me tired. I can cast spells in this state, or walk through a wall."

He phased back into normal space and Ginny immediately stood and ran her hands down his arms as if to make sure he was really there.

"What else can you do?" asked Neville. Hermione sat silently next to him, but Neville's fingers were white from her grip.

"I can teleport things to me," he replied slowly. Their reaction hurt him. Ginny seemed to be unsure, almost wary of him and Hermione sat speechless.

He looked at Ginny, who had stepped away from him and was staring at him like she was only now seeing him.

After a minute of silence from his friends he sighed heavily. "I see," he said. "I guess being a mutant *does* make a difference."

He started to turn, his eyes burned with tears. Tears that he didn't want to give them the pleasure of seeing. Suddenly he was engulfed from the side by a red blur who latched onto him, holding him tightly.

"No!" gasped Ginny. "It doesn't matter!"

Hermione hugged him from behind. "You surprised us, Harry, that's all. Since you were hurt, you've hinted around the edges of it, but you've never come out and said exactly what your talent was."

"We never expected it to be... to be..."

"I think the word Ginny is groping for is cool," murmured Hermione.

Ginny nodded against his chest. He wrapped his arms around her. "I'm sorry. It's a hard habit to break. I'm used to people rejecting me. The Dursleys did it..."

"Them!" growled Neville to Harry's surprise. "Mate, I'd rather be compared to a Death Eater than those people. In fact, from the tales I've heard, they could have been the muggle version of Death Eaters."

Ginny reached up and wiped away the tears that streaked his cheeks. He leaned into her caress for a moment.

"We're sorry we gave you the wrong impression, Harry," Neville said. "Like Hermione said, I think you caught us by surprise. I'm not sure exactly if cool is good, but what you can do is brilliant."

Hermione released him, but Ginny held on and an easy silence descended on them.

"You can go just about anywhere, right, Harry?" asked Ginny.

He nodded, and was surprised when she released him. "I'll be right back," she said, then she turned and dashed up the stairs to the girls dorm.

He glanced over at Neville and Hermione, who had returned to the couch. They could only shrug, as mystified by her behavior as he was.

A minute later she returned to the common room carrying two boxes. She placed them on the table in front of the fireplace and knelt down, opening one box. She pulled out a red orb that seemed to be made of glass. Inside, a gas swirled ominously.

"What is that?" asked Hermione.

The orb hummed malevolently and quivered in Ginny's hands.

"I was just thinking that maybe Harry would like to demonstrate his ability. And it would give me a chance to try out these new thundering dung bombs Fred and George made." She tilted her head slightly and a smile tugged at her lips. "Someplace sacrosanct, like Snape's quarters."

Harry chuckled. "Do you want me to do it, or do you want to come along?"

"You can terliport other people?" Ginny asked in surprise.

He grinned in reply. "It's *teleport* and yes. Just remember the one cardinal rule. Never let go of me until I say it's safe to do so."

Hermione and Neville looked intrigued by this. Harry opened the other box and removed the other dung bomb. He cradled it in one arm and wrapped his free arm around Ginny.

"What's the other bomb for? One of these is enough to will fill up Snape's quarters," she asked.

"You'll see," he replied with a wink, then the two vanished, leaving behind only a puff of smoke.

"Merlin!" Hermione exclaimed.

Neville chuckled and shook his head. "Leave it to Harry."

She glanced over at him and smiled weakly. Harry's abilities had startled her. She turned to speak with him and found herself staring into his eyes. He was watching her intently, as if every motion she made was important.

Neville started to lean closer to her and she leaned towards him. She closed her eyes and their lips barely brushed against each other when

Harry and Ginny appeared with a small puff of smoke.

“That is the wildest... Oh! Oops!” Ginny said with a giggle.

Hermione and Neville pulled apart instantly and both blushed deep red.

“Erm... I had something in my eye,” Hermione exclaimed, then she flinched. As lame excuses went, it ranked up there pretty high.

“No, you had your lips pressed against Neville's,” Harry replied dryly. “I don't think that's an appropriate position for an eye related problem.”

The castle shook under their feet and Ginny started laughing so hard she had to lean against Harry. A few seconds later the castle shook again.

Hermione eyed the pair suspiciously. “All right, one bomb went to Snape's quarters.” It was a measure of her newly acquired mistrust of the facility that she only called a few of the staff by their title anymore. “But where did you drop the other one?”

“Malfoy's room, right under his bed,” Harry answered.

The four friends looked at each other for a moment, then began to laugh.

Mutant Storm

Chapter 11 - Taking a Stand

Standard Disclaimer;

Bob leaned over the prone Alyx and watched her eyes flutter open. He quickly hid the smelly sock he had been waving under her nose.

“What? er. No, it can't be! Another chapter of Mutant Storm? How the hell did that happen?” she exclaimed groggily, then the smell hit her and she turned a wonderful shade of green.

Behind Bob, the sock he tossed landed in a corner with a meaty thud. It still contained the foot of random annoying reviewer number 7.

“Well yeah, I know,” Bob said sheepishly. “It came as a surprise to even me when it appeared on my computer all by itself.” Bob paused and scratched his head. “For some strange reason it was originally written in Klingon, but I translated it.”

Alyx eyed the file in awe and nodded happily. She had been nagging, well not really nagging, more like whining for this file for a while now and simply refused to believe Bob when he claimed he was letting his creative juices ferment.

The last time he allowed his juices to ferment, Alyx woke with a whale of a hangover, and a tattoo proclaiming her to be USDA grade on her buttocks.

“So what's left to do?” she asked.

Bob leaned closer. “We need to tell the people that we don't own Harry Potter.”

Alyx smiled brightly and turned to the nameless audience. “maH ta' ghobe' ghaj Harry Potter!”

Bob tiredly wiped his face and looked at his bride. “So you're the reason why the file was in Klingon?”

Alyx's smile slipped and she slowly edged back. “Um.. no, not me. I was.. um... busy hot tubing with Snape! Yeah!”

Bob grinned and pulled a Federation Mark IV Phaser rifle out from under his seat. Alyx squeaked and dashed for the edge of the stage.

“And now for the next installment of Mutant Storm, enjoy folks,” Bob muttered, then he fired off a shot in Alyx's general direction.

Mutant Storm, Chapter 11, Taking a Stand.

The Great Hall...

The next morning paid witness to the Slytherins coming in and glaring at the rest of the student body with hate filled eyes. Snape was absent from the staff table.

Dumbledore watched passively, while Jean and Minerva both watched warily. There was a tense undercurrent in the hall that was impossible to miss. Jean could sense that the Slytherin boys were boiling mad about something and they were only a hair trigger away from open fighting in the hall.

Harry hunched his head lower at his seat and motioned towards the Slytherin table. “I don't think they appreciated the stink bombs,” he said softly.

Ginny smirked at him. “Even the girls don't seem that happy about it.”

Ron looked up from shoveling his breakfast down his throat. “Hunh?”

“Brilliant, Ron,” Neville commented with a laugh.

Harry relaxed and watched Neville and Hermione explain that the Slytherins were pranked last night. He was surprised and exceedingly grateful when they omitted how they had carried off the prank. He shot Hermione a grateful glance and she smiled back at him.

He was about to say something when Jean sat down next to him.

“Mr. Potter, I've checked your schedule and I notice you have three periods free this morning. I would like you to use that time to work on that project you discussed.”

His eyes widened and he turned to look at her, lowering his shields enough for her to get through.

“Malfoy has a double potions class this morning. I've told the Headmaster that you need to leave the castle during the morning as part of a project you're doing for Professor Xavier. You're attending a two hour lecture on engineering and ethics,” She sent him, then she paused for a moment and widened her connection enough to send Harry a memory of a similar lecture she had once attended.

He blinked and slowly nodded. “I'll work on it, Professor,” he replied. He knew his cover story would annoy the old man, who hated the idea that Harry might be allowing others to influence him.

She nodded and handed him a small bag. He reached in and pulled out a portable GPS unit with a built in compass. He smiled.

Jean stood. "Have a good morning everyone."

"Bye, Mum," Harry said softly, as he examined the unit she'd given him. It was similar to one Logan had shown him how to use over the summer when they went running through the woods.

"What's that, Harry?" asked Ginny.

She was leaning against him and he was acutely aware of her breasts pressing against his arm. He knew just from her emotions that she was curious. She wasn't really trying to tease him. For some reason, that made him feel even better about their growing relationship.

He laid the unit flat on the table and turned the power switch to on. "This is called a Global Positioning Receiver. With this unit and a map I can tell you where we are to within a few meters, anywhere on the planet."

Hermione leaned closer, her eyes glued to the small display. It had finished its power up cycle and was actively seeking reference satellites.

"Even here? Protected by magic and Muggle repelling charms?" Hermione asked, her eyes were glued to the tiny LCD screen.

Harry waited as it found first one, then two reference satellites, beeping with each contact. On the display, the numbers stopped changing, and settled down into a fixed display.

"Are you beginning to see the danger now?" he asked pointedly.

She looked up from the unit and his gaze caught hers. She nodded unhappily.

"I don't understand," Ginny complained.

Harry turned to Ginny and took one of her hands in his. "With this device, I can find out where I am, anywhere on the planet. That means that a Muggle can find this school, even with the Muggle repelling charms and wards.

"My home, Blackmoor Castle, is under a fidelius charm that is protected by Gringotts."

Ginny nodded uncertainly. She knew that a goblin held fidelius was one of the strongest hiding charms in existence.

"Do you remember seeing the Blackbird parked out in front of the castle?"

She nodded, then her eyes widened as she realized the implications of what he was saying. "You can break the charm?"

He smiled and shook his head. "No, we didn't break the charm. It would be more accurate to say we bypassed it using Muggle methods. It would not shock me to know that the Muggle Government already knows that Hogwarts is here. They may not know what it is, but they know it's here."

Harry paused and looked at the others. "Ginny is taking Muggle Studies, like I am, although I need it for different reasons than she does. Hermione is a Muggle born, although possibly is only now coming to understand what I've been saying. Ginny, what is the underlying message my mother has been teaching this term?"

Ginny eyed him doubtfully for a moment. "That we can't hide forever?" she asked, unsure of herself.

Harry smiled. "That's the message. The wizarding world can't hide much longer. So, the choice is up to you. You can ignore it until it all comes crashing down on your heads, or you can be ready for it, prepared for it and ready to accept it."

Harry drained his drink and stood. "If you think Voldemort is a problem, wait until you have four and a half billion people looking at you with envy and jealousy. Voldemort will seem like a kitten in comparison."

He reached over and turned off the GPS unit, then slid it into his book bag. "I'll see you at lunch," he said.

His friends watched him get up and walk away, then they turned to Hermione.

"What was that all about?" Neville asked.

Hermione sighed. "I don't want to believe him, but he may be right."

"Professor Summers is convinced of it," Ginny added.

"Convinced of what?" demanded Ron.

Ginny looked at him. "Professor Summers says that within our lifetime our world will be discovered by the Muggles and that if we don't do something about it now, we risk being destroyed by them."

"What can we do?" Neville asked nervously.

"What can a Muggle do against wizards?" Ron scoffed.

"Trust me, Ron, you may be a powerful force when you're holding your wand, but without it, you're lost. You have no clue how to fight without a wand and the Muggles do," Neville replied seriously. "Harry's been showing me things in the morning, like how to fight with out a wand, and I'm not so sure I'd want to fight a Muggle. You only stay for our morning run, so you rarely see more of what he's been teaching me."

"The Muggles are even better at killing people than Voldemort is," Hermione said softly. "But what can we do about it?"

Harry says the way to do it is through something called economic warfare, but he hasn't explained what he means," Ginny replied. "I'm like my father. I find Muggles fascinating and I'm trying to learn more about them. So when Harry talks about Muggle stuff I tend to pay attention. Merlin knows I love dad, but even I know there's more to being a Muggle than plugs and batteries."

"You know," Hermione said thoughtfully, "Harry may be right."

She blinked at the collective blank stares and sighed in exasperation. "Look, it's not difficult. What he and Professor Summers are saying is that we can't hide for much longer. Right?"

She paused and they nodded. That part they understood.

"Right, so Harry is saying make it worth their while to leave us alone. If the wizards were to supply something that the Muggles can't get, then they'd be forced to let us live our lives our way."

"Oh, this is absurd," snarled a voice from behind them. "Ten points from Gryffindor for talking about such nonsense."

Hermione and Ginny looked up to stare at Snape, who was glaring at them.

He used the opportunity to try a little discrete Legilimency on Hermione.

She frowned and shook her head, then she glared back at Snape, who had hit her shields. They weren't perfect but they were strong enough to keep him out as long as he was performing the spell wandlessly.

Snape's eyes narrowed and Hermione smiled sweetly at him.

Jean, up at the staff table, noticed what was happening. A quick peek inside Hermione's mind convinced her to take some action.

"Aquamenti!" shouted a voice from the Slytherin table. The Gryffindors dove out of the way as the stream of water from Blaise Zabini's wand hit Snape in the back of the head. Jean tried to cover a smile, but the fact was she had been tempted to seriously maim the boy. She had winnowed through the Slytherin boys until she found that Blaise had been the one to throw the killing curse at Harry.

Harry's reaction when she told him was one of calm acceptance. He had expected that one or more of the Slytherins might mean to involve him in more than casual school yard fights this year. On the other hand, he was extremely pleased that she hadn't held it back from him.

Snape whirled in place, the stream of water continued to splash against him. He sputtered. "Zabini!" he roared.

Blaise stared at his wand for a moment, unsure of what was happening, then canceled the spell. Looking at Snape, he winced when the furious man stalked toward him, sputtering in rage.

Hermione turned to eye the staff table speculatively and Jean winked at her. She shook her head in amazement and considered the possibility that Jean was capable of controlling anyone she wanted to.

"Capable, perhaps, but only when absolutely necessary, Miss Granger," a voice said clearly in her head. *"And stopping that snake from probing your mind seemed like a necessary thing."*

Hermione gripped the table and her eyes bulged. Had her shields failed? Then she remembered that Ginny had told her that Occlumency had no impact on mutant abilities.

Ginny looked at Hermione and smiled knowingly. "We'd better get to class," she said, standing up. She could clearly here the sound of jet engines whining in the Great Hall.

Blackmoor Castle, English Channel...

"Storm? Are you still there?" crackled a speaker.

Storm sat up and reached for her headset, placing her magazine down on the console.

"I'm still here. Where are you?" she asked.

She looked up and waved when Logan and the Professor entered the control room.

"I'm at some place called An Groban on my map. The GPS says I'm at 57 degrees, 40 minutes, 57.32 seconds north, 4 degrees 10 minutes 59.35 seconds west. Let me know when you've got that copied down," replied Harry over the speaker.

"Hasn't anyone told him we have a GPS tracker on his jet?" asked Xavier with a smile.

Logan shrugged. "It never came up and it is in the manual. Maybe it never occurred to him."

Storm looked up from writing on a pad. "All right, anything else?"

"Yeah, the vector from this location is on a bearing of 138.265 degrees."

Storm shrugged and wrote down the numbers. Logan reached over and flipped a switch. "Hey, Wiz, what's with all the numbers? Don't tell me you're going all brainiac on us."

"Storm knows what I'm doing, Logan."

He glanced over to look at Storm, who was busy with a computer console.

"Humor me," Logan replied.

"We found a vanishing cabinet at Hogwarts. It's disassembled and it's being slowly reassembled by a Death Eater pretending to be a student. Storm is helping me locate the other cabinet."

Storm looked at her screen in surprise, then she keyed her headset. "Harry, this is going to London. The satellite map clearly shows the street and the building, but there is no street address. It's as if there's no address for this area. Hang on, I'll check another database."

Logan leaned over Storm's shoulder for a look at the satellite photo, then pressed his mic button again. "It looks like it's just off Diagon Alley, Wiz." He released the button and glanced at Storm for a moment. "Don't bother looking. It won't be in any database we have, but the Wiz should be able to figure it out."

"Knockturn Alley," Harry replied. It was possible to hear the whine of the engines in the background this time. He was heading back to Hogwarts. "Knockturn is where you want to go if you want to learn Dark Arts, or just hang out with your Death Eater friends. Storm, can you send my Mum and Dad copies of that map with the location highlighted?"

"I'll do that now, Harry, and I'll send a satellite image as well," she replied, flipping a switch on the console.

Xavier nudged Logan and he handed the Professor a headset. "Harry, what is the significance of this?"

There was a moment of silence. "A vanishing cabinet isn't really vanishing, sir. Think of them as linked portals; step in one cabinet, come out the other. When this baby is complete, the Death Eaters will have a back door into Hogwarts. We could have a hundred Death Eaters in the castle before we knew it."

Xavier scowled. "Why has Dumbledore not told us about this?"

There was a long silence from the speakers. "Damned if I know, Professor. I and a select few know about it. I have trouble believing that he isn't aware of it. For all I know, he's simply ignoring it. He's been turning a blind eye to the Death Eater activity in the castle since the school year started. But that won't continue for much longer."

Xavier frowned. "What do you mean?"

The speakers crackled and they could hear the open circuit, but Harry didn't say anything for a moment. "Professor, I didn't want to come back here. I would have been very happy to stay in New York and learn what it's like to be a normal teenager. All right, a normal, mutant teenager. I wanted to stay in New York, but everyone kept telling me that I couldn't run from Voldemort."

"If I'm going to be stuck fighting this war, it's going to be fought the way I think it should be fought, and that means I'm not taking orders from Dumbledore. He's put the entire staff and student body in danger by allowing those Death Eaters into the school, and he's deliberately ignoring what they are doing. Frankly, sir, if you ask me, I'm not sure which Dark Lord I'm supposed to kill, Voldemort, or Dumbledore."

He paused and they could hear the sigh. "Honestly, Professor, do you expect me to sit back while he allows an army to be assembled in this school right under my nose?"

Xavier looked up to see Scott entering the room. Scott had heard most of Harry's comments. "I meant to tell you about that, Charles," Scott said.

"What are you going to do, Harry?" asked Xavier after acknowledging Scott's comment. He waved Scott over to one of the chairs.

"I'm going to organize the non-Death Eater students so they can protect themselves. Then we're going to clean house. Hold on. I'm coming up on an RAF base and I need to skirt around it."

Xavier swiveled the chair and looked at Scott. "Well?"

Scott shrugged his shoulders. "Those kids are in danger, Professor, and Dumbledore is refusing to do anything to fix it. He's got this high minded notion that everyone should be given a second chance except, strangely enough, Harry."

"Harry's fed up. His contention is, if this is his war to fight, then he's going to fight it the way we taught him, not the way Dumbledore wants it fought. I told you Dumbledore was upset about those Death Eaters you had Storm take care of. Harry was afraid to tell you about it because of your beliefs. He thinks that, sooner or later, we mutants will have to take a firm stand. He's not advocating Magneto's ideas, but he definitely thinks it's time to make the normals acknowledge our rights as people."

Xavier frowned. It was a common complaint and he had heard it a hundred times before, mostly from Logan, who seemed to be one of his looser cannons. Considering how Harry admired the man, it wasn't a stretch to see him adopting some of Logan's ideas.

"Does he have any idea of how to accomplish this without resorting to genocide?" asked Xavier.

Storm watched the conversation between Scott and Xavier with interest.

Scott chuckled. "Well, he rejected Logan's idea of several nuclear weapons."

"That's a relief," Xavier muttered dryly. "Well?"

"He does have an idea, actually. One which he thinks even the wizards can use. But my explanation wouldn't do it justice, so you'll have to wait for him to explain it," Scott replied. "I'll admit I think it has a shot of working, and it's peaceful and non-threatening. When he first explained it to me I thought it was impossible, but the idea just may work. If it does, he'll be buying recognition for Mutants and Wizards."

Xavier nodded. "All right, I'll withhold judgment until Harry explains it to me. But I want you to make sure Harry keeps talking to us, either you or Jean. I want us in the loop. There are nearly five hundred students in that school. I want to avoid making this into a three way war, if possible."

"Got that covered already, Professor," Logan said. "He's been talking to me about tactics and other things they can do, and he's talking to Jean or Scott nearly every day."

Xavier nodded, then turned back to the radio console. "Harry, I'll agree to go along with this, provided you are willing to listen to our advice. You and I are going to have a long conversation one of these days."

"Professor, you and my family are about the only people I'm willing to listen to at this point. Let Dumbledore handle his little Order and the hunt for the Horcruxes. But if so much as a single student is injured, I'll do my best to ruin him."

"Ruin? Not kill?" Xavier said, looking up at Scott.

Scott grinned at him. "Harry feels that the Ministry isn't the only one that can run a smear campaign. He's not about to do anything unless Dumbledore refuses to cooperate. What Harry wants is simple; Dumbledore and Death Eaters out of the school. Let Dumbledore find and deal with the Horcruxes and leave the actual fighting to us."

"Us?" exclaimed Xavier.

"Honestly, Charles, you did insist we convince him to come back here. And you did get involved with Dumbledore's schemes. Jean may disagree, but Harry's an X-Man, like the rest of us, even if he doesn't have a uniform. Harry's involved, that makes it our business."

Xavier nodded slowly.

The radio crackled again and then Harry laughed before speaking, "Tell Hank his new radar spoofer works like a charm. Right now there's a flight of four RAF Tornados chasing ghosts heading away from me."

"That's good to know," Logan said, chomping down on his cigar. "Hank's supposed to put that modification into the Blackbird next week."

Logan turned to Xavier, his eyes alight.

The Professor shook his head and held up a hand. "No, I will not arm the Blackbird, so stop asking."

Scott and Storm grinned. Logan made that request at least once a month.

"I'm about three minutes out from landing, so I'm signing off," the speaker blared.

"Be careful, Harry," Storm replied.

The Great Hall...

Harry walked in a few minutes late. The sound of his jet landing drew attention to him and he nearly groaned, seeing Malfoy nudge Zabini. *Soon gentlemen*, he thought. *As Logan would say, the kid gloves are coming off.*

He walked down the aisle and sat down next to Ginny, then he reached into his book bag and pulled out a single sheet of paper. He had stopped by his Mother's office before coming to the hall to print out a copy of the photo-map Storm had sent to them.

He placed the photo down on the table and slid it to Hermione. She glanced at it, then snatched it up. "This is..."

"It is, isn't it," Harry commented dryly.

Hermione shook her head and huffed at him. "All right, Harry, we get your point. Now please stop rubbing it in?"

Harry blinked, suddenly feeling a little ashamed of himself. He *had* been feeling rather smug.

"What are you two talking about?" asked Ginny in confusion.

"It's a satellite photo of London," Hermione said, then her brows furrowed. "And where the cabinet comes out? Knockturn Alley?"

Harry nodded in confirmation.

"I know what that is," Ginny said proudly. "A satellite is a machine in space right? And it's taken a photograph of..."

She gasped when the impact of what Harry had given them made itself clear. Wizarding land and areas were visible to Muggle technology!

Neville leaned back and crossed his arms, frowning at the photograph. He wasn't in Jean's class and had never taken Muggle Studies, which forced him to rely mostly on Hermione and other Muggle born to explain the Muggles. "So, we need to come up with a way of preventing the camera from seeing us, right?"

Hermione glanced to Harry, then she sighed and turned to Neville. "That won't work, Nev," she said gently, then she gestured at the photo. "Oh, you might be able to confuse this camera, but what about the one after it, and the one after that?"

Neville looked at her in confusion. "Isn't a camera a camera?"

Harry leaned across the table and picked up the photo. "That's the problem, Neville. The technology is advancing too rapidly. By the time you have a counter for this camera, there will be a new camera using a new method and your counter won't work for the new camera. And there's

always a new one under development.”

Neville's frown deepened. “So what is the answer, then?”

Harry smiled. “What?” he asked a few moments later when his friends continued to stare at him suspiciously.

“That look, Harry. You have something up your sleeve,” Ginny said softly.

“I do, but I'm not telling just yet,” he replied. “I don't want to give away my ideas. I've spoken with my Dad and Mum and Gringotts; they've put me in touch with some solicitors here and back in the States. It will be easier to get the ball rolling there because the Magical government is part of the Muggle government and actively cooperates with them, unlike Scrimgeour and his cronies.”

Hermione glared at him. She hated when someone withheld information from her. “All right, but what about that?” she said, gesturing to the photo in Harry's hands.

Harry shrugged. “Unless you can figure out a way of arranging for a surgical airstrike on Knockturn Alley, I'd say there's nothing we can do about it. Anything we do has to be done at this end.”

“Can we hex the cabinet on our end somehow?” asked Neville. “Maybe so it injures people using it, or worse?”

“Good question,” Harry replied, then he turned and looked pointedly at Hermione.

Hermione reached into her robe in a movement so swift and natural it could have been easily mistaken for magic. She pulled out a small Muggle notebook, a ball point pen and wrote a notation down in her book. She was extremely pleased to see Harry was still relying on her for information, despite her mistake with the cabinet.

Harry smirked at her obvious Muggle items and she blushed.

“I prefer the notebook to using parchments. I understand we use the parchments so we can assemble our own personal grimoire, but really, a notebook is so much easier than using the book binding spells. They smudge my handwriting.”

“Merlin knows we wouldn't want smudged handwriting,” Ginny said with a laugh.

Hermione's blush deepened when Neville leaned over and hugged her.

Across the hall, several pairs of eyes watched the Gryffindor table, most with a deep seated animosity, but one pair watched them with a desperate hope. *The other girls had found help after talking with those four, she thought. I wonder if they'll help me?*

“I see Harry has returned from his errand,” Dumbledore commented to Jean at the staff table.

“Yes. I told you it would only take a few hours, Headmaster,” Jean replied.

Dumbledore nodded and sipped from his goblet. It annoyed him no end that this woman was a blank slate to him. His Legilimency was useless against her, and Harry - a fact which bothered him greatly.

“What was it he was doing again? I can't recall,” Dumbledore asked.

Jean smiled tightly. “I never said in the first place. However, if you must know, he met with Professor Xavier to attend a lecture on engineering philosophy.”

Dumbledore turned and looked at Jean in amazement. “Philosophy?” That was the last possible thing he would have thought of.

Jean smiled smugly. “Charles feels that, as mutants, we need to be taught to use our powers for the betterment of mankind. To that end, all of his lessons always include some philosophy. Learning when to use or not use our powers is one of the most important lessons someone in our shoes should know, wouldn't you agree? It in this particular case, the lecture was about engineering and the fact that while we might have the technology to do something, that doesn't mean we should.”

Dumbledore smiled weakly. He didn't like the idea that Charles was filling Harry's head with ideas that ran counter to wizard goals. Despite all that had happened, he just couldn't believe that Harry might reject the wizarding world. After all, the wizards had given him a life away from the Dursleys for most of the year. Wouldn't he see that as worthwhile?

Blackmoor Castle, English Channel (First Week in December)...

“Do you have a minute, Scott?”

Scott turned and placed the wrench on the bench, then he wiped off his greasy hands on a rag. Behind him on the bench was the mostly disassembled pieces of a landing gear rotor.

“Yes, sir?”

Xavier moved his chair a little closer.

“How comfortable are you with this stand that Harry is taking?”

Scott leaned against the bench and folded his arms. “At first I was very uncomfortable, but after listening to Harry, I think he might have a workable plan. Let me ask you a different question. How long do you think it's going to take before a bright analyst at the NRO notices the 'holes' in the satellite images, the areas with no known addresses?”

Xavier scowled. The National Reconnaissance Office was a government agency cloaked in secrecy, that, until recently, had it's very existence denied by the U.S. Government. In all likelihood, they already knew about the holes. The real question was how soon before an outfit like the N.Y. Times or the Washington Post found out.

“All right, so what you're telling me is that Harry and Jean are essentially correct and the Wizarding World is about to be exposed, one way or another. But what does this have to do with Voldemort?”

Scott smiled grimly. “By itself, nothing. Harry's plans for Voldemort are to kill him, then he's going to force the rest of the world to acknowledge the wizards and the mutants.”

Xavier looked up at Scott sharply. “How?”

“He's going to make the mutants, and the wizards, into resources to be cultivated. He has this plan that makes a lot of sense, once you think about it. He'll explain it to you next time he's down here,” Scott replied. “Right now, he's concentrating on Voldemort and keeping the school safe. But he's planning for a much longer and broader view than just Voldemort.”

Xavier nodded thoughtfully. He could pick Harry's plans from Scott's mind if he wanted, but that wasn't his style and his X-Men trusted him to be truthful when it came to his mental abilities.

“I don't like not knowing, but I can wait until he's home. Now what about Dumbledore?”

Scott sighed. “Charles, the man sent him to an abusive home, and he probably knew his Godfather was innocent, as he's the one that cast that Fidelius charm. There's no trust there at all, and the way Dumbledore is pushing Harry, there never will be.”

Scott lifted his visor off his face, keeping his eyes tightly closed and wiped tiredly at them for a moment before placing his visor back on.

“Is your visor bothering you again?”

“No, not really,” Scott replied with a shake of his head. “It's just that sleeping lately has been difficult. I've been worrying about Jean and Harry and it doesn't help knowing that the danger they're in is only going to get worse.”

Charles smiled. “Now you understand how I feel when you are all out on assignments.”

Scott nodded. “I guess that's the truth. And it's not helping that Jean wants to start a family. I think adopting Harry has made her realize that she can be an X-Man and still have a family of her own.”

Charles chuckled. “Well, then, what are you doing down here? It wouldn't hurt you to spend some time with your wife and son. I seem to recall that it takes two people to make a baby, so unless Jean can do it magically, she *will* need your help.”

Scott laughed and wiped his hands on the rag. “I don't need to be given that kind of order more than once. As soon as I finish up with this rotor I'll leave and contact you when I arrive. But first I want to contact Jean and let her know I'm coming up.”

Xavier watched in amusement as Scott all but ran from the room. Shaking his head, he sent his chair toward the door. It was time to talk to Logan about obtaining some heavier ordinance, in case the war heated up. He winced at the thought of what was to come. Logan was going to be so pleased, and his “I told you so's” would continue for years.

Hogwarts, Slytherin Girls Dorm...

Pansy Parkinson was in a quandary. Up until yesterday, she had been a staunch supporter of the Dark Lord. She honestly believed that Muggles were only useful as servants and slaves and Muggle borns would never be as good as pure bloods. That that bitch Granger consistently out performed her only acerbated her ire.

Until yesterday, when her father decided to give her to the Dark Lord as his personal whore. Voldemort had decided that teaching Bellatrix a lot of dark magic had led to her being barren and vulnerable to attack. So he decided he would get an heir off of the Parkinson daughter and keep her ignorant.

Pregnant, stupid and hidden, Pansy thought bitterly. *I was queen of Slytherin House until yesterday. Now I'm supposed to take this portkey to the man who will use me like a common whore? This isn't even an offer of a marriage or even a concubinage. Is it Slytherin to submit like a frightened rabbit? I thought the other girls were stupid to resist, now I see my folly.*

She looked at the letter that had arrived yesterday, proclaiming her new glorious station in life and she nudged the portkey quill that had been enclosed in the note from her father.

She made her decision, then stood and walked from her room. She couldn't approach Potter directly, but there was one she could approach.

“Greengrass,” she said, entering Daphne's room. One of the lesser known facts of Slytherin House was that everyone, fifth year and above, had private rooms. It had been a move made in the fifteenth century and was designed to keep the fatalities to a minimum.

Daphne looked up from her desk. Her hand inched towards her wand.

“Parkinson.”

Pansy tossed her wand on Daphne's bed. “There. I'm unarmed. I only want to talk.”

Daphne smirked at the other girl. “I know about your spare, unregistered wand, Parkinson, and the poisoned dagger you carry.”

Pansy nodded and reached into her robe slowly. Daphne snatched up her wand and had it trained on Pansy in less than a second.

“Take it real slow, Parkinson. If you're really interested in talking, you won't mind disarming.”

A moment later, a short four inch long assassin's wand and a dagger lay on her bed. Also on the bed lay the letter from her father.

Daphne nodded, then she turned slightly and tapped a blue crystal on her desk with her wand. The crystal glowed for a second, then went dark.

“What do you want, Parkinson?” asked Daphne.

“I want out. I know you and Davis have organized the other girls after talking with Potter. I want to be part of that. I don't know what you have done, but I know they are all relieved.”

The door opened and Tracey Davis slipped inside in response to Daphne's summons, via their crystals. Instantly, she had her wand trained on Parkinson.

Pansy noted the other girl and her eyebrows rose. “If I didn't know better, I would think you two are afraid of me.”

With Tracey here, Daphne reached for the letter that lay on her bed and began to read it.

“No, just cautious,” replied Tracey. “Besides, this time last week you were sucking Malfoy's dick and telling the rest of us that we'd better fall in line or the Dark Lord would force us. What's changed?”

“What's changed is that Miss Parkinson has been commanded to be the Dark Lord's whore,” Daphne said without glancing up from the letter. “So, now that you've been declared a fuck toy, you can't own up to your glorious destiny and serve your Master?” she asked snidely, finally looking up from the letter.

Pansy flushed and looked down. The words were accurate and cut to the quick. Last week she had been supporting Malfoy and lording it up over the girls of Slytherin. She had expected to marry Draco, and would have, but that plan went down in flames when Bellatrix was killed. The Dark Lord needed a brood mare to get a heir off of.

“I don't want to be used and thrown away,” she whispered in reply.

“Now you know how we feel,” Tracey snapped back. “You've been trying to talk the fourth years into sleeping with any sixth or seventh year boy since we refused. Now the shoe is on the other foot. Why should we help you?”

Pansy looked up at Daphne, a silent plea in her expression.

“An unbreakable vow, I think, Daph,” said Tracey. “If we agree to help her, she has to agree to do exactly as she's told until Voldemort is out of the picture.”

“An unbreakable...,” exclaimed Pansy. “By that method you could turn me into a street whore for your side.”

“We could,” Daphne agreed amiably. “And as attractive as that idea might be, we won't do that to you. All we will do is send you to a place and tell you to stay there and contact no one. You'll be safe, if a bit isolated and alone, at least for now.”

“You can do that?” Pansy demanded. “How?”

“How isn't something you need to know. You have a choice, Parkinson. We know you're tainted goods; useless to our side, and only good for breeding stock to the other. If we can get you off the table, your going missing will annoy the Dark Lord and probably end up resulting in your father's death.”

Pansy shrugged. “So be it. He sold me as a toy to a man who wasn't even willing to consider me good enough to be his mistress. If there is a man good enough out there to have children with, I haven't met him.”

“I have,” Tracey said wistfully, “and he is far beyond our reach. He's helping us, but has already made his decision as to who he wants.”

Daphne nodded slowly, surprised by her friend's reaction.

Pansy sniffed at the idea. No man these two could know would be worth spreading her legs for.

Daphne picked up Pansy's wand and handed it to her. “The vow, or go make babies with that half blood monster you suck up to.”

Pansy reluctantly accepted the wand. There was no other choice, really. Either she had to do it the way Greengrass insisted, or she'd been flat on her back letting the Dark Lord have her in a few short days.

“I swear on my life and my magic to do exactly what I'm told by either Tracey Davis or Daphne Greengrass, or whomever they assign in that capacity. So mote it be!”

A small blip of light extended from her wand and circled up around her before spreading out and fading away to nothingness.

Daphne nodded in satisfaction and wondered how she was going to explain this to Harry. “All right, your portkey isn't due to trigger until Saturday night. Leave it with me and I'll dispose of it. Go pack. You'll leave the castle at the scheduled time. There's no one where you're going Parkinson, no one except some house elves who have been instructed to feed and look after you, but won't accept any abuse. There's a library you can use to study. Take your text books and work on your class coursework. Hopefully, you'll be able to take your NEWTS with everyone else.

“At some point you'll be joined by others, but you'll be the first going to the safe house. Don't trash the place, don't try to leave it or contact

anyone, and don't try to find out where you are. I'll warn you now that it's goblin warded. If you leave it, you won't be able to come back and we won't help you again."

Pansy nodded and swallowed nervously. The restrictions were tough, but nothing she couldn't live with. Besides, the alternative was unacceptable.

Daphne nodded to Pansy and she turned and left the room. She might be willing to accept help from Greengrass, but she'd never like the silly bitch, she thought nastily.

Daphne waited until the door was closed, then she looked at Tracey. "Did you see it?"

"Yeah. I always suspected she was weak, but that vow response was barely above squib level!" Tracey replied.

Daphne eyed her friend for a moment longer and Tracey began to feel uncomfortable.

"All right, Trace, spill. Since when did you start mooning over Harry Potter?" asked Daphne with a bit of a smirk. She wouldn't dream of admitting that she, too, was finding the new and improved Potter to be quite delicious.

Tracey sighed. "It's too late, I know, but I saw him outside a week ago. It's barely above freezing and he's running around the lake with no shirt on! Poor Longbottom is following him, dressed as if he's in the arctic. And Potter's turned into one very tasty morsel. He was eye candy before, but now I see he has a brain on top of those muscles? Why shouldn't I lust for him? Look at the other guys his age. They look like boys. Potter is a man."

Daphne nodded and agreed with her friend on all her points. "And why is he beyond our reach?"

Tracey looked at Daphne shrewdly. "So you're not an ice princess after all, Daph? Of course he's out of our reach. Weasley has him wrapped around her finger and she's one mean witch when it comes to protecting her property. If she ever messes up and he breaks free of her, I'm going to be all over him like a skin ailment."

"She's not going to mess up with him," Daphne replied. "She knows exactly how good she has it, and the funny thing is, she isn't in it for the power he'll wield, she's in it for him. He loves her and she loves him. He may be too dense to know it yet, but I can guarantee you that little Ginny Weasley knows it right down to her bones. I'm surprised she's not cackling from the top of the astronomy tower because she won the big prize."

Tracey sighed and looked unhappy. "I know. All these years of hearing about arranged marriages and betrothals, you start thinking that real love is a myth. Then suddenly it's happening right in front of your face? I want that too, Daph. I want someone to want to hold me like he does with her. And what's worse is, he doesn't have a single clue.?"

Daphne shook her head. "No, he doesn't, which only makes it all the more special."

The two fell silent, wondering if there was a way they could have something like what Ginny Weasley had.

Muggle Studies Classroom...

The door to the classroom opened and Hermione, Ginny and Neville walked in. Harry looked up from the printer, which was still spitting out the report he had just finished writing.

"What's happened?" he asked. From their expressions he could tell that something unexpected had happened.

Hermione nodded to Neville, who cast a privacy ward on the room. Hermione was reluctantly coming to conclude that, while she was a witch, her strength wasn't in the power of her castings, which were only slightly above normal. She would have been proud of that fact, except that all of her friends were well above the curve, and Harry blew the curve out of the water.

"I received a note from our friends downstairs in the dungeons. It seems that a certain student will be making a one way trip to the safe house this weekend. Her only other option was to become the mother of the heir of the heir of Slytherin," Hermione said smugly.

Harry leaned against the table and looked at Hermione. "And do I know this unwilling mother to be?"

"None other than the Pureblood Princess herself," Ginny said softly, watching Harry. She wanted to gauge his reaction.

Harry scowled. "Parkinson? Are you sure we want to do this?"

"What do you mean?" asked Hermione. His question caught her off guard. She couldn't imagine Harry turning down anyone seeking help.

Harry ran a hand through his hair. "Think about it, Hermione. Between Parkinson and Voldemort, the gene pool is probably little more than a wading puddle of stagnant water. The only thing she'd give him would be squibs and defective children. Maybe we should deny her any help and let them procreate."

"Harry," Ginny said softly. "Voldemort would kill a squib or defective child. Do you want that to happen to a child?"

Harry sighed and lowered his gaze. "No, not really. It just bothers me that I'm stuck helping someone who truly believes she's better than someone like Hermione. She represents everything that is reprehensible about the wizards. After Voldemort is gone, she's likely to go back to her old moral code."

"Mate," Neville said gently, then he waved a hand including everyone present, "we are wizards, like it or not."

Harry looked at him hard and after a long moment of silence he shook his head. "No, you're not anymore, Nev. You, Ginny, even Luna and Ron

to a lesser extent, are moving away from the wizarding norm because of your exposure to Hermione and myself. You're learning things about yourselves and your world which you don't like and want to change. You're moving beyond that and becoming something more.

"When Scrimgeour showed up here, he was going to force me to help him. That was his real purpose and that's why he ordered Dawlish to disarm me before he was even willing to talk to me. What he didn't count on was my disarming Dawlish instead. Scrimgeour can't see beyond his own nose and I'm sorry to say that describes most adult wizards I know. You guys are learning to look beyond your noses and to question what you see."

He paused and his expression hardened. "Pansy is a bigot and will remain one unless someone shows her what happens as a result of her choices. I'll help her, but if she turns into another Bellatrix someday, we will *all* have to live with that."

"We can't punish people because they have potential to turn evil, Harry," Hermione said.

Harry nodded. "I know, but I can't help wondering if Mrs. Hitler would have smothered the little monster in his cradle if she knew what we know today. I can't help but look at some of these bigots and wonder if that's what we should be doing."

He walked over to the printer and gathered up his papers.

"Mrs. Hitler?" asked Neville.

"Adolph Hitler was the Muggle power behind Grindelwald, Nev," Hermione said with a frown. "He started a war in Europe that killed more than twenty million people. Harry's referring to his mother and asking if she would have killed her baby if she knew what kind of monster he would become."

Ginny shivered and hugged herself. "That's one of the things that frightens me the most about the Muggles. Professor Summers hasn't made a big issue of it, but the Muggles are really scary when it comes to making war."

Harry looked up from his printouts. "You don't have to worry about the Muggles coming after the wizards. Right now, they're more frightened by the mutants, and there are more mutants than wizards. Mother Nature is making changes and it's bound to frighten the established powers."

Hermione gestured to his paperwork. "More homework for your Professor Xavier? I thought you emailed him your homework?"

Harry grinned. "I do. This is for McGonagall."

He placed the papers down on the desk and pulled out his wand.

"Harry, Professor McGonagall will only accept homework on parchment!" exclaimed Hermione.

Harry laughed and performed a complicated wand movement before tapping the pile of paper. They glowed a pinkish yellow for a moment, then reformed themselves into parchment.

"I know," he said. "But I learned how to transfigure the paper into parchment when I took the apparation course in Salem. They use the spell a lot and teach it to all their students. The dorms at Salem have a room where Muggle electronics can be used, and a lot of the students bring a computer to school with them."

"Despite the advances in technology that the Americans are now using, they still want the students to build their own personal grimoires, using old fashioned parchment. I remember one boy who had his hardcopy spell book and another copy on CD. The professors at Salem thought it was a nice idea, but they still aren't quite ready to commit to it."

Hermione's expression became almost feral in appearance. "Harry," she said slowly, "if I were to get you a computer, could you have it adjusted to work around magic like yours does? And could you teach me that spell?"

Harry nodded. "It couldn't be ready for a bit. Hank's swamped, converting enough components to make another Cerebro for Professor Xavier. But if I sent it to him now, you might have it just after Christmas. Most of the stuff goes to one of Professor Xavier's factories for conversion, but a special order has to be done by hand."

"And you'll teach me that transfiguration?" she pressed.

Harry grinned and raised his hands in surrender. "Yes, I'll teach you," he replied, then he turned to the others. "What about you two?"

"I wouldn't know what to do with one of those things," Neville said. "I'm hoping that maybe, after Hogwarts, Hermione might be able to show me more of the Muggle world. I know Gran wouldn't approve, but I think it's important to know more about them."

Hermione looked shocked and very pleased with his answer. "I'd be happy to, Nev," she replied shyly.

Harry turned to Ginny. "Would it hurt if you just showed me how to use yours, Harry? I doubt I could afford to buy a machine like that."

He nodded. He found himself wanting to share this technology with her. "It's not hard," he said. "But learning how to type without tying your fingers into knots isn't easy."

Neville's eyes widened. "You can tie your fingers into knots? No way am I touching one of those computer things."

Hermione sighed and shook her head. It was clear to her that she had a lot of explaining to do.

Malfoy Manor...

"Wormtail, where is Parkinson and his cow of a daughter?"

Pettigrew groveled on the floor. “My I-I-lord,” he stammered. “We caught Parkinson and his wife trying to flee the country. Apparently, the daughter never showed up using the portkey he sent her. Instead, Draco Malfoy appeared. He had been stunned, bound and stripped naked.”

Pettigrew cowered on the floor, not wanting to tell his master that the Malfoy heir had been tattooed with the words 'Dumbledore's Toy' on his bum.

Voldemort's eyes narrowed and he repressed a smirk. He had deftly lifted the exact details of Malfoy's condition from the worm's mind. Pettigrew had no training in Occlumency and no ability to keep secrets from his master.

“Send for Snape and summon all my servants. We shall entertain ourselves tonight with Parkinson and his wife, and Snape will explain why the cow is still at that school,” Voldemort said.

Wormtail winced and nodded quickly. Tonight, Otis and his wife would find out the exact price of failure, and he'd once again wish he had never heard of Voldemort.

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry...

Snape stumbled and nearly fell to his knees, then he straightened up. He had spent the last six hours first healing, then helping torture Otis Parkinson and his wife Esther, while Voldemort supervised the effort, issuing Cruciatus curses for even the slightest imagined infraction. Merlin help anyone that the Dark Lord suspected of not doing their best.

Snape had been on the receiving end of several Cruciatus curses for failing to anticipate the needed potions, then again for failing to make them quickly enough.

Draco Malfoy had made a brief appearance before being sent back to Hogwarts. It still amazed Snape that the Malfoy line managed to survive with their haughtiness intact. The stupid fool had tried to bluff his way around the fact that he had been captured, tattooed and sent back to Voldemort naked. Voldemort's response was a rather long exposure to the Cruciatus curse and a threat that if he failed one more time, he'd be given to McNair, who had a fondness for young boys and making them scream.

He released the door frame he had been leaning against and staggered over to a small bench just inside the Entrance Hall. There he sat, breathing heavily.

“Ah, Severus. I was hoping I'd see you this morning,” said a voice he was coming to hate.

“Must you, Headmaster? This night's meeting was most difficult.”

“Did it have anything to do with our missing student?”

Snape frowned. He hadn't told the old man about Parkinson yet.

“How did...”

“As Headmaster, I am privy to many happenings in this school, Professor,” Dumbledore said with a twinkle. “Perhaps someday you'll enjoy a similar privilege.”

Snape fought the urge to roll his eyes at the man, then he swore to himself. “Tonight's meeting had everything to do with the Parkinson family. Otis and Esther took six brutal hours to die, despite my orders and efforts to keep them alive longer. Pansy has vanished and none of the students know where she has gone.”

Dumbledore sighed. “And Draco?”

“He was assaulted and apparently sent to Voldemort's lair in her place. He was also permanently disfigured.”

“What about her friends? Surely they must know something?”

Snape gave the old man a pitying look. “What friends? She was the only female supporter of Voldemort in my house and was universally hated by both sides. The girls are rallying around Greengrass and Davis, both of whom are excellent Occlumencers. I don't know what's going on, but the girls are presenting a solid front that I can't crack without drawing undue attention to myself.”

Dumbledore frowned. “Yes, that skill is becoming more common of late. I discovered last week that Minerva was instructing several of her students in the art. When I tried to forbid her, she reminded me that any Professor may accept a paid tutoring position and she was being paid to tutor the students. I couldn't stop her without taking that perk away from all of the Professors.”

The sound of running feet stopped their conversation and they looked up.

Harry jogged by without so much as a nod, heading for the door and outside. Behind him trailed Neville and Ron. Neville ran more confidently, outfitted in a Nike running suit and a sweatshirt over that. Hermione had purchased the running outfit for for him. Ron, who had just joined them only a few weeks earlier, was bringing up the rear, and puffing like the Hogwarts Express. His outfit had also been selected by his girlfriend, and was decidedly more colorful.

Snape glared at Harry's back hatefully, while Dumbledore looked more thoughtful. All of the students that were learning Occlumency under Minerva were part of Harry's close circle of friends. He was trying to figure out a way to stop the spread of the tutoring, but disturbing rumors had surfaced about Miss Granger instructing the prefects in the art.

Snape turned back to Dumbledore. “Are you going to allow them to leave the school at this hour?” he asked incredulously.

Dumbledore shrugged. “What can I do? There are no rules against the students exercising. They merely run around the lake a few times each morning, usually about this time. There is no harm in their activity and the Muggles swear it does them good.”

Snape waved a hand dismissively. “I take it that Granger and the Weasleys are among those Minerva is teaching?”

Dumbledore nodded. “Yes. I found out about it thanks to Miss Weasley, who has developed an amazing set of defensive shields, including something which gave me a headache that lasted all day. I wanted to know if she had any insight in Mister Potter's thoughts.”

“All of Potter's friends,” Snape mused. “But not Potter.”

“He hardly needs it. What ever technique he was taught has hidden his mind. I can stand in the same room with him and not be able to even detect his mind,” Dumbledore reminded him.

“Well, it's not like he has much of one to start with,” Snape replied testily, then he scowled and stood. He didn't like being reminded that somehow Potter had managed to foil them using an unknown technique.

“With your leave, Headmaster, I will retire to my chambers to get a few hours sleep. Classes start at nine and if I'm lucky I'll get two hours.”

“Of course, my boy. Enjoy your rest,” Dumbledore said with a wave. He remained seated on the bench, thinking about the spy who had betrayed them, the boy who had lost faith in him and wondering where he had gone wrong in guiding them.

On the far side of the lake, three Gryffindor's ran, smirking to each other. Pansy had left for the safe house where she would be kept, out of danger, but effectively a prisoner, until the war ended. The fallout resulted in Snape looking as though he had been put through a wringer, and the Parkinson line had been all but destroyed.

Not a bad start to a new day.

The Great Hall, Breakfast (that morning)...

Harry sat with his friends sipping his coffee. It wasn't a drink that was served at Hogwarts, but Dobby made sure that a hot thermos was sent to Harry every morning from Blackmoor castle. Dobby split his time between overseeing the newly hired elves at Blackmoor and keeping discrete tabs on Harry in case he needed anything. It had taken Harry a while, but he had grown to accept that the little elf considered himself Harry's personal elf and nothing anyone could say would make him budge from that position.

He glanced over at Hermione, who was reading a note that Daphne had slipped her. Ginny sat next to him, their legs touching. He found the contact comforting, and a little unsettling.

“She says that the house is in an uproar. Draco came back late last night after being subjected to the Cruciatus curse, and since he came back naked, everyone knows about his tattoo and the Dark Mark.”

She looked up from the slip of parchment. “Who's idea was it to tattoo the ferret?”

Harry grinned. “It wasn't my idea, but when Tracy told me they were thinking about using Draco, she mentioned it. I thought it was a good idea at the time. What else does she say?”

Hermione turned her attention back to the note. “She says that Draco's treatment has rattled a few of the lesser committed boys, and Snape came in early this morning to talk to the house. He reminded them that what happens in Slytherin stays in Slytherin. Apparently, he tried to turn Draco's treatment into a recruitment speech aimed at the girls and the lower grades.” She paused and shook her head. “Daphne says that most of the girls had to fight to keep from laughing at Snape.”

“And the ferret?” he asked.

Hermione shrugged. “She didn't say. But she did discover one little tidbit. Apparently, the boys in her house talk too much, especially when encouraged by the girls. Draco's little project is a high priority for Tom and he has orders to distract you.”

Harry blinked in surprise. “Distract me from what?” he asked mostly to himself.

“She didn't say, but she thinks that there is another in the house with different orders concerning you,” Hermione replied softly.

“Maybe it's the same one that tried to kill you last month?” Ginny added.

Harry shot her a thoughtful glance, then nodded. He had taken to telling his closest friends what was happening, and had explained about the attempt on his life.

“It could be, but then...”

He stopped. Dumbledore had stood from his seat and was signaling for everyone's attention. The old man waited patiently for the hall to quiet down, then he began to speak.

“Last night, one of our students was attacked and brutally disfigured before being transported out of the castle in a clear attempt to humiliate and shame him. I will not tolerate this sort of behavior and I will expel any student who I find implicated in this. The student in question will now have to suffer through a lifetime of living with the disfigurement that was both crude and cruel.

“If the student or students responsible step forward now, I will not expel them, but rather administer a more lenient punishment...”

Harry's expression darkened and he stared stonily at the Headmaster. The man continued to speak about how he would not tolerate such

behaviors were totally oblivious to the astounded looks the students of three houses were giving him. The Slytherin boys were attacking Muggle born and half bloods nearly every week and he had said nothing. Now, after one Slytherin was attacked and he decided to act?

Harry finally looked away, saddened. He tuned Dumbledore out. The man had said the words that so many didn't want to hear. From his own mouth, he had condemned himself in front of the entire student body.

Ginny sighed and slid her hand into Harry's, lacing her fingers with his. He had told everyone that Dumbledore had strayed from the light, and while most believed him, they'd hoped he was wrong.

Neville turned away from the head table, the disgust evident on his face. "It's up to us then," he murmured.

"It's not enough," Harry whispered.

"Harry?" Ginny asked in alarm.

He shook his head. "It's not enough. Killing Voldemort or learning how to defend ourselves isn't enough. Look at them," he replied, nodding towards the Head table. "With the exception of my Mum and Professor McGonagall, all the others are buying into Dumbledore and his rhetoric."

Harry turned and looked directly at Hermione. Ginny winced and accepted the fact that he'd turn to her first. There was a love between them that transcended mere friendship, but lacked any erotic element. He came to her for advice on many subjects, but when in a group, he'd look to her first as a guide to his moral compass.

"What will the Ministry do if they stumble upon a battlefield full of dead Death Eaters, one dead Dark Lord and a bunch of students?" he asked intently.

He increased the pressure on Ginny's hand, letting her know he understood how she felt about what he had with Hermione.

Hermione closed her eyes, her expression dropped. "I want to say they'd follow their laws, but we know they won't. The most probable thing would be to toss us all in prison."

Harry nodded. "We can't just take out Voldemort. We need to be prepared to bring down everything."

"The Ministry? That's revolution!" Ginny gasped.

Harry nodded. "It's something we have to consider. Especially if we do this with no help from the establishment. Our only other option is the one I took at the start of the summer; leave and let them stew in this situation."

Neville held up a hand and everyone turned to him. "Hold up, everyone. Now, I'm not saying that Harry's wrong, but I *am* going to suggest that we stop and think hard on this. How about we bring it up at the meeting in two days?"

Harry nodded and let the conversation turn back to more mundane matters. Ginny and Neville had been introduced to videos, and movie night was coming up.

Up at the head table, Dumbledore's words had had a profound effect on two people.

Jean stared at the old man, convinced he had slipped into senility, and Minerva was wondering if it were finally time to contact her friends on the Board of Governors to tell them what was going on.

Dumbledore sat watching the students, hoping to catch a guilty look or two. He was surprised by the level of hostility he felt. Over at the Gryffindor table, most of the students seemed to be totally unconcerned to the point of ignoring him entirely. Harry and his friends were engaged in a conversation, to the exclusion of everything else.

Not for the first time he cursed Xavier for teaching Harry to hide his mind. Taking a deep breath, he began to ponder other ways he might discover what Harry was thinking.

Hogsmeade...

Jean walked through the castle gates and started up the road towards the small village. It was a Hogsmeade weekend and she was one of the staff assigned to visit the village at the same time as the students, in case they needed help from a teacher.

She walked with Harry's friends. They could have taken a carriage, but the morning sunshine was inviting, even if there was a definite chill in the air.

Harry wasn't present. Being unable to take Ginny to Hogsmeade was the one real kink in his relationship with her. While she went with friends, he attended his potions class and did his other work, under the guidance of Scott, Charles and Hank.

"So, you've got your day planned out?" she asked Ginny.

Ginny nodded. "Danya, Collin and I need to do a bit of shopping, then we'll catch lunch at the Three Broomsticks before heading back to the castle. Christmas is around the corner and I want to get Harry something nice."

Jean smiled at the girl. "It must be hard to spend these weekends without him around."

Ginny's smile faltered and she nodded. "It is, but I know he's attending classes," she said, then she paused. "Do you think that maybe we could visit him some weekend? Surprise him? I asked my mum about it and she said that she didn't have a problem, because Harry's dad was there with other adults."

I think he'd like that a lot," Jean replied with a smile.

She paused in her walk. They were at the edge of town. "I'll let you go off with your friends, Ginny. If you need me, I'll be over in the book store for a while before going to the Three Broomsticks."

Ginny nodded happily and moved away with her friend.

Jean watched the young girl for a moment longer. She was coming to greatly admire the girl who was in love with her son. Ginny was playing a careful game of slowly acquainting Harry with what life was like in a relationship. One of the most notable benefits of their relationship seemed to be the fact that Ginny was capable of helping him with his emotional control.

Not for the first time she wondered if the youngest Weasley might have a touch of empathy.

Jean continued walking, her mind distracted by her thoughts. She never saw the man slip up behind her and stun her silently. Even a telepath can be taken by surprise, especially one that makes a conscious effort not to read the minds around her.

Hogwarts Library...

"I thought I might find you here, Miss Granger."

Hermione looked up to see Dumbledore smiling benignly at her.

"Was there something you needed, Headmaster?" she asked neutrally.

"Yes. Would you mind however if we took our discussion to my office?"

Hermione raised her Occlumency shields to her fullest and nodded unhappily. She didn't want to be alone with the man. Her shields were good enough to keep a casual scan out, but she couldn't hold up against a concerted attack.

Dumbledore watched his student gather her belongings and he wondered about her reluctance. It never occurred to him that she might be afraid of what he might do when they were alone.

"Can you give me some idea as to why you need me, Headmaster?" she asked as they walked the corridor.

"I was hoping we could talk about Harry Potter," he replied.

Hermione stopped in her tracks and turned to stare at the man. "Sir, with all due respect, I will not discuss Harry without him being present. Frankly, unless you call Professor McGonagall or Professor Summers, I am reluctant to continue with this discussion or even go to your office with just the two of us alone."

Dumbledore frowned. "I mean you no harm, Miss Granger."

"I'm sure you felt the same way about Harry when you left him with those abusive people," she retorted.

Dumbledore blinked and tried another tact. "Miss Granger, I only wanted to ask you a few questions. Your unreasonable lack of cooperation suggests that you might not be a suitable candidate for Head Girl next year."

"Bravo, Headmaster! Resorting to blackmail is more suited to Slytherin than your purported Gryffindor roots. The role of Head Girl isn't something to be dangled as a reward for cooperation. I wonder what the Board of Governors would say to your using it as a way of blackmailing me?"

She paused and took a deep breath. "I will offer you one piece of advice, sir. Look up what happens to those convicted of aiding and abetting the enemy in times of war. It's the only time the Muggles allow capital punishment in this country."

With that, she turned, her hair swinging behind her and walked away from the astounded old wizard. As she walked, her stomach was filled with butterflies and she expected the old man to curse her behind her back.

When no such curse came, she altered her course. She would report this conversation to Professor McGonagall. She might be part of the staff, but the woman's fairness and impartiality were legendary.

Blackmoor Castle...

Scott reached for the phone as soon as it started ringing. Since Harry was in the castle, he knew it wasn't him. *Perhaps Jean wanted to know something. She did say she was going shopping today*, he mused.

"Hello?"

"Scott, I've been kidnapped!"

He bolted to his feet and nearly dropped the phone. "What?" he demanded.

There was a moment of silence, then Jean again. "I woke up a few minutes ago with a pounding headache. I'm in a room with no lights or windows. Can you believe it? They took my wand and left me with my cell phone!"

Logan, attracted by Scott's reaction, stood nearby waiting impatiently to learn what was happening.

“Are you all right?” Scott asked intently.

Jean's voice sounded strained. “I've got a pounding headache and I'm still feeling weak from the stunner.”

Scott looked up at Logan. “Get a trace going on Jean's phone, now!” he snapped while holding his hand over the pickup.

Logan blinked in surprise, then sprinted from the room.

“Listen, sweetheart, we're tracing your connection, so I want you to keep the line open. As soon as we can we'll be there.”

“I'm fairly secure now, Scott,” she replied. “They caught me by surprise, but I'm capable of defending myself.”

He couldn't help but grin. He knew perfectly well that Jean's powers and her other abilities made her a formidable opponent. He had the bruises from their sparring matches to prove it.

Together, the two talked, trying to convey their love and ease their fear.

Elsewhere in Blackmoor Castle...

“Are you finished with your potions for the day?”

Harry looked up and grinned at Professor Xavier. “Yes, sir. I'm just finishing this potion for now. It needs to simmer for a week. By this time next week it will be a light paste that can be applied to an object, causing it to assume the color and shape of whatever it's placed against.”

His tutor was busy working on some paperwork in the far corner of the room. She glanced up and smiled at Xavier, then turned back to her work. Teaching Harry had turned out to be one of the most lucrative tutoring positions she had ever taken and she refused to endanger that job by sticking her nose where it didn't belong.

Xavier shook his head and marveled at the strange concoction. *Wizards sure go out their way to invent some strange things*, he mused.

He watched Harry cast a spell on the cauldron, then move both the cauldron and the fire over to an alchemical alcove that had been set up to allow potions to simmer for weeks at a time.

“Harry, I'm concerned about some of the things I've been hearing and I would like to know exactly what your plans are concerning the wizards,” Xavier said.

Harry nodded and hopped up on the now cleared tabletop. “I figured you'd want to talk to me about it. But you should know, it was partially your idea in the first place.”

Xavier blinked and his eyes narrowed. “What was my idea?”

Harry grinned. He rarely saw the man become unsettled. “Do you remember your lecture on the waves of immigrants to the United States and how they became part of the culture, as well as having their own impact on that same culture?”

Xavier nodded, confused. He had used the immigrants issue as an example of how mass migration could be one way of avoiding wars.

“I got to thinking about those waves, Professor. Each one arrived and made a niche for themselves, effectively becoming a power within the greater American community. It's why the Americans celebrate Saint Patrick's day, or Columbus day.

“Each wave of immigrants started at the bottom, but by doing so, they became an integral part of the economy and had they gone on strike at any time, the economy would have collapsed.”

“Yes, I see your point, Harry, but unlike the Chinese or Irish, wizards aren't going to spend their days in the fields, or building railroads,” Xavier pointed.

Harry waved a hand dismissively. “I know that, sir. I am merely pointing out that, in their own way, each group became a force to be acknowledged in a peaceable manner. I plan on doing the same thing.”

“How?” Xavier pressed.

Harry grinned broadly. “By swindling a Death Eater family out of a gold mine they had all but forgotten that they owned.”

Xavier stared at him in shock, not expecting an answer of this sort. He motioned for Harry to continue.

Harry slid off the table and walked over to a cabinet. Opening it, he extracted a small vial the size of a test tube. He turned and handed it to Xavier.

“That contains one dose of Pepper Up potion, just one of the hundreds of potions on the list I've put together that work for both Muggle and wizard alike.”

Xavier nodded and examined the crystal vial. The vial gave off a faint light of it's own and was warm in his hands. He looked up at Harry inquisitively.

“Two hundred years ago, a wizard by the name of Chester Marius Flint invented the potion and it's been in the Flint family for all this time. Every Pepper Up dose made results in a small fee being paid to the Flint family. You would think that they would be the richest wizarding family around. However, other than the ownership of Pepper Up, their other unique claim to fame is a strong tendency towards compulsive gambling.

The result? They have debts that not even the residuals of their patents can fully pay off. So when a crazy American company approached them and offered to pay them ten thousand galleons for permanent and exclusive rights to market the potion to the Muggles, they laughed themselves silly and rushed to sign the paperwork.”

Harry smirked. “They knew it was illegal to sell the potion to Muggles here in England, and wrongly assumed that it was illegal everywhere. America is changing that, and we’ll market the potion under an exclusive license. The lawyers are locking it down tighter than a goblin’s fist. It will become the basis for making wizards and mutants an economic powerhouse.

“We’ll treat the recipe as a trade secret and we’ll position ourselves as the sole supplier. It will take a number of years, but when the Muggles finally wake up to what we’ve done, it will be too late. We’ll own the market on this potion, as well as a number of others, all made by wizards and distributed by mutants.”

Xavier looked down at the vial in his hands, then back up at Harry. “But what does it do?”

Harry leaned a little closer. “You hold in your hand the cure for the common cold and most flu viruses. One dose and your cold is gone in minutes.”

Xavier stared at Harry in shock. His mouth opened and closed a few times. Finally, he shook his head and a grin started to form. What Harry had in mind could work. If it did, it would be a bloodless, non-violent change to their world. He looked down at the small vial, then back up at Harry. He was about to speak when an alarm sounded in the castle.

Harry looked around wildly. No one had told him about the alarm system and he hadn’t been present when it had been tested.

“Relax, Harry. The alarm signals there is a problem somewhere, but it’s really a call to assemble everyone in the main conference room,” Xavier said, calming the teen.

Harry nodded and took a deep breath.

Xavier swiveled his chair around. “Now, if you’ll follow me?”

Harry followed Xavier from the room, leaving his potions tutor still working on her paper work. As much as she was curious, she studiously avoided eavesdropping. Hopefully her employers would be pleased enough to keep her around for more than just tutoring.

Harry and the Professor arrived in the large conference room just minutes after the alarm sounded. He slid into a chair, while the professor hovered into a spot reserved for his chair.

“What’s the problem, Scott?” asked the Professor.

Scott looked up from a map that he, Storm and Logan were examining. “Jean called us a few minutes ago. She’s been kidnapped by some wizards, or at least she thinks they’re wizards, since they took away her wand and left her with her cell phone.”

Harry bolted upright and his chair fell over backwards with a crash. “What?” he nearly screamed.

Logan grinned at him. “Relax, Harry. The wizards took away her wand, but they left her with her cell phone if you can believe it. We’re tracing down the signal as we speak.”

“Trace hell,” Harry replied hotly. “I can find her quicker and get her out of there.”

Scott glanced up at Harry, then looked over at Logan.

The man shrugged. “It would be the fastest way.”

“I agree. Considering what we know about Voldemort’s people, the quicker we get her out of there, the better,” Xavier said thoughtfully.

“So, then it’s settled? I’ll go get her?” asked Harry.

“Hold on just a second,” Logan replied. “I think we need to plan an appropriate response to this.” He turned to look at Xavier. “Don’t you agree?”

Xavier frowned at Logan, knowing the man’s penchant for violent responses.

Harry looked between the two in confusion. There was a conversation going on between the two men that existed on a level he couldn’t understand.

“You know Logan’s right, Professor” Scott said softly. “They have sent assassins here to kill everyone, they have tried to kill Harry, and while we sit here, they are holding Jean and preparing who knows what.”

“Her kinetic shield will stop a lot, but I don’t know if it will stop an unforgivable curse,” Harry added.

Jean’s shield was capable of turning ordinary air into a solid stronger than steel. They had tested it against several simple hexes and it had held. The problem was that sort of shield required most of her strength and she couldn’t hold it for long, or under a continuous assault.

Xavier frowned and rubbed at his head tiredly. “Call her, put her on speaker,” he commanded.

Scott nodded and pulled out his cell phone. He pressed a number on the keypad and slid the phone into a small device sitting in the center of the table. Instantly, the sound of a soft electronic chime filled the room. Harry looked at Scott with alarm.

“She’s got the phone set to vibrate, not ring. Relax,” he said with a smile.

Relieved Harry turned around, picked up his chair and sat down. He couldn't understand how the others appeared to be so calm when his stomach was clenched into knots.

"Scott?" said a voice from the speaker.

Harry released an explosive sigh of breath and Logan grinned at him knowingly.

"Jean, it's Charles," said Xavier. "We're going to send Harry to pick you up, but we seem to have a slight disagreement over what we should do after that. Logan is pressing for some sort of retaliation, but I fear that will only result in escalating incidents between the different sides."

"And doing nothing is exactly what Dumbledore wants us to do!" Harry exclaimed angrily.

"Harry," chided Scott and Jean simultaneously.

Harry grimaced and looked down, his face flushed.

"Charles, as much as I'd like to take the higher road and not sink to their level, I don't think we have any choice in the matter. These people are talking about bringing the war out into the open. I've been listening in on their thoughts and one of them is planning on attacking a school full of children, normal children, just to see how many they can kill before the police arrive."

It was impossible to ignore and anguish in her voice. Xavier was well aware that touching a mind filled with such foul thoughts was extremely disturbing to the telepath.

"The X-Men have never set out to deliberately kill unless there was no other choice," Xavier said softly.

Scott looked down at the table, chagrined by Xavier's words.

"The X-Men have never had an opponent that killed so willingly before either. Voldemort and his Death Eaters love to kill." Harry said, looking up from the table. "I, more than anyone else here, know that, and have lived with that fact."

He paused and looked around for a moment.

"I don't want to kill. I didn't want to kill those Death Eaters at Gringotts, but you told me that killing was all right when it's done in the name of justice. Where do you draw the line, Professor? My mum is being held by Death Eaters. Sooner or later they will come to kill her, or torture her and after that, then what? A Muggle school? The Prime Minister? The Queen? How many have to die before justice can be served?"

"You wanted me to come here and now we're in the middle of a war. All I ever wanted is now being threatened. If we let Dumbledore do it his way, we'll leave Mum where she is and hope that someday the Death Eaters will see the error of their ways and ask to be forgiven."

Logan snorted and shook his head. Harry shot him a grateful glance before turning back to Xavier. "We can't just let them get away with this. We need to send a message. A simple one that says 'being a Death Eater can get you killed.'"

"The Wiz has a point," Logan added and Scott nodded.

Xavier sighed and nodded reluctantly. "Jean?"

"I'm torn, Charles. I know that doing nothing is not the answer either," said the voice from the speaker.

Harry stood suddenly and ran his hand through his hair nervously. "Look, we're pressed for time. We can argue the moral points about this later. Right now I want to go get my mum out of that place," he said, then he paused and turned to look at Professor Xavier. "Would it assuage your conscious if we gave them a warning?"

Logan crossed his arms and leaned forward, his expression breaking into a huge grin. "A talking bomb?"

Harry glanced over at him and nodded tersely.

Xavier blew out a heavy breath and nodded slowly. "I can see both sides of this argument and I find neither side satisfies me," he said, then he sighed again. "I don't like it, but I can't see a way out of this. We cannot allow Jean to remain where she is, and the message we send must be unequivocal. Mess with the X-Men at your peril."

Xavier looked to Logan. "Prepare your package. Let them have a thirty second warning."

Logan nodded and stood. "I'll need five minutes to put everything together," he replied, then he turned and left the room at a fast trot.

Xavier turned back to Harry and Scott. "Jean is going to have my head for this," he muttered.

"What?" Jean's voice said from the speaker.

"Scott, get Harry outfitted in full X-Men turnout. If he's going to do this, he's going to do this as one of us."

Scott nodded and motioned to Harry, who followed him from the room. The last thing he heard was Jean's voice and it sounded like she was yelling at Xavier.

Hogsmeade...

Jean paced nervously in the small room. She had closed the connection to Scott and the others a few minutes ago and now was waiting for Harry to arrive.

Xavier had ordered Scott to see that Harry was properly outfitted and she could see the sense in that. The X uniforms weren't just for show. The Kevlar armor and built in electronics gave the wearer protection and communications capabilities.

No, it wasn't the fact that he would be wearing the armor, it was what the armor represented. Only official X Men wore the armor.

She had hoped that Harry would not become an X Man. It was a pipe dream and she knew it from the start, but she always held a little hope that Harry would go on to live a nice quiet life somewhere with a nice girl and raise a family.

Once he put on that uniform, her hopes would die. Once he had tasted the life of an X Man, he'd never want to go back.

She stopped pacing when Harry suddenly appeared, carrying a large duffel bag. "Mum!" he exclaimed softly, then he pulled her into a hug.

She could sense some of the tension drain away from him and she realized that she would always have two men who considered her vital to their lives. She was sure Scott was still feeling the uneasiness that Harry was now losing.

Pushing away slightly so she could get a better look at him, she eyed him critically for a moment. He did look very good in the black leather and Kevlar uniform. She absently noted the comm module at the belt was missing, probably because they didn't have one hardened to work around magic yet. His normal mobile phone wasn't designed to be carried into a fight like a comm unit.

"Are you ready to go?" he asked.

When she nodded, he turned away and placed the duffel bag on the floor. Crouching down, he grabbed a hold of a brightly colored cord and yanked hard on it.

Standing he took her hand.

As they teleported away, she could hear the duffel bag shout.

"I'm a exothermic reaction device! 30. I'm a exothermic reaction device! 29..."

Alerted by the noise, the Death Eaters converged on the room where Jean was kept. It took nearly fifteen seconds to remove the locking charms. When the door was opened, they rushed into the room to find their prisoner missing.

"She had no wand, and this room was secure! Where is she? And what the hell is an exothermic reaction device?" one of the Death Eaters asked.

Harry and Logan had followed Xavier's instructions to the letter. The bomb *did* warn people what it was. It wasn't their fault that a wizard wouldn't understand the chemical term for an explosion.

TBC

Mutant Storm
Author's Announcement